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Theresa Heyd*

Narratives of Belonging in the Digital Diaspora: Corpus Approaches to a Cultural Concept

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Abstract: In this study, I examine narratives of belonging through a corpus of digital diasporic discourse. The corpus is based on a Nigerian online discussion forum; its users primarily consist of both local Nigerians and members of the globally dispersed Nigerian diaspora. The study sets out by providing a working definition of narratives of belonging couched in the sociolinguistic tradition of approaching narrative structures. This includes aspects of personal narration, structural features, and reference to concepts that are salient in the construction of belonging. From this preliminary definition, retrieval strategies are developed to identify narratives of belonging in a large-scale dataset through a combination of manual and automated searches. The dataset of narratives is then analyzed, both in terms of structural features such as length and variation in narrative complexity, as well as linguistic properties, such as code-switching and the use of toponyms. Finally, these analyses are used to identify emerging topic strands and recurring themes in these narratives of belonging. It can be argued that such codifications of the diasporic experience are created and reinforced through individuated stories. Narratives of belonging, in other words, systematically contribute to the identity work performed in and by a digital diasporic community.

Keywords: narratives of belonging; digital diaspora; sociolinguistics of globalization

1 Introduction

Example 1

userID 5362 (m)

Re: Are You Proud To Be A Nigerian?

« #119 on: May 21, 2006, 04:04 PM »

haha

when I was in US, when I was asked

Where are you from ?

I say , London

Why , because I study in London

But like duh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

You definitely know am a Nigerian (or @ least an African)

& if asked

Where ae you from originally

Yes, a proud Nigerian

Besides, am always Nigerian in nature

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*Corresponding author: Theresa Heyd, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany, E-mail: theresa.heyd@fu-berlin.de

Sometimes, you wonder if I ever left Muritala Airport
 But why,
 AM A PROUD OMO NAIJA FOR LIFE

The posting quoted above is a fairly typical excerpt from the Nigerian diasporic web forum *nairaland.com*; precisely, it was made in the context of a thread – one of numerous such interactions on this forum alone – where Nigerian identity in the light of global mobility is explored, affirmed and critically discussed by the forum participants.

The utterance quoted in example 1 is notable for a number of reasons. In terms of the linguistic choices and practices displayed in the posting, we note typical choices of young educated Nigerians with a diasporic background. Thus the overall style of the text orientates toward fairly Standard Nigerian English, but includes stylistic and orthographic markers of informality that are typical of forum discussions (e.g. the use of interjections such as *haha*, the strategic use of punctuation resources such as *!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!* for emphasis and @ and & as placeholders for lexical items, or the inclusion of typing errors such as *ae*). From a variationist perspective, the overall text is relatively unmarked, yet contains a few lexical items that stand out and can be interpreted as stylistic moves by the writer: the interjections/discourse markers *like duh*, which can be considered stereotypes of American English colloquial usage in this context; the reduced form *am* for ‘I am’, which has acquired a distinctive role of signaling Nigerianness in the context of this forum (see Heyd 2015); finally, the brief passage of code-switching into Nigerian Pidgin in the concluding statement *AM A PROUD OMO NAIJA FOR LIFE* (I am a proud Nigerian man forever).

Apart from these linguistic features on the systemic level, the short piece of writing is also notable on the discursive level. Thus the posting is constructed around repeated instances of the question *Where are you from?* – a discursive move which, as Myers (2006) points out, is central in the making of place-identity. In this case, the poster sets out by anchoring his diasporic identity both to stays in *US* and *London*; as the text progresses, he self-identifies progressively as *a Nigerian (or @ least an African)*; *a proud Nigerian*; *always Nigerian in nature*; *A PROUD OMO NAIJA FOR LIFE*. This very on-record display of a Nigerian identity is flanked by a place-reference to *Muritala Airport* (a common spelling variant of Murtala Muhammed International Airport, the international airport of Lagos).

All of these microlinguistic and discursive features feed into a larger and more fundamental quality of the short text – namely, its structure and construction as a narrative. More specifically, we can read this text as a narrative of belonging: thus it recounts, based on the structural principle of temporal sequencing, a life story told in terms of migration and mobility, including residual structural features such as an evaluation and a coda (*A PROUD OMO NAIJA FOR LIFE*). Understood in this sense, the notion of “narratives of belonging” can be seen as a feature of diasporic discourse that is not just applicable in a general and abstract anthropological sense, but which holds sociolinguistic relevance for the identification and analysis of such texts.

