

LINGUISTIC IDENTITY, FROM DIGITAL TO INTANGIBLE LINGUISTIC IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF IVORIAN ENGLISH SPEAKERS' USE OF SOME PHONEMES

Déborah Mireille Kouamé YEHOUMAN
Alassane Ouattara University Bouaké
deboratkouame@gmail.com

Abstract:

Language in its original estate knows changes once in contact with mankind in their social interactions. These changes affect language as well as its users. Moreover, this linguistic change can be perceived through linguistic sign losing its nature or identity to an intangible one. This phenomenon compels to give a wider definition to the notion of identity which seems uncontrollable and evolutive. To this extent, how can linguistic identity move from a digital to an intangible one and changing at once language users' identity? The purpose of the present work consists in demonstrating how from a digital identity can result an intangible one, then at the same time enabling to recognize individuals as unique or being part of a social group. This work will point out the evidences of linguistic signs changing from digital that is British Standard English to intangible English which is Ivorian English, and giving birth at the same time to a variety of English speakers.

Key words: intangible, digital, identity, linguistic, culture, non-native, environment.

Résumé:

Les interactions de l'homme génèrent des transformations linguistiques. Celles-ci sont visibles à travers le changement de nature des signes linguistiques qui occasionnent un changement d'identité. Cette identité qui originellement digitale, devient alors intangible. Ce changement d'identité non seulement affecte la langue mais aussi ses utilisateurs. Ce phénomène amène à s'interroger sur la notion de l'identité dont la définition semble incontrôlable et évolutive. Au nombre de toutes les définitions, ce travail se penchera sur l'aspect linguistique du terme. En dépit des précédentes définitions portant sur les critères d'appartenances ou de différenciation à un quelconque group, ce travail montrera l'impact de la culture sur l'identité linguistique dans un environnement non natif. Il en résulte la naissance d'une variété d'utilisateur de la langue Anglaise.

Mots clés : identité, digital, abstrait, langue, culture, non natif, environnement.

INTRODUCTION

Identity involves the recognition and the description of someone or something. The term itself encompasses all the aspects that enable to show the existence of something or of an individual. Seen in this angle, human identity would then cover the physical, cultural, and even environmental features that could make possible the specification of human beings (Buckingham D. 2008, p1). In the Cambridge English Dictionary, the identification process includes all elements that allow making a clear cut distinction, to say, or to prove that a person exists or belongs to a specific group of people. That is to say, the identification process takes into account all the features that are necessary to demonstrate sameness and differences. This subtends that the term identification goes beyond general and well known features and stretches to more specific aspects of people's daily lives. Therefore, identity cannot be complete without language which itself represents a current specific criterion of distinction among people.

Linguistic identity represents a tangible means of distinction between people. How can linguistic identity help understand the scope of the word identity? How can linguistic identity move from a digital to an intangible one? Specifically, as phonetic sounds are not physical but perceivable in the trend of their production, their authentication is possible through speech sounds analysis. Therefore, this linguistic change can better be understood through a linguistic analysis. The phonetic theories are adequate to show the quality of the English spoken by Ivorian English language learners and speakers. Then, the acquisition / learning theories are appropriate to provide with the explanation to the existence of some sounds to those non-native learners.

All the same, the specificities of the sounds production will testify and demonstrate the linguistic intangible identity that would be nothing else than language variation. And, it is worth mentioning that these changes upon language do not affect or alter meaning. This work will focus on the Methodology in a first time. Second, data presentation and the results, then ends with the discussion.

1. Methodology

1.1. Data collection method

The suitable method for showing and explaining the phenomenon described in this work is a face to face interview. It is adapted to obtain more words from the speaker. Also, under the cover of another topic, the respondent does not know exactly what the interviewer is expecting

from him or her apart from the answers to his questions. In the present work, I will be concerned with the qualitative interview of twelve to twenty minutes. This work will be supported by five interviews.

