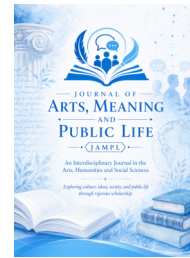
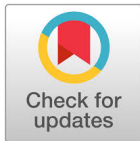


Published by FLAYOO PHL

Journal of Arts, Meaning and Public Life

Arts • Social Sciences • Public Life

<https://flayoophl.com/journals/index.php/jampl>



Language and identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Maasuur Demian Deakaa^{ID}, Solomon Fashie Aongo^{ID}

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University of Lafia, PMB 146, Makurdi Road, Gandu, Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 22 June 2026

Received in revised form: 12 August 2026

Accepted: 14 August

Available online: 14 August 2026

Keywords: Accent, Code-switching,
Negotiating identity, Nigerian English,
Racial discourse

DOI: [10.61298/jampl.2026.1.1.413](https://doi.org/10.61298/jampl.2026.1.1.413)

ABSTRACT

Language use and identity construction in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* reveal how linguistic practices shape cultural, social, and racial identity in transnational contexts. This study explores how accent, Nigerian English, and code-switching function as tools of self-expression, cultural assertion, and agency among selected characters in the novel. Using qualitative textual analysis, with passages selected at random, the study draws on close readings of the novel. The analysis is anchored in raciolinguistic theory and supported by postcolonial scholarship. The findings reveal that Nigerian English affirms cultural heritage, code-switching enables the negotiation of multiple social and racial spaces, and the strategic use of voice and silence empowers characters to assert identity and resist marginalisation. The study also shows how language interacts with racial consciousness: linguistic adaptation cannot erase societal assumptions, but it can mediate self-perception and agency. In conclusion, *Americanah* demonstrates that language is central to identity formation and negotiation, offering insights for educators, literary scholars, and practitioners on validating linguistic diversity, teaching strategic code-switching, and fostering the conscious use of voice to empower individuals in multicultural and diasporic contexts.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by FLAYOO PHL. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is a complex, dynamic, and socially mediated construct that encompasses how individuals understand themselves and are recognised within societal, cultural, and political contexts. It is not fixed; rather, it is continually negotiated through social interactions, lived experiences, and cultural practices. Key dimensions of identity include race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, social class, and language. Among these, language functions not only as a

tool of communication but also as a powerful marker of identity, signalling one's cultural heritage, social positioning, and membership in particular communities. A speaker's accent, dialect, and linguistic choices can convey authenticity, social belonging, or difference, shaping both self-perception and how others perceive him or her. Hall (1996) observes identity as "never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). In this sense, language becomes an important site for examining identity, as it allows users to explore the tensions, negotiations, and transformations that individuals experience in constructing their sense of self. Through narrative, authors reveal

*Corresponding Author. Tel. No.: +2347037704622.

e-mail: deakaad@gmail.com (Maasuur Demian Deakaa^{ID}),
phashsolo2020@gmail.com (Solomon Fashie Aongo^{ID})

how identity is performed, contested, and reimaged in response to social pressures, cultural expectations, and historical realities.

Adichie (2013)'s *Americanah* provides a particularly compelling literary exploration of identity in the context of migration and transnational experience. The novel traces the journey of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who moves to the United States for higher education and career opportunities. In doing so, she confronts the challenges of negotiating identity in a foreign society, where race, culture, and language intersect to shape perceptions of belonging and difference. Language, in particular, emerges as a critical site where identity is performed and contested. Ifemelu experiences the pressure to adopt an American accent as a means of assimilation and professional success, reflecting the social expectations placed on immigrants. The narrator notes that "Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American accent on a sunlit day in July, the same day she met Blaine. it was convincing, the accent. She had perfected, from carefully watching of friends and newscasters... it was an act of will. it took an effort... And so, she resolved to stop." (Adichie, 2013, p. 173). This statement explains the tension between performing a socially acceptable identity and maintaining authentic self-expression. At the same time, Nigerian English functions as a vehicle for cultural memory and self-assertion, allowing characters to preserve connections to their homeland and resist linguistic erasure: "Nigerian English is not wrong, it is alive and precise in its own way" (Adichie, 2013, p. 45).