This paper thus constitutes an exploration and analysis of narratives of belonging in digital diasporic contexts, and their place in the analytical repertoire of the sociolinguistics of mobility. At the same time, it also aims to provide a more principled look at structural and linguistic properties that are indicative of such narratives. In other words, by putting the focus on the narrative substance of such stories, it becomes possible to analyze them in a systematic way, and thus to uncover linguistic and discursive patterns of meaning-making. In diasporic discourse, speakers have a communicative need to foreground their relation to place: their roots, their place of residence, and the trajectory of migration that connects these dots (Heyd and Honkanen 2015). To do so, they often resort to narratives of belonging, and it is argued here that these narrative episodes carry the potential for sociolinguistic insight in a double sense: on the micro level, such stories are the carriers of linguistic features that are indicative of diasporic discourse and thus constitute an ideal object for close linguistic analysis. On the macro level, narratives of belonging are highly condensed discourse structures that encode speakers’ attitude toward place and the diasporic experience. By analyzing them, we can uncover patterns of stancetaking and emerging themes that range from nostalgia for the homeland to idealizations such as the ‘model minority’.

From this vantage point, the analysis of narratives of belonging thus becomes a valuable resource in the analytical toolkit of the sociolinguistics of globalization and mobility. By shifting the analytical focus from qualitative, exploratory readings of ethnographic data to the systematic assessment of diasporic discourse in a corpus approach, it should be possible to systematize and generalize our understanding of narratives of belonging and their recurring features.

2 Narratives of belonging: pre-theoretical and anthropological approaches

The term *narratives of belonging* has become increasingly popular and widely used in recent years (see, for example the study by Anchimbe, this volume). This is hardly surprising: exploring the “shared stories that people socially construct to account for who they are, how the world works, and where different people belong”, to use the useful description that Hughey (2012: 163) gives of narratives of belonging, is an approach that is likely to appeal to scholars working in many different fields. It may be noted that the term “narrative of belonging” brings together two very powerful and evocative notions: on the one hand, storytelling as a fundamental human activity and linguistic act of identity; on the other hand, belonging as a category that is relevant to all explorations of human experience in societies marked by globalization and mobility. In this sense, it becomes apparent why narratives of belonging may constitute an important category of analysis; at the same time, it may also be argued that the concept requires a deeper theoretical and empirical exploration in order to be made useful on a broader level.

Originating in sociological and anthropological research, the notion of narratives of belonging has been applied to life stories and narrated identities constructed around migration, displacement, and diasporic experience; and, occasionally, other social categories such as class or gender. While it is surprisingly difficult to pinpoint the emergence of the term, it is historically associated with sociologist explorations of ethnicity and mobility. For example, Anthias (2002), in discussing collective identity among diasporic and immigrant groups, explores the notion of translocational positionality; here, she invokes the term *narrations of belonging* to explore how her informants, a group of young Greek Cypriot second-generation migrants, “narrated their sense of belonging and not belonging” (Anthias 2002: 492). Using the slightly more general term “narratives of location”, Anthias gives the following working definition:

A narrative is an account that tells a story, and a narrative of location, as it is used here, is an account that tells a story about how we place ourselves in terms of social categories such as those of gender, ethnicity and class at a specific point in time and space. Such accounts often mirror as well as produce social ontologies. However, the narrative is more than a place where accounts of social ontologies are given and goes beyond reproducing and at times remaking these. The narrative is also both a story about who and what we identify with (a story about identification) and is also a story about our practices and the practices of others, including wider social practices and how we experience them. These stories do not necessarily have a beginning, plot or ending; they are composed of fragments whose place in the whole text is emergent and at times contradictory. Nor does the sequence or chronological citing of information necessarily mirror the ‘life’ trajectory or have any particular significance (...) From this point of view, any account that is given about a person’s place in the order of things (in the broader sense) constitutes a story about ‘location’. Such stories will also be articulated in terms of notions of identity making claims to ‘who I am’, which groupings ‘I identify with’ and which groups ‘I participate within’. These stories, at one level, draw on and are therefore derived from collective stories told around us (which often do have a component of a narrative that unfolds genealogically), from discourses, representations and normative systems, as well as stories told within our families and by a range of significant others. At the same time, these stories are ways in which we try to order and organize our experiences in terms of certain conventional norms or rules. These relate to the type of narration that is deemed appropriate in a particular context and in relation to a particular audience – imagined or real. Therefore, these stories have both a conventional and strong intersubjective component. (Anthias 2002: 498-499)

While this account includes a range of social categories (gender, ethnicity and class), it becomes clear that location, and the positionality that is associated with it, constitutes the fundamental category here. It is also worth pointing out that this working definition places strong emphasis on the constructive power of personal narratives (in not just mirroring, but also producing social ontologies). Finally, Anthias’

description at least hints at linguistic properties of narrative accounts, even though they are described here primarily in terms of a lack of linguistic ordering principles – that is, fragmentation, emergence, and lack of sequentiality.¹

