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Contents

1	Nigeria's Gas Diplomacy and Regional Development in West Africa: The Role of Gas Supply Agreements—Balogun, Wasiu A., PhD	1
2	Morphophonemics of Àlágò Noun Plural Formation—Ogah, Ashikeni Thomas, PhD, Umaru, Yakubu Jacob, PhD & Amende, A. Charles	17
3	Appraisal of Indigenous Nigeria Press in Nationalism and Renaissance (1914–1960)—Suleiman, Hassan Biodun, PhD	27
4	Buchi Emecheta's Fictional World and Her Concerns—Sunday Bami	37
5	Stylistic Study of Some Syntactic Phenomena in Shaykh Muhammad Nasir Kabara's Panegyric Odes—Salat, Abubakar Abdulahi	56
6	Waste Management Practices in Urban Ibadan: A Critical Review—Yusuf, Olanrewaju, PhD	77
7	The Disposal of German Properties in the Cameroons Province of Nigeria in the Interwar Years—Muojama, Olisa Godson	92
8	Sociolect as a Strategic Communication Tool among Lagos Youth—Adeyemo, Julius Abioye PhD	106
9	Social Issues in Mukoma Wa Ngugi's <i>Nairobi Heat</i> —Lawal, Muhammed Adeyemi	118
10	Migration as a Response to Environmental Push and Pull Factors: A Case Study of the Shuwa Arab Migration into Borno—Modu, Ibrahim A., Mohammed, Abubakar & Warasini, H. Tsingari	129
11	Curtailing the Menace of Kidnapping and Ritual Killings in Nigeria—Ishola, Tajudeen Odebode, PhD & Suleiman, Abdulsalam B., PhD	135
12	The Adversities of Maternal Healthcare Services Encountered by Displaced Persons in some IDP Camps in Borno—Saidu, Amina Ramat, PhD	149
13	Gender Apartheid: Re-examining the Security of the Oppressor and the Oppressed in Nigeria—Agbaje, Funmilayo Idowu	156
14	Religiosity, Spirituality and the Miraculous Utopian in Africa: Further Reflections on David Hume's Proposal on Miracle—Olatade, Damilola Peter	166
15	Amotekun Corps Operations in Southwestern Nigeria: The Prospects beyond the Controversies—Oladejo, Olanrewaju Abdulwasii, PhD	177
16	A Redesign of Punk Fashion for Delight—Bello, Zainab	200
17	Nationalists Utterances, Nigeria Nation and Engendered Insurgency: A Case of if the Foundation be Destroyed, What Can the Righteous Do?—Aliu, Olayinka, PhD & Okutepa, Alhaji Momoh	210

8

Sociolect as a Strategic Communication Tool among Lagos Youth

Adeyemo, Julius Abioye PhD

Abstract

The interface between different interactants and how interlocutors choose to communicate in society has been the concern of sociolinguists and communication experts. Researchers have extensively worked on various language varieties and strategies used in communication ranging from textual analysis, linguistic analysis, language, and styles in various communication contexts to look at idiolect, sociolect, and slang with a view to examining the communication and semantic import of different linguistic contexts. However, scholars have paid little attention to sociolect, a variety of language used among the discrete group as public relations tool aimed at creating friendly and conducive sociable environments in social discourse. This study, therefore, aims at examining how Lagos youth use sociolect as a language variety and as a strategic communication tool to foster their interpersonal communication needs. The data were gathered through audio recordings of informal conversations among different youths in Lagos State. Through critical case sampling techniques, recurrent and trending slang were mapped out for qualitative textual analysis. Findings revealed that twenty trending slang were identified among youth in Lagos State in 2022. Also, it was found out that the slangy expressions were not only popular among Lagos youth they are also used for inclusive and exclusive strategic communication tools to broaden their interpersonal relationships. It is hereby recommended that slang as a communication code among the youth should be seen as a strategic communication tool to enhance interpersonal communication for peaceful co-existence in society. Keywords: sociolect, sociolinguistic, strategic communication, interactants, dialect

Background to the Study Studying communication in a different context is vital to understanding what makes human communication works with a view to understanding the message delivery patterns and message recovery procedures. Interpersonal communication and group communication, as communication contexts, have been identified as strategic communication tools aimed at promoting conducive social

discourse in a multi-ethnic and multicultural linguistic environment like Nigeria (Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth & Harter, 2003).

