

Emergent Varieties of Nigerian Youth Language, Implication for Language Engineering, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria in Focus

Lucy Mgbengasha Apakama¹ & Gloria U. Amadi²

¹apakamalucy@yahoo.com; Department of Nigerian Languages

²ukezeukwu@gmail.com Department of English Language and Literature

^{1,2}Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, Nigeria

Abstract

Nigeria is a multilingual, multi-cultural and multi-racial nation state that officially adopted English language while retaining the many diverse native tongues in differing domains of use. Within the different varieties and evidence of code switching in language use necessitated by the fusion of English and those native tongues is the peculiarity of language use noticed amongst the youths. Youth language, stylized, variable and a marker of social identity presents the communicative choices the youths are faced within their daily interactions with other members of their social environment. These preferred choices have often made the standard form loose relevance as a code for communication amongst the youths thus affecting acceptability and compliance to the policy on language use in Nigeria. This paper adopting Sense and Reference theory and Harvard Giles Communication Accommodation Theory investigates the language choices of youths in Alvan Ikoku Federal College Education Owerri in their daily interaction with different people in differing domains within the school. This will enable us discover how relevant attempts at language engineering is to the youth of our nation, Nigeria and in extension to an emerging Africa. This language of the youths cut across nations and can actually foster unity in diversity in Africa. It can be standardized by a standardization committee and the different languages of Africa exposed and known by different peoples. This paper suggests a proper documentation of these youth languages across the globe.

KEYWORDS: Youth language, Social identity, Domains of language use, Code switching.

Introduction

Language is the major means of communication and it is specific. The distinctive feature of human species is his ability to use words to communicate thoughts about yesterday today and tomorrow. A human being is equipped with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), which enables him/her to sieve out meaningful utterances and to store such forms necessary in communicating the thought patterns prevalent in a given culture. These thought patterns require stringing words together in a pre-determined fashion that is when to distinguish users of one code from another.

In traditional societies for example, the Igbo people of South East Nigeria certain groups, such as the 'mmanwu' (masquerade) group 'otu ozo' (title holders) develop codes that are known and used only by the initiated few. However, homogeneity in language use existing amongst people from differing age groupings is sustained by the system of acculturation adopted by members within a particular physical geographical boundary. Using acceptable forms of language in propagating traditional values in differing domains are enforced by positively reinforcing good display, abject rejection or even stringent punishment for users of deviant formations.

Formal education, with its new and foreign language codes, which provides alternate means of encoding thoughts disfranchised some few, categorizing them into educated and uneducated. And most recently, the introduction of the Internet Communication Technology (ICT) separated them further into digital and analog. This great divide frustrates the latter, especially when the effect of exposure of the former permeates the traditional systems truncating the use of their valued systems by replacing them

with the foreign ideology and culture which they find too difficult to assimilate. The African child is not left out in this quest for knowledge through ICT.

The youth and the technology race

Technology has broken down geographical boundaries, collapsing time and distance, making available for use new words and new meanings for verbalizing reality (Amadi 2011). Hence, several words have entered the lexicon from different climes and through different avenues mainly because in recent age, the technologically driven world must find expression in people's daily lexicon. The ipods, wi-fi, cyberspace, hyper link, you-tube, twitter, chat room, internet connectivity are some of the concepts that were born with the introduction of the computing system. These words that convey the meanings and the thought processes of the present digital age also magnify how they think the world should be lived-fast and apt.

The present generation has also developed condensed forms of expressing thoughts. The rise in new language forms necessitated by the free form adopted in Short Message Service (SMS) package, the unconventional word coinages in form of slangs and significant shift in the syntactic structure of conventional words phrases or clauses are all noticeable in the language used by Nigerian youths especially among the undergraduates of Nigerian Universities.

Most recently, the whats-app text messaging lexicon tend to slip into everyday language use by the youths. This is prevalent even in formal written work in classroom setting, an attitude that nauseates and repulses the elderly who feel that the use of standard grammar must not be compromised on the alter of technology. It is also worrisome that some words that have traditionally accepted meaning, have found new usage platforms, making it look as if they can make a word mean what they wish, but can they not? Language and social change is a constant phenomenon (Finegar 2012). Since words reflect the structure of the world that we inhabit Spender 1985:31, Litosseliti 2006:19.

Words and their meanings

Using the words of a language is simply being human. However, these words are but abstract symbols that are not intrinsically related to the concepts but are arbitrary chosen and agreed upon by convention to stand for a particular referent. For instance what form of relationship does 'stylo' 'pen' – mkpisi edemedede have on the referent?