In the wake of such positional papers, the notion of narratives/narrations of belonging has gained traction in many studies touching on issues of migration, mobility and constellations of identity in globalized societies. In many cases, the term is used as a more or less peripheral descriptor of discursive activity, but other approaches have an explicit focus on narratives of belonging. For example, the collected volume by Besson and Olwig (2005) on Caribbean narratives of belonging explicitly brings together such Caribbean-based studies focused on “analyzing narratives as accounts of lived lives, as a way of structuring the past, and as modes of communication and performance” (Besson and Olwig 2005). Finally, in sociolinguistic analysis, the concept of narratives of belonging increasingly figures in analyses of multilingualism and multicultural settings, such as Haque’s study on language, race, and belonging in Canada (Haque 2012), but the concept has also been used to examine narrative identity and life trajectories in more general terms. For example, Duranti’s work on the narrative self-positioning of politicians employs the concept of narratives of belonging. Grounded in an ethnographic understanding of storytelling as an act of identity-construction (Ochs and Capps 2001), Duranti describes a narrative of belonging in a very general sense as

a subset of narratives of personal experience (...) In addition to the emphasis on shared “place” (e.g. “I have lived in the district for n- number of years”), narratives of belonging introduce putatively universal or quasi-universal life experiences (e.g. getting or being married, having children, sending children to school, seeing them grow, being exposed to traumatic events, taking care of one’s parents or grandparents). (Duranti 2006: 479)

Duranti’s perspective on narratives of belonging is somewhat specific in that his analysis is focused on the public and thus staged and carefully curated narratives of politicians during election campaigns, but this vantage point also adds another relevant dimension – namely, that such acts of storytelling can take on a function as “coherence-builders” between an individual’s experience and societal norms and discourses.

In summary, we can note that the analysis of narratives of belonging seems to be a timely and highly applicable concept. The stories that people tell about their (shared or individuated) identities have been found to be a felicitous format to capture and systematically chart the lived experience of global mobility, of diasporic experiences and other effects of migration in times of superdiversity. However, the contexts of usage described so far also indicate that the attention paid here to the actual process of storytelling, and to the linguistic-structural result that it produces, is often rather peripheral or coincidental. In part, this is certainly a side effect of ethnographic research: for example, close interaction and interviews with groups or individuals are quite simply likely to produce narrative material. As Anthias points out, “narrative accounts by actors are often the most accessible for social researchers who are interested in the ways individuals understand and interpret their place in the world” (Anthias 2002: 498). As a result, such sociological and anthropological concepts of narratives of belonging are often pre-theoretical, or remain on a more abstract level. Based on this tradition, the underlying narrative concept tends to remain quite general and encompassing. Understood in this sense, analyses in this framework are often strongly geared toward the qualitative interpretation of such stories, and to more theoretical abstractions that may be made on their basis. By contrast, they tend to pay less attention to the linguistic mechanisms involved in their telling. In other words, their focus is on the concept of *belonging* (that is, storytelling as identity construction), rather than on the ensuing *narratives* (that is, storytelling as a discourse pattern).

3 Narratives of belonging: a linguistic working definition

The following theoretical outline is an attempt of making a contribution to the study of personal narratives by linking anthropological insight into identity construction through shared stories with the tools of

¹ It is striking how this linguistic account of (the absence of) structural properties foreshadows constructivist approaches such as small stories (Georgakopoulou and Bauman 2008).

linguistic analysis. By focusing on narratives of migration, mobility and the diasporic experience, we can zoom in on changing patterns of language use. Thus narratives of belonging are a prime site to study multilingual and translocal linguistic repertoires, and to find evidence of globally emerging vernaculars. In the specific context of digital linguistic practices, diasporic narratives of belonging provide evidence for the increasing importance that anchoring to physical space and locality hold in online communication. In this sense, the study provided here links the analysis of personal narratives online with sociolinguistic concepts of space and place.

