

# **Narrative and Identity Construction among Ethiopian Immigrants**

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The main objective of this study is to analyze narratives by Ethiopian immigrants in the Denver metropolitan area, as they share their immigrant experiences while attempting to integrate into the host culture. More specifically, this paper attempts to see how Ethiopian immigrants use narrative as a vehicle for constructing their identity as mainstream citizens in the United States. Focusing on the issue of language socialization, this study investigates the contrast between a former and a current self exhibited in the narratives and describes the sources of the disparity between these two identity positionings. Two main issues are addressed. The first is constructing the current self as a more socialized individual, in contrast with the former-self, representing a less socialized one characterized by linguistic insecurity, nostalgia, and lower self-esteem, among other things. This is exhibited through humorous recall, laughter, code-switching, and at times explicitly stating how one is different currently from who she/he was earlier. The second is the identity that less socialized immigrants construct through negotiation with more socialized immigrants or citizens of the host country making narrative a collaborative enterprise. Constructed around linguistic disfluency, these narratives work to project a more assimilated self who is fluent and capable both linguistically culturally.

## **1 Background**

There are huge numbers of Ethiopian immigrants who have come to work and live in the United States. Estimates put the number between 300,000-600,000 with a large concentration in the Washington DC and Maryland area, and the Los Angeles area in California. There is also a significant Ethiopian immigrant population in the Denver Metro area, which is estimated to be between fifteen and twenty thousand, and the number has been constantly growing. A common problem Ethiopian immigrants face, especially at the initial stages of their arrival in the United States, is the acquisition of the English language. Even though the Ethiopian educational system teaches English from primary up to tertiary (college and university) level and uses it as a medium of instruction from grade seven up to institutions of higher learning, using English as a communication medium for only academic purposes does not offer sufficient exposure to the language or motivation to learn it (Dittmar and Stutterheim, 1985).

When immigrants come to the US, they need at least the minimal degree of proficiency to be able to integrate into the society or to interact with people using English as a medium of communication. Stevens (1994) points out that proficiency in English is not only desirable to immigrants for social reasons, it is also necessary for them to access American political and economic life on practical grounds. Research in the areas of immigrant studies and intercultural communication indicates that language competence, among other things like cultural distance and level of education, is a major factor that determines the life of immigrants (Redmond 1999; Nesdale and Mak 2003).

Even if there are numerous immigrants of different national and ethnic origins in the US, not much research has been conducted regarding narrative and identity among

immigrants in general. In connection with this, Anna De Fina writes, “aside from mainstream images of who immigrants are, little research has been done on the identity that immigrants themselves build and project, and on the processes that affect the formation of such identity” (2000: 132). This study attempts to contribute to filling this gap.

## 2 Objective of the study

The main object of this study is to analyze narratives of Ethiopian immigrants in Denver, Colorado, as they tell and retell their immigrant experiences while attempting to integrate into the host culture. More specifically, this paper attempts to see how the Ethiopian immigrants use narrative as an optimal vehicle for constructing their identity as mainstream citizens in the US (Schiffrin 1996, Johnstone 1996, Kerby 1991, Riessman 1993, inter alia). Focusing on the issue of language socialization, this study in particular investigates the identity contrast that is exhibited in the narratives between what I am calling the *less-socialized former self* and the *more-socialized current self* and describes the sources of the contrast between these two identity positionings, which are both linguistic and cultural in nature.

Six narratives of varying lengths have been used as sources of data, two of which were narrated in Tigrinya, an Ethiopian Semitic language that I speak natively, and four of them narrated primarily in English. The narratives fall under the broad genre of ‘immigrant narratives’ especially with regard to the issue of language socialization since they center around the experiences immigrants undergo in attempting to socialize to the overall way of life of the host country both linguistically and culturally. Following Elinor Ochs and Bambi Scheffelin (1986), I take language socialization to mean both socialization through the use of language and socialization to use language.

