

**CODE-SWITCHING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN
CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH**

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Abstract

This paper focuses mainly on the exploration of the significance of code-switching in communicative contexts. It specifically examines code-switching as a sociolinguistic resource for identity construction in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, with emphasis on how Ifemelu and other characters manage selfhood across transnational spaces. Gumperz's Contextualisation Theory and Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model serve as the theoretical bedrock for this study. To realise the aim of the paper, these theories facilitate the analysis of how code switching functions in unveiling the contextual cue and a strategic choice of language that help the characters in *Americanah* construct, manages, and establish identity across various social and cultural settings. The novel demonstrates that linguistic choices operate not merely as communicative tools but as symbolic acts that reveal characters' attempts to align with, question, or distance themselves from specific cultural affiliations. Ifemelu moved from competent use of Nigerian English and Pidgin in Lagos to her gradual adoption of American phonology and her later conscious reclamation of Nigerian linguistic identity, exposes the tensions inherent in diasporic subjectivity and racialised assimilation. Equally, characters like

Obinze exemplify how language practices mediate class mobility and cultural adaptation within postcolonial and globalised contexts. The paper demonstrates how Adichie employs the language variation to point to the sociocultural power relations, authenticity, and belonging, focusing on emotional and ideological aspects of linguistic hybridity. This study proposes that the idea of code-switching in *Americanah* is a narrative device that keeps an account of the flux, negotiation, and contestation of identity among migrants in multicultural settings, projecting academic discourses of postcolonial language usage and migrant self-representation.

Keywords: Bilingualism, diaspora, language ideology, migration

Introduction

Americanah is the transnational novel of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in which she narrates the story of the migratory process of Ifemelu a young Nigerian woman who goes away to United States and Obinze who goes away to the United Kingdom. The novel unveils such themes like those of migration, race, belonging and cultural displacement as the characters in the novel find their way in new social environments even as they retain their connection to Nigeria. Language plays a central role in this experience, with characters often switching between Nigerian language and the English language, and vice versa, and Nigerian Pidgin. This paper looks at the operation of these code-switching practices as discursive practices by which the characters engage in negotiating and constructing their identities with respect to both local and transnational domains.

Language does not exist in isolation, it is contextualised. This implies that language is situated within a sociocultural environment (Akindele & Adegbite, 2005). Studies in sociolinguistics posit that speakers use linguistic codes strategically to establish and project social identities within diverse contexts (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Omoniyi & White, 2006). For instance, in Nigeria, a typical example of a multilingual society and transnational environment. Code-switching, the act of alternating between languages or linguistic varieties, is useful not only as a communicative mechanism but also as a symbolic tool for representing identity, signaling group membership, maintaining cultural loyalty, and navigating social hierarchies (Gumperz, 1982;

Myers-Scotton, 1993). Similarly Ashcroft et al. are of the opinion that even within postcolonial African literature, the complex histories of colonisation, migration, hybridity, and cultural negotiation, which highlight linguistic performance at the instance of local identities and global influences, are still reflected in linguistic choices (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

Furthermore, Nigeria also stands as a prime example of a linguistically diverse postcolonial nation where English operates alongside indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin as symbols of social class, education, and cultural standing. To a large extent, and according to Bamgbose (2014) and Adegbija (2007), the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment is a fertile ground for fluid linguistic mobility, an environment where individuals switch freely between Standard English, Nigerian English, and Pidgin based on context, audience, and social intent. Blommaert (2010) and Nkwi (2022) strongly believe that this kind of linguistic plurality shapes self-presentation and group belonging, and it becomes more noticeable when Nigerians resettle in Western societies, giving rise to new linguistic ideologies and power structures that mediate identity formation.

Americanah, one of the novels by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is a fictional presentation of these linguistic and identity interactions in transnational migration that is heavily critical in nature. Via characters such as Ifemelu and Obinze, the story demonstrates how Africa migrants face and resolve linguistic demands in the United States and the United Kingdom. The processes of assimilation, racialisation, and cultural nostalgia are a burden to Ifemelu whose language path includes transitions between the Nigerian English, African American Vernacular English (informally), Standard American English, and Pidgin.

