

Language of Communication among University Students in Nigeria: A Study on Slangy Expressions in Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT The aim of this work was to investigate the uniqueness of slang, the creativity therein and its use as a language of communication among the students of Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria. Oral interviews and informal interactions were used to elicit information from 3000 students who gave consent and were randomly selected from a pool of students after the objective of the study was explained. Key Person Interview (KPI) was used to verify/supplement the information obtained from the oral and informal interactions. The results show that the students used different slangy expressions and terms as means of communication. Also, the slang types differed from those used in other institutions and their coinage reflected creativity among students and was sex-dependent with usage more among males than females. The study revealed that slangy expression was used as an effective medium of communication to enhance group identity and solidarity among students of the Federal University of Technology Owerri.

INTRODUCTION

Language may be defined as a system of communication, a medium for emotional expression, a channel of thought, an indispensable foundation of socio-economic/political development and indeed a way of life. Several other definitions of language are documented by other authors (Emenanjo 2007; Fromkin et al. 2007; Finegan 2008). Language plays an all important role in the life of a people. It serves not only as a medium of communication, but also as a symbol of group identity and solidarity. Language enables different groups of people to know who they are and to what ethnic and linguistic entities they belong. Overall, it is a great asset to the society as every single need of man in and outside his society depends on language, and man's needs and aspirations find their expression in language. The origin of language as a vehicle of ideas dates back to prehistoric times (Sleigh 2003: 13).

Communication may refer to an act or a process that not only involves common experience but also mutual influence. Martin and Nakayama (2005: 32) defined communication as "a symbolic process whereby meaning is shared and negotiated". In other words, communication occurs whenever someone attributes meaning to another's words or actions. This is to say that communication is a two-way process involving a sender and a receiver and in which

case, the symbols we send only make meaning because the other person shares our symbolic system. As a process, it involves a channel through which messages are transmitted in such a way that the people communicating can be thought as sending and receiving messages. Similarly, Otagburuagu (2009: 1) noted that communication is a "give and take process- the transmission of information from one person to another using symbols or codes which are meaningful to both the information transmitter and the receiver". According to Verderber and Verderber (2005: 4), the essential elements of communication are participants, messages, meaning, symbols, encoding and decoding: All these factors come to play for communication to be effective and realized.

Slang is a highly colloquial language consisting of either new or established words used imaginatively to secure a vivid or comic effect. Slang usually is metaphorical in that it substitutes a colorful image for a standard word. Slang begins as the talk of insiders, people who share a common experience or attitude, and sometimes spreads to the general vocabulary. The origin of slang dates back to 1800 and was used in England as a "special vocabulary" by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character. With time, its use gained acceptance and spread to other parts of the world. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2004: 1113), slang refers to 'very informal words and

expressions that are more common in spoken language especially used by a particular group of people, for example, children, criminals, soldiers etc'. It is a general consensus that slang terms are informal, transitory, limited in reach and connotative in outlook since it is applicable to members of a social group or group of friends (Myers 2004; Jowitt 2005; Fromkin et al. 2007; Finegan 2008; McGregor 2009). This feature sets members of a group apart from non-members with the result that when a non-member tries to use these terms, he is easily spotted as not using the term effectively and efficiently.

The use of slangs among university students world over has been studied by some authors. For instance, Finegan (2004: 336) reported slang expressions used by students of the University of North Carolina between 1972 and 1993 as inventoried by Eble, C. In Nigeria, the use of slang is common and differs from school to school as they focus particularly on their social life as it concerns eating, drinking, dressing, love habits and environment (Elezianya 2005; Jowitt 2005; Mbata and Ajileye 2009; Terna-Abah 2010). According to Mbata and Ajileye (2009: 6), some of the important factors that motivate the use of slang by students include: the establishment and maintenance of group identity, formation of a united whole and distinctiveness of members from members of other groups.

Objective of Study

Although a few studies have been conducted in Nigeria on the use of slang among students in various institutions as shown above, there is a further imperative to appreciate slang usage among students in other Nigerian universities. This is because of the use of slang to describe student and indeed human activities in different socio-cultural, economic, religious and political context. Furthermore, it is believed by Mbata and Ajileye (2009: 14) that since slangy expressions and terms are yet to be accepted in formal oral and written speech, their continued use may affect teaching and learning in Nigerian universities which is conducted with English language as the medium of instruction. The aim of the present study therefore was to investigate the uniqueness of slang, the creativity therein and its use as a language of communication among the students of Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria.