3.1 Narratives of belonging: levels of granularity

The introductory considerations have already hinted at an issue of granularity. That is, the notion of narratives of belonging can be situated at different levels of specificity or abstraction in the discourse continuum. Moving from more holistic to more atomic, researchers situate narratives of belonging

- in the most general sense, as a recurring ‘master narrative’, where “the narrative of belonging is pegged against other ontological frameworks. See e.g. Markowitz et al. (2003: 304) who contrast “a master narrative of belonging” with “reflexive self-awareness” in a study on Black Hebrews in Israel.
- In the sense of recurrent tropes or common shared stories pertaining to a certain community; e.g. “the history of Whiteness in South Africa as a narrative of belonging” (Nuttall 2001), or Canada’s “existing Anglo-Celtic dominant narrative of belonging” (Haque 2012: 5).
- In the sense of stories told on the individuated level, as one person’s specific account of past and present experience, heritage, ethnic/racial affiliation, citizenship, migration; e.g. the narrative episode by Walter Capps analyzed in Duranti (2001: 124).

It is the most specific level of individuated and verbalized stories that can serve as a basis for linguistic analysis. The following considerations therefore target narratives of belonging at the most atomistic level: as narrative episodes uttered by individuals and presented as self-contained stories of origin and identity. However, it seems likely that these individuated stories may be the fundament of such amalgamated and ritualized narratives of belonging as they are identified at rougher levels of granularity.

3.2 A socio/linguistic perspective

From a recent sociolinguistic perspective, the analysis of narratives of belonging is particularly relevant and promising because it fits in well with an ongoing spatialization of sociolinguistic analysis, and a (renewed) interest in categories of place and space in the analysis of situated language use (for overviews, see e.g. papers in Auer et al. 2013; Auer and Schmidt 2010; Georgakopoulou 2015). This is not limited to approaches that focus on geolocational distribution and areal aspects of language use – issues which are of great methodological interest through the rise of big data approaches and new digital mapping techniques. It is also on the discursive level that the notion of place-making and the presentation of self through spatialized discourse has received renewed interest (e.g. Myers 2006). As argued previously (Heyd and Honkanen 2015), this is also the case – and possibly in particular the case – for the discourse of migrants and members of diasporic networks. Thus in diasporic discourse, speakers have a communicative need to foreground their relation to place: their roots, their place of residence, and the trajectory of migration that connects these dots (Heyd and Honkanen 2015). In this sense, narratives of belonging in such discourse are not a coincidental feature, but an important discursive tool and sociolinguistic resource for communicants. This was shown in detail in Heyd (2014), where narratives of belonging were analyzed in conjunction with the self-ascription of ethnoracial lexical labels. Based on such findings, the central assumption for the data analyzed here is therefore that diasporic discourse is ripe with narratives of belonging at the individuated (that is, most fine-grained) level. As a consequence, such narrative episodes carry the potential for sociolinguistic insight. On the micro level, stories are the carriers of linguistic features that are indicative

of diasporic discourse and thus constitute an ideal object for close linguistic analysis. On the macro level, they constitute highly condensed discourse structures that encode speakers' attitude and stances toward place and the diasporic experience.

3.3 Working definition: minimal structural criteria for narratives of belonging

Based on the sum of considerations laid out so far, the following suggestion can be made regarding the minimal criteria that a piece of discourse might have to fulfill in order to be considered a narrative of belonging. These criteria have to be of a somewhat formal, structural nature, because they need fulfill the purpose of *identifying* narratives of belonging with a certain level of confidence, in particular where they appear in large datasets (see data and methods, below). Based on these minimal criteria, more open, qualitative questions can then be brought to the identified texts for purposes of analysis

- Personal narratives. In order to constitute a narrative of belonging, it seems fundamental that a narrative episode be personalized and related to individual, lived experience. This criterion excludes general and generalized remarks and statements about belonging and identity; it also excludes third-party accounts, where speakers may retell the narratives of belonging of others. As a consequence, such personal narratives of belonging can be identified by at least some minimal, residual deictic anchoring of the narrative episode to the speaker's perspective (e.g. through person- or place-deictic proximal features).
- Account of events. In order to be considered a narrative of belonging, an episode of storytelling will have to include an account of events. Typically, such events will be in the past, although small stories research has highlighted the relevance of ongoing and developing events as a basis for storytelling (e.g. breaking news). However, events that are merely projected and lie in the future, or are described in a purely hypothetical manner, do not form the basis for narratives of belonging.
- Reference to concepts that are salient in the construction of belonging. In terms of its thematic scope, a narrative of belonging will include lexicosemantic cues that anchor the story to the narrative category of belonging. These can include place references; migration trajectories; reference to social categories such as race/ethnicity, cultural heritage, or citizenship; and also descriptions and self-assessments of language skills.
- Evaluation. Finally, a narrative of belonging can be expected to contain some sort of evaluative stance toward the narrative episode – for example, a critical positioning toward the narrated events or an affiliation with the story.

