Chapter 7
Discursive Practice and the Nigerian Identity in Personal Emails

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ABSTRACT
As communication by the electronic mail spreads and becomes increasingly common, more and more people are taking the advantage of its flexibility and simplicity for communicating social identity and cultural matters. This chapter focuses on how Nigerian users of the electronic mails, apply the medium for expressing their identity through discursive means. Data comprises 150 personal emails written and sent between 2002 and 2009 in Lagos and Ota regions of Nigeria by individual email writers, comprising youths and adults from a university community and the Nigerian civil service. Applying socio-linguistic approach and computer-mediated discourse analysis, the study shows that the most common discursive means of expressing the Nigerian identity are greeting forms and modes of address; religious discursive practices and assertions of native personal names. The data also show evidences of Nigerian English in the email messages.

INTRODUCTION
As Information technology and computer based communication becomes the vogue across the world, computer-mediated communication (CMC) including email, has almost replaced other forms of individual and workplace modes of communication. Anyone who has access to a computer system and internet network is eligible to employ the advantage of email communication to send documents ranging from a single sentence greetings/information to a whole page report, newsletters, notices, announcements, adverts or academic materials (Taiwo, 2007). Hence email has become a tool of mass global communication (Lan, 2000) with the advantages of simplicity, cheapness and flexibility. In terms of its flexibility, an email writer may attach visual items such as pictures or articles to their messages and may be forwarded or copied to several other receivers across the globe. Kankaanranta, (2005)
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identifies three overall email genres namely the noticeboard, postman, and dialogue. The dialogue genre is used to exchange information that relates to organisational issues/activities; the postman genre is to deliver documents for information/comment and the noticeboard is to inform employees about workplace matters. Both personal and workplace emails perform significant functions and roles. At a personal level, emailing has removed difficulties associated with verbal communication such as shyness, stuttering or fear and enhances the freedom of self expression (Baron, 1998). At the workplace, email communication increases access to new people; weakens spatial and status barriers, and provides access to information that otherwise would have been unavailable (Garton & Wellman, 1995). It also enables managers to control their subordinates at a distance (Brigham & Corbett, 1997) and since in some organisation, employers have access to their employees’ email accounts, the email system facilitates monitoring and control of the on-going working process (Skovholt & Svennevig, 2006).

Email as a widespread means of personal and workplace communications reveal interesting aspects of people’s cultures and language habits. Workplace emails for instance, contributes significantly to the construction of aspects of social and professional identity/relationship and provide indications of workplace culture and sociolinguistic variables of status, social distance and gender of interlocutors (Abdullah, 2003; Waldvogel, 2005; 2007). Like workplace emails, personal e-mails reveal discursive practices that indicate social identity and reflect socio-cultural practices/belief systems. A study of email greetings and closings reveal that they construct status, social distance, and gender of receivers (Waldvogel, 2005; 2007). And they are also often governed by factors such as sex and religion as well as local communicative strategies (Al-Khatib, 2008). This research aims at defining and identifying discursive practices that are peculiarly Nigerian in email text samples written, received and read by Nigerians. ‘Discursive practice’ represents how discourse is involved in the construction of social and cultural practice including beliefs, knowledge, religion, norms and values. Hence, the study reveals:

(i) Aspects of discursive practice/identity such as greeting forms and forms of address, and personal names associated with the Nigerian people
(ii) Discursive features of the Nigerian peculiar religiosity and
(iii) Features of Nigerian English

The study centres on “personal emails” which implies that they are not situated workplace emails, i.e. they are written by and sent to friends, colleagues (from different workplaces), relations (spouses, siblings, etc) or acquaintances. The corpus is derived from Nigerian email users (teenagers, adults and the elderly) from a university community and the civil service who have adopted the use of email in their day-to-day communication needs. The study seeks to establish that:

(i) Computer-mediated communication (CMC) whether as Email, SMS, Instant Messaging etc. (Herring 2001), promotes and indeed enhances relational information dissemination, group communication and social interaction
(ii) Email as a form of CMC is a significant medium employed by language users for communicating issues that reflect social identity, and cultural practices and indeed a platform for social practice (Herring, 2001).
(iii) Email texts written in English are language samples that reveal regional varieties

BACKGROUND
The Richness Media theory views email as a “lean medium” incapable of communicating rich