

A Sociolinguistic Study of the Use of Slang among Students of the Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa

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Abstract

Language use is bound to many social factors that affect language use. Indeed, sometimes the factors seem to determine or have influence on one's speech and expose one's social class. It is against this backdrop that this article undertakes a sociolinguistic investigation of the use of slang among HND students using Federal Polytechnic Nasarawa. Data for the paper were gathered through direct participatory observation which allows the respondents to converse freely on the subjects without them having the knowledge that they were being observed. The paper employs the Whorfian Hypothesis as the theoretical framework for data analysis. It was discovered that language, irrespective of the form can be used to create identity. It was also discovered that class is the prevalent sociolinguistic factor affecting the use of slang among students. The study concludes that sociolinguistic factors such as ethnicity and religion do not influence the students of the Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa use of slang.

Introduction

There are several possible relationships between language and society. One is the social structure that influences or determines linguistic structure or behaviour. Certain evidence may be adduced to support this view: the age-grading phenomenon whereby young children speak differently from older children and, in

turn, children speak differently from mature adults; studies which show that the varieties of language that speakers use reflect such matters as their regional, social, or ethnic origin and possibly their gender; and other studies which show that particular ways of speaking, choices of words, and even rules for conversing are highly determined by certain social requirements.

Thus, the focus of this work among other things is the analysis of the sociolinguistic factors affecting the use of slangs among the HND students of the Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa. For the purpose of this study slang expressions will incorporate other forms of nonstandard English such as slangs, pidgin, informal codes and more. One's mastery of a language and particularly the English language is measured in part by how one selects language suited to a given context. Most linguists are unanimous about the central role context plays in determining the choice and use of a variety of language. In the words of Alo (77), "nonstandard English is appropriate for communication among people who are intimate such as friends, husbands and wives." People interact and communicate with each other through language. Meaning arises in interaction. Meaning links the distinctions between various expressions. Therefore, language allows for describing oneself and the circumstances of one's existence Maturana & Varela, (18). Interaction through language constitutes identity and social adaptation. Based on language we are able to categorize our experiences and ascribe meaning to it.

One way of using language to construct identity is through the use of slang. Part of the focus of this work also lies on how Higher National Diploma (HND) students

of the Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa use slang to create specific identities. The students studied for this work no doubt use slang as a resource to build the world they live in. Although previous sociolinguistic and lexicographic research by teenage and young adult slang has dominated the wealth of lexical resources available to speakers in the creation and display of youth identity. Yet these studies which rely on written self-report of usage, do not always make clear to what degree they represent actual patterns of slang use. In other words, many studies of youth slang also offer up ideologies of their own. Primary among these is the representation of slang as a unifying practice that consolidates youth identity in opposition to adult. Indeed, despite the dominant views of slang as form of youthful rebellion against the older generation, the divisions between different groups of individuals have not been fully established. No one speaks the same way all the time and people constantly exploit the nuances of the languages they speak for a wide variety of purposes. The consequence is a kind of paradox, hence the formation and use of slangs, jargons, argots and to mention but few. We shall devote our time to discuss these language variations in details in the literature review of this work.

Statement of the Problem

The construction of identity through language involves both practice and ideology, phenomena that are not entirely separable from each other; nor can either be reduced to the other. On the one hand, the social meanings that ideology assigns to particular linguistic forms affect who may legitimately use them and in what way. Thus, the ways people speak may either reinforce or challenge language ideologies. The dialectic between

ideology and practice is evident in the use of slang, being a richly semiotic component of language in which linguistic practices and ideologies sometimes collaborate and sometimes conflict in the production of distinctive youth ideologies based on distinctive styles.

Research Questions

- i. Are there any sociolinguistic factor affecting the use of slang among HND students of the Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa?
- ii. Are there ways through which identity can be created through the use of slang among the students?

Review of Related Literature

Sociolinguistics is a discipline which provides answer to such questions as who speaks what language to whom when and to what end. In addition, it seeks to provide an answer to the question of what accounts for differential changes in social organization of language use and language related behaviours. It also tries to explain why and how this organisation and behaviour have become selectively different in the same social networks of communities on two different occasions. For instance, it explains why one particularly addresses a semi-literate audience in pidgin and another audience, an elite one, in impeccable English.