METHOD

This study was undertaken at the Federal University of Technology Owerri, (FUTO) Nigeria between February 2011 and March 2012. FUTO was established in 1980 by the Federal Government of Nigeria as Nigeria's premier University of Technology. It is situated in Imo State, South East Nigeria. Currently, FUTO has an estimated population of 20,000 students distributed in six schools namely; School of Engineering and Engineering Technology (SEET), School of Science (SOSC), School of Agriculture and Agricultural Technology (SAAT), School of Management Technology (SMAT), School of Health Technology (SOHT), School of Environmental Technology (SOET). In addition, it has a Postgraduate School (PGS), many Institutes and Directorates including the Directorate of General Studies (DGS) which is the Unit of the authors.

Through random sampling method, a total of 3000 undergraduate students (males and females) from the six schools who were 17 years of age and above were enlisted in the study. The students were selected from a larger pool of students who showed interest after the objective of the study was explained to them. Oral interviews and informal interaction were used to elicit information from the students. Key Person Interview (KPI) was used to verify/supplement the information obtained from the oral and informal interactions. The persons used for KPI comprised: Students' Union Government Officials, Presidents' of Students' Associations and Course Representatives. In addition, a few members of staff were interviewed to ascertain whether the standard of the students' written English adjudged by their written examination and other presentations was affected by the use of slangy expression.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result obtained from the oral interviews and informal interactions with students are presented below.

The present study shows that students of the Federal University of Technology Owerri Nigeria use slangy expressions and terms as means of communication among themselves and within groups of students. Therefore, this study is a confirmation that slang usage is very widespread

Some Slangy Expressions Prevalent in Federal University of Technology FUT, Owerri Environment and their Interpretation

<i>Drive one's cappa</i>	– To collect something that belongs to another forcefully.
<i>Bazz</i>	– To smoke
<i>Remove</i>	– Escape
<i>Die it</i>	– To ignore it/forget all about it
<i>Reason</i>	– Rub minds together
<i>On point</i>	– Lovely/ beautiful/amazing
<i>Miss Yarn</i>	– To talk nonsense
<i>Toast/Chaik/Razzle</i>	– Ask someone out on a date
<i>To Leg</i>	– To see someone off
<i>Roast</i>	– Strapped/ bankrupt
<i>To play someone</i>	– Beat someone up
<i>Dey well</i>	– Behave oneself
<i>Everly</i>	– Definitely
<i>To kill it</i>	– Perform very well
<i>Dachii (Igbo)</i>	– Real/ authentic
<i>Wahala (Hausa)</i>	– There is trouble/ confusion etc.
<i>Yawa</i>	– There is trouble
<i>Crash</i>	– To sleep
<i>Beast you</i>	– Get out
<i>Jazz in</i>	– Come in
<i>Container/Control</i>	– A female visitor
<i>Take me to a connected area</i>	– Where I can cheat during exam
<i>Tight</i>	– Shapely
<i>Trip</i>	– Impressed
<i>Pepper</i>	– Money
<i>Set</i>	– Properly dressed/looking expensive
<i>Deposit</i>	– To talk
<i>Fall Hand</i>	– Disappoint
<i>Wack</i>	– Eat
<i>Cut Out</i>	– Leave/Go
<i>Free Me</i>	– Give me without asking for it. / Leave me alone/am not in the mood
<i>Embibing</i>	– Drinking palm wine
<i>Bottling</i>	– Drinking Beer
<i>Lubber</i>	– Uninvited guest/ stupid person/ gate crasher, as the case may be
<i>Loaded</i>	– Rich/Well endowed physically
<i>To Tidy</i>	– Handle someone/ Waylay/ Victimize
<i>Touch</i>	– Stupid
<i>Capout</i>	– Died
<i>Shine your Eyes</i>	– Be Wise/Be Active and at Alert/ Play along etc.
<i>Bash</i>	– Celebrating / Having a party
<i>Show</i>	– Make oneself available/ Come
<i>Shack</i>	– An Alcoholic drink
<i>Packaging</i>	– Front (a bold one at that)/facade
<i>Ginger</i>	– Encourage/Harass/Intimidate/ Frighten/watch out for loopholes.
<i>Vibrate / Rake</i>	– Deny vehemently/talking seriously in self defense.
<i>Micro Chips</i>	– A piece of paper with relevant information or tips written in a specialized tiny writing carried into the examination hall by ineducable student
<i>Sort</i>	– To cut corners and get things done anyway

