Identity Construction on Facebook: The Case of ABES Students

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Abstract

Identity construction is a derivation from perceptions of others and oneself. The language and actuations of people form parts of the identity that they project (self-identity) and are constructed by others (social identity). This study aimed to provide a perspective on the creation of social identity on Facebook through the language codes used and topics discussed in the respondents’ Facebook newsfeeds. The researcher collected a total of 250 messages from the respondents’ accounts. A thematic analysis was carried out to highlight the identities projected by the respondents. Overall, seven social identities of the respondents emerged in the analyses. These are linguistic competence in L2, ability to fit in, patriotic sense, sense of openness, expressiveness, socialness, and religiosity.

Keywords: identity representation; Facebook; identity projection; social identity

Introduction

Language is one of the blueprints of the identity of a person because it is crucial to communication. Moreover, the different ways men use the language have impacted the representation of identities (Itkonen, 2009). The work of Goffman (1963) has been influential in showing that one’s identity is perceived or constructed through speech; thus, how a person chooses and uses the language is of utmost significance to his/her conscious or unconscious construction of identity.

The term identity may be broad for it could refer to self-identity or social identity. Barker (2003) made a distinction of the two. He said that the former indicates someone’s views to himself while the latter stands for the perception of others as to the identity of someone. Identity construction or representation is then a byproduct of perceptions, either by the individual himself/herself or some others.

Social identity, the concentration of this paper refers to the way language users portray themselves as real people through interactions in chats or posts. Also, it allows them to represent and negotiate their social presence with other participants in a virtual community (Guaman, 2012), that is “the ability to portray oneself as a real person” and to perceive the same in the other members of the group (Palloff and Pratt, 2007). This identity construction is prevalent in social networking sites such as Facebook.

Facebook is a social medium. A person’s Facebook profile, unless it has a strict privacy setting, can be viewed by other users. Through the user’s language code, reactions to posts, language in threads, use of emoticon, and the topics commonly discussed in their posts, other users could derive insights as to the personality or identity of the former.

Thus, the concept of self-representation becomes extremely vital in social communication platform. Globally, the conduct of research on identity representation in computer-mediated communication (CMC) has gained popularity. Specifically, the construction of social identity was based on the following overt variables in Facebook: pictures and posts (Spolsky, 1999; Guaman, 2012; Nir, 2012); language used (Lam, 2004; Depew and Miller-Cochran, 2010; Gong, Shuai, and Liu, 2013; Domingo, 2013); and
wall posts, status updates, and collocations with other technologies (Knobel and Lankshear, 2008). These variables were considered as predictors as to the gender, social status, educational level, culture, place of origin, and age (Spolsky, 1999) citizenship and nationality of the person (Adegoke, 2011).

In the Philippines, however, there is a scarcity of published research outputs along identity construction in CMC contexts. Thus, this paper aimed to answer the following questions: 1) What are the languages used by the respondents in expressing their ideas and feelings in Facebook? 2) What are the topics discussed by the respondents?; and 3) How do the languages used and topics discussed by the respondents help in the social identity construction of the ABES students on Facebook?

This study looked into the relationship of language and identity, in general. In the Philippines, social networks such as Facebook have become part and parcel of everybody’s lives. Although these sites serve several functions, they sometimes cause miscommunication due to the language, emoticons, pictures, and figures posted online. This study, therefore, is significant as results provide sociolinguistic awareness as to Facebook users’ understanding to their own language which is an active agent and indicator of their own identity.

**Methodology**

Participants signed informed consent forms before the conduct of the research. The researcher used the printed text of the students’ updated Facebook statuses as primary data. Moreover, the researcher used the following research procedure: reading and understanding updated Facebook statuses which served as the corpus, taking note of updated statuses, gathering samples from the noted Facebook statuses through random sampling, categorizing the language codes used, and identifying the topics commonly discussed by the respondents. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was done with the collected posts of the 25 Bachelor of Arts in English Studies (ABES) students who served as sources of the corpus of the study. The analysis underwent six steps: 1) familiarization with the data; 2) generation of initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing of the themes; 5) defining and naming the themes; and 6) producing the report.

