

**Indexical and Iconic Use of Vernacular Lengthening Practices:  
A Study of Young Turkish Women's Identity Practices on Facebook**

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The 'autonomous' view of orthography has been rejected by the published studies that clearly show how orthographies cannot be detached from social and political contexts (Jaffe ,2000; Romaine ,2002; Sebba ,2003; Schieffelin & Doucet, 1998). Instead, as Sebba (2007) argues, orthographies should be seen as 'social practices' where certain conventions index linguistic and social identities. Many researchers, who analyzed the use of non-standard spellings and non-standard orthographies in their studies, indicated that they act as identity resources (Androutsopoulos, 2000; Jaffe, 2000). In this article, I analyzed the data collected during my online ethnography where young Turkish-English bilingual women used non-standard spellings in their photo comments on Facebook. More specifically, I focused on the semiotic relationship between such vernacular lengthening practice and identity. I looked not only at the use of orthography but also at the impact of phonology on this vernacular lengthening practice.

Facebook, by following the categorization of Sebba (2007), can be seen as an 'unregulated orthography space'. That is, non-standard spellings are very commonly used and accepted in such a space in contrast to 'regulated spaces' where standard forms become the norm and are highly valued, such as academic and business discourses. In this 'unregulated orthography space', this group of young Turkish women used unconventional lengthenings that attracted my attention. In my analysis, I adopted a semiotic approach to investigate the relationship between the use of the vernacular lengthening practice by young Turkish women and their identity construction. In the following section, I discuss the research on orthography as a resource in constructing identities. Then, I discussed the approach I adopted in the present study to language and identity.

### **1. Orthography as an Index of Identity**

Many of the studies on orthography are primarily concerned with the use of non-standard orthographies and/or the standardization or re-standardization of written or unwritten minority languages. 'Non-standard' forms are usually explained in terms of 'standard'. However, these terms are social constructs and are not linguistic facts (Jaffe, 2000). Further, the ideologies of people in power usually set the boundaries of the so-

called 'standard'.

One study on non-standard use of orthography was done by Schieffelin and Doucet (1998) who explored the use of 'Kreyol' in Haiti. They argued that orthography functioned as the representation of self and also the nation in Haiti. The use of 'Kreyol' became an index of national identity and the orthographic icons as symbols of 'Haitianness'. Furthermore, Jaffe and Walton (2000) analyzed the results of an experiment where subjects read texts written in non-standard orthographies. They concluded that people did associate such non-standard texts with stigmatized identities. More specifically, the non-standard orthography has been perceived as an index of low social status. Moreover, Androutsopoulos (2000) analyzing punk fanzines in German context concluded that the creative use of non-standard orthography marked the subcultural affiliation and hence indexed subcultural identities.

It is not only the use of non-standard orthographies that could index a certain kind of identity. Even the use of a small symbol in orthographic representation could mark the sameness or differentiation and index certain social and/or ethnic identities. For instance, Powers' (1990) study of Lakota showed that different diacritics to mark some phonemic distinctions were used by Lakota people to index their ethnic identity. Like Powers (1990), Romaine (2002) found that the use of two symbols for the glottal stop and vowel lengthening became a debate between the younger and the older generations and questioned the authenticity of ethnic identities in Hawaiian context.

Following these studies, I see orthography as a 'social practice' that could be used as a resource in constructing identity. Concerning the iconic and/or indexical relationship between language and identity, I adopted a social constructionist approach that is discussed in the following section.

## **2. A Social Constructionist Approach to Identity**

In the present study, drawing insights from the social constructionist approach, I see 'identity' as a social phenomenon that can be constructed, reconstructed and shifted depending upon changes in context rather than a priori given fact (Bucholtz, 1999; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995). Further, as supported by many scholars (Bucholtz 1999, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995; Goodwin, 1990), I argue that gender cannot be studied in isolation from other social categories that one belongs to. Thus, in my analysis, I consider young Turkish women's ethnicity, religion, and age important social categories in addition to gender. Furthermore, as many contemporary scholars argue "identities emerge in practice" rather than are predetermined depending on the social order and structure (Bucholtz, 1999: 209). As a consequence, in order to eliminate the essentialization of gender practices, I look locally and hence focus on a "community of practice" in my analysis (Bucholtz and Hall, 2003; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1998; Meyerhoff, 2002). By the employment of such a view of community, language is not seen as the only means that determines the boundaries of a community. Instead, other social practices in addition to linguistic ones together shape the blurred boundaries of a 'community of practice'.