The choice of this method can be justified by the fact that it is conceived to create meaning. The interview is not meant to simply ask and answer questions; it creates a certain connection between the interviewer and respondents. It favors an opened and communicational environment and confidence. The most interesting feature with the interview is that the interviewer is neutral and data or meanings are more natural. Most of the times, the respondents ignore the real goals of the interview. In addition, the interviewer cannot manipulate respondents' answers. In brief interviews enable to know more about the target population. Sarah Tracy (2013, p.132) acknowledges the efficiency of the interview in any qualitative research because they give access to data that any other method would reveal.

1.1.1. Participants

The data have been collected through a face to face interview and within a qualitative method. The target population of my analysis is concerned with some students from the different level at the department of English. My sample essentially consists of English language learners at the University Alassane Ouattara's department of English. It is a mix population.

The choice of this population is suitable because the English department is made of three main stages and eight levels, and at the department of English, all are supposed to be able to use correctly the target language. The participants were chosen randomly and at all levels so that the real value of those learners could be revealed.

1.1.2. Sampling

The pilot study was done on the target population. The first interviews focused on the learning environment and language variation. Within these ten first interviews, while some were under pressure, and threatened, others were prepared in advance and did their best to give adequate answers with their best pronunciations. As the goal of the interview was to get variable in a natural way, I first improved it by focusing their attention on answering questions based on their daily lives at school. This enabled them to produce more words than in the first interviews within which they were warned about the assessment of the quality of their output (oral production). In other words, the solution to make them speak naturally was to favor

unconsciousness by stop talking about language variation and favor opened questions about the learning environment. This permitted to have more words that could reveal more variables.

1.1.3. Variables

The fundamental variable taken into account to collect the data of this study is the correctness in pronunciation. In fact, as the study is concerned with the identification of learners and English language users through their oral production, variables deal with the production of phonemes like “th” , “a” , and “o” whose realization are troublesome in a French speaking environment.

1.1.4. Methods

Data were collected through a qualitative method. The interviews have been made at the university Alassane Ouattara within two years, 2016-2017. They were unstructured and by their flexibility, the conversations were opened and turned into active and creative one. The interviews consisted in asking questions to respondents about the English language learning conditions and the environment in which the learning takes place. They were asked questions so that they could talk about their difficulties and suggestions for a better learning. Clearly, the questions enabled them to exteriorize their feelings and opinion on these aspects of their training so that their difficulties, worries and hopes could be exteriorized. Under this method, qualitative data on phonetics are available for determining non native English language learners’ identity when using the Standard English. The purpose as it has been enlightened above is to make them speak more so that we could have more words from them.

1.2. Data presentation

The following table shows the data collected at the Campus two of the Alassane Ouattara University of Bouaké. Respondents’ pronunciations will be judged according to the following items: “G” for Good (correct pronunciation) and “B” for Bad (all other pronunciations).

Table I: table summarizing some respondents’ ways of pronunciation at Alassane Ouattara University’s department of English.

Speakers	Their pronunciation	IPA transcription	Phonemes (sounds)	Judgment of respondents’ pronunciation