The examination of language in *Americanah* is necessary for several reasons. First, it illuminates the complex ways in which migrants negotiate belonging and social acceptance in transnational spaces. Accents, dialects, and code-switching are not merely communicative tools but markers of cultural identity and social negotiation. Second, the novel explains the relationship between language and racial consciousness; in the U.S., Ifemelu's experiences force her to confront what it means to be Black, a racial identity she had not fully internalised in Nigeria. Furthermore, studying language in the novel demonstrates how linguistic practices can serve both as instruments of power and sites of resistance, shaping not only how characters are perceived but also how they perceive themselves. Ifemelu's blog demonstrates how language can be a medium of empowerment and critical engagement. She states that "when I write, I feel like I am reclaiming myself" (Adichie, 2013, p. 213).

Consequent upon the foregoing, the study investigates how language functions as a central marker of identity in *Americanah*, focusing on the interplay between accents, code-switching, Nigerian English, and racial consciousness. By explicating the ways in which characters negotiate, perform, and reclaim identity through language, the study reveals the broader implications of Adichie's work for understanding the interconnection of culture, migration, and social belonging. Generally, *Americanah* shows that identity is inseparable from linguistic practice, and that authenticity arises not from conformity to imposed norms but from speaking from a grounded sense of self.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RACIOLINGUISTIC THEORY

Raciolinguistic theory, developed by Alim et al. (2016), explores the intricate relationship between language, race, and social power. It posits that linguistic practices are deeply racialised and that

the way people speak—their accent, vocabulary, grammar, and style—can influence how they are perceived, treated, and positioned in society. The theory also emphasises that speakers from marginalised or racialised communities often engage in conscious or unconscious linguistic strategies, such as code-switching, to navigate social hierarchies, assert authority, or negotiate belonging.

Raciolinguistics is particularly suitable for this study because *Americanah* explores the experiences of Nigerian characters in diasporic settings where race and language intersect visibly. Ifemelu's adjustment of her accent and speech in the United States, Obinze's careful linguistic negotiation in London, and the racialised reception of their language, illustrate that identity formation cannot be understood without considering both linguistic and racial dimensions. Through this theory, the study explains how language functions not only as a marker of cultural identity but also as a medium through which racial consciousness, social power, and agency are enacted. Raciolinguistics provides a perspective for analysing how Adichie's characters use language to navigate transnational, cultural, and racial spaces, making it highly appropriate for examining the intersections of language, identity, and race in *Americanah*.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of Adichie's *Americanah* in which relevant passages are illustrating accent, Nigerian English, and code-switching were randomly selected and subjected to close reading. The analysis is anchored by raciolinguistic theory to examine how linguistic practices function as tools of self-expression, identity, and agency within transnational and racialised contexts.

4. ACCENT AND THE PERFORMANCE OF BELONGING

In *Americanah*, accent functions as a central site where identity, social mobility, and cultural negotiation intersect. For Ifemelu, her Nigerian accent is initially a marker of her personal and cultural identity, but upon arriving in the United States, she becomes acutely aware that it also signals foreignness and difference. Early in her experience, she recounts a painstaking exchange with the registration officer, Cristina Tomas, after the officer understands that she is a foreign student: "... You. Will. First. Need. To. Get. a Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office" (Adichie, 2013, p. 133). To gain a sense of belonging, Ifemelu decides to yield; the narrator confirms that "And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practise an American accent" (Adichie, 2013, p. 134). This demonstrates the performative aspect of language: accent is not merely a neutral marker of speech, but a social tool whose manipulation is often necessary to navigate institutional and interpersonal hierarchies. Lippi-Green (2012) argues that accents can carry implicit social evaluations and can function as markers of class, ethnicity, and perceived credibility, thereby advantaging or disadvantaging speakers in different contexts. Ifemelu succinctly exemplifies this argument in *Americanah*. Here, the American accent becomes a currency for professional acceptance and social legitimacy, revealing the pressures placed on immigrants to conform linguistically in order to achieve recognition and success. Yet this linguistic adaptation is fraught with tension, as it threatens Ifemelu's sense of authen-

ticity and selfhood. She acknowledges that while mastering the accent can open doors, it also produces a feeling of artificiality and estrangement:

Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words “You sound American” into a garland that she hung around her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won; Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally now. She had won, indeed, but her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers. (Adichie, 2013, p. 175)

This reflection shows the psychological dimension of linguistic conformity. Fought (2006) notes that linguistic discrimination operates not only externally but also internally, shaping speakers’ self-perception and reinforcing social hierarchies (Fought, 2006, p. 12). The act of modifying one’s accent thus becomes both a pragmatic strategy and a source of alienation, illustrating the double bind faced by migrants who must balance adaptation with cultural authenticity.