Above all, sociolinguistics describes the general patterns of language use within a monolingual or multilingual speech community so as to show the systematic nature of the alternations between one variety and another among individuals who share a repertoire of varieties. In monolingual speech communities, the

linguistic repertoire of particular social groups may consist of sexual social class varieties, other social classes, e.g. occupational and educational varieties, and regional varieties of the same language. For instance, within the Ebira-Tao speech community, distinction has to be made between administrators and teachers who speak Ebira language and petty traders who speak the same variety. It should also be noted that there is an overlap in the preoccupations of the sociology of language and sociolinguistics in such a way that the two concepts are used interchangeably to describe the relationship between language and society, Hyme, (19), Hertzler (196).

The basic notion underlying sociolinguistics is quite simple: language use in interactions. The notion is simple, but the ways in which language reflects behaviour can often be complex and subtle. Furthermore, the relationship between language and society affects a wide range of encounter from the broadly-based international relations to narrowly defined interpersonal relationships.

In another development, two trends have characterized the development of sociolinguistics over the past several decades. First, the rise of particular specializations within this field has coincided with the emergence of more broadly based social and political issues. Thus, they focus on the subject matters such as language and nationalism, language and ethnicity, and language and gender have corresponded with the rise of related issues in society at large. Second, specialists who examine the role of language and society have become more and more interested in applying the results of their studies to the broadly based social, educational, and political problems that probably gave rise to their

emergence as sociolinguistics themes to begin with. Sociolinguistics thus, offers a unique opportunity to bring together theory, description, and application in the study of language.

Slang: Conceptualization

The use of English slang among students of higher learning across the globe has become a common phenomenon. According to Eble (1-2), “the creative use of language by college students to grumble to each other about their lot in life and about those in authority over them must date back in Western Europe to the earliest days of the universities”. Public interest in college slang during the latter part of the nineteenth century is shown by the many short and often anecdotal articles on the topic published in newspapers and magazines. Some of these include the works by Eble (1979), (1993), whose works dwell on slang used by students of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The use of English slang is not restricted to the United States of America and other parts of the developed world alone. In Nigeria also, there is hardly any institution of higher learning where students especially at informal contexts do not use slang. This is evident from the web site <http://www.ngex.com/entertainment/on-campus/campus-slang> which is exclusively for Nigerian campus slang where students from different Nigerian Universities send in slang vocabularies and their meanings as used on their campuses.

According to Eble (1), a survey of writings about English slang confirms not only the marginal status accorded to it but also the opposing values associated

with this status which often ‘puts slang continually at odds with good grammar and social respectability.’ Equally, Bolton (1982:354) posits that, “slang makes a poor choice for the writer who wants to address an audience beyond the time and place in which he writes.” Quirk et al (1972) put slang in a footnote where it is described as an “attitudinal variety outside the common core of English.” Giving that English slang is considered informal and nonstandard as shown by the different definitions discussed above, it is therefore not supposed to be used in formal contexts. Unfortunately however, our data proves otherwise as students of the selected institutions engage in the use of English slang which they code mix with Standard English expressions in their write-ups during examinations without putting such slang words in inverted commas. The use of slang words is not restricted to the written communication of students alone but is also used in their spoken communication in formal contexts. Below are some of the slangs commonly used among HND students of the Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa:

- i. After one: A girl with a child before marriage.
- ii. Swag: a pompous manner of walking intended to show off to others.
- iii. Runs: generally used to denote illegal or immoral activities.
- iv. Jambite: referring to a first year undergraduate.
- v. Fashi: to forget about something or careless about something.
- vi. Toast: to talk to a girl or ask a girl out for a date.
- vii. Bone-face: to snub somebody.

- viii. Chips: pieces of papers on which something is written to take into examination halls with intents to cheat.
- ix. Form: to put on airs, or affective manners to impress others.
- x. Gist: an informal conversation, especially about other people's affairs.
- xi. Dub: to cheat during examination or test by copying another person's answers word for word.
- xii. Tush: refined person.
- xiii. Number six: one's brain.
- xiv. Bakassi: a girl's buttocks
- xv. Aristo: rich married men that date young girls.