By following this view, researchers analyzed both linguistic and non-linguistic practices in their research on language, gender and identity and concluded that non-linguistic practices in addition to linguistic practices are important in constructing and indexing both individual and/or group identities (Bucholtz, 1999; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995). Furthermore, it allows researcher to work with local groups and local identities. Thus, in my analysis, I examined the semiotic relationship between the observed vernacular lengthening practice and identity in a "community of practice" where gender is only one level of social identity in addition to many other levels.

### 3. A Community of Practice

The data in this research are taken from an online social network site, Facebook. I started conducting an online ethnography in September 2008. I particularly focused on two communities of practices. I became part of the first community purposefully to observe gendered practices of the entry-level US college students in a Midwestern university. However, the second community of practice that I studied captured my interest via my own personal use of Facebook. In this study, the data are taken from this second group<sup>33</sup>. All of the members of this group are one of my friend's friends. They are all young Turkish women who live in New York- New Jersey area. A few of them were raised in the US whereas the others moved to the U.S. later in their lives. They are all fluent speakers of Turkish and English. In this community of practice, some of them are high school girls while others are college or master students. What brings these girls together is their affiliation with a religious group and especially their big sister/big brother program. In this program, big sisters are assigned to certain group of high school and college girls to help them both in their studies and in their socialization process. The aim is to help these girls to maintain their ethnic and religious identities in their process from teenagehood to adulthood and to be socialized as open-minded people. Further, it is aimed that these big sisters, by being either undergraduate or graduate students, would help these teenage girls to be more motivated in their education.

In this community of practice, some of them share an apartment while others stay with their families. Social activities are mainly organized by big sisters and teenage girls' attendance is sought. Big sisters try to find fun activities that will serve for social needs of these teenage girls. Thus teenage girls usually go outside to watch a movie in a theater, to shop, to eat in a restaurant with their big sisters and even they sometimes stay together or go out of state trips. They like to take pictures together and usually post them on Facebook. Whenever one of them uploads new pictures of the group, they hurry to comment on them.

### 4. Sense of Humor as "Social Capital"

In this community of practice, shared practices of members help them to establish and maintain their intra-group relations. Sense of humor serves as "social capital" in this community of practice. Both teenagers and big sisters mark their group membership via joking, teasing and making fun of each other. In their offline worlds, they usually organize social fun activities to spend time together. They seek to carry this offline schema to the online world via the use of Facebook. Especially the photos that they take together in their offline world are usually uploaded by one of the group members on her Facebook account. Group photos serve as a resource of humor. They pay attention to choose and upload funny photos that would help them to initiate a fun talk via photo commenting. They not only use real pictures that are taken in their social gatherings but also cartoons which help them to tease each other and initiate a fun talk. Whenever they use a cartoon, they employ funny tagging practices to tease each other. In addition, they play with their photos via using Photoshop to create weird and funny effects that would increase their resources for fun talk.

I discussed the non-linguistic practices that helped young Turkish women to be humorous in their community of practice. Now, I discuss the linguistic practices that are

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<sup>33</sup> I asked permission of my friend (HH) who is one of the big sisters in this community of practice and she let her friends know about the study. I only used the initials of their first and last name for ethical purposes.

used as a kind of speech play to mark humor among young Turkish women. I mainly draw insights from Sherzer (2002) in my discussion of linguistic practices. These women used two codes and code-switch very often in their photo comments to mark their intra-group solidarity and social connectedness. Sherzer (2002) argued that code-switching is also a kind of speech play that can be used creatively to index hybrid identities. Thus, in this community of practice Turkish women mark their ethnic background as Turkish and also mark their affiliation with the US culture by the use of two codes. Further, Turkish women, as argued by Sherzer (2002), negotiated the boundaries of language in their community of practice to play with the language to mark humor and index their group identity. Being Turkish, female, and humorous are not only aspects that mark group membership, each member is expected to be able to use two codes, English and Turkish, and further be able to mix these two or switch when necessary. It seems evident that the mixed use of these two codes serves as a resource in young Turkish women's identity claims within their community of practice and marks their ethnic and cultural background. The mixed use of English and Turkish by young Turkish women also serves as a resource for humorous practices.