The expression ‘immigrant narratives’ has been used by De Fina (2000) in a non-technical sense. Her focus was on the role of ethnicity in identification of the self among Hispanic immigrants. In this paper, the expression ‘immigrant narratives’ will be used to indicate a macro-genre within which the narratives told by Ethiopian immigrants would fall. The immigrant narratives I examine here focus on the difficulty that immigrants face in attempting to socialize linguistically and culturally, a shared experience that most immigrants pass through.

## 3 Analyses of Narratives

In the narratives employed for this study, there is interplay between language, narrative and identity. For this study, I take identity broadly to mean the social positioning of the self against other (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 586). The immigrants were using narratives to show how they are different now, i.e., *current-self*, from who they were in the past, i.e., *former-self*, particularly when they first came to the United States. The former-self is characterized among other things by linguistic insecurity, feeling of inferiority, asking for help and seeking comfort when faced with challenging circumstances, at times weeping when unable to cope with situations, resisting interacting with people speaking languages other than one’s native language, and a tendency not to initiate conversation. Above all, these immigrants reported feeling uncomfortable when

confronted with situations that were alien to what they were accustomed to. Other features include nostalgia and in extreme cases, a desire to go back to the home country, although this is an option which is rarely taken. The current self, on the other hand, is characterized by much better language proficiency and in some cases native-like fluency, a feeling of equality, self-reliance and self-confidence, dealing with diverse situations and resisting routine, and laughter when talking about past experiences, especially incidents in the first few months of stay in the host country. Also, the current self does not limit socializing with people of the same origin but interacts with people of different backgrounds and aspires to be naturalized and become an American citizen.

In each of the narratives that I will discuss here, speakers jokingly recall a moment of linguistic mishap or misunderstanding with an American interlocutor. As such, linguistic miscommunication becomes a metaphor for the former unsocialized self, which is presented in contrast with a current and more enlightened socialized self. The speaker in Excerpt 1, for example, recalls a previous misunderstanding between herself and a customer when she was working in a donut shop, where she worked in the first two years of her arrival in the US.

(1) What size?

- 1 Teki: Ninetee::n, ninety-four - It was 1994, January.  
 2 January.  
 3 ((Everybody laughs.))  
 4 Month of Ja-ha-nuary - It was the month of January.  
 5 *ʔiyya nəyra ihih* ((Laughter))  
 6 ((All others laugh too.)) ((All others laugh too.))  
 7 Fevy: *ehe* - Okay.  
 8 Teki: *Dunkin Donut yisərrih nəyre,* - I was working at Dunkin Donuts,  
 ...  
 -->50 Teki: Can I have **croissant**? *ʔilunni.* - He said, "Can I have croissant?"  
 -->51 Ihih "What size." - I said, "What size?"  
 52 ((Reporting her own speech.))  
 53 ((Everybody laughs.))  
 -->54 "What size," *ih* *ʔiləyyo.* - "What size?" I said to him.  
 -->55 "What size," ((laughter)) - "What size?" ((laughter))  
 -->56 "no ki- croissant croissant." - "No ki- croissant croissant"  
 57 ((Reporting what the man said.))  
 58 *əh ok ʔihim* - "Ok. ehm."  
 59 (She nods her head to mean she  
 60 understood.))  
 -->61 *yea but what size.* - "Yea, but what size?"  
 62 Fevy: *gin tay ʔiyyu* - But what is croissant?  
 63 *tu-croissant*  
 64 *ʔanəwwin* - I don't know it either.  
 65 *ʔayfələt'kuwwon ʔikko*  
 66 *zinəgerizi.*  
 67 Teki: *zibillaʕ* - It is something edible.  
 68 Fevy: ( )  
 69 Teki: *kəriʔəki ʔiyyə* - I will show you at Safe Way  
 70 *Safe Way.*  
 71 Getch: ( )  
 -->72 Teki *nissom zibillaʕ ʔiyyom* - What they are asking me is  
 -->73 *zibluni zəlləwu.* something to eat.  
 74 Fevy: *ʔiwwə.* - Yea.

