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Doing race and ethnicity in a digital community: Lexical labels and narratives of belonging in a Nigerian web forum

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ABSTRACT

In computer-mediated communication, social categories such as race and ethnicity have to be actively performed and constructed by participants in order to gain visibility; it can be argued that new forms of super-diversity and their sociolinguistic implications become particularly tangible here. As a consequence, such racialized discourse provides ideal material for a sociolinguistic analysis of CMC. Based on these assumptions, this study focuses on how race and ethnicity are performed on the web forum Nairaland, a digital community and place of interaction for Nigerian locals, first- and secondgeneration Nigerian emigrants, as well as participants with other ethnic backgrounds. A large-scale corpus (17 million token, time span of 4 years) was analyzed in terms of racial and ethnic identity construction of the community members; in particular, the use of Nigerian Pidgin as an ethnolinguistic repertoire within the community was taken into account. The analysis includes visualizations of the globalized community structure, a quantitative assessment of the distribution of racial and ethnic labels, and a qualitative close reading of diasporic narratives of belonging. The results of this study illustrate how the use and (often conscious) selection of ethnolinguistic repertoires contribute to the complex and varied racial/ethnical identities on display in the forum data. In this sense, this paper makes a contribution to our understanding of the sociolinguistic implications of super-diversity, and the essential role that digital mediation plays in its emergence.

1. Introduction

Within the fast-growing theoretical framework on super-diversity, the role of digital media in general and of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in particular holds a firm place. Thus the impact of communication technology is outlined in Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 4):

> Historically, migration movements from the 1990s onwards have coincided with the development of the internet and mobile phones, and these have affected the cultural life of diaspora communities of all kinds. (…) These technologies impact on sedentary "host" communities as well, with people getting involved in transnational networks that offer potentially altered forms of identity, community formation and cooperation (Baron, 2008). In the first instance, these developments are changes in the material world – new technologies of communication and knowledge as well as new demographics – but for large numbers of people across the world, they are also lived experiences and sociocultural modes of life that may be changing in ways and degrees that we have yet to understand.

There should be little doubt about the general validity of this point, and the contributions within this special volume add some empirical leverage to the theoretical claims. Nevertheless, many open questions remain regarding the role of CMC in the emergence of super-diversity: for example, should mediated communication be seen as one monolithic factor that contributes to super-diversity, or is the digital impact on super-diversity linked to more specific innovations and time points, such as the emergence of social media? Is the increasing linguistic diversity on the internet as evidenced in Danet and Herring (2007) a prerequisite for, or a result of, digital super-diversity? Clearly, there is a lot of room for more fine-grained analyses of how super-diversity, mediated communication and the sociolinguistics of globalization are intertwined. This becomes particularly apparent with regard to migration, race and ethnicity – factors that are at the very core of the debate on super-diversity. Since race and ethnicity have to be actively performed and constructed by participants in CMC interactions in order to gain visibility, new forms of super-diversity and their sociolinguistic implications become particularly tangible here. As a consequence, such racialized discourse provides ideal material for a sociolinguistic analysis of CMC.

This paper is intended as a contribution to this field by analyzing how a globalized contact variety, in this case Nigerian Pidgin, is helped along by digital media, and how factors such as

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race, ethnicity and belonging are negotiated and linguistically represented in a particular digital community. It is part of a larger, ongoing project called "Cyber-Creole: Jamaican Creole and Nigerian Pidgin as contact varieties in globalized communication" focused on contact varieties as globalized vernaculars that are particularly used in mediated, mobile and diasporic contexts.[1] Web forums whose online communities function as large and diverse digital communities are the source of the data, which are downloaded and organized in the form of large-scale corpora (around 17 million tokens per forum); this corpus-based approach allows for analyses on multiple levels: visualizations and network models of the online community; quantitative analyses; and qualitative work. In this vein, the following study is structured as follows: after a brief outline of theoretical assumptions and central Nigerian identity concepts, Section 2 provides a closer look at the corpus itself and the mapping of the community. Section 3 summarizes a quantitative approach to racial and ethnic epithets in the data. Section 4 is a discourse-analytical close reading of such racialized discourse that focuses on narratives of belonging as they are put forward by members of the community. The findings are discussed and summarized in Section 5. Taken together, this multi-level analysis should provide a closer look at sociolinguistic implications of doing race and ethnicity online, such as styling, crossing (Rampton, 1995), and issues of linguistic self-perception and performance, and how these mechanisms play out in the context of digitally mediated discourse and its sociotechnical conditions.

1.1. From local vernacular to digital ethnolinguistic repertoire

As argued elsewhere (Heyd and Mair, forthcoming), it is generally accepted that the Internet is losing its status as "monolithically white and male" (Leung, 2005: 7) and is gradually becoming a place of more linguistic diversity. Indeed, it has been argued that digital media provide a semiotic system where race and ethnicity are actively showcased and articulated by its users (Nakamura, 2007). Regarding linguistic diversity, the work by Danet and Herring (2007) has provided evidence that this is true on the global scale but also for individual languages and their varieties. Thus nonstandard vernaculars are gaining in online presence and visibility. The persistence of written CMC and the community structure of forums allow for the development of writing standards in previously oral vernaculars. The global network also connects natives with more mobile emigrants in diasporic communities, and even outsiders who take an interest in the culture and linguistic practices of a particular ethnolinguistic community. In short, these tendencies point toward a gradual vernacularization of the web. As evidenced in the introductory quote by Rampton and Blommaert (2011), this phenomenon is well-recognized in the literature on super-diversity. It can be posited that the sociotechnical conditions of online communication seem to be conducive to the emergence of such digital, diasporic and deterritorialized vernaculars.

This sociotechnical setting allows for some further assumptions regarding Nigerian Pidgin as a globalized vernacular in the making. The following characteristics are strongly prominent in the data to be discussed here. First, the users in this online community display a very high level of metalinguistic awareness and reflexivity. This is in line with CMC studies quite in general; for example, Herring (2007: 15) notes: "The overall greater persistence of [CMC] heightens meta-linguistic awareness: It allows users to reflect on their communication – and play with language – in ways that would be difficult in speech." It is probably also in the nature of such diasporic, polyphonous settings that communicants tend to be very self-aware of their language use.