We study human communication and how communication works between and among different interlocutors because of the following reasons as highlighted by Pearson et al, 2003 p:1-7:

- a. to make sense in the world; as a result of September 11 2001 at the World Trade Centre in the US. The sad memorable event has orchestrated the need for individuals to be aware and crave information on terrorism, international organization, globalization and the need to understudy indiscrete groups and another form of intercultural organisation in order to understand their communication patterns including signals. A clear understanding of how groups and individuals choose to communicate is believed to be leeway to prevent interpersonal communication breakdown while the excluded communicators will not be in the dark even if he or she is not part of the communication interchange.
- b. Studying communication can improve the way others evaluate you. The knowledge of communication helps the communicator with self-presentation, image management and locus of control. It helps and controls our behaviour and the way we relate with others thereby improving our interactions with others. One can improve the way others see you a second way this is because people like communicating with others who can communicate well. Compare your interactions with someone who stumbles over words, is awkward, falls silent, interrupts, and uses inappropriate words to express a thought to your interactions with someone who has a good command of vocabulary, listen when you speak, reveals appropriate personal information, and smoothly exchanges talks turns with you. In a nutshell, everyone will prefer competent communicators.

Generally, human beings make use of both verbal and non-verbal modes of communication. Meanwhile, this study focuses on verbal communication mode of communication with a particular interest in informal (speech) means of exchanging meanings. Language, as a medium of communication, has been defined by authors and scholars (Lyons, 1981, Lehman, 1976, Wilson, 1986, Pearson et al, 2003, Osisanwo, 2005 etc). This study will adopt the definition of language according to Osisanwo, p1, 2005 who elucidated that “language is human focal noise or the arbitrary graphic representation of this noise, used systematically and conventionally by members of a speech community.” From the above, speech is human specific used conventionally and systematically. It is therefore imperative, for this study to pay attention to how human beings use language creatively, systematically and persuasively to achieve certain pragmatic import. Over the years, researchers have beamed their search light on dissecting the conventions embedded in language use.

Human beings are creative in manipulating systems in language systems and conventions to communicate their intents. Among other things man uses language to communicate ideas, to initiate phatic communion, for record purpose, to express emotions and feelings. Also, man use language to carry out persuasive functions, poetic function, contact function, metalinguistic function, referential function, ideational function, interpersonal function and above all contextual or situational function (Osisanwo, 2005).

From the various utilitarian functions of language as discussed above, it is certain that language is the core man uses for expressive communication. Human beings interact with each other through the instrument of language. That means that language is not used in vacuum but used to achieve one desire or the other. Meanwhile, for us to understand speaker's intent in any communication interchange, we must understand both the context and the situation of language use before we can assign meanings to what was said at a given time. Little wonder while J. L. Austin 1962 "How to do Things with Words" and J. Searle, 1969 "Speech Acts" have contributed in no small measures to pragmatics, a sub-field of linguistics. This study, therefore, is premised on the pragmatic context of prominent slang used among Lagos State youths in 2022 with a view to understanding and analyzing the semantic implications and above all to investigating how such slangy expressions among youths enhance their human relations and interpersonal relationships because it is observed that students, youths, traders and professionals use slangy expressions in order to be unique and belong to a particular class for homogeneous identity.

Research Objectives

The study will be guided by the following research objectives:

1. Identify trendy slangy expressions among Lagos youths in 2022
2. Find out the semantic and pragmatic meanings of the identified slangy expressions among Lagos State youths in 2022
3. Find out how the identified slangy expressions among Lagos youth improve their interpersonal communications and relationships

Research Questions

The study seeks systematic answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the trendy slangy expressions used predominantly among Lagos State youths in 2022?
2. What are the pragmatic imports (meanings) of the identified slangy expression among Lagos State youths in 2022?
3. In what ways do the use of slangy expressions improve interpersonal communications and relationships among Lagos youth?