Hence, finding an acceptable definition for the linguistic word is intractable owing to its nature and manner of its use in human communication. When Bloomfield (1933) defines the word as a minimum free form that could occur in isolation, he did not take into cognizance several meaning bearing forms that cannot be used in isolation. For instance in teacher and sister, the 'er' in teacher denotes 'doer' while in sister, it does not. From an orthographic perspective, Tomori (2005) posits that words are those forms that are sandwiched in between two spaces. However, everyday language use is replete with instances of contractions that negate this position. For instance, "should not" is 'shouldn't' in normal speech. This also happens to several compound words that lack identifiable boundaries such as "everyday", "blackboard" and so on. Semantically, identifiable distinct structural forms are meant to denote particular meanings, but in language use, homonyms, homophones, polysemy, synonyms abound, providing choice based on sense relations. This sense relation is usually a function of who the perceiver is. Perception according to Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2007:129) is "the process whereby people convert the physical energy of the world outside of them into meaningful internal processes".

This is done when we attach significance to the external world and to our experiences which are ordinarily devoid of intrinsic meaning. While culture homogenizes the significance we attach to similar experiences, factors such as age, gender, social group introduce variations inherent in the sensory perceptions of similar experiences which creates the difference noticeable in the choices that users of a language make from the lexicon bank for verbalizing perceptions.

The linguistic behavior of the youths

Language use in society reflects certain characteristics of the user. This creates the variation in language output made apparent in the choice of words, word forms and even in the manner in which the phonemes of such words are realized while in use.

Most noticeable language variation is as a result of age. Slang “a term often used to describe a variety of language with informal, often fiddly, non standard vocabulary (Katamba 1994:170) is used by the youths who find joy in using the expressions emanating from the many creative ways that they can manipulate words for group identity. Slang to them, is the most creative avenue for inventing new words or in manipulating existing ones in expressing their meanings. Slangs seem acceptable in conversations especially among peers. However, it is sometimes seen as a code used when one wants to be a deviant. Finegan (2002:347) documents that Slangs “signals rebellions undertones or an intentional distancing of its user from mainstream values.” Hence slang expressions are known to be popular amongst youths who value “group identity, formation of a unified whole and distinctiveness of members of other groups (Mbata and Ajeleye 2009:6).

Empirical studies of (Dozie and Madu (2012), Elezianya (2005) and Njemanze 2010) indicate that slangs, novel ways of expression, are quite popular amongst youths especially males, while these slang expression sometimes find their way into conventional usage, it is still regarded a debased form of language that should not be encouraged in language study especially amongst undergraduates. What if it has come to stay and cuts across the range and fate of undergraduates in African universities?

This paper concentrates on these areas which bother teachers of English language especially those in institutions of higher learning where students should be seen to have perfected in the use of standardized language forms. In order to decipher its effect on language use and what could be done to foist a symbolic relation between users and the social cultural system.

Theoretical framework

This paper adopted a sense and reference, theories which was propounded by Gottlob (1982). This theory explains the relationship between the linguistic word of experience (reference) and the complex systems of relations that hold between the linguistic elements themselves (sense). In adopting this theory, we can explain how linguistic expressions with similar reference can have different senses especially when such interpretation is marked by who the language user is and on which culture divide he belongs to.

The paper will also adopt the Howard Giles communication accommodation theory (CAT) (1973). This theory argues that ‘when people interact, they adjust their speech, their vocal patterns their gestures to accommodate to others. This will help minimize the social differences between interlocutors.

Objective of the study

Some studies carried out by researchers have investigated the use of slangs and the introduction of some deviant from emanating from the adoption of technology in the communicative encounter among the youths. This study will replicate this study in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Oweri, Imo State of Nigeria. It will then explore how concerted effort at language engineering could help enrich the language repertoire of users of English in Nigeria with the aim of offering choices to language users and creating new ways of expressing old and emerging ideas to meet the challenges of contemporary dynamic of communication in a world that is constantly in a flux. How can these slangs be updated or incorporated into the English Language and produce a modern Nigerian English. This stems from the fact that there are different new Englishes. (Tomori, 2005).

Method of data collections

The data used were generated from primary sources-text messages sent by students and a collection of slang words used in communication amongst students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education with the help of an unstructured questionnaire. Some data were also generated by the authors who are mature and active language users within this linguistically diverse and complex environment.

Two thousand, five hundred students male and female of different age brackets from the five faculties in the institution was randomly selected for the exercise. This is a purposive sample. Oral conversations were also used to decipher the differing domains of the use of slangs. Two hundred students were asked to write out twenty slangs that they know and compilations were made.

Some slangs are known to originate from individuals from distinct languages but later they found their way into public expression. The slang words presented below are some of the ones that are commonly used by students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education.

How are you? – How far?; how your side?; olee way?, fine – I dee, Oluwa wu onye show, udo di! I don't understand you O. I don't understand your package. You dey fall my hand, abeg show.