Her experiences demonstrate that language is central to managing race and belonging in the diaspora, challenging the assumption that linguistic adaptation equals acceptance or empowerment (Nwakanma, 2017). Obinze's British encounters similarly reveal the tensions between immigrant precariousness and linguistic performance, projecting how language is deployed for both empowerment and marginalisation.

Studies in *Americanah* have mainly focused on the theme of race, diasporicism, and transnationalism (Eze, 2020; Okuyade, 2020). The studies considered in this paper do not dismiss the fact that language is a form of identity, but to a great extent, they consider it in terms of themes and do not focus on the pragmatic and stylistic process of language use. This gap is addressed in the current study where close stylistic and pragmatic analysis of code-switching is conducted in specific interactions, how the language used serves as a source of contextualisation, stance markers, and identity indicators as the characters conform, criticize, or oppose sociocultural norms.

It observes that language choice has moved from a mere literary device to a lived sociolinguistic practice, describing and shaping the migrant condition, particularly concerning the complex context of identity politics in postcolonial and globalised settings. In this respect, the given work focuses on the essential role of code-switching as the means of the narrative and identity interpretation in modern African literature and demonstrates that the linguistic practice reflects the power of agency and social resistance. By considering the language use of the characters in the Nigerian and American space, the study shows that identity is not fixed but fluid, negotiated and constantly re-constructed in the discourse.

With a detailed reading of *Americanah*, it offers an insight into the ways African migrants manage belonging, cultural continuity, linguistic power, and racialised experiences, enriching the scholarly discourse on language, migration, and identity in contemporary global literature. This study, therefore, seeks to analyse how code-switching in *Americanah* serves as a sociolinguistic and narrative strategy through which characters construct, negotiate, and represent identity in various transnational spaces. It intends to identify and classify instances of code-switching among key characters in *Americanah*; interpret how these linguistic shifts represent belonging, resistance, power, and cultural negotiation, and analyse how linguistic choices shape diasporic identity and self-presentation within the novel.

Review of Related Literature

The sociolinguistic theory has long developed that code-switching is patterned as a resource to index social identities and put interaction

into perspective. The contextualisation cues of code-switching as presented by Gumperz (1982) are the foregrounds of the interactional work done by the speakers when they switch between linguistic codes. Although this framework has been clearly used to analyse conversational data, its analytical possibilities to literary dialogue especially in migrant fiction have had relatively less practical focus. The given study expands the ideas of Gumperz since it shows how the characters of Adichie employ the code-switching not only as a means of controlling the interaction but also of dramatizing the tensions of the identity within the narrative space.

To elaborate on Gumperz, the Markedness Model proposed by Myers-Scotton (1993) explains the reasons why bilingual speakers will select specific codes to index status, solidarity, or identity. Even though this model has been extensively used with other sociolinguistic examples of African contexts, the literature, which has been conducted on *Americanah* so far, seldom operationalises the model on the specific interaction of the characters. Whereas the abstract use of identity in the previous body of scholarship can be broadly seen to follow a similar pattern, the current research will impose the model directly onto the textual interactions, revealing how marked and unmarked options determine the social placement of characters in the context of diaspora.

In the field of African sociolinguistics, the pragmatic and indexical roles are recorded in the works of Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin (Adegbija, 2007; Bamgbose, 2014). These works however mainly deal with the spoken discourse, as opposed to literary representation. Though Ugwuanyi (2025) emphasises recent developments in sociophonetic research, corpus-based research of Nigerian English, these methodologies fail to make any consideration of how fictional dialogue derives real sociolinguistic practice. This work fills this gap by addressing the literary language used by Adichie as the place in which the sociolinguistic reality is recontextualised artistically.

According to postcolonial scholars, linguistic hybridity in African literature serves as an opposition to colonial language orders (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2002; Adejunmobi, 2004). Even though such a view throws more light on the ideological importance of multilingualism, in many cases, it can be at a macro-level. In comparison, the current

research study exhibits how resistance is performed in a pragmatic way, by making moment-to-moment code decisions, which indicate conformity, deviance, or conformity.

