

Yoruba Slangs in Students' Narratives in Lagos: A Linguistic and Sociocultural Implication

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Abstract

The widespread and acceptability of slang in the narratives of an urban African speech community is not unconnected with the indigenous structure of the society which allows close and steady communication among language users. One of the motivations for the spread of slang is the interactive condition of a speech communities. The conceptualization of slang in a society is strongly characterized by social groups and informal language-use (cf. Hatmann & James, 1998). Lagos is a Nigerian city with Yoruba as the lingua franca. The city can be described as a potpourri of diverse sociolinguistic interaction in Nigeria with massive use of slang. This study examines the derivation, contents, structure and usage of slang involving Yoruba lexicons in Lagos. Population boost in Lagos has helped in the creation of numerous social groups, among which is the university community where students constitute a significant percentage of the population. This research will examine the use of slang with Yoruba lexicon among University students. Even though the language of instruction in the university is English, it is observed that the language of slang is mostly always Yoruba, which is the lingua franca of the immediate speech environment. This paper investigates the reason why Yoruba is easily adopted for slang in the academic space despite the conspicuous representation of different ethnic nationals. Mixed research methodology is employed for this study. A certain number of students will be interviewed in order to investigate their proficiency level in the use of slang. Furthermore, linguistic and sociolinguistic analysis of the slang is carried out which involves the semantic analysis of the slangs. Grammatical inquiry including morphosyntactic investigation will also be carried out. To achieve this, the foregrounding theory will serve as framework for the theoretical analysis. It is hypothesized that natural language should be represented with informal linguistic and sociocultural narratives. Therefore, this study is an attempt to reinvigorate the slang involving Yoruba language as a communication pattern of the students at the University of Lagos.

Keywords: Slang, Conventionalized, Morphosyntactic, Derivation, Lingua-franca, Speech Community

Introduction

Slang is a form of language use that involves in-group communication, colourful words and phrases that could be connotatively used (Eble, 1996) Slang has a specificity status which is often very often colloquial: the language and dialect tend to be specific to a particular territory (Namvar, 2014). Slang used in a sociolinguistic space is language specific, it could also be based on the

general worldview of a particular speech community. Slang could be considered as one of the literary tools that is responsible for development of terminologies in a language, although this does not mean that there is a preconceived effort by the speakers of a language to use slangs to develop terminologies, it is a form of conventional arrangement, mostly among the youths in a certain speech setting. Also, slang usage can be said to be periodic, it is time bound. Large percentage of slangs are easily forgotten with time, especially when such slangs lack broad acceptability and conventionality among other categories of speakers apart from the youth, who are considered as more active slang users. Slangs are developed from occurrences in a society. This idea about the feature of slang is summarized in Izmaylova Zamaletdinova & Zholshayeva (2017, p. 76) that “Slang – the complex, difficult and inevitable language phenomenon, it stems from historical, social and cultural tendencies of life mostly expressed through the language of the immediate environment. It is imperative to state the lingua franca of a place plays a very important role in the type of slang and its usage in a particular speech community. As such, slangs with Yoruba lingua codes are bound to be more popular in a place where Yoruba is the lingua franca. In Lagos, Nigeria, Yoruba language has the most speakership status, even though there are so many speakers of other languages in the city. In this study, I examine slangs that have Yoruba grammaticality, gathered from students of the University of Lagos irrespective of their ethnic representation, and I then analyse the linguistic and sociocultural features of the slangs.

Yoruba Language Use

Yoruba, is a member of the Niger-Congo language family, apart from being the language spoken in the Southwestern zone of Nigeria, to which Lagos belong, it is spoken in eight other West African countries and in twenty-four countries of the world (Joshua project.net). There is no doubt that Yoruba language has evolved over centuries, especially since its contact and interaction with other languages and culture. Earlier on, different analytical processes and patterns have presented the language as a natural language with rich literary devices like idioms, metaphor and personification (Olatunji, 1984; Osunnuga, 2016). The natural status of the language is one of the reasons why it can be manipulated to achieve extra-grammatical devices that defies grammatical rules (Bamgbose, 1986). It can be concluded that slangs are easily achieved with Yoruba language because of its manipulative capability which resonated around various literary techniques. For instance, connotation is an important aspect of some Yoruba literary devices, and this is also paramount in slang derivation and analysis. In this research, the investigation of the structure,

semantics and general usage of Yoruba slangs in the way that it is being engaged by some selected students of the University of Lagos, is considered.