75 Teki: *ʔanə dɪmma,* - But I thought that they  
 -->76 *coffee məsilunni?* were asking for coffee.

The command of English of the narrator of this story was unsteady at that point and she says the training she received was so formulaic that she was told to respond to people who order coffee by saying ‘What size?’ as can be seen in Lines 50-61. What is humorous about this excerpt is that the speaker says ‘What size?’ in response to a customer ordering a *croissant*, a word that she is not familiar with. The miscommunication was eventually resolved by nonverbal means.

Significantly, this was a very emotional moment for the teller, who says that this is one of the most terrible but memorable experiences she had ever had in the US. She later narrates that after this incident, she went to the basement of the coffee shop and wept bitterly, especially after one of her co-workers mocked what had happened to other employees. She even recalls that she shared the overall incident to her husband who strongly advised her not to be embarrassed or weep when faced with such kinds of incidents. Yet, when telling the narrative 11 years later, she narrates her story with laughter, so as to contrast her current socialized self with a former linguistically (and hence culturally) inept self. In short, now she is a well-socialized and enlightened individual with good command of the English language, a good paying job, and she does not appear to have similar problems any more.

At times, immigrants recall misunderstandings with citizens of the host country partly due to language and partly due to some broader cultural asymmetries. In Excerpt 2, Dawit, an Ethiopian who came to the US in the mid 1990s, remembers an interaction between himself and an American who works in a post office.

## (2) Get out of here!

1 Dawit: You remember Once, I was eh::: applying for employment in  
 2 post office, I was giving my application, ...  
 3 And then the lady was eh checking the am- *amətə mihrət*  
 4 {year of salvation} ((This is to mean AD.)) and then  
 5 you know the year.  
 6 Yosef: Yea.  
 7 Dawit: So she was comparing and at some point there was a big gap.  
 8 Yosef: ehem ...  
 9 Dawit: It's 1988 in my country. She goes, "Are you still in the  
 -->10 80s?" I said, "yes." And then she said, "**Get out of here**".  
 11 Hewan: Ihihhi  
 12 Dawit: Means like don't be kidding me, right?  
 13 Hewan: Yea.  
 14 Dawit: I said oh what did I do.  
 15 Yosef: Ihihhi  
 -->16 Dawit: I was collecting **everything** to **get** out of there.  
 17 ((Everybody laughs including the narrator.)) ...  
 18 Tedi: Dropping your items to leave.  
 -->19 Dawit: Sh then she go but what did I do? She goes like, "**My God**  
 -->20 **you guys are funny**. You're still in the **80s?** **My God.**" And  
 21 she gave me applications again and I wrote bla bla bla bla.  
 -->22 then I thought 'Get out of here' means like 'Don't be  
 23 kidding me.  
 24 Tedi: Hm:::  
 25 Dawit: So from then on  
 26 Tedi: So that's the *Kine* {pun}  
 -->27 Dawit: I learnt something.

The misunderstanding between the narrator of this story and his American interlocutor can be seen from two perspectives. On the part of the American, the root source of the misunderstanding is conceptual, i.e., the calendar difference between the US and Ethiopia. Ethiopians follow the Julian Calendar, which is about 7 years and 8 months behind the Gregorian calendar. On the part of the Ethiopian, the misunderstanding results from the American's colloquial expression 'Get out of here!' Dawit interprets this statement literally as meaning 'Leave this area!' as he states in line 16. But while the former self of the narrative was challenged by this, the current self positions it as a learning experience, talking about it as a mere former challenge with no similar setbacks in the present. On the other hand, the use by the American of the second person plural 'you guys are funny' (line 20) instead of the singular form while addressing the immigrant shows that the narrator of the story is identified not as an individual but as a member of a whole group, i.e., Ethiopians and more specifically Ethiopian immigrants.