The data also show early-stage signs of a commodification process for Nigerian Pidgin, which is strongly tied to the notions of medicalization and deterritorialization. There appears to be an emerging linguistic and pop-cultural prestige; concomitant factors, such as the emergence of a "Nollywood" movie industry and the launch of web interfaces and social media based in Nigerian Pidgin, are discussed in greater detail in Heyd and Mair (forthcoming).

Finally, Nigerian Pidgin and the other vernaculars found in the data are approached here as (digital) ethnolinguistic repertoires rather than static varieties, as has recently been proposed in contributions by Sharma (2011) or Benor (2010). In Benor's approach, the notion of an ethnolinguistic repertoire replaces that of an ethnolect or an ethnic variety in order to account for problems such as intra-group and intra-speaker variation; thus a specific ethnolinguistic repertoire may serve as "a fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities." (Benor, 2010: 160) In this approach, Nigerian Pidgin would represent one ethnolinguistic repertoire that is characterized by a set of distinctive linguistic features on different levels of linguistic description, in particular lexical and (morpho-)syntactic features. The degree to which a speaker of Nigerian Pidgin uses these features may be dependent on his or her background and situational factors. In this sense, many of the examples shown in the subsequent analysis would not qualify as instances of Nigerian Pidgin in conventional analysis, as they may contain only very few, sometimes inconspicuous markers of the variety; in an ethnolinguistic repertoires approach, such 'minimalistic' usage of a repertoire is seen as legitimate and tailored to the situational needs of a speaker/user. In addition, this approach, which ties in sociolinguistic notions such as indexicality (Eckert, 2008) with ethnolectal research, seems particularly apt to capture the linguistic behavior found in online communication: as argued elsewhere, "in some respects the digital vernaculars are actually richer than the ones spoken on the ground, because writers may exploit visual resources (e.g. expressive spellings) or explore new modes of contact and combination among varieties and languages for which the new medium provides opportunities." (Heyd and Mair, forthcoming). Therefore, Nigerian Pidgin and its usage in the Nairaland data are treated in the following as a digital ethnolinguistic repertoire.

1.2. Dimensions of identity in Nigerian society and the Nairaland corpus

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multilingual society, and it is safe to say that ethnic/tribal affiliation remains the central reference point of identity for many Nigerians at home and also abroad. The biggest ethnic groups Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo are well-represented in the corpus analyzed here; their respective languages are used in the forum and receive particular metalinguistic attention in threads of linguistic diversity and performance such as "If You Can Speak Yoruba, Talk It In Here!" or "Be Proud To Speak Hausa Language Here".

By contrast, the nationhood of Nigeria, and by extension citizenship as a concept for identification, remains a highly problematic and contested issue. The colonial past, the conflict between ethnic and religious groups, persistent problems in political leadership, and the western exploitation of the oil industry are but a few recurring problems in the perception of Nigeria as a nation; they are extensively referred to and discussed in the forum data. However, this picture may slowly be changing:

[1] Thus Jamaican Creole has been shown to be widely available as a target for crossing and similar forms of linguistic appropriation. It is part of the ongoing analysis to monitor whether Nigerian Pidgin is following suit in this dynamics. See Moll (2012), Mair (2013) for results from the Jamaican Creole subcorpus.

in particular in the younger generation, and possibly fueled by globalization, medicalization and international migration, the term "Naija" has come to take on social meaning as a symbol of identification for many Nigerians at home and abroad. This new valorization of nationhood and citizenship is evident in semiotic acts such as displays of the national flag and its characteristic green color, but also in an orientation toward Nigerian Pidgin as the lingua franca and perceived unofficial national language. Notably, threads of linguistic performance similar to the ethnic languages exist for Nigerian Pidgin: "People Wey Sabi Write Pidgin: Make Una Show Una Skills" ["People who know how to write Pidgin: Come and show your skills."]. These different semiotic outlets are exemplified in a member of the online community, whose narrative of belonging makes explicit reference to "ma naija accent very obvious, and ma Naija flag on ma backpack." While nationhood is not the central focus of this paper, it is worth noting that "Naija", and Nigerian Pidgin as its concomitant ethnolinguistic repertoire, may be emerging as a unifying concept of identity to Nigerians.

Apart from ethnicity and nationality, the notion of emigration is certainly a central theme for Nigerian identity, and the diasporic experience is particularly prominent in the corpus data. Large-scale global emigration from African states is a relatively recent phenomenon that has gained momentum since the 1980s and is due partly to very specific mechanisms – such as the liberalization of American immigration policy since the 1960s and the political situation in Nigeria – and partly to more general factors as they have been discussed within the framework of super-diversity: easier access to international travel the rise of global communication technology and related effects of globalization. (For overviews that focus on the North American experience, see Takyi and Boate, 2006; Abbott, 2006: 150ff.; Balogun, 2011; Mederios Kent, 2007). These migration flows have brought about a number of common perceptions and stereotypes of self and other. Many of them are centered around the high level of education among Nigerian immigrants, for example the problem of an African brain drain and the perception of Nigerians as a new "model minority"; these images are in part supported by demographic data, but also function as a positive self-image in diasporic discourse. An aspect that is particularly prominent in the corpus material is the interaction between Nigerian emigrants and the resident African American population – a relationship that is wrought with cultural expectations, but also conflict, stereotypes and even black-on-black violence. The prevalent concepts and conflicts of identity are more fully explored in Section 4.