The predominant studies on *Americanah* specifically have been on race, migration, and transnational identity (Nwakanma, 2017; Okuyade, 2020). Although these analyses adopt the concept of linguistic hybridity, they usually perceive language as a backdrop, but not as an interactional process. Newer research (Bhusal, 2025; Singh, 2025; Edward, Tyokor, and Iloanwusi, 2025) acknowledges code-switching as an aesthetic and political strategy, but does not often provide pragmatic analysis in addition to a stylistic analysis of specific passages. This work contributes to the debate by combining the sociolinguistic theory with a close textual analysis in demonstrating how exactly code-switching conducts identity work in the novel.

Overall, despite the fact that the current literature confirms that language is relevant in *Americanah*, only a limited number of the studies deal with the critical examination of how pragmatic decisions and how stylistic patterning interact with each other within the text. This work has placed itself as a methodologically based intervention that bridges the sociolinguistics, pragmatics and postcolonial literary analysis by integrating the Contextualisation Theory (Gumperz) and the Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton).

Theoretical Framework

This study is conducted under the lens of Gumperz's Contextualisation Theory and Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model, two pivotal sociolinguistic theories that directly inform the analysis of code-switching as a tool for identity construction. These frameworks provide both interactional-pragmatic and socio-motivational perspectives for investigating the strategic deployment of Nigerian English, American Standard English, and Nigerian Pidgin in *Americanah*.

Gumperz's Contextualisation Theory (1982)

Gumperz (1982) describes code-switching as a contextualisation cue used by speakers to signal social meaning, alignments, attitudes, and identity positions in conversation. In this study, linguistic choices

are embedded in social contexts and operate as signals from which speakers negotiate power, intimacy, solidarity, or distance. In the case of *Americanah*, Ifemelu's movement between American English in professional or academic spaces and Nigerian English or Pidgin with Nigerian compatriots serves as a contextual cue representing belonging, nostalgia, and identity readjustment; it frames her identity in a way that is different according to the audience and situation. Therefore, one of the strategies that can be used as a powerful contextual cue to indicate solidarity, distance, authority, intimacy, resistance, or alignment in a multilingual context is the shift between linguistic codes. This theory is particularly appropriate for the analysis of *Americanah* because it demonstrates several instances where characters incessantly navigate diverse social environments shaped by migration, race, and cultural difference.

Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model (1993)

A complementary approach adopted in this study is Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model. This is a model that unravels the ideology behind the basic reasons why speakers choose particular codes in specific social situations. According to Myers-Scotton, this model categorically establishes that speakers' deployment of marked or unmarked linguistic choices is normally a factor of expected norms and desired identity outcomes. Characters' linguistic choices often exhibit such strategic negotiation in the novel *Americanah*.

An instance occurs in the text when Ifemelu adopts American English in academic or professional settings. At this point, the character strategically establishes an "unmarked choice" that is in consonance with institutional expectations and also with assimilation pressures. On the other hand, when she introduces Nigerian Pidgin or Nigerian English in these contexts, she somehow generates a "marked choice" representing cultural identity and resisting full assimilation. Thus, this model ensures a framework that enhances the interpretation of code-switching as identity work, that is, a conscious social action from which characters normally position themselves in relation to power structures, cultural expectations, and interpersonal relationships.

In an attempt to uncover how code-switching in *Americanah* functions as a strategy for identity construction, this study employs a qualitative,

descriptive, and interpretive research design. A qualitative approach is appropriate because of its emphatic emphasis on the meaning, function, and social significance of language use in the text rather than numerical measurement. While the primary data come from the work *Americanah*, a novel deliberately selected because of its vast representation of Nigerian migrants navigating linguistic and cultural spaces in the United States and the United Kingdom, special attention is given to the protagonist, Ifemelu, whose linguistic choices in dialogues, blog posts, and internal monologues contain useful instances of identity negotiation. Equally, secondary data include relevant interactions between Obinze and minor characters who participate in transnational linguistic exchanges.