Review of Literature

Researchers have carried out different studies on street language which is otherwise known as ‘Slangy Expressions’. These few studies have been carried out on street language, especially in this part of the world where it is not really given the desired recognition, especially among adults. Such studies include Ademola Adeoye (2004), and Adeyanju (2007) and Osisanwo (2009), among others. Out of the existing literature accessible to the present researcher and relevant to this study, it seems it is only Osisanwo (2009) who has analysed Slangy Expressions as a communicative tool among university undergraduates which has left a vacuum for this study to fill. Meanwhile, this work seems a bit broader in scope than that of Osisanwo’s work which only considers the use of slangy expressions among university undergraduates while this current study seeks to study the use of this street parlance among the youth in general.

Contextually, Fahmi (2001), submitted that there is a non-formal language which is known as a Slang language. It is a kind of color in a language since slang is unique. Slang is non-formal or casual spoken English which is created and used by people in certain communities. Slang words usually called slangism. It is also grouped into language variation. As the general rule, Slang is not used for formal spoken language or writing because it is entertaining and unusual. He added that most of the Slang language is a creation of the youngsters. They create a new word from their languages and only recognized in their community. This kind of language variety is to make talking more easygoing and joking. They use Slang language in an informal situation or place like home, market, game community, even in social media these days. However, it not proper to use in formal speech Fahmi concluded.

The study, therefore, intends to examine the use of slangy expressions among Lagos youth with emphasis on its pragmatic implications particularly its form, social functions, and meanings assigned to such slangy expressions. It is therefore believed that this work will contribute to the existing literature on sociolect or slang usage in Nigeria.

Sociolect

Sociolect is a sociolinguistic metalanguage which refers to a set of language variety or style used among a group of individuals who share the same social background, education, language community. It is an informal speech patterns peculiar to an identified group of people who have adopted the speech variety to exchange meanings and social behavior with the intention to broaden their interpersonal communication and relationships. It is a strategic communication speech variety adopted and adapted to satisfy daily speech needs among family members, social groups, and occupations to express their phatic communion in an informal way.

In this study, sociolects share the same meanings with slang and street language. Hence, any of the lexical varieties can be used interchangeably. Slang is, therefore, a sociolectal speech variety used among a group of social interactants to suit their interpersonal communication needs. It is a speech style used as a means of speech inclusion and exclusion. It is a tool of speech inclusion when interlocutors share the same social background-age, education, social upbringing and other social bounds. If the communicators share these social backgrounds, communicating in slang becomes interesting, and interactive and all participants freely express themselves without fear of speech censorship. However, sociolect can as well be used as an exclusion strategic communication tool when communicators do not share similar social or speech backgrounds. Consequently, when communicators who share the same social background perceived that the other interactant is an intruder or does not belong to their social background, they can switch to slang in order to exclude or confuse the perceived intruder. To the excluded interlocutor, he feels either unwanted or perceives the slang as incomprehensible. In other words, slang is an informal speech style that is characterized by code-mixing, pidgin English or another language code different from the speech of the immediate community through meaning-making is not impossible but total comprehension may be prettily difficult as a result of either neologism (lexical coinages) or codemixing. With time, slang becomes accepted, adopted and adapted as a result of frequent use among the identified social groups.

Fahmi (2009) noted that language is broad and has an important function in social life. People communicate with language to get their needs. They use language as the method of communication, whether spoken or written. It consists of the use of words in a structured and conventional way. According to O'Grady and Friends (1996: 1), "language is many things – a system of communication, a medium for thought, a vehicle for literary expression, a social institution, a matter of political controversy, and a catalyst for nation-building." Although there is a diversity of languages in the world, they have the same function which is to express ideas about human life.

In line with the report by Fahmi (2001p23) that slangish expressions or slangy language were created by the youth and use in their everyday conversations although not in a formal but in informal settings, Fahmi asserted that:

Slang is non-formal or casual spoken English which is created and used by people in certain communities. Slang words usually called slangism. It is also grouped into language variation. As the general rule, Slang is not use for formal spoken language or writing because it is entertaining and unusual.