2. Data and methods

2.1. The corpus

The analysis carried out here is based on the web forum www.nairaland.com, the self-described "Home Of Nigerians And Friends Of Nigeria" on the Internet. It is a meeting place for local Nigerians, recent and longstanding emigrants, and even outsiders who take an interest in Nigerian culture and language practices (such as spouses or members of diverse communities with Nigerian friends). The broad range of subforums includes many aspects of daily life, from technology, sports and entertainment to practical categories such as job vacancies and events, to more general discussions on culture, families, politics, or religion. As noted in the introduction, discussions on language and metalinguistic issues are very prominent and are addressed both explicitly (mainly in the "culture" section) and implicitly in many threads throughout all subforums. The structure of the platform is primarily geared toward the discussion boards, but it does include certain social network features: registered members have profiles where personal information can be given (such as gender and location) or is automatically registered by the system (such as last login), and can interact with other users symbolically (following) and directly (message function).

The project presented here is a corpus-based approach: posts on nairaland.com from 2005 to 2008 form the basis for the Nairaland corpus which contains almost 250,000 posts written by over 10,000 members, yielding a total of around 17 million tokens. The organization of the data in a corpus has obvious advantages: while the genre-specific structure of the web forum data is maintained (posts by identifiable users in thematic threads), it allows for systematic searches and quantitative and qualitative analyses. In addition, the embedded information regarding gender and geolocation of the users sheds light on specific usage patterns and distributions and can be used to visualize the diasporic spread of the community as described in Section 2.2 below. Using a corpus approach to analyze digital vernaculars in a community is a departure from the much more common ethnographic approach typically found in this field (Murthy, 2008; see other contributions, this volume). While the analyses may be somewhat less situated and user-oriented than an ethnographic study, and while certain categories of information (such as self-assertions about gender and location) need to be interpreted with caution, the analyses in Sections 3 and 4 show that corpus data are a good source for both quantitative and qualitative assessments of digital vernaculars.

2.2. Mapping the community

In order to assess the geographic distribution of the Nairaland community and to map the global spread of this digital diaspora, the users were coded for geolocation. Since many of the over 10,000 users in the corpus are very infrequent posters, only the top 1000 members were coded; they make up over 75 per cent of the data (around 194,000 posts). Two strategies were employed for determining geolocation and ascribing coordinates. In a first step, information given in the member profiles was used; for the users without self-reported profile information, semi-automatic corpus searches were used to gather information about location. In this way, around 700 of the top 1000 users were coded for geolocation at the time of writing; through further qualitative analysis, this rate is expected to rise further in due course.

It is clear that there are limitations to this approach. For one, it relies on users' self-disclosed information and may therefore be incorrect or outdated (although the issue of anonymity and inaccurate self-representation on the Internet may be less dramatic than once assumed). More importantly, geolocation is a very static category – a snapshot which only captures one user's place at one specific time point. In this sense, it is a far cry from the migratory movement that may in fact characterize a dynamic and super-diverse community such as this one. Indeed, qualitative analyses over the corpus time span of almost 4 years reveal moves across the globe by many users; in this sense, the mapping of geolocation provides a somewhat simplified version of the community. With these caveats in mind (see also Mair, 2013 for a further discussion), we can see this approach as an approximation that nevertheless yields interesting insights into the global spread of Nairaland.

The map in Fig. 1 shows the global spread of the Nairaland corpus. The colors are weighted by number of postings. Nigeria is the most prominent country, with the United States a close second, followed by Great Britain. Countries with distinctly fewer postings include Canada, European nations such as Italy, Spain and Germany, Ghana and the Arab Emirates. Finally, outliers with only

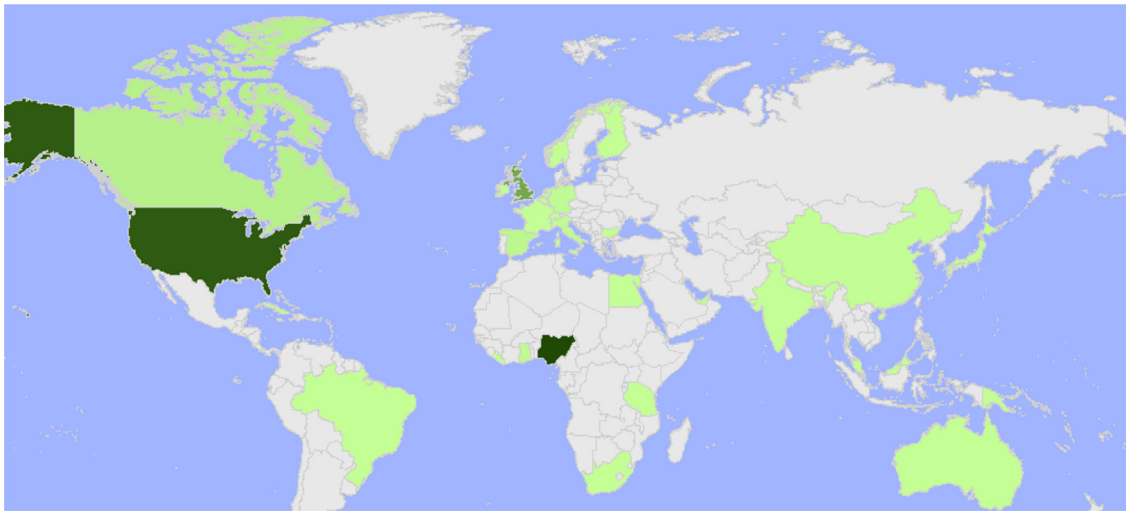

Fig. 1. The global spread of Nairaland. Shaded countries indicate the presence of community members; high frequency of posting is indicated by a darker shade.