Excerpt 3 is also about a misunderstanding that an Ethiopian immigrant faced due to linguistic setback, i.e., pronunciation. Here Dawit recalls a moment where he confused the word 'boss' with the word 'bus' (lines 7-8):

### (3) Boss versus Bus

1 Dawit: May be you guys have heard this. I was working eh I was  
 2 working in San Jose parking area again. So one guy came  
 3 early very early seven a.m. He was working for his boss for  
 4 his *alek'a* {boss}. He parked his car. He said, "What's up  
 5 my friend." I said, "Good morning." Because I was very  
 6 *ch'əwa* {well mannered} at that time. ( ) I was honest I'm  
 -->7 like, "Hei good morning." He goes, "You know what? My boss  
 -->8 is late." I said, 'What number.' I thought he said 'bus.'  
 9 You know.  
 10 Tedi: Woo::: ahaha ((exaggerated laughter))  
 11 Dawit: I said what number. Ahaha Imagine my *alək'a* {boss} is late.  
 -->12 *sint kut'ir? sint kut'ir aləka?* {What number? Boss number what?}  
 13 ((Everybody laughs.))  
 -->14 Tedi: Silly guy.  
 15 Dawit: Ehm? Yea  
 16 Yosef: That was silly.  
 17 Dawit: That was funny man?  
 18 Yosef: Ehm?

The narrator then switches into Amharic (line12) for emphatic purposes so as to make sure everybody gets the meaning. By joking about this linguistic mishap, Dawit expresses that this is something that happened to him some years back, before he became a competent and well-socialized Ethiopian with a good command of the English language. (Silly has a negative connotation, while funny has a positive one.)

In like manner, the teller of the story in Excerpt 4, Tedi, narrates what he faced in the first couple of weeks of his stay in the US. He caught a bus which took him to an area which he had never been before and hence was not able to identify where he was. (He was supposed to take Bus 3-A, but he took Bus 3-B, which took him in the opposite direction.) In the excerpt given below, there is a disagreement between the immigrant and an American which makes the negotiation of identity somewhat difficult.

(4) You don't belong to America!

1 Tedi: Let me finish this. ((He says this fast with the intent of  
 2 getting the floor.)) Finally he said, Ok. I said, ok he he  
 3 got mad. Ok "So you don know what city you're from?" ((The  
 4 old man is asking and expressing his surprise at the same  
 5 time.))  
 6 ((Responding to the man, the storyteller says,))  
 7 Well, we didn't leave any we didn't see any village or any  
 8 any any land, did we. Any forest, did we. Because in  
 9 Ethiopia, when we when we when we go to other city, you  
 10 have to see some kind of forest before you get to another  
 11 city. And he said, "WHAT?" Ihi ((a short laughter as he  
 -->12 speaks)) You **know what?** You **don't** belong to **America.**"  
 13 ((Everybody laughs including the storyteller.))  
 14 Dawit: Oh my God!  
 15 You don't belong to America. ((repeats what the story  
 16 teller said out of surprise.))  
 17 Tedi: You don't belong to America. ((Confirming what the old man  
 -->18 said)) I wish I **met** him (this time) how I **look**. You know  
 -->19 how what I **learned** what what I experience I have **now**.  
 20 But anyways he he talked to the driver of the the taxi I  
 21 mean the the bus and he let me go back again and then I had  
 22 to travel on foot. I think may be ten or thirteen miles  
 23 home later on. So but anyways yea went on foot, because  
 24 ((There is overlap here which is hard to detect.))

Part of the confusion for this storyteller is that he was trying to assume things as if they were in his country of origin (lines 6-11), where it is not common to see adjacent cities. What results is a problem of acceptance and hence identity challenge on the part of the Ethiopian immigrant. When the immigrant tries to justify why he is not able to identify the place where he is supposed to get off the bus, the American not only rejects the justification that the immigrant tries to offer, but also tells him explicitly that he does not belong to the host country altogether (line 12). The immigrant brings up these former challenges as a point of contrast with his current identity. He is a different, competent and well-socialized individual at the time of narrating the story, as shown in lines 18-19 where he explicitly states his wish to show the American how different he is now if he could meet him.