Importantly, Adichie (2013) presents accent as fluid and negotiable, capable of signalling resistance and self-assertion. When Ifemelu later chooses to abandon the American accent and return to her Nigerian speech patterns, it represents a conscious reclamation of identity: “I stopped pretending to be someone else. I spoke the way I had always spoken, with the intonation and rhythm of Lagos, and it felt like returning home. For the first time in years, I was not performing, not trying to pass, not negotiating my identity. I was simply myself, and it was enough” (Adichie, 2013, p. 112). This moment reinforces postcolonial perspectives on language and identity. Ngugi (1986) asserts that language is intimately tied to culture and self-definition, writing that to use one’s native language is to resist cultural domination and assert personal and collective identity (Ngugi, 1986, p. 4). Ifemelu’s linguistic reclamation illustrates this principle, emphasising that authentic selfhood does not require conformity to dominant norms but arises from embracing one’s own voice and heritage.

Accent in *Americanah* also intersects with race, revealing the limits of linguistic adaptation in a racially stratified society. Despite mastering an American accent, Ifemelu continues to experience the social realities of being Black in the United States:

I realised that speaking like an American did not make me American, did not shield me from the assumptions people made about me. Being black in America meant that every word I said, every inflection, was interpreted through the lens of race. No accent could change that; no speech pattern could erase the markers of skin. (Adichie, 2013, p. 98)

This observation demonstrates that while language is a crucial component of identity, it cannot fully mediate structural inequalities or erase societal perceptions. Alim et al. (2016) argue that

linguistic practice in diasporic contexts is inseparable from racial and social hierarchies, with speech both reflecting and reproducing power dynamics (Alim et al., 2016, p. 23). Ifemelu’s journey thus shows how accent functions as a tool for negotiation but not as a guarantee of belonging.

Finally, language becomes a medium for personal empowerment and agency. Through her blog, Ifemelu articulates her experiences and critiques social hierarchies, reclaiming her voice and authority. She states that “when I write, I feel like I am reclaiming myself, carving out a space where my words are not judged by accent, by color, by where I come from. Here, my language is mine, and it carries my identity, unapologetically” (Adichie, 2013, p. 213). Through these experiences, Adichie (2013) demonstrates that accent is not merely a stylistic feature of speech but a critical site where identity, authenticity, and power intersect. Ifemelu’s linguistic journey shows that identity is continually negotiated through language, and that true selfhood is achieved not through imitation but through the confident articulation of one’s own voice.

5. NIGERIAN ENGLISH AS CULTURAL ASSERTION

While accent reflects the performative negotiation of identity in transnational spaces, Nigerian English in *Americanah* operates as a deliberate assertion of cultural heritage and selfhood. For Ifemelu, retaining Nigerian linguistic patterns is not a deficiency to be corrected but a vital connection to home, memory, and communal belonging. Early in her American experience, she reflects on how her Nigerian English is perceived: “I noticed how Americans frowned at some of the words I used, how they repeated them, asking what they meant. But I could not stop saying ‘wahala’ or ‘abeg.’ It was not just habit; it was a part of me. I was saying who I was, even if no one else could understand it fully” (Adichie, 2013, p. 45). This emphasises that Nigerian English is a carrier of identity, linking language to cultural specificity and personal history. Ngugi (1986) asserts that language embodies culture and worldview; he states that “Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (Ngugi, 1986, p. 4). By retaining Nigerian English, Ifemelu resists linguistic erasure and asserts her right to exist authentically within a society that privileges American norms.