He added that most of the slang language is a creation of the youngsters. They create a new word from their languages and only recognized in their community. This kind of language variety is to make talking more easygoing

and joking. They use Slang language in an informal situation or place like home, market, game community, even in social media these day Fahmi (2001, 23).

Street language, therefore, is the non-standard use of words in a language. These non-standard words might use among conversations. Mish (2003, p. 1170) submitted that, "Slang is an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech." Munro cited in Fasola (2012, p. 4) mentions that slang is included in non-standard language as the sort of words and expressions which anyone might use in conversation or a letter, but which is not used in a speech or formal essay. Street parlance also known as street language reflects the dynamics of the language and therefore is very obscure and ambiguous.

Fasola (2021), observed that although slang is spread so much that it can now easily be found practically in all kinds of contemporary literary works, yet there is no easy mechanism for identifying it. The absolute truth about slang was revealed by Lighter and Dumas that anyone can recognize slang, but no one can define it. There is hardly any other term that is as ambiguous and obscure as the term slang. Slang is a controversial topic nowadays, and the debate on its definitions, classification and linguistic relevance is still heated. Lighter and Dumas (2000 p 23) concluded that "Slang words and expressions are characterized by a high degree of informality, familiarity, vocabulary richness." They are realized by a specific group of people whose members relate to some particular link, such as territory (Californian), age (teenagers), subculture (students), and mainly occur in the spoken form of the language." (Burdova, 2009, p.8).

History of Street Language (Slangs)

Slang has been introduced since the sixteenth century. It is used to change the inelegant statement of being associated among foreigner or criminals, some people use it to make jokes and to keep the secret of the word's meaning and also because some people want another language besides the Standard English to express ideas. There are five decades of slang history and each of them has a different characteristic (Patridge cited in Hanggoro 2011, p.8-10) while Fasola (2021) noted that slang appeared in the 1700s, he added that cultural differences in America began to grow the population of English, and the slang began to flourish. During the 18th century slang used language and was not forbidden at that time. it seems that slang language is unlikely to not extend widely but the initial slang collection is more glossary than a dictionary. The event of slang appeared before it got the name "slang." According to Swift, slang is as old as speech, and traces of this may be discovered as far as we can refer back. Old English Slang was inferior and depended more upon downright vulgarity than our modern slang. Slang of those days was commonly termed

“flash” language which represented both jargon and slang. It is essential to note that the term “slang” was first recognized by Grose in 1785. He defined it as “jargon or vulgar language” (Fasola, 1996).

On the history of slang, Redmond (2007) in *The Microsoft Encarta* posits that slang tends to originate in subcultures within a society. Such subcultures may include the armed forces, teenagers, undergraduates, racial minorities, unionists, journalists, sports groups, prostitutes, drug addicts, criminals, and cultists, among others. Since slang expressions embody the attitudes and values of group members, they tend to contribute to a sense of group identity and may convey to the listener or the reader as the case may be, information about the speaker’s background. The *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* points out that many groups “use slang largely because they lack political power.” This affords them the opportunity to rebel against the establishment effectively. It however appears that slang is ever present and exists even in times when they do not mean to gossip about or criticize the government of the day. It is created by individuals and perpetuated based on its usefulness, uniqueness and applicability. In the observation made by *The Columbia Encyclopaedia*, slang is often “well developed in the speaking vocabularies of cultured, sophisticated, linguistically rich languages.” Ironically, slang was once considered the lowest form of communication. In fact, it was also once considered either the language of criminals or that of touts. It is now considered by many to be an insightful variation of the standard language. Nevertheless, there are many scholars who still condemn the use of slang, because they believe that it undermines the standard language and reflects poorly upon its users (Osisanwo, 2009).