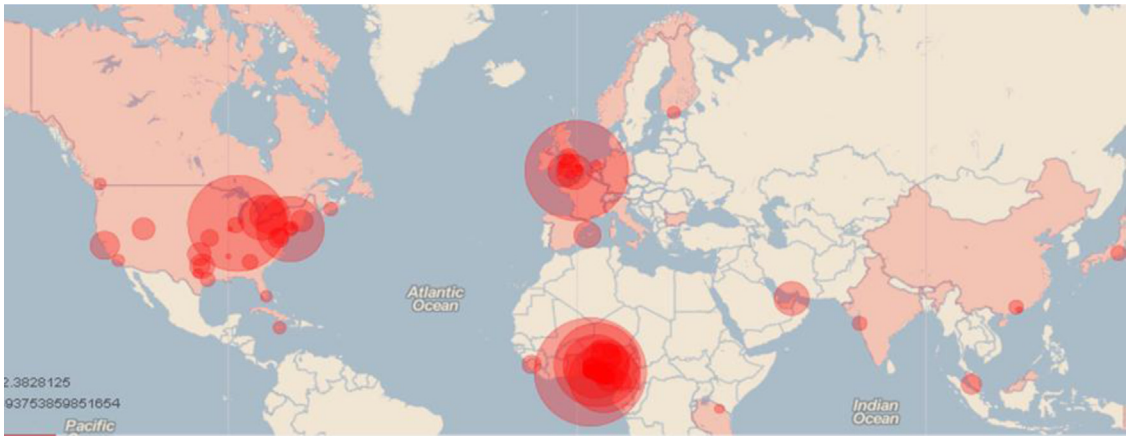

Fig. 2. Nairaland visualized through corpus software. Shaded countries indicate the presence of community members; circles indicate community members in specific cities. Circle size is proportional to frequency.

few postings are spread all over the globe, from Finland to India and Australia.

The visualization in Fig. 2 draws directly on corpus software. In this case, the mapping is much more fine-grained – it shows regions and even cities to the extent that user data are available. The system is geared toward the visualization of lexical distributions, so a high frequency item ("and", ca. 131,000 tokens) is used here. This visualization confirms the notion of Nairaland as a community with a strong grounding in the home territory, a globalized diaspora with hubs in the UK and the US, and smaller communities or even individual users all over the globe. Some of the implications are worth mentioning. For example, the strong anchoring to Nigeria may seem obvious, but it is not in fact a given of such web-based communities: thus geolocational analysis of the corpus used for Jamaican Creole in the project revealed an almost exclusively diasporic community, with only very few participants based in Jamaica. It is also interesting to consider the spread of the community over North America: some hubs are not surprising (communities along the Eastern Seaboard, the West Coast and the Great Lakes), but many users are also located in less expected places in the Midwest or the south, such as Cleveland, Oklahoma City or Dallas. This pattern corresponds with demographic research on African immigration to the United States. As Mederios Kent (2007: 12) notes, "African-born blacks are (…) widely dispersed throughout the United States (…) While the New York area is still a major destination, the diversity visa and refugee admissions have sent Africans to wider-ranging parts of the United States."

Mapping the Nairaland community, in sum, yields the picture of a social network that is super-diverse in some respect, but does follow established patterns of diversity and globalization in other respects – most obviously, the visual data suggest a site for interaction between Nigerian and US-based users. The analysis in Section 3 will focus on this dialog; Section 4 widens the scope to concepts of race and ethnicity beyond this framework.

3. Epithets of race and ethnicity

3.1. Labels of belonging

As the geolocational visualizations have shown, quantifying even a relatively straightforward category such as geographic place can be complicated in a digital corpus approach. It is not surprising, then, that more fluid categories of identity and belonging are extremely difficult to assess quantitatively in a large dataset. Not only are categories and labels of race and ethnicity more complex, multi-layered and less binary; users are also less likely to self-identify in a clear-cut manner with regard to their own racial/ethnic identity. This is not to say, however, that the

topic is not addressed in a forum such as Nairaland. Quite to the contrary, threads covering topics such as provenance and belonging (and, by extension, linguistic identity attached to these concepts) are easily found and widespread in the corpus. These discussions can be approached in a qualitative approach; this is done in more detail in Section 4, where embedded narratives of belonging are analyzed. In a corpus approach, a way to assess racial and ethnic identity concepts quantitatively here is through the use of epithets and labels. Ethnoracial labels are increasingly being studied in ethnographic approaches to language and identity (see e.g. Buchholtz, 2010; Schilling-Estes, 2004; Modan, 2001). Previous research has shown that such terms provide an interesting look at the ascription, appropriation, and construction of identities. The following discussion applies this scope of analysis to the corpus material to give an overview on commonly used epithets of race and ethnicity in the Nairaland corpus and provides a detailed analysis of one term in particular, namely *akata*, which seems to capture the complexity of globalized and super-diverse identities and epitomize some of the racial debates prevalent in this community.

A few abstractions and general assumptions can be made about labels of race and ethnicity. For example, such terms may be used as auto- or heterostereotypes, that is as images of self or other (a distinction roughly equivalent to in-group or out-group usage). Labels of race and ethnicity can be used in a relatively neutral, largely denotational sense; this might, for example, be the case with labels that primarily point to nationality or regional/geographic provenance. In many if not most cases, however, such labels can be expected to contain an at least residual connotational aspect. Such an element of evaluation may be overt, for example by virtue of being explicitly encoded in the label (e.g. *White Trash*), or relatively implicit/covert and only accessible in situated discourse (e.g. the use of *Paki* in British English or *Ami* in German). Finally, the value attached to such terms can be positive or negative, prestigious or stigmatized; however, this type of evaluation is strongly dependent on the other factors brought up so far, for example to speaker roles – labels may be negative and even taboo in general usage, but acquire in-group prestige through linguistic appropriation, as has been well-established for terms such as *nigger* or *queer*.

3.2. A list of race and ethnicity labels in Nairaland

For this analysis, a word list of race and ethnicity in Nairaland was compiled. The list of potentially relevant lexical items is self-compiled and therefore probably not exhaustive. As a starting point, existing lists such as the Wikipedia List of ethnic slurs (*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_slurs*) as well as the Racial Slur Database (http://www.rsdb.org/) were used. Likely candidates were checked for occurrence in the corpus; other items found through semi-automatic searches and qualitative analyses were gradually added. Through this strategy, a list was compiled which, while probably not comprehensive, should nevertheless give a reliable impression of racial and ethnic epithets as they are used in the Nairaland community. An overview is given in Table 1.

