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Creativity in Students' Slang Usage

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Abstract

Slang is one of the prominent language usages whose existence is no longer contested. It involves use of language originally characterised by poor vocabulary, inconsistent lexicon, unconventionality and designed to be the speech of people involved in criminality and other questionable character. Hence, it suffers social stigma among linguists and lexicographers as they often associate its usage with overtly impertinent behaviour. However, in spite of this social stigma, slang continues to flourish among people especially youths whose language is heavily characterised with slang lexicon. In view of this, the study examined the processes of creativity involved in the use of slang among some selected youths. Interview was used to collect data from the selected subjects. Systemic Functional Linguistics contexts of situation and culture was adopted as theoretical framework for the study. After the analysis, it was discovered that the creation of slangy vocabulary mainly occurs on the lexical morphology and lexical semantics which include: coinage, borrowing, clipping, acronym, blending and metaphorical extension of meaning. The findings also show that slang lexical expressions relate to certain areas of students' academic life and their social interaction, notably the students' relationship with their teachers, difficult and simple courses, performance and other informal activities.

Keywords: acronym, borrowing, , clipping, coinage , extension metaphorical

Introduction

No living language simply consists of only one set of words which can be used the same way in all situations. There are many ways to say the same thing in a language, depending on where you are, who you are talking to, and how you feel. The degree of formality and non-formality are among the main factors which determine words and

structures appropriate to the situation in which one uses a language.

Slang, as a form of language used by particular groups, offers its speakers avenues to create and used words differently. It consists of lexicon of its own through the creation of new words or using old or existing words with new or distinctive meanings. Hence most of slangy words and



expressions cannot be found in the dictionary, because they are distortions of existing words or entirely invented terms. Slang is used by many kinds of groups who share situations or interests. Thus, it “acts as a class divider” (Adams 2005) that sets them apart or makes it difficult for ordinary people to understand them.

However, slang is academically used sparingly, and only away from classroom or professional settings. Speculating on why slang has not been subjected to serious scholarly analysis, Eble (1996) argues that “the neglect of slang as a topic for research may be the result of such factors as the belief that slang use changes rapidly or that slang is not standard language”. Also, Dumas and Lighter (1974) further stress the reasons why slang is considered as inferior form of speech in most setting:

It is markedly lower in prestige than Standard English.

It tends to appear first in the language of groups with low status, who may have little power or responsibility.

It is often taboo and unlikely to be used by people of high Status and it tends to displace the conventional terms...

However, Adams (2005:23) defends the usage of slang by saying “slang is a type of linguistic jaywalking: you can stand at the crosswalk and wait for the light to change, but that would be boring, as well as slow, so

we’d rather not”. Thus, a perusal of the literature shows that slang has now been a subject considered worthy of scholarly attention. Speculating on why slang has not been subjected to serious scholarly analysis, (Wall, 2006: 54) argues that “the neglect of slang as a topic for research may be the result of such factors as the belief that slang use changes rapidly or that slang is not standard language”. In buttressing the point, Blake (2010: 102) submits that many linguists have used the high turnover rate of slang items as the key element, claiming that slang is whimsical and arbitrary and that its ephemeral qualities render its study implicitly inconsequential. Linguists have recently started showing considerable interest in it because of the prominence it has among youth.

Moreover, slang is one of the idiosyncratic aspects of youth language which allows them to shape and reshape language to suit their individual needs and status which involves shared knowledge and culture. This study sets to explore the processes involved in the formation and use of slangy items used by the selected students in the study area through identifying, examining and classifying their expressions.

Literature Review

Though usually problematic to define, the available literature offers different perspectives on what constitutes slang. The word evokes mixed reactions among public and scholars. What is slang for one



person may not be slang for another. Even dictionaries on slang seem to differ on which words should be regarded as slang. Dumas and Lighter (1978:5) argue that the term “slang” has rarely been defined in a way that is useful to linguists. Everyone has their own opinion of what constitutes slang, but no clear linguistic effort or model has come forth to produce criteria for which words should be regarded as slang and which should not. Eble (1996:289) highlights the circumstances surrounding the definition of slang. She observes that one cannot set a clear linguistic distinction among terms such as jargon and colloquialisms. Hence, Dumas and Lighter (1978: ii) conclude that “while we all share an assumption that there is a lexical category of slang, we differ widely in our assumptions about what items belong in that category. However, there are reactions ranging from describing slang as simply “bad” language to slang as a creative language that demands attention and explanation.