Adichie (2013) further demonstrates that Nigerian English allows characters to express subtlety of emotion, humour, and social critique that standard American English cannot fully capture. In her blog, Ifemelu reflects on cultural specificity and the expressive power of Nigerian speech: “Sometimes I write in ways that are not perfectly American, and readers comment on the words or the phrasing. But that is the point. Language is not only about comprehension; it is about identity. I write the way I think, the way my mind speaks, and my mind is Nigerian” (Adichie, 2013, p. 213). This shows that Nigerian English is not merely functional but performative and expressive, shaping the identity of the speaker and resisting homogenising pressures. Linguists have noted that such linguistic varieties function as sites of empowerment and cultural continuity in diasporic contexts. Alim et al. (2016) particularly observe that maintaining African linguistic features in diasporic writing can support a sense of authenticity and ownership while enabling speakers and writers to assert their histories and social

realities. Ifemelu's conscious use of Nigerian English, therefore, is both a stylistic choice and a political statement, asserting the legitimacy of her voice amid dominant linguistic hierarchies.

Moreover, Nigerian English in *Americanah* functions as a subtle critique of the epistemic authority of American linguistic norms. Through dialogue and internal reflection, Ifemelu often shows the richness and precision of Nigerian expressions, thus: "People said Nigerian English was broken, mangled, not real. But I knew better. It was alive. Every idiom, every inflection carried meaning beyond the words themselves. It was not lesser; it was different. And it spoke of a world I knew intimately" (Adichie, 2013, p. 112). In positioning Nigerian English as "alive" and precise, Adichie (2013) challenges colonial and postcolonial linguistic hierarchies that have historically devalued African varieties of English. Trudgill (2000) has argued that language varieties labelled as "non-standard" are often unfairly perceived as inferior, despite possessing internal logic, expressiveness, and social functionality (Trudgill, 2000, p. 89). In this light, Nigerian English in the novel emerges as a tool of self-assertion, authenticity, and resistance.

Finally, Nigerian English also serves as a marker of relational identity, distinguishing characters within both Nigerian and diasporic social networks. Through code-switching between Nigerian English, American English, and Igbo, Ifemelu negotiates her belonging in different contexts while signalling allegiance to her roots: "When I spoke to Nigerians, my words flew freely, filled with idioms and rhythms that were mine. With Americans, I modified, softened, adapted. But my real voice, the one that belonged to me and Lagos, came alive only among those who shared it" (Adichie, 2013, p. 132). This assertion demonstrates that Nigerian English is inseparable from social and cultural identity, functioning as a repository of memory, humour, and intimacy. It reinforces the idea that language is not only a tool of communication but a marker of belonging and resistance. Nigerian English in *Americanah* operates as a deliberate assertion of cultural identity, authenticity, and selfhood. Through its retention and strategic deployment, Adichie foregrounds the expressive, political, and social power of linguistic heritage. In resisting dominant American English norms, Ifemelu asserts that identity is performed through language, and that authentic selfhood requires fidelity to one's cultural and linguistic roots.

6. CODE-SWITCHING AND CONTEXTUAL IDENTITY

In *Americanah*, code-switching is not exclusive to Ifemelu; other characters also negotiate identity through language, showing how linguistic practice functions as a broader social and cultural phenomenon. Nicholas, Obinze's cousin, is described as using English with his children in a way that reflects sensitivity to their British accents:

Nicholas (his cousin) "spoke to them only in English, careful English, as though he thought that Igbo he shared with their mother would infect them, perhaps make them lose their precious British accents. Then he would say, 'Ojiugo', well done. I'm hungry". (Adichie, 2013, p. 239)

The novel further presents a London episode involving Emenike and pronunciation:

Once I was with him [Emenike] in London and he was mocking this guy he worked with, a Nigerian guy, for not knowing how to pronounce f-e-a-t-h-e-r-s-t-o-n-e-h-a-u-g-h. He pronounced it phonetically like the guy had, which was obviously the wrong way, and he didn't say it the right way. I didn't know how to pronounce it either and he knew I didn't know and there were these horrible minutes when he pretended we were both laughing at the guy. When of course we weren't. He was laughing at me too. (Adichie, 2013, p. 434)

These passages demonstrate that linguistic adjustment and pronunciation can become part of negotiating identity and social acceptance in the London setting. Fought (2006) observes that speakers from minority or immigrant communities may adjust their speech to navigate social hierarchies and reduce stigma.

