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**ETHNOCENTRISM AND CULTURAL ASSIMILATION: LANGUAGE AND ACCENT  
AS THE MARKER OF IDENTITY**

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**Abstract**

*The novel "Americanah" by Chimamanda Adichie explores themes of migration, identity, racial dynamics, and the role of language and accent in the formation of identity. Spoken language and accent provide cues to individuals' social identities and social status. There is a gap in scholarly analysis that examines how these elements impact the immigrants' experiences. The objective of this study is to investigate how the characters use language to negotiate their identities and social standing in diverse settings and how they switch accents to make cultural shifts, claim their identities, and take advantage of different opportunities. It explored the interplay of race, gender, and class using the paradigm of intersectionality. The research employed qualitative content analysis and quantitative research design. It was found out that the immigrants frequently experienced a conflict between the cultures of their home country and the host country. Hence, linguistic choices may be shaped by a deliberate or subconscious desire to assimilate. Over time, an individual's accent is likely to mirror that of the group with which they identify. The linguistic challenges faced by the protagonist underscore the broader immigrant experience, where language becomes a key aspect of negotiating one's cultural identity in a new environment. This mirrors real-world situations where English language proficiency plays a role in both social and career mobility. Even in Pakistan, a strong command of English enhances one's employability and opens doors to opportunities. The study also prompts the readers to question cultural biases and stereotypes prevalent in their own country.*

**Keywords:** *Ethnocentrism, intersectionality, linguistic practices, accent, identity*

**Introduction**

The novel Americanah is written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It portrays transnational experiences and explores the themes including migration, identity and racial dynamics. This study investigates the linguistic choices, code-switching, language ideologies, and power relations. It shows how language can be utilized as a medium for expressing and building social identities in the context of transnational migration. Chambers (1994) states that 'language is a means of cultural construction'.



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In the context of transnational migration, this study explores themes related to race, identity, immigration, assimilation and resistance, particularly in the United States and Nigeria. Role of language and accent in the formation of identity is a prominent motif in the novel. Language functions as a medium for the construction of social identity and expression. Spoken language and accent reflect the social and regional identities, nationality, ethnic group, and social status or class. The accents can sometimes lead to stereotyping and prejudice. Moreover, there is frequently a relationship between language ability and social standing, power relations, and the access to opportunity. The linguistic challenges faced by the protagonist underscore the broader immigrant experience, where language becomes a key aspect of negotiating one's cultural identity in a new environment. This mirrors real-world situations where English language proficiency plays a role in both social and career mobility.

### **Research Objectives:**

The primary objectives of the study are as follows:

- To analyze the societal norms and biases that influence linguistic practices.
- To explore how the characters navigate their identity and social status in various contexts through their linguistic choices.
- To investigate the role of switching between accents and languages as a means of cultural transitions and asserting identities.
- To examine how language ideologies are influenced by race, nationality, class and gender.
- To examine how accent and linguistic proficiency give access to various opportunities.

### **Literature Review**

It has been noticed that much research has been conducted on the novel using the framework of feminism, post-colonial and critical race theory. Begum (2019) analyzed Americana as a transnational feminist novel using the theories of deconstruction and negofeminism as the tools of evaluation and analysis. No study has been conducted from the perspective of ethnocentrism and intersectionality. Thus the current study is first of its kind to examine the text with a particular focus on intersectionality.

### **Methodology**

The research employed qualitative content analysis as well as quantification to examine meanings, themes and patterns in the novel, tracing representation of linguistic variation, linguistic diversity, identity negotiation, code-switching, and accent.



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For this purpose, the sections that illustrated the subtleties of language were analyzed, followed by a thorough examination of linguistic choices, code-switching patterns, and linguistic ideologies. The excerpts from the novel were contextualized within their narrative and sociocultural context to explore how the linguistic choices helped build up certain identities. The selected excerpts allowed me to study how racial identity interacts with gender, nationality, and class. Digital discourse and social media interactions also shed light on the characters' transnational experiences and identities.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Using the framework of intersectionality, this study investigated the interplay of race, gender and class in the novel. Williams Crenshaw first used the term intersectionality in 1989. He was an American civil right activist and a proponent of critical race theory.