		British	/	American	
Speaker1	Have [hʌv]	[hæv] ; [həv]		[æ] ; [ə]	G
	Them [dem]	[ðem]		[ð]	B
	Role [rɒl]	[rəʊl]		[əʊ]	B
Speaker 2	Those [voʒ]	[ðəʊz] ; [ðoʊz]		[ð]	B
	So [so]	[səʊ]		[əʊ]	B
	About [eɪ'baʊt]	[ə'baʊt]		[ə]	B
Speaker 3	according [eɪ'kɔː.dɪŋ]	[ə'kɔː.dɪŋ]		[ə]	B
	Going ['gɔɪŋ]	['gəʊɪŋ]		[əʊ]	B
	Than [dæn]	[ðæn]		[ð]	B
Speaker 4	These [vɪz]	[ðiːz] ; [ðæs]		[ð]	B
	Profitable ['prɒf.I.tə.bl]	['prɒf.I.tə.bl]		[ɒ]	B
	Can [kæn]	[kæn]		[æ]	G
Speaker 5	Opportunity [ɒ]	['ɒp.ə'tjuː.nəti]		[ɒ]	G
	Accessible [æk'ses.ə.bl]	[æk'ses.ə.bl]		[ə]	B
	That [dæt]	[ðæt] ; [ðət]		[ð]	B
SPEAKER 6	Go [gəʊ]	[gəʊ]		[əʊ]	G
	This [dɪs]	[ðɪs]		[ð]	B
	can [kʌn]	[kæn]		[æ]	B
SPEAKER 7	Then [ðæn]	[ðæn]		[ð]	G
	Knowledge ['nɒl. Idʒ]	['nɒl. Idʒ]		[ɒ]	G
	Disappointed[dɪs.ʌ'pɔɪntɪd]	[dɪs.ə'pɔɪntɪd]		[ə]	B
SPEAKER 8	The [və]	[ði] ; [ðə]		[ð]	B
	Are [ʌ:r]	[v:r]		[ɒ]	B
	Pronunciation [ɒ]	[prə , nʌnt.sɪ'eɪ.ʃn]		[ə]	B
SPEAKER 9	Not [nɒt]	[nɒt]		[ɒ]	B
	Acceptable [ʌk'sep.tə.bl]	[æk'sep.tə.bl]		[ə]	B
	This [ðɪs]	[ðɪs]		[ð]	G
SPEAKER 10	Of [ɔf]	[ɒv]		[ɒ]	B
	Than [vʌn]	[ðæn]		[ð]	B
	Accustomed [ʌ'ks.təm]	[ə'ks.təm]		[ə]	B

Source: personal construction.

The table as presented above enables to identify the phonemes and their different realization in a non-native environment. Accordingly, the chosen phonemes have multiple realizations in Côte d'Ivoire mainly to Bouaké English language learners. In accordance with the words collected from these non-native speakers, the variable “th” is realized as [ð] according to the IPA. As far as the phoneme “a” is concerned and according to the IPA, within the selected words three sounds are allowed: [æ]; [ə], and [ɒ]. The third phoneme “o” in their words is realizable as: [ɒ]; [ə]and [əʊ] in accordance with IPA.

But in this environment where coexist the French language as official language and the other local languages the phoneme “th” has three possible realizations which are: [ð];[v]; and [d]. As for the phoneme “a”, it appears through the following sounds: [æ]; [ə], [ɒ]; [ʌ]; and [eɪ]. The third phoneme “o” is articulated as [ɒ]; [ə]; [o]; [ɔ]and [əʊ]. The size of samples and the percentages of the different realizations of the variables are recorded in the table below:

Table II: size and percentages of the realization of the different sounds

Phonemes	Sounds	Respondents' pronunciation	percentage
Th	[ð]	02	20%
	[v]	03	30%
	[d]	05	50%
A	[ʌ]	06	60%
	[æ]	01	10%
	[eɪ]	02	20%
	[ɒ]	01	10%
	[ə]	00	0%
	[əʊ]	00	0%
O	[ɔ]	03	30%
	[ə]	00	0%
	[o]	04	40%
	[əʊ]	01	10%
	[ɒ]	02	20%

Source: personal construction

2. Results and discussion

The results of the investigations show that the English language in a non-native environment is submitted to change as it has been mentioned in the introduction. Those changes

linguistically are known as variation. Although linguistic variation can have many origins, they all lead to the creation of speech communities.

2.1. Results

The different tables show the effects of contact of the local languages with the English language. We notice the alteration of speech sounds in the interactions of Ivorian English learners. Ten English language learners have been interviewed and for S. J. Tracy (2013, p.138) five interviews are sufficient unless we don't find the data needed, we can go above until we find the required data. Within their output, three words randomly containing the phonemes selected as variables have been recorded and analyzed through phonetic theories. Ten words containing the phoneme "th" realized as [ð] according to IPA have been recorded. Ten other words containing the phoneme "o" realized as [əʊ] ; [ə] and [ɒ] according to the English standard have been reported through different words. Moreover, ten other words showing the phoneme "a" have been collected. The phoneme according to the international phonetic alphabet is realizable as [ə] ; [æ] and [ɒ]. These data in the selected environment revealed the information below:

- The voiced inter-dental fricative [ð] losing its nature and becoming voiced, labio-dental fricative [v]. In some cases, it is also taken for a voiced, alveolar, plosive [d]. The common point between them is that they are all voiced.
- The back closed-mid lax , rounded vowel [o] ; the back open-mid lax rounded vowel [ɔ], are used where the diphthong made of central mid open, lax and the back high lax [əʊ] vowel; the back low lax vowel [ɒ] , and the central mid open lax vowel [ə]are required.
- As for the third category of sounds, they appear as [ə] ; [æ] and [ɒ] which are respectively:
 - the central mid lax vowel
 - front low-mid lax vowel and,
 - back low lax vowel

In this environment, they become [ʌ] a back low-mid lax vowel and the sound [eɪ], just like the first letter of English language alphabet.

On the ground, the interviews revealed three categories of pronunciation of the sound [ð]. Accordingly, it was pronounced [v] by thirty percent (30%) of the population interviewed; fifty

percent (50%) reproduced the sound as [d] and the third category, made of twenty percent (20%) of the target population realized the sound correctly. As for the phoneme “o” , it was pronounced four ways. Forty percent (40%) of the respondents pronounced it [o]. Thirty percent (30%) pronounced it [ɔ]; twenty percent (20%) realized it like [ɒ] and the ten percent (10%) used correctly the sound [əʊ]. These interviews grossly revealed the feelings of the English language in such environment facing the results of their output. In fact, most of English language learners at the University Alassane Ouattara complain about the lack of learning material, the time devoted to speaking the English language is not enough, and even in places supposed to favor practice, the use of the English language is not total. It is altered with French from time to time. And the last complaint was that there were almost no scholarship to go abroad or to countries where the language is spoken so that to be immersed. Some very few people acknowledged that although the difficulties, they toughly gathered money for some linguistic trips to get immersed.

2.2. Discussion

This experimental study devoted to determine the linguistic size of identity revealed that identity is not only created but also is multidimensional. That is the existence of linguistic digital identity and the intangible one. The present research aims at demonstrating how can linguistic digital identity move to an intangible one. Specifically, on the ground, the output of English language learners in Côte d’Ivoire, a French speaking country was greatly influenced by the dominant language they speak. The results show that English sounds like [ð], [o] and [a]were respectively affected by some familiar sounds like [v]; [d]; [ɔ]; [o] [e]; and [æ]. The English phonemes “th” in this case identifiable by [ð], and “o” recognized by [əʊ]; [ə] and [ɒ], then [a] identifiable by [æ]; [ə] and [ɒ] lose their nature and become [v]; [d]; [ɔ]; [o], and [ʌ]; [eɪ]. By this action, their tangible identity recommended by the IPA becomes intangible by their users’ interaction in a non-native environment. Their identity is then changed as well as those of their users by the birth of a new category of English language speakers. It means that identity can be perceived through three angles; legal matters, social matters and individuals’ physical aspects. V. D. Gaulejac (2002, p. 176) certifies that identity encompasses all the features that enable to talk about resemblance or the belonging to the same group or species. He argues:

L'identité est définie à partir de l'appartenance de chaque individu à une famille, une communauté, une classe sociale, un peuple, une nation, etc. Le collectif préexiste à la personne, lui assignant une place dans la structure sociale à partir d'une série de modifications et de normes

de classement qui fondent l'ordre symbolique. Instance de référence, entre l'imaginaire et le réel, entre le temps chronologique de l'Histoire et le temps du vécu, entre le personnel et le social, le symbolique instaure les mots et les signes nécessaires à la définition de soi-même. Chacun s'inscrit dans cet ordre en reprenant à son compte les éléments qui lui permettent d'affirmer son identité culturelle, ethnique, nationale, ou même continentale. Entre l'identité individuelle et l'identité collective, il existe des liens étroits dans la mesure où, loin de s'opposer, elles se coproduisent¹

By this quotation, it is clear that, the term gathers what is necessary to talk about sameness and similarities between people. And as well as personal identity, collective identity focuses on social aspects that preexisted before. However, V. D. Gaulejac (2002, p.175) states that in addition to their common bases, identity is at the same time subjective and objective. It not only focuses on the three aspects listed above but also the feelings, perceptions and intensions which are subjective, vulnerable and transitory. Although the matter of speech sounds' mispronunciation taken as feature of linguistic and personal identification may seem transitory, it stays obvious by their existence.