In this study, I primarily focused on lengthening practices of young Turkish women in their community of practice. I explored if Turkish or English language has an impact on such a practice and further what purpose the lengthening practice serves in this community. More specifically, I explored the semiotic relationship between such practices and young Turkish women's identity. To better draw a conclusion, I look at their lengthening practices in addition to other linguistic and non-linguistic practices. It seems that overall they play with language in their community of practice to create a fun talk to serve for their identity needs (Sherzer, 2002). Many other social practices also serve for humorous purposes among young Turkish women.

## 5. The Analysis of Vernacular Lengthening Practice

During my ethnography, I realized that young Turkish women in their community of practice lengthened words in a non-standard way. They frequently employed such vernacular lengthening practices when they were exchanging photo comments and messages on Facebook. I did a more close analysis of this lengthening practice among this group of young Turkish women. They predominantly use English in exchanging photo comments during the period I observed them. My analysis revealed that young Turkish women recycled the final letter of a word in orthographic representation to create a lengthening effect. They did follow the same rule both typing in Turkish and English. An example is presented below from the data where both Turkish and English words were lengthened by the recycling the final character of a word<sup>34</sup>.

- (1) NE wrote  
 at 4:49pm on October 2nd, 2008  
 ill be **waitingggg askimm** [my darling] ♥=]

As it could be seen from the above example, NE recycled the “g” character in the English word “waiting” and the “m” at the end of the Turkish word “askim” which means “my darling”. All members of this community of practice did lengthen the words by recycling the final character, be it a vowel or a consonant, in the orthographic representation of a Turkish or an English word. Very rarely, they recycled the characters

<sup>34</sup> Whenever a Turkish word or phrase is used, I italicized it and translated it to English in [ ] either below or next to the actual text.

other than the ones in final position (see Excerpt 2 and 3).

- (2) NE wrote  
at 3:29pm on October 29th, 2008  
**awwwhh** we love u too *Haa ablaaa* [HH sister] :)♥
- (3) DT wrote  
at 4:20pm on September 3rd, 2008  
**goood goood**, well gay mostly but its aight i guess lol and are you coming backk? i heard you were gonna be in turkey for school? :(

After observing the frequent employment of such vernacular lengthening practices on Facebook by young Turkish women in their community of practice, I analyzed other multilingual Turkish and English groups and English-Turkish bilingual groups on Facebook to see if I could find a similar pattern on their use of orthography. I observed that it is very rarely present among multilingual English speakers whereas it is more common among multilingual Turkish speakers and English-Turkish bilinguals. However, those groups who use non-standard lengthenings in their messages do also use standard lengthening practices very commonly. Further, the employment of vernacular lengthening practices is not as common as it is in this group of young Turkish women. Thus, I argue that even though such unconventional lengthenings are present and considered a variant among Turkish people, it becomes an identity resource for the group I observed.

I further analyzed the data to see if these young Turkish women follow English or Turkish phonology in their lengthening practices. It seems that they did not follow the rules of English phonology in lengthening a word. In English, stress is somewhat unpredictable (Cruttenden, 1997). Thus, there is no regularity in lengthening a word. However, almost always it is a vowel that gets lengthened for affective purposes in English. After concluding that it is not the English phonology that influences such practices, I turned to the Turkish phonology to find an explanation for the found pattern. I argue that there should be something that triggers the use of such vernacular lengthenings by Turkish people on their use of Facebook since it is more common among Turkish people.

First of all, in Turkish, word stress can be predicted from a regular stress rule. It is usually the final syllable that carries the stress in Turkish words (Kabak and Vogel, 2001). However, there are a few exceptions to this rule. Certain place names, uninflected adverbs and some borrowings do not follow the mentioned stress rule. In addition, non-final stress can be found when certain affixes are added to a word. In Turkish, it is usually the final vowel that carries the stress gets lengthened. On the one hand, it seems that young Turkish women by their choice of putting the emphasis to the final syllable did somewhat follow the regular stress pattern found in Turkish language. On the other hand, not all of their lengthening both in Turkish and English did strictly follow Turkish norms.

Another interesting case is the lengthening of the “e” character at the end of the English words where “e” is present orthographically but silent in actual speech (see Excerpts 4 and 5).