A systematic textual reading of the novel was conducted to identify instances of code-switching, noting passages with contextual notes such as the speaker, the language, the type of switching, and classification based on the type of switch (such as intra-sentential, inter-sentential, tag switching) and its function. Excerpts that vividly describe concepts of identity negotiation, cultural belonging or resistance were selected by purposive sampling. The criteria used to choose the right excerpts are the following: there must be a code-switch to the Nigerian English and American English, and it may or may not include the presence of the Nigerian Pidgin, there must be a situation where the social, cultural, or ideological orientation is demonstrated, and the excerpts must be relevant in terms of identity, migration, or transnational experience. Data analysis was done in line with the principles of pragmatic-stylistics due to the fact that the research poses the question in constructing identity through language in a literary and diasporic world.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section is devoted to an articulated pragma-stylistic analysis of code-switching in the novel, with a special focus on its role in identity construction, negotiation, and representation. Through the aforementioned theories, the study explores how characters like Ifemelu and Obinze strategically manipulate Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and American English to establish a sense of belonging, resist assimilation, and affirm cultural identity.

Code-Switching and Affirmation of Nigerian Cultural Identity

During most of her interactions with compatriots, Ifemelu frequently employs Pidgin and Nigerian English. One particular instance is during a conversation with her friend in New York, where she states:

Na so life be for America, dem no sabi how we dey do things for Lagos.

A sense of solidarity and shared cultural understanding is signaled here through the deployment of an intra-sentential switch. In consonance with Gumperz (1982), this switch serves as a contextual cue for intimacy and in-group membership. In the case of Myers-Scotton (1993), the use of Pidgin in the above is labeled a “marked choice” in a predominantly American English environment, affirming Nigerian identity and somehow resisting total assimilation. A similar instance is equally noted in Ifemelu’s blog posts while she attempts to maintain Nigerian idioms with:

Some people sabi hair politics pass others, na true talk I dey yan.

The use of a peculiar idiom here, as a personal choice, gives priority to cultural authenticity while equally maintaining a diasporic voice that sends signals to Nigerian and African readers in general.

Negotiation of Transnational Belonging

The notion of code-switching equally reflects an idea of negotiation of belonging across transnational spaces. For example, Ifemelu intentionally deploys Standard American English whenever she is in a professional gathering. One such instance is obtained in an email to her editor:

I will submit the article by Friday, ensuring all sources are properly cited.

Here, in consonance with the context, the language use aligns with the expected norms, i.e., an unmarked choice. However, immediately she comes in contact with Nigerian acquaintances in the US, Ifemelu

reverts to the use of Nigerian English. For example:

Chai! I no believe this thing just happen!

This type of alternation is a marker of her ability to navigate multiple cultural expectations concurrently and with ease. Similarly, another character that displays this linguistic attitude is Obinze. One of his interactions in London captures this pattern; Obinze, in a conversation with a local landlord, adopts the use of formal British English for the purpose of presenting himself as competent and respectful:

I assure you I will pay the rent promptly.

But the situation is not the same in the midst of his Nigerian friends, he switches to Nigerian English as found in:

How far my guy?

This greeting is used by the Nigerians in the diaspora, and it is an identity at the collective level. In terms of style, Nigerian Pidgin serves as a cultural shortcut, which instantly defines the in-group membership. In a pragmatic sense, it serves as a contextualisation cue (Gumperz, 1982), which presents the interaction as intimate and culturally based. Identity in this case is relational, built up in terms of shared linguistic resources, which delimit an insider and an outsider. Pidgin is specifically chosen to assert Nigerian identity even in the foreign environments demonstrating how language maintains the sense of community belonging across borders.

Expression of Resistance and Critique

Code-switching is also deployed as an instrument of resistance. Ifemelu critiques American racial dynamics on her blog by blending Nigerian English and American English:

Dem dey always talk say race no matter, but for real,
dem dey see you different.