Partridge (1935:67) asserts that the term “slang” might not be beyond definition, but it is “incapable of precise definition”. However, an early definition can be found in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1946) where slang is defined as:

... in what is now usual sense, a general name for the class of words, more or less artificial or affected in origin or use, which are not recognized as belonging to the standard vocabulary of the language into which they

have been introduced, but have an extensive currency in some section of society either as a means of concealing secrets or as intentionally undignified substitutes for those modes of expression that are employed by persons who values themselves on propriety of speech (1926:207)

This definition has four major points. Firstly, it says that slang is in the “words” or the “vocabulary” which can be described as belonging to the lexicon of a language. Secondly, it further states that slangy “words” do not belong to the variety of a standard language as it is often associated with poor grammar and poor diction. Thirdly, it expresses that a speaker who uses slang does so intentionally. Lastly, the excerpt also refers the use of slang to some sections of society which means it is specifically used by a group of people as their own sub-culture.

Partridge (1935) who spent most of time studying and collecting slangy expressions and later authored a dictionary of slang and unconventional English relates his definition of slang to the Webster’s Third (new) International Dictionary (1985:342) which describes it as:

...a non-standard vocabulary composed of word and senses characterized primarily by connotations of extreme informality. Composed typically of coinages or arbitrarily changed words, clipped or shortened forms, extravagant, forced figures of speech, or verbal novelties, experiencing quick popularity



and relatively rapid decline into disuse.

The definition identifies informality as a feature of slang. This is to say that slang is not used in formal discourses. Partridge (1935:74), while shortlisting the functions of slang, claims that it is intentionally used to decrease the formality of spoken as well as written discourse.

Anderson and Trudgil (1990), state that slang includes the vocabulary of “the underworld (street gangs, drug traffickers) as well as the specific vocabulary of “a particular profession and colloquial language below the level of standard educated speech”, consisting of new words or of current words employed in some new special sense”. Allen (1998:819), in *Concise Encyclopaedia of Pragmatics*, points to the uncertain existence of slang, describing it as “vocabulary in limbo... awaiting acceptance or rejection by standard usage.

Thus, Anderson and Trudgil (1990) posit that slang mostly consists of words and expressions which are extremely informal and often fashionable but rather temporary. They further emphasize very strongly that slang is sociological rather than a purely linguistic phenomenon used to mark social differences and reinforce relationship within a group and to keep outsiders outside. Yule (2006:211) observes that what is slang to a generation may not be slang to the next generation, since language is constantly changing, and words and expressions can move from one form to another.

However, Dumas and Lighter (1978: 14-15) outline four criteria for deciding whether a linguistic item constitutes slang. Their view is that a linguistic item constitutes slang if it fits two of the four criteria below:

- a. The presence of the expression will markedly lower the dignity of the formal discourse (whether in speech or in writing), which means as a receiver, you will not expect to find such an expression in a formal discourse. For example, expressions such as “getting around”, “screwing around”, “picking around” are opposed to the more formal expression “sleeping around”.
- b. The use of the expression is based on the sender special familiarity with the group of people. “Special familiarity” refers to “in” terms which are opposed to the more conventionally accepted terms.
- c. The expression is seen as a taboo term in ordinary discourse among persons of higher social status or responsibility.
- d. The expression is used in place of the conventional synonym in order to: protect the sender from the discomfort of conventional terms or to protect the sender from the discomfort of further elaboration. Lexical items and expressions borrowed from



other languages fit into this category.

The foregoing discussions suggest that Dumas and Lighter (1978) are inclined to defining slang terms based on how they deviate from societal norms and attitudes. However, Ellis (2002:6) sees slang as “a variety of language used in certain contexts by means of which people express their sense of belonging to a particular group within the community which is not specific to any geographic location”. For Spolsky (1998:35) slang is a kind of jargon marked by its rejection of formal rules, its comparative freshness and its common euphemism, and its marked use to claim solidarity. Galperin (1971: 96) states that slang seems to mean everything that is below the standard usage of present-day English.