In their work on the interrelationship between language and identity, Bucholtz and Hall (2003, 2005) posit a framework of *tactics of intersubjectivity* involving three paired components. In Extract 4, we observe the *adequation* and *distinction* pair of tactics (which roughly mean similarity and difference), as well as what the authors call *illegitimation* (i.e. delegitimacy). The immigrant attempts to claim that he deserves and is competent enough to be in the US which is *adequation* in intent, but he is using the tactic of distinction in practice. That is the reason why he could not succeed at that point. On the other hand, the American observes that there is a strong disparity between what he sees and the kind of identity that the Ethiopian immigrant claims to be competent enough to belong to the US. He not only emphasizes the distinction (difference) but also delegitimizes the identity the Ethiopian immigrant claims.

As they are in the process of socializing to the culture and different aspects of life of the host country, immigrants at times do not clearly know what to say and how to act in different contexts. As such, these narratives are often integrated into socialization 'lessons'. Problems are created when immigrants simply try to act as though they were in

their native country, a situation which they always recall in their narratives. Excerpt 5 is a good illustration of this, where Mary, a teenage Ethiopian immigrant, recalls her response to a compliment given to her by her tutor about the progress she was exhibiting in her knowledge of English words.

(5) Why else would I learn?

- |       |  |  |
|-------|--|--|
| 1     | Mary: <i>məs'ɪʔa nəyra.</i>                    | M: <i>She had come.</i>                        |
| 2     | <i>məs'ɪʔa tay ʔilahinni,</i>                  | <i>She came and she said to me,</i>            |
| 3     | <b>"Meron lomisibba</b>                        | <b>"Meron, this time</b>                       |
| 4     | <b>more</b> <i>wordtat fəlit'ki,</i>           | <b>"You know more words,"</b>                  |
| 5     | <i>ʔilahinni.</i>                              | <i>She said to me.</i>                         |
| 6     | ((Reporting what a tutor said to her.))        |  |
| 7     | <i>ʔanə dimma? ehe</i>                         | <i>And then I ehm</i>                          |
| -->8  | <b>"nimintay diyyə</b>                         | <b>"why else would I</b>                       |
| -->9  | <b>zimahar zəlləxu?" ehe</b>                   | <b>learn?" ehe</b>                             |
| 10    | <i>ʔiləyya. ((laughter))</i>                   | <i>I said to her.</i>                          |
| 11    | ((Reporting what she responded to the tutor.)) |  |
| 12    | ((Everybody laughs with Teki more audibly.))   |  |
| 13    | Teki: <i>wəyləkə. taybəlki? ihih</i>           | T: <i>Amazing! What did you say?</i>           |
| 14    | Mary: <i>ehehe</i>                             | M: <i>Laugh</i>                                |
| -->15 | Teki: [ <i>Thank you zəytibliyya nerki,</i>    | T: <i>Why didn't you say thank you to her?</i> |
| -->16 | Mary: [ <i>Why am I learning. eheh</i>         | M: <i>That's why I am learning.</i>            |
| 17    | Gech: <i>ehehe</i>                             | W: <i>Laughs.</i>                              |
| 18    | Teki: <i>ehehehe</i>                           | T: <i>Laughs.</i>                              |

When the tutor gives her a compliment, the teenager responds using a rhetorical question, which literally translates into 'Why else would I learn?' This basically means 'I am a student and I am supposed to work hard and know more and more words.' This response would be quite appropriate in an Ethiopian context. Two of her listeners, who are more socialized than the teenage immigrant, comment on what the teenager said, arguing that she should have said 'Thank you' instead. More specifically, she was 'problematized' (Ochs & Taylor, 2001) by Teki, her mom, in line 15, who takes the responsibility of assisting her daughter so that she would have a better understanding of the host culture.

There is also an overlap between what the teenager says and what her mother suggests to her concerning what she has to say when responding to compliments (lines 15-16). This overlap happens since the teenage immigrant takes a defensive position sticking to what she said as though she were in Ethiopia. It is interesting that following the reaction from the interlocutors, the teenager code-switches into English when reporting what she said to her tutor. She perhaps does so either to mean that she responded to her tutor in English, not in Tigrinya, or to demonstrate her command of English. In either case, the teenage immigrant is negotiating a different identity, a more socialized one. In this jointly produced narrative, there is a conflict between less socialized and more socialized immigrants, since the latter usually tend to 'problematize' the former in attempting to help them socialize to the host culture better.