Theoretical Framework:

The theory for this research is linguistic relativity hypothesis or also known as Whorfian Hypothesis. This hypothesis postulates three hypotheses as regards the relationship between language and society. The first hypothesis postulates that language affects the society and its world view. The second hypothesis postulates that society affects the way we use language. This hypothesis believes that knowledge is socially acquired; and the necessary behaviours are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment society (culture). Therefore, is the know-how that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living. The third hypothesis postulates that there is no relationship between language, society and culture. In this paper, we are concerned with the second hypothesis that culture affects our use of language. That the culture /society of a people find reflection in the language they employ. Within the society are certain factors that influence a language

users' choice of words in different contexts. These factors include age, gender, class, religion and ethnicity. This theory would best suffice for this investigation as it helps in establishing if society has a role to play in a language users' use of language in a speech event.

Methodology

The data for this research were got from primary source: the HNDII students of the federal polytechnic, Nasarawa. A total of twenty students were selected at random for analysis. Participants were drawn from the five different schools/ faculties of the institution-Applied Science, Business Studies, Environmental Studies, Engineering Technology, and Information Technology. The researcher employed non-participatory observation in gathering data for the work. This is to allow the respondents converse freely without the knowledge that they are being observed. Thus, a total of 125 participants drawn from the five schools/faculties attended a social night out organized for students of the Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa at the Students' Village hostel. The researcher recorded their conversations with the aid of audio tape recorder. The recorded conversations were later transcribed for analysis. A total of 125 students were randomly selected and their conversation recorded. After the transcription of purposive sampling was carried out to identify the slangy expressions in the conversation; a total of 25 students' conversations were identified. The 25 students are made up of 5 students each from five schools/faculties

Presentation of Data and Analysis

The transcribed data is analyzed in two ways: the identified expressions are categorized into different kinds

of slangy expressions. The second analysis is a tabular analysis identifying the different factors affecting the use of these expressions. The data for this study consists of 30 purposively selected slang words/expressions from the respondents out of the many heard. These slang expressions selected were categorized and presented in a tabular form followed by explanation on each of the table for analysis.

Table I: Categories of the slang expressions

Identified slang (non-standard expression)	Types of slang (Non-Standard expression)	Meaning
Kola	Slang	Bribe
A fast guy	English slang	Fraudster
Town bike	English slang	Prostitute
Rain coat	English slang	Condom
I wanna cut	English Slang	I want to leave
Kilishi	Hausa slang (code mix)	A girl/Lady
Paraga	Slang	Whiskey
Beans	English form	Girls
Import	English	Expecting someone
Software	English	Lady
Tubeless	English slang	Without underpants
Kilohaps	Yoruba + English	What is happening
Holy water	Religious term + code mix	Sexual encounter
Ninja	English slang	Ustaz (a male Muslim student who is committed to his religion.
Aashi	Yoruba/code mix	Prostitute
Mugu	Hausa/code mix	Intelligent, wise
Maga	Slang	Misbehave
Network the bash	Slang code mix	To pass information for a party widely.
To titrate	English slang	To urinate
Oxygen	English word	Cigarette
I dey go church	Pidgin + religious code	Visiting a boy or girl

		friend
One four three	English words	I love you
Delete	English	Leave here
Hommie, I wan go jack	English slang code mix with pidgin	Friend, I want to study
I no wan France	Pidgin + English slang	I don't want 'fa'/'
Engine waga	English + slang	Engineering student
Log in		Join me
Burn fuse		Drunkenness
Chance		Woo
P.P	Slang form in Abbreviation	Private Practice (Love infidelity).

Table 2: Frequency table of the slang and the socio-linguistic factors affecting the use of slang.