Based on these criteria, narratives of belonging can be identified within larger chunks of discourse, and can be isolated as narrative episodes that may often occur in larger passages where general negotiations and discursive explorations of identity take place. To have such a heuristics of identification can benefit any researcher who is confronted with large datasets, including material from ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and in particular data from digital discourse. In the following, this approach is explored through a corpus of online forum discussions; based on the minimal criteria laid out here, other open questions can then be explored based on the narrative episodes that the approach yields. This concerns, in particular, more open and qualitative questions, for example:

- What structural properties do such narratives display? (Length and complexity, codeswitching, naming practices...)
- How is identity work achieved through these narratives?
- How do narratives at the individuated level interact with more general/abstract levels of narratives of belonging?

In this sense, the approach suggested here leads to qualitative close-reading through a preceding procedure of quantitative filtering.

4 Data and methods

4.1 The Nairaland corpus

The work presented here uses a Nigeria-based community to explore these quantitative and qualitative aspects of narratives of belonging. The platform *nairaland.com* is a web forum that doubles as an online community whose members are local Nigerians as well as a globally spread diasporic community. The discourse produced in this context provides rich and multi-layered material to track the dynamics of a digital diaspora: linguistically, the data exhibit a complex linguistic ecology, in which ethnolinguistic repertoires, standard and nonstandard varieties of English, as well as other languages are used and performed. In terms of topics, there are recurring references to the diasporic experience: participants navigate topics such as belonging and adapting, being authentic and legitimate. This resonates well with the overall notion of digital diasporas as an emerging phenomenon of diasporic and transnational communication. As Crush et al. (2012) outline,

(o)nlne communication has become particularly valuable to transnational and diasporic communities as it creates a meeting place of the private and the public, the interpersonal and the communal (...) In and through the Internet, diasporic communities have created a space of (global) commons, a sense of ‘imagined community’ across borders. (Crush et al. 2012: 347)

The study is based on a fully searchable corpus of Nairaland data developed at the University of Freiburg that has a size of ca. 17 million tokens and a time span of three years (2005-2008). Because the data are organized so as to retain the original structure of the digital genre – that is, as threads that capture online conversations between participants – the material is well-suited for both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This means that the size of the corpus permits meaningful assessments of linguistic patterns; at the same time, the context of utterance for linguistic items can be analyzed in qualitative close readings that permit a truly situated analysis. In this sense, the material doubles as corpus and community; the strengths of both approaches are combined in this analysis to explore the digital diaspora that is established through *nairaland.com*. Thus while the analysis is centered on qualitative close readings of digital narratives of belonging, it does so based on a quantitatively commanding dataset that permits generalizations.

It can be suggested that the demographic setting, and the conversational nature of discourse in such an online community, appear to prompt the telling of narratives of belonging. Thus the corpus data contain a wealth of personal accounts where users discuss their origins, migration experiences, and attitudes toward ethnicity, citizenship, and other categories of belonging, in the context of a globalized and highly dynamic diasporic community (for quantitative and qualitative explorations, see e.g. Heyd and Mair 2014, Heyd 2014).

4.2 Data extraction

From the description given above, it is clear that the data used here constitute very promising raw data for analyses of narrative episodes within a framework of belonging as understood here. Indeed, this was confirmed by early explorative analyses of the material (see e.g. Heyd 2014), where narrative episodes repeatedly surfaced as peripheral structures in other analytical strategies.

These preliminary findings prompted the question addressed here: how can narratives of belonging at the individuated level be reliably identified in a large-scale corpus? Considering the large datasets that are typical of contemporary corpus and digital humanities contexts, this needle-in-the-haystack problem can pose considerable methodological challenges.

For the present analysis, the minimal criteria outlined in section three were therefore strategically used to identify and extract narratives of belonging from the Nairaland corpus. To do so, a semi-automated approach was adopted that used three steps of data extraction:

- In a first step, a large subcorpus was created by extracting concordances for verbal constructions

that are indexical of narratives of belonging. In particular, this included the strings *born in*, *moved to* and *grew up in*. Based on these concordances, the entire contributions containing the strings were extracted. In addition, entire forum threads were identified based on qualitative analysis and added to the subcorpus if they constituted an explicit elicitation of testimonials, such as *Where are you from?*; *Are you proud to be a Nigerian?* or *Nigerian Kids Born In The US Going Back To Nigeria*.

- Based on this initial subcorpus, the data were manually coded for the minimal structural criteria outlined in section 3.
- On this basis, a final dataset of 221 narratives (word count 38639) of belonging was identified and extracted.

It should be emphasized that this dataset does not represent the totality of narrative episodes of belonging in the Nairaland corpus. However, the procedure demonstrated that relying on a set of rather formal and structurally motivated criteria enhances the quality and quantity of relevant texts extracted. The following provides a first descriptive analysis of narratives of belonging in the Nairaland corpus.