Slangy words change meaning all the time and acquire different meanings for different groups. The words can, however, occasionally enter into standard usage, but the majority of them have a short lifespan and is rapidly replaced by new ones. Speakers often draw on the resources of the language, including its phonological, morphological and cultural aspects, to express new meanings.

Martiello (2017) defines slang by distinguishing the general from the specific. While general slang terms are used deliberately by speakers to break with the standard usage, and are therefore not group restricted,

specific slang terms are used by people of common age and experience such as the students in this study. Slangy expressions are therefore in-group markers. Hummon (2018) sees students slang as “oral, informal, highly expressive language that is created and used primarily as part of their academic and social life”.

From the definitions above, it is apparent that slang is viewed from different fields of study: for some, slang is mainly a sociological construct, while for others, slang is a purely linguistic notion. Both these notions can be accommodated in sociolinguistics, which is the study of language in relation to society. This study has however adopted slang as a sociolinguistic phenomenon which entails the study of a distinctive vocabulary that indicates social identity.

Theoretical Framework

The study considers slang as a variety according to use. Slang users tend to bear in mind the context of situation and culture before employing slangy expressions in their speech. Hence, as theoretical framework, the study adopts Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) theory which classifies language use according to the dimensions of field, tenor and mode.

Systemic Functional Linguistics is a theory of that emphasizes the functional use of language in context. It was developed by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday; a British linguist, Halliday is



considered as the main proponent of the theory. Along with him, his colleagues and students like, Ruqaiya Hasan, Christian Matthiessen, Martin. O'Halloran and many more have been making significant contributions to SFL. The theory is built on previous works of some influential linguists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and J.R. Firth. Bronislaw Malinowski was a polish anthropologist who did most of his works based in England (O'Donnell, 2012) Firth, a linguist, established linguistics as a discipline in Britain and developed Malinowski's emphasizes the importance of considering the context in which language is used, including the social, cultural, and situational factors that influence language choice and use. Thus, SFL theory is concerned with the way people use language to get things done in a social context. Language in SFL is viewed as a network of systems and choices available to speakers and writers to make meaning in a particular sociocultural context. The key assumptions about the model are that language is (1) used for functional purposes; (2) context specific which is determined by the sociocultural context where it is used; (3) used for making meaning; and (4) a semiotic process which involves making choices of language rather than relying on rules (Fassol, 2020).

Methodology

The study area is Federal College of Horticulture Dadin- Kowa, located in Gombe state, north-eastern Nigeria. It offers different programmes ranging from pre-diploma, diploma

and Higher National Diploma courses. The college is considered as a cosmopolitan environment where students from different socio-economic background are found. Being an agriculture-based institution, practical activities are prioritised more than theoretical aspects. Thus, students do take less time in their classes than in the field and this may perhaps expose them to the use slang expressions more frequently.

The participants are National Diploma (NDII) students of the Horticultural Technology Department. They fall between the ages of 18 and 24 and hail from different socio-ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Some of them are Hausa, Fulani, Tangale, Bolewa, Kanuri and others. The sample size is made up of thirty-seven out of fifty-six students in the department. The participants were divided into groups. Interview was used to collect data from each of the groups. Personal observation was also used by the researcher to collect data. The researcher had eventually collected and analysed fifty slang expressions. The basic assumption is that slang is common among youths and that slangy expressions are sometimes derived not only from English lexicon but indigenous Nigerian languages.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Participants were asked to state some of the slang expressions they frequently use in their speeches, their meanings and how they use them. The data obtained revealed that youths consider slang usage as a



platform where they can create and use language according to their own distinct ways. It allows them to shape and reshape their tongue to coin words that suit their individual needs. The creativity in the lexical items collected for the study is mainly embedded on the level of lexical morphology and lexical semantic where students create new slang expressions from the various processes involved in word formation which include coinage (neologism), borrowing, clipping, acronym, and blending. These are analysed below:

- A. Coinage** : this describes how respondents manipulate their tongue to create new slang words which were not in existence before. The following are the examples of such coined terms;
- B. A. Fulasmo - a generous student
 - b. Babora - having practical when it is raining
 - c. Chaltie - a brilliant student both in class and in the field
 - d. Filara - a female student who is married
 - e. Juth - a sickly pregnant woman who could not go the practical in the farm
 - f. Rightie - a principled lecturer
 - g. Langurush - somebody who usually shows off in speaking English
 - h. Zafxie - a hard working student in practicals but weak in class
 - i. Fammer - a student who does not have registration fees
 - j. Teepor - a damsel
 - k. Waskolie - a close friend

- l. Nesfert - a shortened semester due to some reason(s)
- m. Tifaka - a lecturer whose coursestudents usually fail
- n. Misira - a male student who manual work to pay his/her school fees

The analysis of these expressions shows that they are not standard lexicon but created and used by the respondents to express their talents and identify themselves as members of a group. One interesting aspect of some of the created slang terms is their recognizable functions. Like any new coinage, a slang word may fill gap in the existing lexicon. For example, there is no single word that describes or defines a “principled lecturer”. Therefore, the respondents coined the term “*rightie*” to refer to the said person; and a male student who does some manual work to pay his school fees is termed as “*misara*”. It is however worthy to note that some terms are inflected to show gender difference as it is found in standard words. A female student who does some manual work to pay school fess, is called “*misari*” instead of “*misara*”

b. Borrowing

Languages and dialects normally do not exist in a vacuum. Their speakers often come into contact with other languages which results in borrowing from each other. Evidence from the data suggests that some slang terms originate from borrowing, as a result of language contact with English and other African languages (Dumas and



Lighter, 1978:14-15). Thus, because English is the lingua franca in Nigeria, borrowing from English by indigenous languages is considerable during the colonial period and beyond. This process has even been extended to slang usage, whereby some English lexical words are used as slang lexical terms by the speakers of indigenous Nigerian language. Likewise, some native words are used as slang for those who speak English as their second language. The following are the examples collected from the participants of this study:

- a. "Gatari" axe - (borrowed from Hausa)- a student who overstays in the college due to poor academic performance.
- b. "Lami" (a Hausa name given to a baby girl born on Thursday)- a Peugeot 504 saloon car
- c. Scooter - daily meals
- d. Snooker - a very fast journey
- e. "Sammani"- (a Hausa name for a male person) - a farm attendant
- f. "*jabbama*" - (a Fulfulde word "welcome") a female student who dates a lecturer
- g. Satellite - a brand new bus
- h. Socket - a friendly person
- i. Gear box - family issues

Looking at these slang terms, one can say that they are all standard vocabulary found in different languages. However, when used as slang, their semantic meanings are extended, via a process described by

linguists as "relexicalisation" where a substituted word may be used for an existing term. Moreover, most of the borrowed words are lexical items of the languages mainly spoken in the environment.

C. Clipping

Clipping is a creative process of shortening existing standard words which results into creating new words. The meanings of the shortened words are retained as shown in this study. Examples are given below:

- a. lec - Lecturer
- b. Assig - assignment
- c. Sems - semester
- d. Inst - instructor
- e. "kwas" - "*kwaskwarima*" - a quick shower
- f. Hort - Horticulture

From the interview with the respondents, it was discovered that most of the shortened words are mainly used in writing, especially when sending text messages to their classmates but not to their teachers. This has shown that context of situation determines when the slang terms are used. The relationship between the speech actors (i.e tenor) also guides the usage.

D. Abbreviations

This is also another process through which the participants displayed their talent of creativity to form slangy expressions. Eble (1996:35) refers to this process as a situation in which "sounds are eliminated from words without an immediate change in meaning". The following



are some of the examples collected from the respondents:

- a. B.K. - Book
- b. C. S. - Class
- c. O. C. - Orchard
- d. H. N. - Hinna (a town where the college farm was located)
- e. G. H. - Green House
- f. H. T. - Hostel
- g. P. J. - Project
- h. P. T. - Practical

It can be seen from the preceding examples that the compound words are abbreviated to form a slang term by using the first two letters of the compound words. More examples can be seen below:

C.R. - Class Representatives

S.C. - Sim Card

D.C. - Debit Card

S. E. - Semester Exams

R.F. - Registration Fees

U.G. - (a Hausa word meaning “a godfather”) *ubangida*

Though the use of accepted acronyms is acceptable in standard language, these ones obtained from the respondents are neither accepted nor known by other language users. Their usage is only confined to the respondents and their classmates who live in the same environment; hence they are considered as slang.