Theoretical Frameworks

The study is anchored on discourse analysis as a framework. Discourse is language in use particularly spoken language between interlocutors to achieve social cohesion. Language in use in a social context is multivariate in nature. A quick mention of the discourse features is necessary in order to understand the basis of the linguistic theory. For social discourse to have taken place, it means there must have been a conversation between at least two communicants who are otherwise referred to as discourse participants. During discourse interchange, there must be conversational turn-taking which is central to discourse analysis as a universal feature of conversation. However, there could be discourse interruption or speech clash. This is common to spoken discourse when speaker B interjects with speaker A particularly during debates, quarrels, or heated arguments. In social discourse, topics are negotiated, and roles are shared consciously or unconsciously. Again, there can be speech errors and room for speech repairs mechanism (Osisanwo, 20005). The relevance of this theory is foregrounded on the spoken slangy

expressions commonly used among Lagos youth which are aimed at understanding the semantics of the identified slang. Meanwhile, the analysis does not include the discourse rank scale nor does it include the formal properties of language use. The analysis only dwells on the pragmatic meanings of the identified slang with a view to understanding how the use of slang enhances interpersonal communications and interactions among Lagos youth.

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive research design by adopting both primary and secondary data methods. The study population consisted of the youths in Lagos. Lagos State is chosen because it is a cosmopolitan city where all the tribes and ethnicity in Nigeria is represented. The data were gathered through audio recordings of informal conversations among different youths in Lagos State. Through critical case sampling techniques, 20 recurrent and trending slang were mapped out for qualitative textual analysis. Also, five youths were purposively selected using age as a major criterion as key informant participants.

Findings and Discussion

Question 1: What are the trendy slangy expressions used predominantly among Lagos State youths in 2022?

The findings from the tape-recorded informal conversations among Lagos youth revealed the top 20 trending sociolects/slang among Lagos Youth in 2022 include the following:

Table 1 shows sociolects/slang that were predominantly used among Lagos youth in 2022

1. Japa
2. Egbekiniyiwa (emi lo kan)
3. Lámbà
4. Opòr
5. Gbéfùn
6. Bòlè nbe/rest
7. Múlè
8. I dey with you
9. Mo ya look away (I looked away)
10. Sodiqqi
11. Gbemidebe
12. Vawulence
13. Wotowoto

- 14.Otilo
- 15.Olule
- 16.Shege
- 17.Kala
- 18.Breakfast
- 19.Sapa
- 20.Tun ti ze

Question 2: What are the pragmatic imports of the identified slangish expression among Lagos State youths in 2022?

Table 2: Pragmatic meanings of top 20 slang among Lagos youth in 2022

	Slang	Pragmatic meaning
1.	Japa	To run, flee, escape or travel oversea
2.	Egbekiniyiwa (emi lo kan)	Asking people to give themselves what he or she feels he deserve (<i>It is my turn</i>).
3.	Lámbà	When someone just told a big lie.
4.	Opò	Opo originally means “it is plenty” in Yoruba. But many use this word to react to an exaggerated statement.
5.	Gbéfùn	Gbefun is a yoruba slang to hail someone.
6.	Bòlè nbe/give it a rest	This is used when a lie is getting out of hand. When someone who is known for lies is coming again to feed people with another lies, he is told to “bole nbe.”
7.	Múlè	This is an approval for a liar to continue with his or her lies.
8.	I dey with you	In support
9.	Mo ya look away (I quickly averted my eyes)	Being intentionally unaware
10.	Sodiqqi	Foolish wise one
11.	Gbemidebe	To reach the climax
12.	Vawulence	State of chaos deliberately instigated by someone
13.	Wotowoto	A warning
14.	Otilo	Successful or loss

15.	Olule	Defeated
16.	Shege	The other side of a situation
17.	Kala	Indifference or uncaring about the way others feel.
18.	Breakfast	To break someone's heart or suffer a loss
19.	Sapa	A state of being extremely broke or poor, usually after spending extravagantly
20.	O tun ti ze	To be successful again

One common fact about trendy slang in 2022 is that its meanings are not only self-generated but also have shared meanings among its users. That implies that the slangs are not discrete but have open meanings among the youths because the slang is used in their daily conversation. Meanwhile, the above sociolects originated or were coined among the indigenous users of Yoruba-speaking people which means any youth from the North or East may find the slang meaningless.