5 Narratives of belonging: a first corpus-based analysis

In terms of structural features, a first striking factor of variation in the individual texts examined here is their length. Thus some of the forum posts are extremely elaborate and lengthy texts (the highest word count is 1849 for an individual text), whereas some of the entries are extremely short and structurally minimalistic texts that may consist of only one or two sentences or, in some cases, only a few words. In example 2, given below, the word count of 223 is far from the maximum lengths encountered, but it illustrates the sequentially dense structure of some of the longer narrative episodes:

Example 2

userID 6812 (f)

Re: Nigerian Kids Born In The US Going Back To Nigeria

« #21 on: August 07, 2008, 09:06 AM »

yeah I could so relate to that.

I went to Nigeria when I was eight.

As soon as I got there, they all just looked at me kind of funny or whatever.

Then they would all kind of mock me in a weird way and they would talk about how I did my hair and the clothes I would wear and how I sounded funny.

But we were only supposed to stay there over the summer, but we ended up staying for six months and me and my mom came back just in time for Christmas.

Anyways, the whole time that I stayed there, I kind of adopted their customs and ways of doin things so when I had came back to the US I kind of had to readjust to everything back here and also explain why I had started to school here in the States like four months late.

Just being there had opened my eyes to a whole nother side of my ethnic background.

But just thinking about the whole thing about my family over there kind of sarcastically making fun of the way I said things or the way I acted, it kind of makes me laugh!

But it was then that I realized that I'm not just an Americian, but I'm also of Nigerian descent, so therefore that makes me a Nigerian.

This narrative is typical of long episodes in that it contains colloquial stylistic markers that indicate a stance modelled on oral storytelling; this is evident in the bundling of discourse markers, hedges and general extenders (“kind of funny or whatever”), the use of narrative cues (“Anyways”), and repeating patterns such as sentence-initial “but”.

Example 3 is a highly representative case of the narrative episodes found in the Nairaland subcorpus:

Example 3

userID 15243 (f)

Re: Raising Children: Abroad Or Overseas

« #3 on: July 19, 2007, 12:28 AM »

I was born? in Nigeria. I came to America when I was 15. Now married with 3 children, my husband and I were thinking about sending the girls to Nigeria for High School. I mean we will all be living in Nigeria. I will never send any of my kids to Nigeria without me being there.

In this brief episode (word count: 56), the structural features of a narrative of belonging as posited here are all present in an extremely concise and condensed, yet fully-formed manner. Thus the narrative sets out with the place of origin (“born? In Nigeria”), then retraces the trajectory of migration (“came to America”) and links it to larger biographic aspects of belonging (“Now married with three children”). A striking aspect of this narrative episode – and one that is not present in many of the data points – is the linking to ongoing events and thus to unfolding aspects of this narrative of belonging. Thus the concept of return migration is taken up here and considered as a possibility: “(...) thinking about sending the girls to Nigeria (...) I mean we will all be living in Nigeria”. Finally, the narrative episode closes with an evaluative positioning: “I will never send any of my kids to Nigeria without me being there.” In the context of narrative constructions of belonging, this statement can be read as more than just general parental consideration, but also as a cautious stance toward experiences of migration and displacement – and, possibly, as a somewhat reserved diasporic perspective toward the country of origin.

Finally, example 4 is a striking illustration of how minimalistic narrative episodes of belonging can be worded, while retaining the structural minimal criteria laid out earlier:

Example 4

userID 6409 (f)

Re: Where Are You From?

« #152 on: January 24, 2008, 03:17 PM »

Born in UK. 100% Bini.

In this ultra-short narrative episode, comprising just five lexical elements, some syntactic features are elided. However, since the first sentence can be reconstructed as “(I was) Born in UK” as a direct response to the question contained in the thread title, the utterance fulfills the minimal criteria of personal deictic anchoring and an account of events past. With regard to terms and concepts that are salient for identity construction, this minimalistic narrative operates on an opposition between (a British/diasporic) place of birth and a (Nigerian) ethnic affiliation: thus Bini refers to Edo ethnicity. The wording “100% Bini”, in this sense, can be understood as more than just positive stancetaking and identification with the speaker’s ethnic heritage; through the direct structural opposition of both propositions, the ethnic positioning functions as an evaluation where diasporic belonging via birthplace is constructed as secondary.