- (4) BT wrote  
at 9:26am on April 4th, 2009  
*HHAAAAAAAAAAAAA ABLAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA* [sister HH]....:)  
you loook soo **adorableee** yaa *benidee goturrr* [bring me with you] :(  
*cook ozledimm seni* [I missed you so much]

- (5) ND wrote  
at 7:01am on September 4th, 2008  
ohh *dun* [yesterday] it was **gonee** LOL xD

Some of the other words that were lengthened by the recycling the “e” in the data are “game”, “sure”, “people”, “life”, and “recognize”. These lengthened words, where “e” is recycled, are somewhat acceptable in Turkish. This is due to the highly phonetic nature of Turkish orthography. When these words are pronounced by a native English speaker, the grapheme “e” is not present in actual production. However, if these words are treated as Turkish words and produced by following Turkish orthography and its sound-grapheme correspondences, the “e” character will correspond to /e/ sound in actual speech. Thus, the reduplication of the “e” grapheme would correspond the lengthening of the vowel /e:/ which can be articulated easily in actual speech. For instance, the word “adorable” would be /ədɔːrəbəl/ or /ədɔːrəb/ in English whereas it would be produced as /adɔːrable/ in Turkish. Thus, when the letter “e” is reduplicated it would be produced as /adɔːrable:/ by a Turkish speaker. However, it is not possible to add such a lengthening effect to the actual English pronunciation of the words since “e” is silent orally. Therefore, I think young Turkish women might be justifying their orthographic practices by somewhat following highly phonetic nature of Turkish orthography in these cases.

As I discussed earlier, some of the recycled final characters follow neither Turkish nor English lengthening patterns. These are all apparently and phonologically consonants, such as “c” in “pic”, “d” in “tried”, “t” in “it”, “g” in “tag”, “r” in “computer”, “k” in “back”, “l” in “hell” (see Excerpts 6, 7, 8, and 9).

- (6) NE wrote  
at 6:52am on September 4th, 2008  
lol no u **donntt**, its the **computerr**  
i look worse **thenn** uu =]  
hehe  
be happy that u dont look like this in real lifee...)
- (7) ND wrote  
at 2:51am on September 2nd, 2008  
woah xD i like **ittt**. =)
- (8) NE wrote  
at 11:08pm on October 18th, 2008  
ne biliyim EBin biraz havasi var gibi [I don’t know why but I think she looks like EB here]  
the **piccc**:/jk
- (9) BT wrote  
at 10:06pm on October 22nd, 2009  
its been way too long since i passed the carpim tablosu [multiplication table] HH abla [sister HH], and last time i checked i was still a girl!)...**andddd** i dont ever remember coming home to tell anybody about what i learned that day, it never go that interesting:D, but gotta admit, loooooove the parents...:D

## 6. Lengthening as an Element of Fun Talk

After analyzing the lengthening from a phonetic and a phonological perspective, I adapted a pragmatic and a sociolinguistic perspective in this section to discuss the possible

pragmatic meanings this lengthening practice carries and what purpose it serves in identity claims of young Turkish women in their community of practice.

In analyzing the data, I did not look at lengthening practices in isolation from other linguistic and non-linguistic practices in photo comments. As I discussed earlier, sense of humor became the social capital in this community of practice. Group members aimed to show their sense of humor through uploading funny pictures and/or cartoons and also initiating a fun talk via posting. In their fun talk, they did use lengthening very often compare to the other groups that I am observing on Facebook. They do not follow English or Turkish phonology in lengthening a word. Instead, they employ vernacular lengthening practices which is also a variant among other Turkish speakers on Facebook but not very commonly used as it is in this group to lengthen words in their posts. By following Sherzer (2002), I argued that the frequent use of such lengthening practices is a kind of speech play that serves as a crucial element of fun talk in this community of practice. It seems that young Turkish women would like to be funny in every level of their language use. They want their photo comments to be funny at a first glance and to mark the mood as humorous when these messages are read. They reached their aim via the use of vernacular lengthenings at the orthographic level. It is apparent that lengthening practices became a crucial resource at the orthographic level in this community of practice to mark sense of humor and hence index their group identity. Further, I argue that these orthographic representations become iconic in this community of practice and is an example of iconic use of speech play at the orthographic level.