The numbers are raw frequencies as they occur in the corpus. Where possible and reasonable, plural and singular forms of a term are included in the number (e.g. *Akata/Akatas*, *Brit/Brits*); however, singular forms that are mostly used as general adjectives, but not racial/ethnic labels, were not included (e.g. *American*, *Asian*). Most terms for nationality were also not included (e.g. *Germans*, *Mexicans*) unless they hold particular cultural importance in the context of Nairaland that transcends the pure denotation of national provenance. Orthographic variants are not subsumed as they may index different social meanings (e.g. *oyinbo/oyibo/oyigbo*; *nigger/nigga*).

Table 1
Raw frequencies of ethnoracial labels in the Nairaland corpus.

Nigerians	12,927
Igbos	1876
Americans	1344
Yorubas	1312
Blacks	1298
Whites	974
African Americans	746
Oyinbo	727
AAs	610
Black people	546
White people	537
Oyibo	517
Hausas	495
Yankee	309
Akata	282
Indians	253
Nigga	216
Asians	202
Brits	176
Naija People	170
Whiteman	126
Nigger	118
White folks	110
Hispanics	99
Naijas	98
Latinos	90
Black folks	53
Jand	53
White trash	33
Redneck	26
Oyigbo	25
Uncle Tom	25
Paki	18
Jamo	16
Janded	16
blk	10
Chincos	10
Chinks	7
Japs	7
Orientals	7
Chavs	6
Kaffirs	6
Hillbillies	5
Nigs	5
jd	3
Agata	2

As can be seen, the spectrum is considerable, both in the range of frequencies and in terms of label types and targets. The word clouds in Fig. 3 provides a visual approximation of the lexical field. As Table 1 indicates, the term *Nigerians* as a label of nationality is by far the most frequent item; it has been left out of Fig. 3a so as not to distort the visualization. Fig. 3b zooms in on those items with a frequency of 300 or less.

A number of observations can be made. As can be seen, reference is most frequently made to nationality, at least where it concerns the two hubs of Nairaland – Nigeria and the United States. As a close second, ethnicity in terms of tribal affiliation is an important category (*Igbos*, *Yorubas*). Apart from these two categories, which may be relatively straightforward reflections of user demographics in the community, it is striking that many of the epithets found here are racial in the most conventional sense of the word: they refer to skin color in terms of a black/white binary. Thus high frequency items on the list are *Blacks/Whites* and *Black people/White people*; *African Americans* and the acronym *AAs*; and *Oyibo/Oyinbo*, a term of Igbo origin that denotes White people. Apart from these major categories, it is also interesting to look at specific trends and items in the low frequency range. These include terms that are specific to Nigerian Pidgin, such as *Naija*

Fig. 3. The lexical field of ethnoracial labels in the Nairaland corpus.

and *Nig* for Nigerians, *Jand* and *Yankee* for British and American people respectively, and ethnic slurs such as *Chinco/Chink*, *Jap* or *Paki*. On the other hand, there are also labels such as *chavs*, *White trash* or *Hillbillies*, which are firmly rooted in British and American culture and are usually used as class slurs amongst White people.

All in all, it can be noted that the use of ethnic and racial labels in the Nairaland corpus correspond quite closely to its geolocational spread as outlined in Section 2: thus these terms refer to (1) the local Nigerian settings and the embedded ethnic diversity; (2) the major hubs for emigration, Great Britain and North America, and the racial concepts and stereotypes that they invoke; (3) reference to international, globalized settings and cultural contact with more remote cultures end ethnicities.

3.3. Example: akata

It is beyond the scope of this paper to spell out in depth the connotations and layers of social meaning that go along with all of the items listed in Table 1. As pointed out above, one strong and recurrent topic in these labels is race, lexicalized here in labels of whiteness and blackness (*white people, black people*, etc.), and terms of race that are specific for Nigerian Pidgin (*oyibo, akata*, and others). This form of racialized discourse is not only striking and relevant per se: closer analysis reveals that many of these labels are tied explicitly or implicitly to notions of belonging and of othering – depending on speaker stance and context, they may be used as means to create social and ethnic closeness and distancing. These rich semantic undercurrents become particularly important where such labels are used not just with the Nigerian situation in mind, but with regard to the global diaspora and the diverse settings that many Nairaland users live and communicate in. As an exemplary case that illustrates well these layers of meaning and social connotation, the racialized label *akata* is analyzed more closely in the following.

Akata is a word of Yoruba origin. In its indigenous usage, the etymology and denotation of the word is often indicated as fox, feral cat or wild animal in general. In contemporary usage, this literal meaning has largely been lost in a semantic shift to *akata* as a label for groups of people. This more recent usage as an epithet almost always carries a negative connotation (except for rare cases of linguistic appropriation, where the term may be used in self-reference and is then imbued with covert prestige). The denotational range of *akata*, however, involves some semantic variation; the finer points of these specific meanings are insightful and telling for the analysis of racialized discourse in Nigerian Pidgin. Essentially, three distinct strands of meaning can be distinguished for *akata*:

Stranger/foreigner in general. Examples from the corpus:

(1) "You BERRA LEAVE that AKATA (CHINESE MAN) AND FIND BETTER Nigeria GUY" (topic of the thread: "Dating A Nigerian Guy In China")
(2) "An outsider is an outsider! Akata is Akata! no matter what what the color or mix may be." Topic: Can A Nigerian Man Be Happy With An English Wife?

Nigerian emigrant. Examples from the corpus:

(3) "Akata is a term used to describe Nigerians living abroad, ne?" (…) "Question wasnt really meant to be answered. It is true that Akata=janded/yankee-rised nigerian" (topic: "Why Would A Man Go For A Second Wife?")
(4) "They have already chased you to a foreign land and you are making noise here. (…) You sound like an akata Nigerian!" (topic: Do You Think Mujahid Dokubo-asari Should Be Release?)