One of the basic ideologies behind the shift is to signal an ideological stance, linking the Nigerian diasporic audience with shared

experiences of exclusion. According to Gumperz, the shifts are known as contextualisation cues that frame narrative perspective and social commentary. While, in line with Myers-Scotton, they are called marked choices, with the intention to resist dominant linguistic norms and equally affirm Nigerian cultural authority. In the same vein, when Ifemelu recounts experiences of stereotyping in New York, she combines Nigerian English syntax and American vocabulary as in:

They dey look me like say I no belong here, but I just
waka go my work.

The tension between keeping oneself and adapting in this way is one of the elements used to resist assimilation without denying her postcolonial agency, as in the above alternation. To this end, Ifemelu takes advantage of her blogging to consciously showcase language hybridity by inverting the mainstream discourse on race and identity in the west. The use of Nigerian linguistic forms in the context of English speaking itself can be viewed as an example of what Myers-Scotton (1993) had referred to as a marked choice, a tactic that is used to oppose assimilation and assert postcolonial agency.

Recapturing Identity with Linguistic Choices

Ifemelu overtly rejects an idea of linguistic subordination in her linguistic choices perhaps to construct self-identity. A typical instance is observed in:

I like my accent.

This statement of declaration is a turning point of identity reclaiming. The utterance is not linguistically complicated, and pragmatically it is aggressive. In making the choice, which does not embrace linguistic assimilation, Ifemelu is being bold. Here, identity is agentic and self-generated and not determined by external confirmation. The denial of the accent repression is an indicator of the re-identification with her Nigerian identity, an utterance that equally constitutes a marked choice (Myers-Scotton, 1993), the fact that code choice is a means of asserting autonomy and opposing symbolic domination.

Accent, Self-Perception and Fragmented Identity

She had learnt to talk like an American

This work of observation is an indicator of the initial stages of identity change of Ifemelu in the United States. The adoption of American accent is not a neutral language phenomenon but a self-making process that is driven by self-preservation and social progress. Pragmatically, the accent change is an unmarked option (Myers-Scotton, 1993), through which Ifemelu can conform to the prevailing norms in institutional space. On an identity front, though, the change brings about alienation, because her linguistic self no longer coincides with her cultural one. The identity, in this case, is represented as something imposed by the outside and being in conflict with itself, and language serves as the tool of that conflict.

In all these cases, *Americanah* identity is created using repetitive, habitual use of language. The alteration of the accent, the use of Pidgin and strategic use of codes allow characters to bargain a place to belong, fight marginalisation, and establish the continuum of cultures. Code-switching then operates as a performative resource, which enables the identities to be performed and not simply described. In this way, it has been shown that the identity of *Americanah* is the result of practical communication and the style. Language is not a representation of identity, but a way of making visible, disputed and changed identity.

Conclusion

In this study, an attempt has been made to interrogate how code-switching serves as a strategy for identity construction in *Americanah*, with emphasis put on the protagonist Ifemelu and selected minor characters. Through the theories applied, the analysis established that linguistic alternation is contextually motivated and socially strategic, functioning to communicate relational, cultural, and ideological meanings.

The findings suggest that the instances of code-switching in the novel perform several interrelated functions. While it helps characters who attempt to affirm their Nigerian cultural identity, especially through the use of Nigerian English and Pidgin in intimate or nostalgic

interactions, thus pointing towards solidarity and authenticity, it also facilitates the negotiation of transnational belonging. In this way, it helps characters manage assimilation pressures in the diaspora without jeopardising their cultural heritage. In addition, code-switching functions as a true tool of resistance and critique, allowing characters to challenge dominant Western norms while asserting their postcolonial agency. By and large, the research proves that code-switching is intentional, socially knowledgeable, and ideologically significant. It is the work of collective and personal identity. Finally, the fact that the Nigerian English, Pidgin, and American English are strategically used in *Americanah* can be interpreted as the means of importance of the language as a key tool in negotiating cultural, social, and ideological identities, which makes language a significant concern in the modern African diaspora literature.

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