Intersectionality examines the various aspects of a person's identity (such as social class, race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, etc.) and how these aspects shape their experiences and opportunities. These aspects are directly or indirectly related to discrimination, oppression and domination. All these multiple forms of identity work together on multiple levels.

Thus the current study explored how characters' identities as black immigrants shape their interactions and choices in multiple cultural contexts.

### **Research Question**

How do linguistic choices and accents reflect the black characters' social statuses, backgrounds, and assimilation process in the migratory experience?

### **Results and Discussion**

Adichie incorporates various languages and linguistic features in the novel such as English, Igbo, Ebonics, French, Pidgin English and Nigerian English. Nigerian English is the variety of English spoken in Nigeria and used by Nigerians. Analyzing the instances of these linguistic features reveal cultural dynamics, power relationships, and the characters' multilingual experiences.

### **Linguistic Diversity**

The diverse linguistic landscape reflects the complexity of cultural diversity, identity, race, migration, the characters' sense of belonging or alienation and nationality in the US, UK and Nigeria. The journey of the protagonist Ifemelu as she tries to adjust herself to the American way of life is reflected by the novel's navigation through a variety of languages and dialects. The novel conveys the linguistic diversity, the distinctive accents and slang of various American regions as well as the vocabulary of academics. Ifemelu's return to Nigeria also demonstrates the linguistic diversity of her own country by showing how English, Nigerian Pidgin, and other regional



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languages coexist there. The characters are shown struggling with the difficulties of migration. The novel reflects onto the cultural and social aspects of their life.

### **Linguistic Choices**

Ifemelu's linguistic choices evolve when she flies to USA from Nigeria. Even after coming back to Nigeria, her language shows unconsciously the use of American English and expressions. When she utters a swear word, Obinze points out, "Very American word." These choices reflect her changing identity.

### **Language and Assimilation**

The immigrant characters' language use is linked to their assimilation experiences. Nigerian and other African characters in USA and UK use language to navigate their new surroundings.

Aunty Uju starts assimilating in the American environment. She wants her son to learn American English only. She says to Ifemelu: Please don't speak Igbo to him. 'Two languages will confuse him'. Aunty Uju's son is completely immersed in the American linguistic environment. 'He sprinkled his speech with ain't and y'all.' He insists on calling the sausages as hot dogs. When Ifemelu insists on calling them sausages, Aunty Ugu says, 'They are not sausages, they are hot dogs.'

Ifemelu tells Obinze that the Americans 'overused the word "excited," a professor excited about a new book, a student excited about a class, a politician on TV excited about a law; it was altogether too much excitement'. Later in the novel she tells Obinze that she was excited about her media class.

Nicholas while talking to his children in UK spoke to them only in English, as if the Igbo language would infect them, perhaps make them lose their precious British accents.

Blaine admits that he has become too used to his 'White People Are WatchingUs' voice.' Later he tells Ifemelu, 'younger black folk don't really do code switching anymore. The middle-class kids can't speak Ebonics'.

### **Perception of Beauty**

The protagonist writes a popular blog to depict race and culture. She also explores the perception of beauty and hair standards. She talks about how many African American women change their hair to fit in because of the Eurocentric beauty ideals that are pervasive in American culture. They



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use weaves or chemical treatments. This is a form of ethnocentrism, where one culture's beauty standards are regarded as superior, forcing people to modify their own appearance.

### **Slangs**

Ifemelu and other Nigerian characters often use Nigerian slangs and phrases, such as "naija" (short for Nigeria), "abeg" (please), "na wa o" (an expression of surprise or disbelief), and "oya" (come on or let's go). 'She looked at him, amused by his earnestness. "Aje-butter! University boy'. Ajebutter is a Yoruba slang that refers to a rich and extremely lazy kid, who speaks with an American or British accent and extremely sensitive.