Below are the photo comments of a picture posted by the group members. In the picture, there are three of the group members and one of them is holding a bottle. One of them uploaded the picture to her Facebook account. However, in order to make the picture funnier, she used photoshop to add some funny effects to it. With the effects, SG's nose became pointy, NE's hands were lengthened, and their eyes were forwarded.

Excerpt (10):

1. NE wrote  
at 8:17pm on September 30th, 2008  
im telling u tht thing looks like a beer *sisesii* [bottle].....
2. SG wrote  
at 9:54pm on September 30th, 2008  
too bad its just **GAZOZZ** [soda] :d
3. NE wrote  
at 10:57pm on September 30th, 2008  
actually its *limonlu soda* [lemonade]..  
**butt** im just imagining it as **beerr** hahahaha....  
i just noticed that my hand looks **humongouss**...  
and i love how ur nose is **soo pointyy**...
4. ND wrote  
at 1:37am on October 1st, 2008  
SG your face looks **flawlessssssss**=)  
and NE your eyes scared me **\*\*<33333333**

5. SG wrote  
at 10:36am on October 1st, 2008  
*lmao burunuma bak* [look at my nose] (h)
6. NE wrote  
at 2:09pm on October 1st, 2008  
**yeahh** SG your **nosee** makes you look like a **witchh**  
**LMAOOO** but a pretty one:P **ilyy♥**  
  
and thanks but no **thankss** *NDcuk* [dear ND] lol♥
7. SG wrote  
at 2:54pm on October 1st, 2008  
**lol** :D *gozumde batmis* [my eyes were forwarded] haha
8. NE wrote  
at 5:20pm on October 1st, 2008  
**bothh wayss** we look mad **sexyy**  
hehehe....:)  
**ahh** school **tomorowwww**:(
9. AME wrote  
at 3:21pm on October 2nd, 2008  
hah yeah you wish that was **beerrrr** [=] thats ok NE ill hook you up one day ;)
10. SG wrote  
at 3:45pm on October 2nd, 2008  
:D
11. NE wrote  
at 4:49pm on October 2nd, 2008  
ill be **waitinggg askimm** [my love] ♥ =]

In actual speech, different types of phonations and phonological elements can be used to index a certain type of identity and/or to mark different social stances (Hay and Drager, 2007; Hill and Zepeda, 1999, Sicoli (under review)). However, in written communication, many of these elements are absent. I argued that young Turkish women, by recycling the final character of a word in orthographic representation of words, aimed to create such kind of effect in written communication. Thus, through the employment of vernacular lengthenings as a kind of speech play, these young Turkish women sought to be humorous in their use of orthography (Sherzer, 2002). As Bourdieu (1978) argued we cannot isolate one level of language use from other levels and hence we should look at multiple levels of language use. As it is observed in this community of practice, in their overall language use, young Turkish women rely on speech play to be humorous to mark their group membership and so they rely on speech play at the orthographic level to be humorous.

## 9. Conclusion

The creative use of orthography in lengthening words by young Turkish women demonstrated that lengthening practices by following a non-standard rule within this community served as a form of speech play at the orthographic level (Sherzer, 2002).



Young Turkish women saw such practices as a crucial element in their fun talk. This linguistic practice in addition to other mentioned social practices helped young Turkish women to be humorous and hence to serve for their group's identity needs. In other words, they marked their solidarity with each other and further indexed their group identity as 'humorous' and 'cool' by the use of lengthening practices in their community of practice. This clearly indicates that orthography cannot be detached from social contexts as argued by many (Jaffe, 2000; Romaine, 2002; Schieffelin & Doucet, 1998) and should also be seen as a 'social practice' that helps to convey different pragmatic meanings in various contexts and hence to construct social identities (Sebba, 2003, 2007).

Furthermore, I argued that even though young Turkish women did not follow English or Turkish norms in their lengthening practices, it seems that the regular stress pattern of Turkish has an impact in Turkish women's choice of putting the emphasis to the final syllable. The employment of Turkish stress rule both in English and Turkish words index these women's Turkishness even when using the English code. This is also credited by many researchers who argued that the use of non-standard spellings and/or certain diacritics or symbols by certain people mark their ethnic identities and/or cultural affiliation (Androutsopoulos, 2000; Jaffe, 2000; Powers, 1990; Schieffelin & Doucet, 1998).

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