To ensure the validity of the researcher’s analyses on the social identities that were determined, three genuine Ilocanos (people who speak Ilokano and reside in the northern part of the Philippines) looked into and approved the interpretations.

**Results and Discussion**

This section thoroughly discusses the data gathered from the study. It presents the language codes used, common themes of the topics discussed by the respondents, and the identity construction in Facebook.

**Language Codes Used in Facebook Posts**

The first problem of this study calls for the identification of the language codes used by the respondents in their Facebook posts whenever they express their ideas, opinions, and emotions. In this context, language codes refer to the language used by the students when they go online.

Table 1 and Figure 1 show that there are four codes that are being used by the respondents: English, Filipino, Iluko, and mixed (a combination of two or three languages: English, Filipino, Iluko).

The data show that 55% of the respondents uses the English language (see 1) when they post in their Facebook accounts. This result is not that surprising since the respondents are English language studies students and that they are using an English-occupied space known worldwide and is used by different
Table 1: Language codes used in Facebook posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Codes</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iluko</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>250</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

nations. It also implies that their facility in the English language is carried over even outside their language classrooms, in this case, in the social networking site. Likewise, the fact that the English language is considered as the international language, the language being used by the majority, its use in social networking sites is expected so that users could connect to a larger audience, thus, widening their circle.

It is interesting to note that the result supports the findings of Domingo (2013) when he found that English is also the most commonly used code for selected teachers of Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU) when they log in their Facebook accounts. Further, the result supports the finding that English is by far the most frequently used language, other than respondents' vernacular when going online (Flash Eurobarometer, 2011).

The table also reveals that mixed (37%), a combination of two or more languages (English, Filipino, and Iluko), is next to English as to the commonly used language code in Facebook posts. Of the 250 posts, 93 messages are expressed in a mixed language: Ilocano-English, English-Filipino-Ilocano, English-Filipino, and Ilocano-Filipino.

It is not surprising that the news feeds of the Facebook users are flooded with messages expressed in mixed languages because as Li (1998) put it, code-mixing is common among bilinguals. Since Ilocanos are known to be multilinguals, the presence of three languages in a string of utterance in the data is but normal.

In a study conducted by Durano in 2009, he found that public and private secondary school students have a positive attitude towards code-switching. According to Gumperz (1982), bilinguals would slip into a different language or by accident without even realizing it or intending to do it. Also, Gross (2006), said that code-switching is a communication strategy employed by bilingual speakers to express the real intent of the message which is beyond its structural and referential content. Further, he said that this occurred to conform to the communication context or to make the environment less formal.

Code-switching happens because, in all instances, communicators want to fit in and put their messages across. Some multilingual persons, like Bautista (2004), claim that code-switching is a speech style and is used as the language of middle–upper class, college level students, bachelor’s degree holders, and learned Filipinos in less formal speaking environments. Also, code-switching is done because of the following factors: 1) use of habitual expressions (thank you, sorry, good, morning, etc.); 2) mood of the speaker (when respondents are at the peak of their emotion); 3) address an audience (bakla, baket, kabsat, etc.), 4) positive remark; 5) politeness (opo, po); and 6) as a competitive/defensive strategy.

In addition, whenever necessary, respondents switch to a language that is most commonly used by their target readers. Thus, the prominence of mixed languages in all contexts: school, at home, offices, etc.

Moreover, the data gathered show that the respondents also use their national (6%) language. This indicates that even though the respondents are more exposed to the English language, there are still times that they use their other second language which is Filipino when they update their statuses in Facebook because of the following reasons: 1) the beauty of the Filipino language and 2) its impact to the readers.

The Filipino language is no doubt, syllable
timed. That is why majority of the Filipino words have vowel sounds. Considering this feature of the language, the formation of rhyme is a lot easier.