After moving to USA, Ifemelu noticed:

They all laughed at the same things and said "Gross!" about the same things; they were well choreographed. Stephanie announced that she had homemade beer in her fridge and everyone chanted "Cool!" Then Teresa said, "Can I have the regular beer, Steph?" in the small voice of a person afraid to offend..."

Obinze was surprised to see the blog posts written by Ifemelu. "The blog posts astonished him, they seemed so American and so alien, the irreverent voice with its slanginess, its mix of high and low language, and he could not imagine her writing them." Other slangs such as 'babe' and 'bird' were also used. The slang bird, sometimes offensive, refers to a girl or young woman, especially one's girlfriend.

### **American Ways**

Ifemelu could not bring herself to cope up with the American ways of schooling.

School in America was easy, assignments sent in by e-mail, classrooms air-conditioned, professors willing to give makeup tests. But she was uncomfortable with what the professors called "participation," and did not see why it should be part of the final grade; it merely made students talk and talk, class time wasted on obvious words, hollow words, sometimes meaningless words. It had to be that Americans were taught, from elementary school, to always say something in class, no matter what.

Ifemelu noticed how easily the students avoided exposing their ignorance in the class.

They never said "I don't know." They said, instead, "I'm not sure," which did not give any information but still suggested the possibility



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of knowledge. And they ambled, these Americans, they walked without rhythm. They avoided giving direct instructions: they did not say “Ask somebody upstairs”; they said “You might want to ask somebody upstairs.”

### **Social Status**

Linguistic choices in the novel reflect the identities and social status. Ifemelu consciously tries to change her accent from Nigerian to American in order to blend in and access opportunities, but later reverts back to her Nigerian accent as a form of repulsion. Obinze's British accent represents his desire for social advancement. These linguistic shifts manifest the desire to align with societal norms and succeed in their respective countries.

### **Social Identity**

The accents are salient cues to individuals' social identities (Dehghani et al., 2015). The characters' identity is closely tied to their linguistic experiences. The novel shows how the language use evolves as the characters adapt to their new environments. Immigrants have at least two cultural identities, and accent will make either identity salient (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Aunt Uju pronounced her name as *you-joo* instead of *oo-joo* while answering the phone call. When Ifemelu inquired about the new pronunciation of her name, Aunt Uju replied, “It’s what they call me.”

### **Code-Switching**

Gumperz (1982) defines code switching as the mingling of two different grammatical systems or subsystems within the same speech. Ifemelua, Obinze, Aunt Ugu and other characters especially those from African-American backgrounds keep on code-switching between American English, Nigerian English, Ebonics, French, Yoruba, Igbo and pidgin based on the context. This reflects the complex identity dynamics within the African diaspora. Adichie’s code-switching marks familiarity and kinship among discourse participants belonging to the same ethnic group. Shaukat (2022) states that ‘people sometimes switch to the language they belong to, in order to show solidarity with that language’.

When Obinze was on the train to Essex, he noticed that all the people around him were Nigerians, and the train was filled with loud conversations in Yoruba and Pidgin. Thus code-switching reflects the characters' ability to adapt their speech to different social settings. Aunt Uju expresses her emotions in Igbo while reprimanding her son. “I will send you back to Nigeria if you do that again!” speaking Igboas she did to him only when she was angry”.



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## Language and Kinship

Spoken language is a reflection of individuals' nationality, regional membership, ethnic group, and social status or class (Labov, 2006). Ifemelu's language choices reflect her changing sense of self, her connections to her Nigerian roots, and her encounters with American culture. When she meets Kayode after so many years, she has a strong urge to awaken her Nigerian self. They both lapsed into "their Nigerian voices and their Nigerian selves, louder, more heightened, adding "o" to their sentences."

Nishimura (1995, as cited in Shaukat, 2022) documented that individuals of a specific bilingual community engage in code-switching in order to express in-group, ethnic and generational identity. When Ginika picks Ifemelu from the US airport, 'Ginika had lapsed into Nigerian English, a dated, overcooked version, eager to prove how unchanged she was.'