Methodology

Both qualitative and Quantitative research methodologies are employed to gather the data used for this study. Twenty students, ten Yoruba speakers and ten non-Yoruba speakers are observed and interviewed based on their slang usage during communication. The reason for collecting the data from both Yoruba and non-Yoruba speakers is not unconnected with the cosmopolitan nature of the location of the University of Lagos, with the mixture of different ethnic nationals. One of the impetus for employing this method is to compare the quantity of Yoruba slangs used among the Yoruba-speaking students and that of the non-Yoruba-speaking students of the University of Lagos. The essence of the observation and interview is to see if sociolinguistic influence could determine the frequency of Yoruba slangs over ethnolinguistic influence. Furthermore, the grammar of the slangs are then analysed, using the theory of foregrounding which has the capability of identifying extra-semantic and deep features in an oral communication process.

Theoretical Model

The theory of foregrounding is employed to analyse the data gathered from the students. Foregrounding theory analyses linguistic texts in a wholesome manner in order to capture all the intricacies involved in an expression. Theory of Foregrounding is seen as one of the analytical tool for filling the gap that could have been created between poetry and daily conversation (Lisheng, 2006). Slangs could be viewed as a form of elevated linguistic expression; employing poetic means to achieve daily communication and especially among some particular group of people, the foregrounding theory is apt in analyzing such expressions. The theory, which could be traced to the effort of the Czech theorist, Mukarovsky, is a technique designed to draw attention to a part of the text in which some special point is made in a speech, in order to determine the extra-meaning attributed to a particular phonological, syntactic and semantic structure (Fowler, 1996; Douthwaite, 2000)

Foregrounding is a useful tool in drawing a distinction between linguistic meaning and stylistic meaning of language text (Ghizalah, 1987). While linguistic meaning refers to the immediate or surface meaning of a text, stylistic meaning is the effect or function brought about by the linguistic sequence contextualized by the deep meaning of the text (Osunnuga, 2016, p. 52). This suggests

that the theory of foregrounding grammatically analyses more than what can be understood at the surface level. And this describes the situation with slang in Yoruba, and other world languages.

Some Reviews of Slangs in Nigeria

Nigeria has over 400 indigenous languages, this multilingual status has provided a very interesting background for diverse language analytic realities. Also, some of the languages are said to be more natural than evolved. As such, there have been successful efforts by various scholars, both indigenous and foreign, to interrogate the different sections of linguistic analysis of the indigenous Nigerian languages. Part of these sections include the juxtaposition of linguistic and stylistic analysis of the languages, with slang of various Nigerian languages as a subsection. Adedun (2008) is a study whereby slang is considered as a dialect of a language. The research was carried out among the students of the University of Lagos, Nigeria. In the study, slang is considered a low variety code in a language situation of competing variants. Adedun concluded that slang in the University of Lagos is a manifestation of the multilingual nature of the Nigerian nation since the slangs collected from the students of the university are derived using different Nigerian languages.

Dozie and Madu (2012) is a study that examines the topic of slang expression among students of the Federal University of Technology, Owerri. The research established that students' communication through the use of slang enhances group identity and solidarity among students of the University. Also, in Aboh (2015), what is analysed is the use of slang by Nigerian novelists to navigate through the topic of 'sacredness' of sex and sex related topics in their works. The author was able to establish that the novelists whose works were examined, deploy slang as euphemistic strategies to account for "sex and sexual identity". This is almost always the case in many African societies where sexual expressions and innuendos are avoided due to the high sense of morality that is being preserved.