Moreover, respondents use Filipino in their post to create an impact to the readers. There are structures that are more appealing when expressed in Filipino rather than in English or Ilocano.

Lastly, the table also shows that the use of Iluko (2%) ranked last. This happens since Facebook is treated by the respondents as non-scholar, casual, and calming platform where they could use their first language to reach out to their friends in their own culture.

The study of Flash Eurobarometer (2011) found that English is frequently used language when going online; however, the Iluko language, the native language of the respondents, is still being used when they go online, specifically in Facebook.

From the examples gathered in this study, Iluko is used when the users want to express their judgments, when the message is directed to someone, and when the message is for themselves.

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It is interesting to note that the occurrence of posts expressed in the national language and the vernacular is infrequent. The rarity of such is reflective of the ongoing language politics in the country; that Filipinos favored more the English language than the native ones because the former is associated with the language of the learned and those in the upper level of the social strata. The use of the mother-tongue/national language is important as this is said to be a particularly significant aspect of the (ethnic) identity of the respondents.

This result somehow differs from the findings of sociolinguists like Romaine (1984), Eckert (1997) and Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2003) who carried out extensive studies on youth discourse that the typical sociolinguistic features of adolescent’s or teenager’s language include heavy vernacular use. The scope of this study may have contributed to such difference. The study considered the Facebook posts of the students which are more carefully thought of than their real language in their Facebook threads. Moreover, with the belief, that Facebook is a borderless communication platform, respondents may have opted to use a language that is more global: English.

Common Themes of the Topics Discussed on Facebook

Of the 250 Facebook posts, seven topics were noted by the researcher to be the most commonly talked over by the respondents: referential, emotions, relationships, religion/faith, school-related matters, entertainment, news and current events (Figure 1). Referential (47.6%) messages are the most evident in the Facebook posts of the students. Referential is a communicative function that is used to describe or talk about facts, things, actions, events, or people in the environment (Jakobson, 1960). This finding implies that the respondents inform the public of their latest whereabouts and give general information about their wishes, ideas, and opinions when they are on Facebook. The result supports the impression that new communication technologies allow the airing of personal concerns to a public sphere; thus, making the said topic the most obvious purpose of language (Jackson, 1960).

Next to referential is the topic of emotions (20.4%). These topics express the conscious reactions on experiences, ideas, feelings, and situations which are then channeled to the social network whether consciously or unconsciously done. This act of going online implies that respondents are quite open to the idea of public display of emotion or the expression of sentiments in public. People go online because of several reasons: the feeling that nobody is there to listen to them, they
just want to solicit sympathy from the public, or they just want to. Moreover, Facebook in general, is now considered as a “friend” who accompanies someone in his/her solitude. Lastly, it makes someone more courageous in terms of expressing such emotions.

In this study, the researcher also identified topics on relationships (17.2%). Specifically, there are messages addressed to their boyfriend/girlfriend, family members, and friends. These data are not that surprising to be observed from the posts since Filipinos are known to uphold the sense of close family ties (Hisona, n.d.). It is a fact that Filipinos feel and practice strong family ties elsewhere. Also, the respondents, who are at the peak of their younger years are expected to be more aggressive in their expression of their love. Thus, Facebook is used as one of the channels of said aggressiveness.

Next to topics on relationships is religion/faith (7.2%). The researcher noted from the posts that some of the respondents channel their expression of thanks to the Supreme Being to the social network. The said behavior is normal since the Philippines is hailed as the only Christian nation in Asia (CEMANES, 2010). Often, expression of hope, guidance, and praises are read in the respondents’ posts. The respondents also discussed school-related topics (4%). Based on the data, it shows that there is a meager percentage of the said topic. It implies that the respondents use Facebook as a platform for them to relax and amuse themselves. After all, most of their time is allotted for the discussion of school-related concerns. That is why rarely that academic-related concerns are seen in their newsfeeds. If they post, school-related topics are meant to push their classmates to study more, accomplish requirements, beat schedules, and to make requests.