African American. Examples from the corpus:

(5) "Twice i visited my aunt in the states i saw the so called akatas selling drugs and killing themselves while the Africans especially naijas were working and hustling every other thing but drugs." (topic: "Marriage Squeeze: Is This Only An African American Woman's Problem?")
(6) "@All you akata haters, just shut up i mean seriously. geez you guys spend so much time watching too much t.v to even no what real AA are like." (topic: "This Is Why Africans Look Down On Black Americans")

These different semantic aspects make obvious that *akata* is used as a term of othering in a very strong, almost literal sense: *akata* is

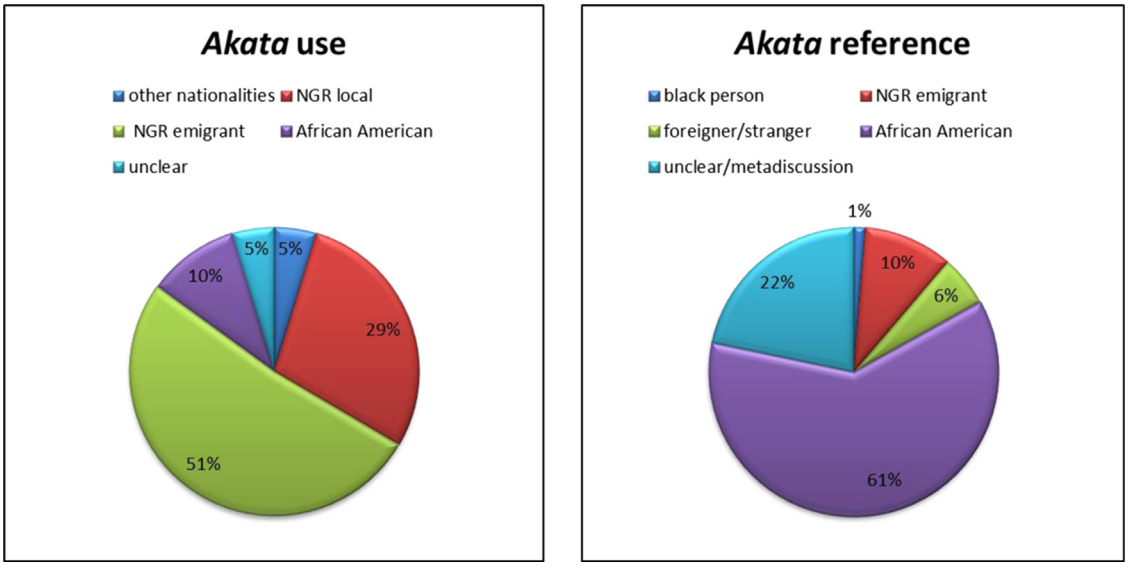

Fig. 4. *Akata* use and reference. *Akata* coded for identity/provenance of the user and for intended reference/semantic variant.

used to refer to those who are perceived as other, be they strangers, emigrants from the home country, or African Americans. It is striking that these different usages of the word evoke a semantic chain shift that is aligned with migratory movements – depending on the perspective and the relevant population dynamics, the label of the other may be ascribed to emigrants from the community, to those they meet abroad, or to strangers in general.

But this dynamic of distancing is not only geared toward the relatively literal notion of spatial distance and migration movements. Maybe more importantly, the negative connotation that is present in almost all instances of the word gives insight about the stereotypes associated with this racial label, and is an effect of the social distancing that is at work. This is true for all semantic strands of usage, but the negative stereotypes are most palpable and explicit with regard to African Americans. The imagery here is strongly informed by stereotypes of 'ghetto' and 'thug' culture and notions of African Americans as societal dropouts. Thus one user in a thread is suspected by another one to be a "hoody trash/akata from the worst low down ghetto somewhere in Chicago and have enough free time on your hand because your mom's is on Welfare and partly subsidized by Tyrone the crack dealer." Another user describes akatas as "poor role models" and lists as her reasons "drugs, no regards for the institution of marriage, enjoy having illegitimate children, rude as hell, discriminatory, lazy, obnoxious, ignorant, do not know the importance of an education". These tropes and stereotypical descriptions are a continuation of the notion of Nigerians as a "model minority", as the successful participants in education and international migration; pitting this self-perception against the notion of African American "hoody trash". This study cannot offer an extensive analysis of the complex relationship between African American communities and recent African immigrants, but it can be argued that usage of the term *akata* and the associated linguistic stereotypes in this globalized community is a reflection of an ongoing struggle between these groups in everyday life.

To further assess the usage of *akata* and its implications as a racial epithet, its instances in the corpus were analyzed according to semantic/pragmatic parameters, namely use and reference:

(1) Who uses the instance of *akata*? What is the user's background/geolocation?
(2) What is the reference of the instance? Which semantic strand does it denote?

Although both parameters are somewhat fuzzy, the results that emerge are strikingly clear-cut. As depicted in Fig. 4a and b, *akata* is mostly *used by* Nigerian emigrants (51%) and *in reference to* African Americans (61%). Further analysis revealed that these two aspects map onto each other well.

In summary, it has become clear that the current usage of *akata*, at least in the particular Nairaland community, has become a term of social and ethnic distancing that is first and foremost geared toward the diasporic situation, toward the global mobility that produces close cultural and linguistic contact between groups such as Nigerian emigrants and African American residents. In this sense, the 'semantic shift' from indigenous, original meaning (*akata* as feral cat) to abstract local meaning (*akata* as Nigerian emigrant) to diasporic meaning (*akata* as African American) shows a shift in perspective that is concomitant with the effects of globalization, migration and shifting population dynamics – and shows how Nigerian Pidgin as an ethnolinguistic resource is impacted and shaped by this change. In closing, it may be noted that related items in the corpus are similarly loaded with the potential for racial and social othering (for example *oyinbo* for white people, *nigger*/*nigga, Naija*/*Nig*) and are likely to display similar semantic patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

4. Ethnolinguistic repertoires: race and ethnicity in narratives of belonging

So far, the Nairaland corpus data have been approached from two angles that emphasize the large-scale nature of the material: by visualizing the global spread of the diaspora, and through quantitative assessments of variation in the lexical field of racial terms. While these results clearly demonstrate the value of using corpora to approach issues of super-diversity and the sociolinguistics of globalization, the textual excerpts shown so far also hint at other uses of these data. In particular, they enable the systematic search for and pinpointed close-reading of relevant forum discussions and recurring topics in the community – in other words, a qualitative approach to further understand the linguistic usage and self-assessment of these communicants. While this kind of qualitative work cannot have the same underpinnings as (online or offline) ethnographic work, it provides a third pillar of analysis to the work outlined so far in this paper. The following analysis therefore focuses on ways of doing race and ethnicity in the corpus

data, in particular through narratives of belonging and the way they encode linguistic usage and self-assessment.