Also at the salon, when Ayesha asked about Ifemelu's visa, 'Ifemelu's irritation dissolved, and in its place, a gossamer sense of kinship grew, because Aisha would not have asked if she were not an African.'

## Repulsion/Transnational Hybrid Self

Ifemelu is seen transforming to a new self as an Americanah which she repels later, asserting her individuality. She thought, 'Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?' So she 'resolved to stop faking the American accent.'

She first spoke without the American accent that afternoon at Thirtieth Street Station... "Could I have a round-trip to Haverhill, please? Returning Sunday afternoon. I have a Student Advantage card," she said, and felt a rush of pleasure from giving the t its full due in "advantage," from not rolling her r in "Haverhill." This was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake.

"How are you?" he asked.

She had learned to say "Good-how-are-you?" in that singsong American way, but now she said, "I'm well, thank you."

Ifemelu states:

I realized that if I ever have children, I don't want them to have American childhoods. I don't want them to say 'Hi' to adults, I want them to say 'Good morning' and 'Good afternoon.' I don't want them to mumble 'Good' when somebody says 'How are you?' to



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them. Or to raise five fingers when asked how old they are. I want them to say 'I'm fine, thank you' and 'I'm five years old.'

Obinze's mother does not like Obinze's obsession with America. She wants him to read English authors such as Graham Greene but he is into reading American novels and uses words like trunk and schedule with a k sound.

Obinze just said 'trunk,' ma. He said it's in the trunk of your car," she said. In their America-Britain jousting, she always sided with his mother. "Trunk is a part of a tree and not a part of a car, my dear son," his mother said. When Obinze pronounced "schedule" with the k sound, his mother said, "Ifemelunamma, please tell my son I don't speak American. Could he say that in English?"

### Idiomatic Expressions and Proverbs

Nigerian English often employs idiomatic expressions that may not be immediately familiar to American readers.

shine your eye" (be vigilant or alert)

a talking-to (to scold someone for misbehaving)

a money-miss-road (a person who happens to have money but doesn't know how to spend it.

I am not going to eat the land if I don't sell it.

*Ife esika Kita*, the recession is biting everybody

*Akota ife ka ubi, e lee oba* If something bigger than the farm is dug up, the barn is sold.

*Acho afu adi ako n'akpa dibia*. The medicine man's bag has all kinds of things."

*E gbuo dike n'ogu uno, e luo na ogu agu, e loteya*. If you kill a warrior in a local fight, you'll remember him when fighting enemies."

These proverbs add depth and cultural richness to the narrative. They act as metaphorical links connecting the protagonists' experiences in America with their Nigerian heritage. They not only convey the knowledge and customs of their own country, but they also offer a way of communication that transcends language barriers. Adichie emphasizes the idea that cultural heritage is an important part of one's identity and that it may provide comfort and direction in the face of the difficulties and complexities of immigrant life by using proverbs. In this setting, proverbs transform into a potent tool for maintaining and disseminating cultural values and viewpoints.



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### **Rural Background**

A few black characters purposefully take on distinct accents to hide their rural origins or upbringing. This moving representation sheds light on the difficult realities of African immigrants attempting to assimilate and find acceptance in their new country while highlighting the complexity of identity and the extent people may go to. Vincent's Igbo had a rural accent but he tried to hide it by trying to be more British than the British.

At first Vincent affected a British accent, saying "innit" too many times. "This is business, innit, but I'm helping you. You can use my NI number and pay me forty percent of what you make," Vincent said. "It's business, innit.

Bartholomew covered his rural background with his excessive use of American forms such as gonna and wanna.

Ifemelu sensed, from his demeanor, a deprived rural upbringing that he tried to compensate for with his American affectation, his gonnas and wannas.

### **Racial Stratification**

Racial stratification is common in modern countries, and race can serve as a predictor of group membership (Kinzler et al., 2009).