The instances of slang in selected Yorùbá films with the aim of analysing their derivation and exploring the context in which they are being used is the crux of the study of Asiru and Ogotu (2018). They observed that the issue of slanging, which had earlier been associated with bad language and poor communication has unconsciously metamorphosed to a somewhat generally accepted code, used by the public. If slang language has gained this much attention in various speech communities in Nigeria, it is not out of place to investigate the grammatical and stylistic

analysis of the different languages used for slang. Considering the scholarly studies that have been carried out on the use of slang, there is a gap with regards to critical analysis of the Nigerian languages being used for slanging. A possible reason for this might be the use of different languages for slanging. This challenge is not unconnected to the multilingual situation of Nigeria. However, what I intend to achieve with this paper is to document and analyse slangs that are derived with Yoruba language alone among selected students of the University of Lagos.

Data Presentation and Analysis

One of the methods considered for data collection in this study is to employ the use of Yoruba slangs by both Yoruba and non-Yoruba speakers. Out of the twenty students of the University of Lagos that were observed and interviewed, ten of them who are non-Yoruba speakers are able to make use of Yoruba slangs effectively.

Below are some of the slangs effectively used by the non-Yoruba respondents:

1. Má fọ
Do not break
Do not be scared
2. Alayé (oní ayé)
Owner of the earth
My buddy (known or unknown)
3. Kò sí wèrè
There is no madness
There is no problems
4. Ajé
Deity of wealth
To be very sure
5. Fọ lẹnu
Break mouth
To defeat

In the data set (1-5), I show that the meaning of the slangs cannot be literally understood without a strong grasp of the Yoruba language, yet the speakers are not speakers of Yoruba. By this, two points are observed, first, the process of learning and using slang is a totally different phenomenon from language learning. Second, the language of the immediate environment plays a major role in the type of slang language utilized by slang users.

Another set of students that were interviewed are the Yoruba speakers who cannot be said to be very fluent in the language, they speak English language, which is the official language, more and

fluently. As such, they would not have used some of the terms used in slang in their daily communication.

6. Ọmọ àsẹ
Child blasphemy¹
Dull person
7. Àgbà firiyòyò
Elder classy (Onomatopoeia)
A respected person
8. Gbénu sí i kì í ẹ àténù
Put.mouth to it is not glutton
Drinking from you does not mean I am a glutton
9. Kò kan ayé
It does not touch the world
The issue does not concern me
10. Horo sí horo
Corner to corner
To treat the same way one was treated.

The slangs in (6-10) are commonly used among students, however, when asked about the literal meaning of the terms, most of them do not know while others gave a wrong meaning. This is an indication that even though the terms used in slang are lexical items from a particular language, it does not necessarily mean that the terms constantly or understandably used in daily communication.

Another view of Yoruba slang to be examined in this study is the structure of the slangs. Some of the slangs are presented with semantic repetition. Consider the following:

11. Má fọ, o fọ tì
Do not break, you break Neg.
Do not be scared
12. Jí, má sùn
Wake up, do not sleep
Do not be outsmarted

In the examples above, the phrase in each example can be said to have the same meaning. In (11), the two phrases has negative items: *má* and *tì*. *Má* is a sentence initial negator while *tì* is a sentence final negator, the two negating the verb *fọ*. In (12), *jí* (wake up) and *má sùn* (do not sleep) have the same meaning, such that the act of not sleeping translates to staying awake.

Furthermore, different Yoruba slangs can be used in a way to possess the same meaning. This is achieved when the lexical items of the slangs are not the same. Examples below:

¹ The author is not certain about the meaning of this word, hence the meaning given.

13. a Gbé igbó
 carry bush
 carry a course over
- b. Jẹ ẹwà
 eat beans
 carry a course over

The meaning ascribed to the slangs in (13a) and (13b) are the same. In (13a) *igbó* (bush) is interpreted to mean carry-over, while in (13b), *ẹwà* (beans) is interpreted to mean carry-over. What this suggests is that there are different antecedents to the derivation of the two slangs. And the two are used interchangeably by students to mean the same expression.