Slangy expression	No. of Time s used	% of use	Age		Sex		Religi ous	Et hn icity	Class
			16-25	26-30	M	F			
Kola	4	5%	2	2	1	3	-		General
Fast guy	3	3.75 %	1	2	2	1	-		General
Town bike	3	3.75 %	2	1	3	0			Business studies student
Rain coat	8	10%	4	4	6	2			General
I wanna cut	2	2.5%	2	0	1	1			General
Kilishi	2	2.5%	2	0	2	0		2	General
Paraga	6	7.5%	4	2	5	1		6	Business school & information technology
Beans	2	7.5%	2	0	2	0			Business school & information technology
Import	1	1.25 %	1	0	1	0			Business school & information technology
Software	4	5%	3	1	3	1			Information technology & engineering

									students
Tubeless	2	2.5%	2	0	1	1			General
Kilohaps	9	11.25 %	9	0	7	2		9	General
Holy water	2	2.5%	2	0	0	2	1		School of business studies
Ninja	1	1.25 %	1	0	1	0			General
Ashi	3	3.75 %	2	1	0	3			General
Mugu	2	5%	0	2	1	1		4	General
Maga	1	1.25 %	1	0	0	1		1	General
Network the bash	2	2.5%	1	1	1	1			Information tech.
To titrate	2	2.5%	1	1	1	1			Engineering/sciences
Oxygen	3	3.7%	2	1	2	1			Science
I dey go church	1	1.25 %	0	1	0	1	1		Business student
One four three	02	2.5%	02	0	2	0			Science
Delete	4	5%	3	1	3	1			Information tech.
Hommie, I wan go jack	1	1.25 %	0	1	1	0			General
I no wan France	1	1.25 %	0	1	1	0			Sch. Of business
Engine waga	2	2.5%	2	0	1	1		2	Engineering
Log in	2	2.5%	1	1	1	1			Information tech.
Burn fuse	2	2.5%	2	0	2	0	0	0	Science
Chance	3	3.75 %	2	1	3	0	0	0	General
P.P	1	1.25 %	0	1	0	1	0	0	General
Total slang Frequency	80	100%	56/70%	24/30%	53/66.25%	27/33.75%	02/2.5%	7/33.75%	

Discussions of Findings

Table 2 reveals that the number of male students' usage of the slangs identified is higher than that of the females. Data gathered from their conversation has revealed that

males use more derogatory words than females. The study also shows that there are more slang terms to describe women than men.

Also, both males and females used more slang terms for 'woman' than 'man'. The males use the slang about 53 times which is 66.25% while the females use them 27 times -33.75%. thus, indicating that gender can also affect the use of slangs by the students.

Apart from gender, the study shows the age differences in the use of slang among the HND students. The statistics shows that 70% of the slangs used during the study were used by students in the age category of 16-25, while that of 26-30 have 30% of usage. It means students between the ages of 16-25 use more slangs than those above them.

Thus, it can be said that as the age increases the use of slangs decreases. These findings supports the one made by de Klerk (68-82) and Bembe (43) who argued that slang are expected to be used more by youth than older adults. Older adults have been shown to be more conservative in their use of variables than younger age groups (Eckert: 164). This shows that age can also affect the student's choice and use of slangs in their conversation.

It is also evident from table two that though some of the slangs are used generally by all the students from the different schools under study, there are some slangy expressions that are specific to a particular school of studies as a form of the class factor. The data presented clearly showed for instance school of Information Technology, Sciences and Engineering have some specific codes (slang word) that are mostly peculiar to only those

in that class of students which makes it possible for them to exclude outsiders in their conversation. The students of Business studies, though use some specific slangs also in communicating among themselves, the slang expressions are not as technical as those of the three schools mentioned and are also used by other students. From this, it can be argued that slangs used according to the class (area of specialization) can also affect the variety of slangs one chooses to use in communication.

Ethnicity is also a factor looked at and it is found out that words from our ethnic background are evident in the slang used by selected students. About 33.75% of words from their native languages were incorporated into the slangs of the students. However, despite its presence the number is too minimal that it will affect the use and understanding of slangs as used by the HND students of Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa.

Religion is also a significant factor that can determine the use of slang but in this study the number of occurrence in usage 2.5% is insignificant as such has no much impact on the use of slangs by the HND students of Federal Polytechnic Nasarawa.

Conclusion

This study discovered that class is an important sociolinguistic variable affecting the use of slangs by the students. It showed that different classes had some peculiar slangy expressions for certain situations. Other sociolinguistic factors that affect the students use of slangy expressions are age and gender. It was revealed that students within the age of 16-25 use more slangs irrespective of how many years they have spent in the

polytechnic. Some slangy expressions were peculiar to a particular gender. It served as a code amongst them. However, the research showed that amongst the HND students of Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa, ethnicity and religion do not influence their use of slangs.

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