Even younger characters, such as Doris, the editor of *Zoe Magazine*, navigate identity through language, though in subtler ways. Adichie (2013) reports that "... (Doris) spoke with teenage American accent that made her sentences sound like questions, except for when she was speaking to her mother on the phone; then her English took on a flat, stolid Nigerianness" (Adichie, 2013, p. 402). This observation illustrates the intergenerational and social dimensions of code-switching. Alim et al. (2016) argue that young diasporic speakers often develop a hybrid linguistic identity, blending elements from heritage and host languages to negotiate belonging in multiple spaces (Alim et al., 2016, p. 67). Doris's linguistic flexibility reflects this hybridisation, showing that code-switching is both a conscious strategy and a natural process of identity formation.

Through these perspectives, Obinze's struggle with assimilation, Auntie Uju's professional adaptation, and Doris's hybridised speech, Adichie illustrates that code-switching is a widespread and multifaceted phenomenon. It is simultaneously adaptive, performative, and expressive, enabling characters to negotiate cultural, social, and racial expectations while retaining connections to their heritage. Bucholtz (2011) presents code-switching as a resource for performing social identities and for signalling membership, resistance, or creativity. In *Americanah*, Adichie demonstrates that linguistic negotiation is inseparable from broader questions of identity, agency, and belonging across generations and contexts.

7. LANGUAGE, RACE, AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Adichie presents language as a powerful medium through which racial consciousness is both experienced and performed. The novel shows that linguistic practice in diasporic contexts is inseparable from racial identity, shaping how characters are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Ifemelu's experiences in the United States are central to this exploration. Early in her stay, she realises that her accent and speech do not shield her from racialised assumptions:

Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American accent on a sunlit day in July, the same day she met Blaine. It was convincing, the accent. She had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the *t*, the creamy roll of the *r*, the sentences starting with 'So', and the sliding response of "oh really", but

the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds. And so she resolved to stop, on that summer day, the weekend of Dike's birthday. (Adichie, 2013, p. 173)

The above illustrates the limitations of linguistic adaptation in navigating racial hierarchies. Indeed, language and race are intertwined in diasporic contexts, with linguistic conformity sometimes mitigating but never fully eliminating the social implications of racial identity. For Ifemelu, the tension between speech and skin colour becomes a site of racial consciousness, forcing her to confront the societal reality of being Black in America.

Obinze's experiences in London mirror this racial-linguistic intersection. As an undocumented Nigerian immigrant, he recognises that language alone does not grant him belonging; race and nationality profoundly shape social treatment:

I could speak properly, carefully, remove any trace of my Nigerian accent, but the police still looked at me differently. Landlords still hesitated. I learned quickly that language was necessary, but it was not sufficient. I was always someone else, someone foreign, someone suspect, no matter how I spoke. (Adichie, 2013, p. 180)

Obinze's reflection illustrates how racial and linguistic identities interact to influence social positioning. Fought (2006) shows that racialised speakers may continuously monitor and adjust their speech to navigate perceptions of competence and legitimacy. Adichie dramatises this concept through Obinze's struggle to reconcile linguistic adaptation with racialised marginalisation.

Aunty Uju, too, negotiates language, race, and professional authority in the U.S. medical system. Despite her expertise, she feels compelled to adjust her linguistic patterns to be recognised as competent: "Even as I worked hard to speak clearly, to avoid Nigerian idioms, to sound professional, I sensed that my race marked me first. Patients and colleagues judged me before I opened my mouth, and I learned that the right accent could help, but it could not erase what they saw" (Adichie, 2013, p. 205). This exposes the compounded pressures of racial and gendered expectations on language use. Lippi-Green (2012) believes that women of colour in professional spaces face intensified scrutiny over speech patterns, as linguistic norms are often racialised and gendered (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 72). Aunty Uju's experience emphasises that language functions as both a tool of empowerment and a site of vulnerability in racially stratified contexts.

Even younger characters in *Americanah* such as Dike begin to navigate racialised linguistic awareness. Though a child, he experiences subtle racial consciousness in his interactions: "At school, my teachers sometimes corrected the way I said certain words, saying they were wrong, but my mother told me it was just how we spoke at home. Still, I noticed how differently people reacted when I spoke differently, and I wondered if being black meant speaking in certain ways" (Adichie, 2013, p. 290). Dike's reflection demonstrates how racialised language awareness begins early and is embedded in social interactions. Alim

et al. (2016) argue that diasporic speakers often develop a raciolinguistic consciousness, an acute awareness of how speech is interpreted through racial lenses. Dike's hybrid speech patterns foreshadow the complex negotiations of identity he will continue to perform as he grows up in a bicultural environment.