<i>Gbege(Delta)</i>	– You are in trouble
<i>Pin</i>	– I am in my house
<i>Handbag</i>	– Your girlfriend
<i>Jonz</i>	– Not making sense / saying rubbish
<i>Headpan</i>	– Use your sense
<i>Slack</i>	– Don't be lousy
<i>Chilax / Chill</i>	– Relax
<i>Freestyle</i>	– Leave it

and fashionable amongst students in higher institutions in Nigeria. These expressions are created in their numbers and show how these students come up with very strange but lucid expression of self in split seconds. Our study supports the views earlier reported by Mbata and Ajilieye (2009:13) that these slang expressions could emanate from an individual student or a small group of students, and often spread in use and scope with time. Often times, students who want to appear trendy join in using and spreading these slang expressions. This fact is corroborated by earlier studies by Brook (1979) and reported by Adebayo (2002: 8) that; “slang words are invented by a few people for the pleasure of novelty and imitated by others who like to be in the fashion and they undergo the file of all fashions”.

The result of our study also shows that many of the slangy expressions and terms used by students of the Federal University of Technology Owerri differ from those used by students in other institutions in Nigeria. This is not surprising since the slang terms used by students focus mainly on their social life as reflected by eating and drinking habits, dressing habits, love life and sex habits as well as their environment which is a major determinant of socio-cultural values, attitudes and behaviours of people. According to Mbata and Ajilieye (2009:14), the effectiveness of slang depends entirely on the situation or circumstances of its use, thus giving rise to different slang expressions used in the hostels, refectory and other eating places, examination halls, lecture halls etc. Furthermore, the need for establishment and maintenance of group identity, formation of a united whole and distinctiveness of members from members of other groups as reported by several authors (Finegan 2004; Fromkin et al. 2007; McGregor 2009; Mbata and Ajilieye 2009) underscore the uniqueness of slangs used by FUTO students.

Also our study revealed that slang usage and in particular slang coinage is sex-dependent as

males created and used these expressions more than females. This finding supports previous studies by Elezianya (2005: 73) which posits that males use more of slangy expressions than females. The reasons adduced for this include the following: "that males are the originators of these expressions which gradually flow into the female stream; that the males are much more vocal than the females as far as these "unsavoury" expressions are concerned; and because these expressions are unclassified, they sound better in the males circle". In addition, considering the morphology of some of these slangy expressions, this study corroborates the studies by Njemanze (2010:271) who noted that not all these expressions fit into the so called standard variety of sentences as we have some that blend with an infusion of our pidgin variety while just a few are vernacular-oriented statements. As established by previous studies (Finegan 2008; Holmes 2008; Mbata and Ajileye 2009; McGregor 2009), our study is a further confirmation that slang is popular among teenagers and college/university students. However, Finegan (2008: 320) noted that slang is also used by "specialized groups of all sorts, from physicians and computer hackers to police officers and stock-brokers".

Much as it is believed that slang is not a standard variety or is considered a low class language, it is very important to note that some of mental work goes into its coinage and eventual usage which communicates its "special" message for the intended user. Our study revealed that the usage of slang encouraged creativity among students. Also in certain situations, it afforded the students among other things: the opportunity to express themselves openly and be opinionated; the ability to communicate effectively; the right to full integration into an existing social system; freedom to see themselves as creative and enterprising; and chance to see themselves as creators or originators of the language in time and space.

Finally, our studies showed that these expressions did not affect to a large extent the quality of spoken and written English of the students. While majority of the students agreed that the use of slang did not affect their spoken and written English, a few agreed that it affected them. This finding was corroborated by some staff who were interviewed and who confirmed that the quality/standard of the students' written English

adjudged from the students' examination papers were adequate.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that slang has widespread use among students of Federal University of Technology Owerri. This they use as an effective medium of communication to enhance group identity and solidarity. The use of slang among these students comes quite naturally and may be considered the linguistic prerogative of these students and indeed other young people. Furthermore, it brings to bear on their creative aptitude as well as demonstrate that these expressions are actuated by certain factors such as age/gender, social background, environment, etc.

Without prejudice, students as inventors of these expressions should be encouraged to develop a standard orthography of this speech pattern. Though this may vary from region to region but ultimately, it will serve a purpose, communication, which is the bedrock of every language. Once this is achieved, slang will no longer be short-lived and would have developed lexical properties so much so that nouns, verbs, pronouns etc. stand on their own without constant elucidation of the subject matter.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From our studies, we recommend that students should sustain the use of these slangy expressions and make them thrive with time as this would help in the evolution of these expressions into a standardized local vocabulary. Furthermore, students should through social interaction widen the reach of slang to enhance communication especially where the target language is not mutually shared. Finally, slang should not always be looked upon as a low class variety but should be considered more as a medium of communication as its effectiveness depends crucially on the circumstances of its use

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