### **N-word**

While watching the movie *Roots* in class, the bleeping of the N-word sparks a passionate debate among the black students.

I mean, 'nigger' is a word that exists. People use it. It is part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to bleep it out.

One black student dares to assert that censoring the word amounts to denying its sad historical connotations. 'But it's like being in denial. If it was used like that, then it should be represented like that. Hiding it doesn't make it go away.'

They argue that if the N-word has been used historically, it should be depicted as such, unedited, in order to face the awful reality it stands for. The argument serves as a metaphor for the larger discussion around the N-word and its use in American culture. It brings home the conflict between addressing the pervasive racism in society head-on and trying to protect audiences from



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its harsh realities. In the end, the conversation was a potent reminder of the ongoing discussions in modern America about race, language, and historical representation.

### **Word play**

#### **Americanah**

Americanah refers to the people who have experienced life as immigrants in the United States and have become Americanized in their attitudes, behaviors, and perspectives and they return to their native country with a different worldview.

#### **Color-blind**

When Curt, the white handsome man tells his mother about Ifemelu-the black Nigerian girl, her mother remarks, "America was now color-blind." This challenges the notion of racial equality.

#### **Knee-grow**

Again when Obinze trips and injures his knee, the white driver callously remarks, 'His knee is bad because he's a knee-grow!' This callous remark highlights the pervasive racism that characters like Obinze deal with on a daily basis and reflects racially charged language and behavior.

#### **White house**

During Obama's election campaigns, someone writes the post:

How can a monkey be president? Somebody do us a favor and put a bullet in this guy. Send him back to the African jungle. A black man will never be in the white house, dude, it's called the white house for a reason.

#### **Raceteenth**

The blog name 'Raceteenth' is used as a pun to resonate with Juneteenth in order to highlight the ongoing struggle for racial equality and justice. While Juneteenth honors the liberation of Black Americans who had been held in slavery, "Raceteenth" emphasizes that the struggle against racial injustice and discrimination is far from over. It stresses the continuous need of tackling racial issues and challenges in contemporary society. It underscores that the legacy of slavery still affects Black people's lives today.

#### **Moral Judgment**

When Ifemelu visits Aunty Uju in Flatlands during her first year in America, she is struck by how mostly slim white people get off the train, and the people left are mostly black and fat.



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She had thought of them as “big,” because one of the first things her friend Ginika told her was that “fat” in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgment like “stupid” or “bastard,” and not a mere description like “short” or “tall.” So she had banished “fat” from her vocabulary. But “fat” came back to her last winter, after almost thirteen years, when a man in line behind her at the supermarket muttered, “Fat people don’t need to be eating that shit,” as she paid for her giant bag of Tostitos.

She considers it a perfect blog post. She files the post under the tag “race, gender and body size.”

### **Communication Barriers**

Ifemelu’s father could not understand American accent.

I do not understand Americans. They say ‘job’ and you think they have said ‘jab,’ ” her father declared, spelling both words. “One finds the British manner of speaking much preferable.

Once Nigel says ‘male’ and Obinze thinks he has said ‘mile’.

### **Stereotyping and Prejudice**

The novel also delves into how accents can lead to stereotyping and prejudice. Ifemelu faces both subtle and overt discrimination due to her Nigerian accent in the United States.

### **Cultural Context**

Odebunmi (2006) calls context as ‘the spine of meaning’ and adds that in order to fully explain what a speaker indicates and what a listener infers, context is essential. The choice of words reflects the cultural and historical context of each country and how they perceive and discuss issues related to race and identity.

back home... I was a half-caste... now I say biracial, and I’m supposed to be offended when somebody says half-caste.

This exchange between Ginika and Ifemelu reflects the significance of the linguistic choice and the cultural perspectives on racial identity. In Nigeria, the term "half-caste" is used to describe mixed-race individuals, but in America, the term "biracial" is preferred. It shows that language can carry different connotations and implications in diverse cultural settings.