Americanah shows that language is a critical medium for understanding and performing racial identity. For Ifemelu, Obinze, Aunty Uju, and Dike, linguistic practice is inseparable from racial consciousness. The novel demonstrates that while speech can facilitate adaptation and self-expression, it cannot erase societal assumptions rooted in race. As Ifemelu reflects through her blog, language can, however, serve as a means of empowerment and critique: "When I write, I feel my words are mine, unshaped by prejudice, unjudged by color. Here, my voice is free, and the world cannot reduce me to what I am not" (Adichie, 2013, p. 213). Through these experiences, Adichie emphasises that language mediates racial awareness and identity, shaping both external perception and internal self-conception.

8. SILENCE, VOICE, AND AGENCY

In *Americanah*, Adichie demonstrates that language is not only a medium for expressing identity but also a tool for claiming agency. Characters negotiate when to speak, when to remain silent, and how to use their voices strategically, showing the interplay between linguistic expression, empowerment, and social positioning. Ifemelu's blog serves as a primary site where she asserts her voice and reclaims agency over her experiences: "When I write, I feel like I am reclaiming myself, carving out a space where my words are not judged by accent, by color, by where I come from. Here, my language is mine, and it carries my identity, unapologetically. I am not performing, not hiding, not negotiating. This is me" (Adichie, 2013, p. 213). This emphasises the transformative power of language: by choosing when and how to speak, Ifemelu creates autonomy and resists societal pressures to conform. Bucholtz (2011) argues that voice in diasporic literature functions as a site of empowerment, enabling characters to critique dominant social structures while asserting selfhood (Bucholtz, 2011, p. 87). For Ifemelu, writing becomes a deliberate act of self-assertion and resistance against linguistic and racial hierarchies.

Obinze, too, experiences the tension between silence and speech as he navigates racialised and undocumented spaces in London. Constrained by fear and social surveillance, he often remains silent, aware of the potential consequences of speaking freely: "I kept my head down, spoke only when necessary, careful not to draw attention. Every word could be used against me. I learned that silence was a shield, a way to protect myself. Yet in that silence, I felt diminished, as if my voice did not belong in this place" (Adichie, 2013, p. 182). Obinze's experience exposes that silence can be both protective and limiting. Khalid et al. (2023) note that marginalised individuals often negotiate between vocal expression and strategic silence to navigate power asymmetries. For Obinze, language mediates survival, and his ability to speak freely is curtailed by social and legal structures, illustrating the constraints placed on agency in transnational and racialised contexts.

Aunty Uju's professional and personal experiences similarly demonstrate how voice is entwined with power and respect. While she adjusts her speech for professional settings, she also discovers

moments where speaking authentically grants her authority: “I learned to speak firmly, clearly, without apology. In the hospital, I had to assert myself to be heard, to be respected. But with my family, I let the words flow naturally, Nigerian words and rhythms that reminded me who I was. Voice is power, and choosing when and how to use it matters” (Adichie, 2013, p. 207). This exposes the dual nature of voice: it is a tool for both self-expression and strategic negotiation. Lippi-Green (2012) observes that linguistic performance can serve as a mechanism to assert authority, navigate institutional hierarchies, and resist marginalisation (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 72). Aunt Uju demonstrates in *Americanah* that agency involves knowing not only what to say but when and how to say it.

Even Dike, Aunt Uju’s son, encounters moments in which speaking about racialised treatment becomes part of negotiating identity and agency:

...my group leader, Haley? She gave sunscreen to everyone but she wouldn’t give me any. She said I didn’t need it... she thought that because you’re dark you don’t need sunscreen. But you do. Many people don’t know that dark people also need sunscreen... it’s okay, he said... You wanted her to give you the sunscreen too, right? I guess so; he said so with a shrug. I just want to be regular. (Adichie, 2013, pp. 183–184)

Dike’s response shows how racial difference can shape a young person’s sense of normalcy and belonging, while his willingness to speak about the experience makes voice part of the negotiation of agency.