E. Blending

Yule (1985:53) observes that the process of blending occurs when a part of a word is deleted. The same

principle applies to some of the lexical items that were collected for this research. The respondents show their talent of creativity by coining slang terms through blending of some standard words to form new ones. This mostly happens in compound and clipped words. These blended words are mainly used in social media and SMS writings. This might be attributed to how they are shortened. Examples are given below:

Acabo – academic + board

Difxams – difficult + examinations

Labfa – laboratory + farm (used when students are engaged in practicals both in the laboratory and in the farm).

Cxams - continuous assessment + examination. (used to refer to the permission given to students who missed class test but where asked to answer one additional question during exams for the missed test)

Saza- “zafi da sanyi” (derived from Hausa to mean cold and hot weather) - a moderate weather.

Another important feature of creativity identified in this study is metaphorical extension. The use of metaphor as a linguistic tool is common in creating slang expressions among the respondents. Metaphor has the potential to push the boundaries of human thought and experience. It uses analogy or likeness to name one thing from one domain in terms of something from another domain.



The respondents characteristically employ metaphor to describe many items, persons, events etc. The most obvious set of metaphoric word applies to the linkage of animal characteristics to humans ones. A clear example is from the use of an animal name, such as 'snake' to refer to a person. This name is metaphorically used to mean a "wicked and dangerous person". This is so because snake is known as a wicked and dangerous creature. Similarly, the word "*doki*" which means a "horse" in Hausa is used metaphorically to connote a young lady that hails from influential, royal and wealthy background. This connotation is informed by the fact that a horse is culturally owned and used by the royal and rich people in the society.

Yet another example is the use of an expression "Niger Delta" to refer to the person's workplace where he/she earns a living. This is used to mimic Niger Delta region where Nigeria gets most of its revenue. The word "Malaria" is also metaphorically extended to refer to a common and yet difficult problem whose solution is not readily available. This is so because malaria is a disease that has not been thoroughly and easily treated especially in countries like Nigeria. Also, the term ATM (Automated Teller Machine) is used as a slang expression that is used as a metaphor to refer to a person who is not extravagant because ATM, despite being loaded with a huge amount of money, cannot dispense

cash to anybody whose account does not have sufficient funds.

Moreover, due to the current insurgency facing some parts of the country, the respondents figuratively adopt the word "Sambisa", which is a forest hideout for Boko Haram insurgents in Borno State, Nigeria to mean an "examination hall". This metaphorical extension is made possible due to similarities between the two concepts. The difficult and terrible experiences abductees face in that forest is compared to the experiences students face in the examination hall. Meanwhile, a word "glo" which is a name of a telecom company in Nigeria is metaphorically extended by the respondents to refer to a green vegetable soup. This extension is also informed by the similarity of the green colour between vegetables and the trademark green logo of "glo".

Findings

The study has found that despite being corrupt version of a standard language, slang enhances communication among its users. It allows them to shape, manipulate and use language through their own creative ways. They do that for different purposes which include simplicity, euphemism, concealment and group identity. It has also been observed that while some linguists believe that some slangy expressions are short lived (Anderson and Trudgill 1990), the findings of this study have revealed that some slang terms can stay long and passed from one set of students to another. Moreover, slang items used by the



respondents mostly feature their academic and social life in the institution.

Further, the students' slang is used to exclude 'others' so that speakers who do not belong the discourse community members are not understood. Therefore, slang usage can be a tactic of inter-group distinctiveness at the disposal of people seeking a positive social identity.

Conclusion

It is apparent that slang exists and used for different purposes among different groups of language users including students. Participants in this paper consider slang as a platform to use language different from others in various ways through the processes of coinage, blending, clipping acronyms, borrowing and metaphorical extension of meanings for easy communication.

Given that slang can create challenges in formal communication, future research needs to explore its impact on academic writing, and how it affects students' ability to write and understand academic content. Further, engaging on research which has to do with how slang affects the users' sociality and emotions helps the society to appreciate its relevance in communication across diverse social groups.

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