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### Digital Communication and Identity

Ifemelu's blog posts provide a platform for her to discuss race, identity, and cultural observations. Ifemelu's blog posts play a significant role in the novel. Although Ifemelu claims to have rejected American ways and accent, her blog posts are so Americanized. For Obinze all the posts were so American and Alien.

The blog posts astonished him, they seemed so American and so alien, the irreverent voice with its slanginess, its mix of high and low language, and he could not imagine her writing them.

The blogs serve as a platform to vent out her anger. She changes the title of her blog to 'Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black'. She writes in one of her blogs:

In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. Racists are the thin-lipped mean white people in the movies about the civil rights era. Here's the thing: the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not. So if you haven't lynched somebody then you can't be called a racist. If you're not a bloodsucking monster, then you can't be called a racist. Somebody has to be able to say that racists are not monsters.

Adichie also addresses hair, namely the hair of black women, in her novel.

Ifemelu refers to hair as 'the perfect metaphor for race in America' in her blog post, reflecting on her struggle to accept racism in the United States.

She learns that how she styles her hair affects how other people view and judge her. She feels the pressure to follow certain rules rather than being free to style her hair the way she likes. She realizes the importance of straightened hair when she goes for the job interview: 'Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters'. She further realizes that she needs "to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls, but never kinky".

### Accent

Accent is a useful indicator of ethnicity (Dehghani et al., 2015). The term accent was mentioned in the novel multiple times. At times it was used to show the identity of the people. At other occasions it showed the love or hatred for the foreign ways. The table below gives the details of the descriptors and their frequency.



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<b>Accent Referred to 66 Times</b>	
<b>Descriptors</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Identity	20 times
Xenophilia	12
Stereotyping/prejudice	8
Assimilation	7
Xenophobia/repulsion	5
Prestige	4
Incomprehensible	4
Affectation	4
Exclusion	1

The term accent has been used most of the time to show identity in the novel. It shows xenophilia as well as prejudice and xenophobia. When the protagonist moves to USA, she understands the US standards and tries to adjust and adhere to them but later rejects them. But this deviation also means that she has to accept the consequences. Ifemelu's ability to switch between accents also reflects her position. There are other characters in the novel who are not capable of switching between accents.

She refuses to follow the American cultural standards about haircuts and accents, yet there are other instances in which she unconsciously absorbs the principles and values of her new country. Ifemelu has a mini breakdown shortly after arriving, but she dismisses her friend Ginika's theory that she is suffering from depression: 'Depression was what happened to Americans, with their self-absorbing need to turn everything into an illness. She was not suffering from depression; she was merely a little tired and a little slow'.

## **Conclusion**

This research reflects how characters like Ifemelu and Obinze navigate their identities and how this affects their experiences and linguistic choices. This study demonstrates how language and accent work as a dynamic force within the narrative. Identity can be reflected through the linguistic choices and accent which work as a dynamic force. The findings help us understand the complexities of the social interactions and the complex layers of identity formation. The years Ifemelu has spent in the United States have changed her. When she finally returns to her home country, she hardly recognizes Lagos anymore: 'She had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence?' The description of the "strange familiar" captures her



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sense of uncertainty. She is not entirely immersed in either US or Nigerian society, but she is also not wholly unfamiliar with either one. When she moves back to Nigeria, her friends call her “Americanah”, the name for Americanized people in Nigeria.

The study shows that the adolescent immigrants frequently find themselves torn between two cultures of their home country and host country. Assimilation into a foreign culture is easy for the second generation but really challenging for the first generation of immigrants. Moreover, the linguistic choices might be influenced by a conscious or unconscious urge to fit in. However, a person's accent will eventually resemble that of the group of speakers they identify with. The study also sheds light on the broader social and political implications of language use and agency. Language proficiency is frequently correlated with power dynamics, social standing and access to opportunities. This reflects circumstances in the real world where social and career mobility are influenced by language proficiency. Even in Pakistan, a strong command of English enhances one's employability and opens doors to opportunities. The study also prompts the readers to question cultural biases and stereotypes prevalent in their own country.

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