Adichie illustrates that language is a dynamic instrument of agency. Whether through writing, conversation, or strategic silence, characters negotiate identity, assert selfhood, and resist social constraints. Voice becomes an act of empowerment, while silence may simultaneously protect and constrain. By portraying the different ways characters engage with language, Adichie emphasises that identity is inseparable from the ability to articulate or withhold one’s voice, showing the centrality of linguistic agency in the construction of selfhood.

9. CONCLUSION

Adichie’s *Americanah* illustrates that language is inseparable from identity, functioning simultaneously as a tool of self-expression, a marker of cultural belonging, and a site of negotiation within social and racial hierarchies. Through the experiences of Ifemelu, Obinze, Aunt Uju, and Dike, the novel demonstrates that accent, code-switching, and Nigerian English are not merely stylistic features of speech but central mechanisms through which characters assert agency, negotiate belonging, and navigate the complexities of transnational life.

Accent, as Ifemelu and Obinze experience, reflects the performative pressures of assimilation and the tension between authenticity and societal acceptance. Ifemelu’s deliberate reclamation of her Nigerian accent underscores the connection between linguistic authenticity and selfhood, consistent with Ngũgĩ (1986)’s assertion that language carries culture and identity (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 4). Similarly, Nigerian English emerges as a vehicle for cultural assertion, preserving memory, emotional nuance, and heritage in the face of dominant linguistic norms. Through her deliberate use

of Nigerian English, Ifemelu resists linguistic erasure and affirms the legitimacy of her cultural voice, demonstrating that identity is deeply embedded in language.

Code-switching further complicates the relationship between language and identity, allowing characters to negotiate multiple social, cultural, and racial spaces. Ifemelu, Obinze, and Dike in *Americanah* illustrate that code-switching is both a strategic adaptation and a performance of self, enabling them to navigate belonging, maintain connections to heritage, and assert individuality. However, as the novel reveals, linguistic flexibility alone cannot erase racialised assumptions. Characters experience a raciolinguistic consciousness in which race, accent, and nationality intersect, showing that language mediates but does not fully determine social inclusion.

Finally, Adichie foregrounds the interplay of voice, silence, and agency. Characters negotiate when to speak, how to speak, and when to remain silent, demonstrating that control over language is intimately connected to empowerment. Ifemelu’s blog exemplifies the transformative potential of voice, creating a space where linguistic expression becomes an act of self-assertion, resistance, and authenticity (Adichie, 2013, p. 213). Even younger characters, like Dike, reflect the intergenerational transmission of linguistic identity and agency, showing that the negotiation of voice begins early and continues across social and cultural contexts.

In summary, *Americanah* affirms that language is not a neutral medium but a central axis around which identity, culture, race, and power revolve. Through accent, Nigerian English, code-switching, and the strategic use of voice, Adichie’s characters navigate the complexities of transnational and diasporic life, asserting selfhood while responding to social pressures. Thus, the study underscores the necessity of examining language in literary texts, as it illuminates the nuanced and dynamic ways identity is performed, contested, and reclaimed. Exploring the linguistic dimension of identity, *Americanah* contributes to broader conversations about migration, race, and cultural belonging, demonstrating that who we are is inseparable from how we speak.

DATA AVAILABILITY

No new research dataset was generated in this study; the analysis is based on the published novel cited in the references.

COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

FUNDING

This research was purely self-sponsored and received no funding from any source.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study did not involve human participants, animals, confidential personal information, or sensitive data. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2013). *Americanah*. Alfred A. Knopf. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/878/americanah-by-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie/9780307962126/>

- Alim, H. S., Rickford, J. R., & Ball, A. F. (Eds.). (2016). *Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190625696.001.0001>
- Bucholtz, M. (2011). *White kids: Language, race, and styles of youth identity*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/white-kids/D592489760AC52DE06AE466ED9E0D5A0>.
- Fought, C. (2006). *Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791215>.
- Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs “identity”? In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1–17). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907.n1>.
- Khalid, A., Holmes, G., & Parpart, J. L. (Eds.). (2023). *The Politics of Silence, Voice and the In-Between: Exploring Gender, Race and Insecurity from the Margins*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003349945>.
- Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://books.google.com/books/about/English_with_an_Accent.html?id=ZD8UQwAACAAJ.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. James Currey. <https://boydellandbrewer.com/book/decolonising-the-mind-9780852555019/>.
- Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society*. Penguin Books. <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/25789/sociolinguistics-by-peter-trudgill/9780140289213>.