Being a social construct, the identification process deals with the association of a personal identifier with an individual attributes, (name and surname, physical aspects of the term, function, language through speech communities, nationality, and many other aspects of human daily activities) which can be associated to people. Language being a criterion of identification, linguistic identity represents the identification of individuals along with the language they speak (A. Pilote et al., 2020, p. 66-68)

For J. D. Feron (1999) along with the previous definitions given to the word, they seem not sufficient to cover all the domains it is concerned with. Accordingly, it must go beyond and cover legal matters. That is to say, since the existence of someone must be proved by some evidences like name, age and some physical traits, linguistic identity is also confirmed legally by norms like the international alphabet and IPA. In the same way, linguistic identity can be established by the recognition of its speakers M. Bucholtz and K. Hall (2017).

¹ Identity is defined from the fact that each individual belongs to a family, a community, a social class, a people, a nation, etc. The collective preexists the person, assigning him a place in the social structure based on series of modifications and classification standards. They form the basis of the symbolic order. Instance of reference, between the imaginary and the real, between the chronological time of History and the time of lived experience, between the personal and the social, the symbolic establishes the words and signs necessary for the definition of oneself. Everyone fits into this order by taking on their own the elements that allow them to assert their cultural, ethnic, national, or even continental identity. Between individual identity and collective identity, there are close links to the extent that, far from opposing each other, they co-produce. (My own translation)

Cote d'Ivoire is a French speaking country where many others foreign languages mainly German and Spanish coexist. So, English finds itself in an environment where local languages and French Language which is the official language, influence the English language.

In fact, S. Krashen (2013, p.20) and N. H. Tuan , T. N. Mai, (2015,p.10) demonstrate that users of a second language need to be in an immersion environment to really overcome second language learning challenges like suitable pronunciation. As mentioned above, the relations of forces between English and mostly French in Cote d'Ivoire, especially in Bouaké are marked by some pronunciation gaps that do not affect meaning. This phenomenon has already been explained by many linguists and results in what is known as language variation.

From the data, it can explicitly be seen that Bouaké English language learners) pronounce the phonemes “th” mostly as [d] and [v]. Fewer succeed in producing the correct pronunciation [ð]. As for the phoneme “o”, they mostly produce it [ɔ], and [o]. . Sometimes, they produce [ɒ] which are very closed to their vernaculars and mostly French languages. In some rare cases, they succeed in reproducing “o” as [əʊ] which is mostly correct. And concerning the last phoneme chosen for this study “a”, it is somehow successfully realized as[ʌ], for S. Krashen(2013,p.20) and T.D. Keeley(2016,p.59), this is not only due to the existence of other languages, but also to many other reasons in relation with learners. They may be physiological, psychological, environmental or others.

CONCLUSION

After enlightening the meaning of the word “identity” linguistic identity would refer to all features that enable to identify a language. These features in this case are concerned with the name and the structure of that language. In this context, the digital linguistic identity refers to the tangible or digital elements that language is made of and can be represented internationally. The International Phonetic Alphabet which enables to materialize the English language sounds appears as the suitable means by which language sounds articulation can be checked. Through IPA, language sounds can be materialized and described so that sounds that do not exist or which are mispronounced are recognized. Otherwise, linguistic intangible identity would represent the new language that derives from the English language affected by the changes from non-natives interaction. Also, the changes as presented in table I do neither affect the meaning, nor communication. Thus, linguistic intangible identity is an identifier by means of which its performers can be identified. And, those speakers stay a new speech community identifiable by their output.

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