Narratives of belonging have become a substantial resource for research into sociocultural aspects of identity, migration and their sociolinguistic and discursive implications (see e.g. Meinhof and Galasinski, 2005). Based on narrative theory that closely links the construction of reality and identity with acts of storytelling (Bruner, 1991), the importance of narrative episodes in everyday life and in its sociolinguistic embeddedness (Ochs and Capps, 2001) has kindled a renewed interest in narrative analysis. In conjunction with this, fields such as sociology and anthropology make increased use of narratives in the analysis of issues such as migration, citizenship, and race/ethnicity. In such narratives of belonging, speakers often ponder their own biographies and upbringing and engage with concepts of identity that are relevant to their experience. Importantly for the data presented here, this also often entails the metalinguistic assessment and discussion of the concomitant labels of race, ethnicity and citizenship.

In ethnographic analyses, regardless of their particular focus, narratives of belonging tend to be elicited or at least prompted in some way. Here is a fairly typical example of such a narrative episode, taken from an anthropological study on assimilation, transnationalism, and second-generation identity in Nigerian immigrants to the USA (Balogun, 2011: 8–9):

(7) "I think I've gone through all these phases… I remember sitting there trying to pick my label. Am I Nigerian? Am I African-American? Am I black? You know trying to think of that label and I would just like okay I'm Nigerian–American, I remember consciously making that decision. And when it really comes down to it – I mean it matters who's looking at you. For some people I'm black, for others I'm African–American. I just know that I do have a love for Nigeria that was instilled in me growing up. But I am in America so there's no way I can just label myself one thing and try to live the lifestyle of that label."

In the corpus material, this kind of explicit steering, for example through an interviewer, is obviously not given. Nevertheless, narratives of belonging are a recurring feature in the data; as the following examples show, the similarity to ethnographically elicited narratives is, at least in some of the cases, striking. Some of them are produced spontaneously within the context of a thread; in other cases, they are prompted by the community itself in topical threads. One of them is the discussion "Are you proud to be a Nigerian?", from which the following examples are taken:

(8) "I am Nigerian, born in D.C. To embrace both nationalities, I regard myself as a Nigerian–American. But to tell you the truth, I consider myself a Nigerian first, before America. That was where I grew up."

(9) "me, my papa na oyibo man i no go lie..ma mama na Nigeria woman..i was born n bred in Nigeria..ever so proud to b nigerian..nigerian for life but i wont deny ma father's land as well. so to cut the story short..when i'm asked i say..ma dad is white (frm london) and ma mom is blk (frm imo..nigeria) but i was born n bred in Nigeria! i knw it's too long to say but, that is jst it. i prefer Nigeria to london…i no go lie because d only special thingy bout this place is jst da jobs…skl..technology…fings like that…ONLY!!

i prefer ma Nigeria friends…and i prefer ma Nigeria family better because i get as the ones here b..LoL…i'm being serious You knw!

i av dual nationality..and that is cuttin d long story short"

These two examples show the considerable variation in the style of such narratives: one is a succinct, descriptive reflection of the user's provenance, the other much longer, emotionally invested, and drawing strongly on features from Nigerian Pidgin (lexical, such as "oyibo"; syntactic, such as the negation "no go lie"), features from Cockney ("fing", "av") and CMC abbreviations ("skl" for *school*, "LoL") Nevertheless, their essence is remarkably similar. Thus both examples recount important stations and influences in the individual biographies and provide brief narrative episodes about their personal history; the second example also includes a retelling of typical offline encounters that focus on belonging and migration. In addition, both users include labels of race/ethnicity, and in this case particularly citizenship, in their accounts: *Nigerian*; *Nigerian-American*; *oyibo man*; *Nigeria woman*; *white (frm london); blk (frm imo..nigeria).* These labels are used as emblems that make these complex narratives of belonging more manageable and tellable to the audience – as the user in the second example puts it, they are an efficient way of "cuttin d long story short".

The examples shown so far while varied and individual, all fall into the relatively established spectrum of first- or second generation emigration from Nigeria to the United States and the United Kingdom. As the visualization of this community showed, this is both expectable in terms of the structuring of forum participants, and concomitant with Nigerian migration patterns at large. However, some narratives of belonging in the corpus also tell the story of much more diverse – in fact, arguably super-diverse biographies. This includes emigrants to 'unlikely' destinations, such as Japan or South Asia; participants who have a high frequency of moving, or who move back and forth between Nigeria and another country; and people with a multiracial or multiethnic background. Here is an example for such a super-diverse narrative of belonging from the corpus:

(10) "i wouldnt want to be anything other than a nigerian.i am extremely multiracial(thanks to my mum)she is part cuban/irish and greek/japanese.but my dad is an OSHUN NINJA all the way..even though i have oriental eyes and very fair skin (.i still represent for naija every time)