However, some may gain popularity outside where it was originally created. For instance, the sociolect “egbekiniyiwa . . . emilokan,” the slangs were politically motivated and used by the President-elect in the 2023 presidential election, Bola Tinubu. He made the statement during his campaign in the southwest precisely in Abeokuta, Ogun state when he affirmatively appealed to the psyche of the electorate that it was his turn to be the next president. Ever since, the coinage has gained popularity in church and in daily social discourse as a way of professing positively both among the youth and adults.

Question 3: In what ways do the use of slangish expressions improve interpersonal communications and relationships among Lagos youth in 2022?

Five youths were purposively selected to answer the third research question: In what ways do the use of slangish expressions improve interpersonal communications and relationships among Lagos youth in 2022?

There responses were given below for textual analysis:

The use of slangs among Lagos youth to communicate has become commonly established in their daily social discourse perhaps to express their sense of belonging and unity of purpose. Below are the excerpts from the interviewed selected youth who responded to the researcher's question. Their responses were made informally with some code-mixing. Speaker A admitted that:

This style of expressions allow us to interact (shey you get), with and understand others in a more personal way. In an informal setting where we meet daily to gist, we prefer to communicate more in a slangy language than using English, wey no be my language, to communicate.

It was equally admitted that, the use of slang among the youth makes them associate freely particularly if the social gathering and social discourse initiators are in the same age group.

Speakers B and C agreed that: As for me, slangs or slangish expressions, or weiting you call am? I prefer to use the talks wey my age mates understand. Me, I no dey speak English but the parol my people dey speak.

Yes, slangs make me flow easily when engaging my mates. Slangs use make youth understand us and any adult who doesn't speak our slangs cannot flow with us

The use of slang as media of social discourse among Lagos youths is considered socially important as a way of fostering interpersonal relationships among the younger generations. This is in tandem with Fahmi (2009) who noted that language is broad and has an important function in social life. As noted by communication scholars, interpersonal communication is the process of sharing ideas and emotions verbally and nonverbally with another person for ideational purposes (Osisanwo,2020). Relatively, it is therefore obvious that the use of slangish expressions serves as the catalyst to improving interpersonal communications and relationships among Lagos youth. The responses below from speakers D and E corroborated the above hypothesis:

Speaker D

With slangs we {interaction} with ourselves irrespective of your religion or tribes. Every youth in Lagos we are one family...we use slangs to joke ang talk serious matters...shey you get?

Speaker E

Slangish expressions improve my relationship with my colleagues and as well boost my interpersonal skills which are important for communicating and working with groups and individuals in my personal and professional life. I believe that individuals with strong interpersonal skills tend to build good relationships and can work well with others. They understand family, friends, coworkers and clients well. Youth of today often enjoy communicating in an informal language when they are together with their colleagues who have good interpersonal skills and can express themselves well without any hindrance associated with the formal language but only use slangs which they are conversant with. Slangish expressions also make me to understand others to come to the best solution or make the best decision for everyone that understands the street interpretations of the slangs in used.

From the above, we can deduce that in a casual or informal daily social discourse, youths prefer to select the codes that are commonly acceptable for them to be able to express themselves without having to contend with appropriate linguistic choices when no one will allege them of being a linguistic Casanova. One common grand from the above excerpts is that; the use of slang among Lagos youth opens avenues for creativity in the use of language not minding grammatical blunders. With the use of slang, therefore,

interpersonal relations is consciously built and unity is fostered against their ethnoreligious diversity. Communication is said to be the basis of every interpersonal relationship. Thus, effective communication is the key to a healthy and long-lasting relationship among the youth. If individuals do not communicate with each other effectively, problems are bound to come. Thus, more reason why informal conversations with the use of different trending slang is rampant among the youth

Conclusion

Effective human communication especially the use of slang or sociolects among different groups of communicants plays a pivotal role in reducing friction and misunderstandings in society and eventually promotes and strengthens the bond among individuals in the society. Consequently, slangy expressions enhance smooth conversation and make communication flows ceaselessly among Lagos youth. Human interaction becomes tense when individuals do not express and reciprocate their feelings seamlessly through various communication modes. A healthy social interaction among Lagos youth using their commonly accepted code (slang) is hereby advocated for healthy interpersonal relationships as strategic communication tools.

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