Apart from length and internal structure of the narrative episodes, language choice emerged as a relevant category of analysis. Based on the selection procedure for the subcorpus, it is in the nature of the data that most narrative episodes are written in varieties of English. This selection bias, however, by no means precludes the use of multilingual practices within the individual texts. In particular, many of the narratives contain practices of code-mixing and code-switching, as the following examples illustrate:

Example 5

userID9503 (m) Re: Where Are You From? « #117 on: October 03, 2007, 06:03 AM »

My dad is from Oko in Anambra state,my mom is from Dallas, Texas[usa].I was born in Huntsville,Alabama.I went to Naija for 4 years.Now,I be original Igbo man[I na-ghota]

This brief narrative of belonging succinctly sketches a diasporic upbringing in a biracial family; echoing the trajectory of migration from example 3, a return to Nigeria is part of this narrative and figures prominently in the evaluative stance. For this speaker, the period of going “to Naija for 4 years” is cast as a rite of passage that seems to be associated with ethnic authenticity – the making of a “real Igbo man”. In this narrative episode, the authenticity claim made in the evaluative segment is accompanied by and underscored with a code-switched utterance: “I na-ghota”, a formulaic greeting in Igbo (“How do you do”). In this sense, the switch into the ethnic language that represents the speaker’s self-positioning can be understood here as a very on-record and explicit act of identity that is achieved through conscious language choice.

In example 6, the language switch is inserted in a much more self-reflexive and metalinguistic context:

Example 6

userID 15400 (f) Re: Nigerian Kids Born In The US Going Back To Nigeria« #18 on: November 19, 2007, 04:31 AM »

I guess everyone has a different experience. I was born in the states but raised in Nigeria Secondary/Primary School. When I speak English fellow Nijas cannot tell I am from Nigerian until I pull out my **you de yan Okpata** or **which ones na**, then people realise that I am from Nigeria. Personally, I leave English behind when I hit the Lagos airport.

The narrative of belonging told here moves along surprisingly similar lines of being born in the American diaspora, but moving back to Nigeria, in this case for schooling. The speaker here self-aligns not with a specific ethnic identity, but rather uses Nigerian Pidgin resources to self-align with “fellow Nijas”. The code-switched segments (“you de yan Okpata” – you speak rubbish; “which ones na” – which one is it) are embedded here as self-quotations. This points to a recurring theme in these narratives of belonging: namely, that a speaker’s linguistic profile and repertoires are seen as proxies for expressing and signaling belonging.

Finally, the Nairaland subcorpus also contains cases of multilingual usage which are less transparent and visible as the previous instances:

Example 7

userID (8599) Re: Where Are You From? « #169 on: Yesterday at 06:56:45 PM »

mama from umutu in delta and dada from easterncape south africa

moi an irish by naturalisation.

In this case, the narrative structure of the episode is again extremely short and minimalistic. Indeed, while this segment displays clear proximal deictic anchoring, overt place references and sequentiality, it is debatable whether there is a true narrative impetus at the core of the utterance; nevertheless, a certain residual narrative quality is evident. It is all the more striking, then, that such a truly “small” story opens a window onto a biography that is rich with aspects of mobility and belonging. Thus it contains references to roots in Nigeria (“umutu in delta”) and South Africa (“easterncape”), but also to a trajectory to the diaspora and, indeed, a self-alignment with a Western identity (“irish by naturalization”). These two aspects of identity are subtly yet distinctly marked by brief segments of code-mixing. Thus reference to the speaker’s parents is made as “mama” and “dada”; while these are virtually global forms of reference to parents in early language acquisition and in affective contexts, these can nevertheless be understood here as brief switches into Nigerian Pidgin (see e.g. Faraclas 2013: 183). By contrast, the Western identity is introduced by the self-reference “moi”. It is unlikely that the speaker here intends to signal a French repertoire, or affiliation with Francophone contexts. Rather, the item “moi” here is used as part of a Western English repertoire, where the word acquires a self-ironic and playfully pretentious social meaning (see Wales 1996: 15 and fn. 21 for a discussion of this usage). In this sense, the word is used here as a gentle form of self-deprecation, while also signaling intense familiarity with Western English forms of displaying irony. In sum, it can be said that

where multilingual practices are employed in these narratives of belonging, this does not happen for purely practical (e.g. translating or explaining) purposes; instead, the example discussed here indicates strategic use, e.g. to make authenticity claims and reinforce stance-taking, to illustrate metalinguistic debates, and, in general, to index identities.