(…) its interesting how some people just feel because i am multiracial,i should be happy i have some sort of "other" escape from my africanness…my close-minded cousins have told me…"oh you so lucky d..at least you look like one of us.."and I'm like HELLOO.. (…) 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 account, the reference to the user's biography, and the use of racial labels, is complemented with references to facial/physical features, as well as attempts at using features from the NP repertoire and metalinguistic reflections on them; thus "warri imitation accent" refers to the type of NP spoken around the city of Warri in the Niger Delta, which is often evoked as the gravitational center of NP as a repertoire. This example illustrates how NP is part of a semiotic system whose use enables members of the community to "represent for naija" even in highly diasporic and/or mediated contexts.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the Nairaland corpus also includes narratives of belonging from beyond the Nigerian community in a narrow sense. As noted in Section 2, the forum also attracts users whose link to Nigeria is only indirect, for example through a spouse or a circle of friends. This is the case for the following user, who shares her take on the issue of belonging, identity and ethnicity in the "Are you proud to be a Nigerian?" thread:

(11) "I must say, it's hard for black Americans who want to connect with their "roots" and already feel alienated by American society, but are once again alienated by other people of African descent or who are African by birthplace. I mean I'm American and my boyfriend is Nigerian – I don't see what's wrong with that.:/

I feel as if we African–Americans just don't fit in anywhere. I mean, think about it. We don't fit in with this American society that sterotypes us (and every other ethnic group), profiles us, rejects us, etc. And we African–Americans don't even fit in with other African-Americans! If you're too light, you're not right. If you're too dark, you're not right. If you're too preppy, you're not right. If you're too "gangsta"/hip-hop, you're not right. I mean there are just so many divisions within this "African–American" community that we really don't fit in anywhere, or even have any place to "come home" to. I'm really looking forward to taking a DNA test to trace my roots back to Africa just so I can actually have a place to call home. Just so I can have a true identity."

This perspective from the other side provides an insightful commentary on and mirror to the Nigerian narratives of belonging: where many of the Nigerian biographies are informed by the diasporic experience and histories of recent emigration to the United States or Great Britain, West Africa serves as an imagined place of longing for African Americans. The reference to genealogical DNA testing in this final example points to an increasingly popular way among African Americans of tracing their African roots, and to a budding technology of identity construction that takes its cues from genetic markers and population genetics. In this sense, the starting point that was outlined in Section 1 – that super-diverse settings of language and identity are strongly tied to technology and technological mediation – gains an additional dimension.

5. Concluding discussion: super-diverse, or just diverse?

This paper has taken a first look at race and ethnicity in a Nigerian digital community, and how they are linguistically performed. The evidence should have shown that there are linguistic corollaries to doing race and ethnicity online which can be assessed both in quantitative (e.g. distribution of racial/ethnic labels) and qualitative (e.g. narratives of belonging) ways. As the examples have shown, in the Nairaland corpus these performances are often tied to the more or less strategic use of Nigerian Pidgin features – both by local Nigerian community members, who draw on this resource in a very confident and authoritative manner, and by diasporic members whose link to Nigeria may be more indirect, and whose use of the NP repertoire tends to be more exploratory and self-conscious. In a digital community as the one analyzed here, all of these strategies become legitimate strategies of authentication. NP in this setting therefore is an apt example of a (digital) ethnolinguistic repertoire in Benor's sense, "a fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities" (2010: 160).

The discussion here was focused strongly on the American experience of Nigerian emigrants. In part, this is due to the data available in the corpus. As the visualization of the community in Section 2.2 illustrates, the United States has become a central place for Nigerian emigrants, and this is well-reflected in the Nairaland community. In addition, the analyses shown in Sections 3 and 4 have revealed that the identity work that results from the immersion into American society is particularly rich and complex. This was evident, for example, in the semantic shift of *akata*, but also from the diasporic narratives of belonging.

However, this analytical focus on Nigerian emigration to North America raises questions with regard to super-diversity as a theoretical framework. If super-diversity is indeed conceptualized as the "diversification of diversity", as "a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything previously experienced in a particular society" (Vertovec, 2007), it seems justified to think about a reasonable delineation for the concept. In other words, is there a cut-off for super-diversity? How diverse and complex does a racial/ethnic identity have to be in order to pass for 'super-diverse'? The biographies and sociolinguistic profiles of the community members analyzed here, rich and complex as they may be, are not altogether recent from a population dynamics standpoint: West African immigration to North America has been a stable factor for at least 20 years, and while there is variation and recent technological innovation has made this type of migration less predictable, it still proceeds according to somewhat established patterns. In a narrow sense of the concept, the label 'super-diverse' might be reserved for narratives of belonging such as this one:

(12) "I am proud to be what I am. I'm Nigerian, Bahamian and British. When people ask me where I'm from, I don't say 'Nigeria', I say 'Nigeria and the Bahamas'. That is the truth. I'm not fully Nigerian so why claim to be one?"

"When people on the internet ask me where I'm from, I say 'I'm originally from Nigeria and the Bahamas but I'm currently living in Belgium'. Again, it's the truth."

It is worth noting that speakers such as this one are part of a super-diverse vanguard, whereas large parts of the online community are not deeply involved in this process. Regardless of these conceptual issues, the results of this study should have illustrated how the use and (often conscious) selection of ethnolinguistic repertoires contributes to the complex and varied racial/ethnical identities on display in computer-mediated communication. The conceptual fluidity of the term 'super-diversity' can be taken as an indication that the ongoing debate needs not only more theory-building, but will also be informed by more fine-grained evidence grounded in discourse practices.

The data presented here can serve as a contribution to our understanding of the sociolinguistic implications of super-diversity, and the essential role that digital mediation plays in its emergence. With regard to the sociolinguistics of globalization, it has been argued that "in the context of globalization, people and linguistic resources are mobile" (Blommaert and Backus, 2011: 12). The Nairaland data show that this double meaning of mobility holds true both with regard to geolocational place but also to actual vs. virtual space. Thus the communicants described here are mobilized both in terms of their highly diverse backgrounds and complex migration patterns, but also with regard to participation in online communication and its deterritorialized and dis-located nature. This added notion of digital mobility is likely to become even more prominent and relevant where more recent forms of social media are taken into account, such as Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr or similar platforms. In this sense, the true mobilization of digital linguistic practices has probably only just begun.

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