Since the respondents are graduating students, it is expected that they are very busy in accomplishing their requirements. In this context, the students’ way of channeling out their stresses, anxieties, and worries is through Facebook; thus, the emergence of topics on entertainment (1.6%) in the respondents’ newsfeeds. These come in the form of jokes and punch lines. According to CEMANES (2010), Filipinos have this sense of humor that despite the trials and misfortunes that they are going through, they still manage to smile and win all those adversities.

Lastly, news and current events (1.2%) were noted to be the least discussed topic of the respondents. The finding supports Klix (2009) when he said that students display little knowledge on current events.

There are reasons why this is happening. First, students do not get to watch news and current affairs programs or read the dailies because of their busy schedules. Second, in the Philippine context, news programs are broadcast at early evening where some students are still on their way from school or are doing household chores. Lastly, teenagers do prefer to watch soap operas and sitcoms than news programs.

Identity Construction in Facebook

Overall, seven themes emerged in the analyses on the language codes and topics discussed by the respondents: linguistic competence in L2, ability to fit in, patriotic sense, sense of openness, expressiveness, socialness, and religiosity (Figure 1). The language used by the respondents signal three social identities: use of English as marker of second language user, group affiliation, and patriotic sense.

Linguistic Competence in L2. It can be gleaned that the respondents prefer more the English language than the other languages. Such preference is due to their level of proficiency in the said language which is attributed to the stature of English in the country—the country’s second language. In fact, it is used in education, in business, and in various affairs of the state. This is not surprising since the respondents in this study are English language students.

Ability to fit in. The students are
perceived to be adaptable to various situations. It can be inferred that respondents code mix so that they could blend in the culture and the nature of the Facebook users. In fact, according to Durano (2009), codeswitching is a result of language adaptation in different situations. Using the mixed language, the ABES students could identify themselves as part of the majority – students who use a more informal language. Thus, this gives them more chances to have ‘friends’ or to engage casual conversations with anybody. Filipinos can adjust effortlessly to a new environment or different conditions. They are capable of being modified to suit different conditions or a different purpose (Cemanes, 2010).

**Patriotic Sense.** The respondents, despite their proficiency in English, still use their national and/or mother tongue in posting their updates on their Facebook accounts. This act shows that they value said languages, and somehow, it speaks of their attitude of being proud of their identity as Filipinos/Ilocanos.

Meanwhile, there are four distinct identities of the users based on the topics that they discuss in their posts: sense of openness, expressiveness, fervidness in fostering interpersonal relationships and religiosity.

**Sense of openness.** Respondents love to disclose (openness) some of their activities, accomplishments and practically, a slice of their experiences. In this context, Facebook is used as the respondents’ personal journal and as an extension of their real world. This practice was noticed on the topics discussed in their posts (referential).

**Expressiveness.** Furthermore, Facebook users also communicate expressiveness by voicing out their emotions in the social media as manifested in the usual topics discussed (emotions, and relationships). Socialness. The respondents, likewise, value relationships which is fostered through their socialness or by performing social tasks such as opening, maintaining and closing a communication channel.

**Religiosity.** The respondents are perceived to be God-fearing. Their posts suggest that the users indeed believe in God. After all, Filipinos are known to be religious people, and they belong to various religious groups.

### Conclusion

After analyzing the language used and the topics discussed by the respondents in their Facebook accounts, the following conclusions were drawn:

First, the respondents are multilingual when they go online. They speak at least four types of languages: English, Filipino, Ilocano, and mixed languages.
Second, the respondents talk about an array of topics which are not just limited to their field of specialization. The discussion on the variety of topics speak of the diversity of the interest of those involved in the communication platform. Lastly, the social identity of the respondents communicated in their posts is still reflective of the genuine culture of Filipinos. Their sense of openness, being adaptive to various situations, how they value their native/national languages, their expressiveness, openness, spirituality, and socialness manifest, though only a bit, the current social identity of the Filipino youth.

References