The discourse of grammaticality of slang in any language is crucial. This is because slangs are known not to follow the grammatical rules of the language in context. There is no exception to this assertion with Yoruba slangs.

Below are examples of Yoruba slangs that fall into this category:

14. Wos wobi
 Look, look here
15. Twale
 Respect
16. Oskiborobo
 No particular meaning but it is used to psyche someone up
17. Má fọ
 Do not break
 Do not be scared
18. Ojà jẹ Wálé
 Market ate Wale
 I was drunk

The slangs in (14-17) are considered ungrammatical with the rule governing the grammar of Yoruba language. For instance, *wos* in (14) has defied the final consonant rule of Yoruba which states that consonant cannot end a word. Similarly, the rule of consonant cluster is broken with the usage of two adjacent consonants in (15 and 16).

Also, the slang in (17) defiles the selective rule in the deep structure of generative grammar because the verb is responsible for the selection of an appropriate subject. As such, the verb *fọ* (break) cannot select a subject with the feature of (+human). Therefore, the construction is ungrammatical in the syntax of the language. Same is the case with the datum in (18), the verb *jẹ* (eat) cannot select a subject with [-human] feature, as it is only [+human] that have the capability of eating. However, this is allowed in slang because of the ungrammatical feature of slang.

Furthermore, there is massive use of pronoun in Yoruba slang. However, the pronouns are not very direct in their usage, the noun they represent are mostly obscure when the slang is used.

Consider the following data set:

19. Ó ta lènu
Pron. spicy in.mouth
It is very authentic
20. O po yéyẹ
Pron. plenty
It is very numerous
21. Ó yá
Pron. ready
It is set/we are ready
22. Gbé e fún un
Carry Pron. for Pron.
Give it to him
23. Orí ẹ wà nìbẹ̀
Head Pron. is there
You are on the right path
24. Má sùn lé e
Neg. sleep on it
Do not be slow
25. O ò mọ bí ó ẹ́ ń lọ
Pron. Neg. know how Pron is going
You do not know what is going on

The slangs in (19-25) all contains the use of pronouns. But it is pertinent to note that the nouns represented by the pronouns are not definite in the slangs. The pronoun *ó* in (20) could mean any noun or noun phrase that is much in quantity. For example, the pronoun could refer to *money*, *materials*, or even an act of bravery by someone. In the same vein, the second pronoun in the slang in (25) *ó* is not referring to a particular noun but the pronoun is situated in the context where the slang is used and it conveys the right meaning to the hearer.

Lastly, the way students use Yoruba slangs in a manipulative manner that involves ironical use of the language. Consider the examples in (26 and 27):

26. Ọmọ oró
Child poison
Great person
27. Baba were
Father madness
Smart person

Literally, the slangs above are presented in the negative context, however, the users mean to use them as positive expression about someone, especially when such a person has the capacity of performing an enviable feat. The slang can be used in the context as in (28) below:

28. *Ọmọ oró ni Messi ní orí pápá*
Child poison is Messi on head field
Messi is a fantastic player on the field of play

Messi, a football player is praised with a slangy language which literally gives a negative impression but it actually refers to him as being very good in what he is known for.

Conclusion

In this research, I have been able to establish that Yoruba language is a language capable of being used for slanging. I have presented the observation that language learning is quite different from slang learning with the use of non-Yoruba speakers as part of the respondents during data collection. Also, it is observed that some of the respondents who are not fluent in Yoruba language are able to conveniently use Yoruba slangs even without the complete understanding of some of the terms used in the slang. The sociolinguistic factors of a particular speech community has a stronger influence on non-native speakers of such speech community over the ethnolinguistic effects of the speakers. The slangs presented are also not code-mixed or code-switched with other languages. This does not mean that there are not slangs that contains Yoruba with one or two other languages. Also, the ungrammaticality feature of slangs is displayed with varying examples to show.

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