A related issue regarding newly arrived immigrants is going to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. As part of the ESL program or personal effort to have working knowledge of English for communicative purposes, a common strategy

employed is memorizing certain formulaic expressions which occur frequently. Examples of this are expressions such as ‘you know’ and ‘you too’ as in Excerpt 6:

(6) You too!

1 Yosef: Ok. Le me tell you what she said. Somebody came from eh she was  
 2 workin. This lady she she was working [and  
 3 David: [Which lady, The girl?  
 4 Yosef: Her, thel the girl workin here. She was workin and this guy an  
 5 American guy came and she he talked to her and he said, "Where  
 6 you from?" She said, "From Ethiopia." "Oh! Really." ((Quoting  
 7 the American. He is varying his voice while trying to imitate  
 8 the American man and the Ethiopian girl.)) "Yea:::h." ((Quoting  
 9 her)) "Ok. Oh. You speak you speak good English." ((quoting the  
 10 American))  
 -->11 "Oh! Thank you. You **too**." ((Quoting the girl.))  
 12 ((Everybody laughs.))  
 13 Tedi: Wow right. [That's very funny.  
 14 David: [That's very it's beautiful.  
 15 Elsa: liar.  
 16 Tedi: That's great.  
 17 Elsa: He is lying. Don't listen to him.  
 -> 18 David: I think I said the same thing.

In this excerpt, the expression ‘you too’ has been used inappropriately. Having been accustomed to the habit of responding to wishes and appreciation made by their interlocutors, immigrants or speakers of English as a second language may use this expression in occasions where it may not be appropriate as a response of reciprocity. Although this expression has been reportedly used by the female speaker, *David* admits that he had said the same thing (Line 18). Hence, these narratives often function as collaborative productions of a former self, with speakers and listeners jointly producing a former unsocialized self that they have now moved away from.

#### 4 Conclusion

This study addresses two main issues in the narratives by Ethiopian immigrants. The first is constructing the current self, which is a more socialized and assimilated individual, in contrast with the former-self, which was a less socialized one to the US way of life and was characterized by, among other things, linguistic insecurity, lower self-esteem, and nostalgia. This is done through humorous recall, laughter, code-switching, and at times explicitly stating how one is currently different from who he/she was earlier. The second main issue is the identity that less socialized immigrants construct through negotiation with more socialized immigrants or citizens of the host country who are observed problematizing less socialized immigrants. Thus these narratives are a collaborative enterprise, involving members of the community in a trajectory towards a mainstream American identity. Constructed around a linguistic disfluency, these narratives work to project a more assimilated self who is fluent and capable, both linguistically and culturally. In her research on Hispanic immigrants, Anna De Fina (2000) finds that humor is largely absent, especially in argumentative stories of immigrants. Contrary to this, we find that humor, in so much as it is used to make a fun of a former self, is a crucial component of the narratives shared by Ethiopian immigrants.

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## Appendix

### Transcription conventions:

*Italics* indicate Amharic/Tigrinya words in the narratives in English, and English words in the narratives in Tigrinya.

**Bold face** indicates louder talk or words uttered with more stress or focus.

: A colon indicates lengthening of segments (the more the colons, the longer the segment).

(.) Dots in parentheses mark pauses (more dots indicate longer the pauses).

wi- A hyphen immediately following a letter indicates an abrupt cutoff in speaking.

. A period indicates a falling contour.

? A question mark indicates a rising contour.

, A comma indicates a fall-rise.

" " Quotation marks indicate somebody else's speech stated directly by another.

[ A left bracket marks the beginning of an overlap.

/ / Slashes indicated phonetic transcription of some of the words uttered.

{ } Curly brackets give English translation of Amharic words uttered by the speakers.

( ) Single parentheses enclose words that are not clearly audible (or best guesses).

(( )) Double parenthesis enclose transcriber comments.