As a final point, it is interesting and insightful to consider the naming practices that speakers employ to construct their narratives of belonging. The notion of nonstandard place names is explored in depth in Heyd and Honkanen (2015); as was shown there, such toponyms are strategically employed for self-positioning, for example to show affiliation with or distance from a specific place (and, by extension, the social meanings associated with that place). In other words, place names play a crucial role in the discursive place-making that speakers engage in (Myers 2006). It is not surprising, then, that such nonstandard toponyms play an important role in the construction of narratives of belonging. Indeed, this linguistic practice is present in many of the examples analyzed so far. Thus the speaker's affectionate reference to "Muritala Airport" in example 1 is a nonstandard place reference that will only be understood by participants with good familiarity with Nigeria, Lagos and its infrastructure. The use of this term therefore does not just imply an affectionate speaker stance toward his country of origin; it also works as a marker of authenticity, and of legitimacy in his claims of belonging, of being "always Nigerian in nature". A much more pervasive term (indeed, the most wide-spread lexical label of belonging in the corpus – see Heyd 2014) is *Naija*, as an affectionate reference to Nigeria as a country and its inhabitants. This term was already seen in examples 5 and 6 is also employed in example 8:

Example 8

userID 7666 (f) Re: Are You Proud To Be A Nigerian? « #67 on: February 04, 2006, 03:56 PM »
 (...) i might hold an european passport but i still got my naija one..and its strictly for convenience purposes.. and if anyone asks me if I'm proud to be a nigerian...i say in my best warri imitation accent...I want to PROUD DIE? ?

In this case, it becomes evident through the narrative episode that the speaker is relatively far advanced in her acculturation process in the diasporic setting. Nevertheless, she emphasizes her Nigerian belonging by referring to "my *Naija* [passport]". This residual affiliation with Nigeria is further underlined by her reference to her linguistic profile, where she refers to her "best warri imitation accent". "Warri" here is a nonstandard toponym for Nigeria's delta region, based on the city of Warri. By extension, it has also become a nonstandard synonym for the use of Nigerian Pidgin, which is strongly associated with the delta region. By using the term "warri", and her attempt at a Nigerian Pidgin expression "I want to PROUD DIE" ('to die proudly'), the speaker thus actively affiliates herself with a Nigerian narrative of belonging, even though she self-reflexively describes this move as a form of "imitation".

As a final case, example 9 portrays a speaker who has fully embraced his superdiverse identity and fully acknowledges this status as a "citizen of the world" in his narrative of belonging:

Example 9

userID 9384(m) Re: Where Are You From?« #61 on: September 23, 2007, 12:09 PM »
 I guess I am citizen of the world, born in England by nigerian parents from Ijebu Ode and Sagamu. Now an american citizen. And yes, I have all palis. Would that make me a Naijabrican?

The self-reference "Naijabrican" is an ad-hoc lexical label, a portmanteau that incorporates *Naija*, *British* and *American* belonging. This example thus provides a striking illustration of how narratives of belonging are often created and maintained in this global diasporic community: as diverse and aggregated identities that may be multifaceted, but that can nevertheless be embraced and acknowledged in their complex nature.

6 Concluding discussion: widening the scope

This paper has attempted to provide a first concise analysis of narratives of belonging as a specific narrative genre, and to do so from an explicitly (socio)linguistic vantage point. In particular, it has argued that narratives of belonging can be understood as a productive category for linguistic and structurally oriented analysis. By approaching such narratives from an initially formal approach that orientates toward linguistic features and structural patterns, it becomes possible a) to reliably identify and extract narratives of belonging from large datasets such as corpus data or large ethnographic collections, and b) to systematize their exploration and description by grounding it in sociolinguistic categories of analysis.

Based on these guiding principles, this first overview on narratives of belonging from a sociolinguistic perspectives has highlighted a number of characteristics and features of such storytelling practices and how they pertain to the digital diaspora, in particular with regard to this global Nigerian community. Nevertheless, open questions remain. Thus the criteria established here could be tested against other datasets, in particular to test the robustness of these features across cultures and communities. Comparative data are widely available (see also paper by Anchimbe, this volume) and could be used to refine and further generalize this approach.

An additional dimension could not be explored here, but pertains in particular to narratives of belonging as they are being constructed on social media: thus anecdotic evidence suggests that the digital construction of stories as they are related to identity and concepts of belonging increasingly rely on multimodal resources. Thus narratives of belonging emanating from the digital Nigerian diaspora increasingly use audio/visually oriented platforms such as Tumblr or Pinterest; in these media-rich environments, narratives of belonging are often constructed around audio and visual cues such as color symbolism, video performances and similar material. It can be hypothesized that while the identities constructed here are relatively similar to the text-based narratives analyzed in this study, it is obvious that new heuristics must be found and employed to include such social media storytelling. Digital narratives of belonging thus provide a continuing challenge for a sociolinguistics of convergence that can attend to the diverse and complex forms of digital storytelling.

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