Bash	-	to party
Carry last	-	low performance
Chill	-	take it easy
Chook eye	-	to unnecessarily interfere
Cut liver	-	to lose confidence
Drag	-	cannabis
E speak kwale	-	don't say that again
Eripulem	-	ornately move away
Fall my hand	-	to disappoint
Fuck up	-	committed an error
Ginger	-	encourage one to achieve a purpose
Have two aside	-	have private talk
I ma how far	-	do you have any news (contest)?
I ma how far	-	what do you know about something
Inwere swag	-	carrying oneself well
Iri-uwa	-	enjoying wealth
Johnbenson	-	to run
Lor moral	-	lack of motivation
No wahala	-	not much problem
No yawaa	-	there is no problem
O nweghi much	-	lack much knowledge
Ogbonge	-	fine young lady
Owu-ite	-	lack of money
Shiwaa door	-	leave through the door
Slack	-	become lousy
To chop crase	-	to behave stupidly
To fear face	-	loose confidence to confront another
To fly	-	to move in fast
To match	-	to walk
To reason	-	to discuss objectively
To shack	-	to have a drink especially an alcoholic beverage
To sort	-	Get underserved favour
To trip	-	to admire
To vibrate	-	Talking with passion
To waka	-	to walk/to walk away
Yarn	-	to talk intimately
Yorker	-	returnee from abroad

Text Messages

Youth Language	Correct English Language & Usage
Sample I Tym 2 pursue nu goals. Move 4ward with confidence and korage 4 u are a special person. May 2day of ol dayz be amazing 2u; hbd	Time to pursue new goals Move forward with confidence and courage for you are a special person May today of all days be amazing to you happy birthday
Sample II Mann na way, where u dey? Abeg wen coming 2 skul bring ma note 4 mi I nd it bad	Man, greetings, where are you? I beg you when coming to school, bring my note book for me. I need it urgently.
Sample III Old gal, hw fa? I wot kom 2 skul 2day will kom tomor. na ur guy ted dey rite.	Old girl, how are you? I will not be in school today. I will come tomorrow. It is your friend Ted, writing.
Sample IV Hi, I wan tel you say dat mitin we tink abt don reach o, e go happen on sat 7 th , abeg try cm wit ur company guys and wit ur drums mk we use am play d program. No fail 2 bring smtin 4 me oo	Hi, I want to tell you that, that meeting we talked about is around the corner. It will be on Saturday, 7 th . Please try and come with members of your group and also your drums (instruments) so we can use them and play at the programme. Do not fail to bring something for me o.
Sample V Guy, g morn. No yawaa till next wk. I don giv dem ur no make dem kol u. ol d best, c u 2moro.	Guy, good morning. There is no problem (I will get in touch with you later) next week. I have given them your phone number so that they can call you. all the best and see you tomorrow.
Sample VI Babe, abeg send mi our hed no, I wan yarn d madm smtin abt d exam n sortin. Lol.	Babe, please send our head of department's phone number. I want to talk to her about something concerning the examination and how to get underserved favour. Laugh out loud

These documentations represent the communicative patterns of youths especially the ones in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri. The data indicates that students use slangs in their everyday conversation, especially among their mates. The students did not use so slangs with the authors during conversation. This may be due to the fact that they were talking to their teachers. Students say the use of slangs makes communication among them easier and allows them form alliance with their mates.

The text messages reveal that students make use of sound to form words e.g. km (come), uses number e.g. 4 (for), removes vowels e.g. Tym (time). The syntactic structure is also highly reformed to make them concise e.g. 4ward, 2day, Hbd (happy birthday). The most difficult situation noticed here is that the students allow these contractions slip into their everyday language use even in formal situations though not purposely. Thus it is fingered as the major cause of failure in external examinations. They at times use it to make writing faster. Since some of the “context of use are not traditionally Igbo, most Igbo youth make use of available codes to move along” (Apakama, 2006:66)

Implications to language engineering

Everyday, new words are added to the lexicon to improve the quality of communication. The introduction of the ICT opened a new world in which individuals become members by just a click of a button in the privacy of their rooms. This new world presents coinages which are manipulated to meet the exigencies of the present time. Slangs creatively developed by youths and their novel ways of encoding written messages are options available for users of a language in communicating thought. It however requires language engineering such that it could be accepted by language users for encoding meanings consistently in their culture.

Ammon (2005) defines language engineering as ‘an attempt to influence the form of language Pp. 26. It also refers to the potential of a language to express new and emerging idea in a fast changing world. (Adedum and Shodipe 2015).

It then implies that adequate planning is required for slangs and text messaging to achieve acceptability they must also go through the following processes.

1. **Standardization:** This requires picking a version as an acceptable form and legitimizing them.
2. **Graphization:** Recording the orthography, spelling and their use in grammar forms.
3. **Modernization:** Using these new forms in new areas such that the word will form a part of the language register of a distinct field of study.

Conclusion

This study has shown that students in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education use slangs in their private conversation. They however, have not introduced the use of these slangs significantly in their class work. However, the contraptions have seeped unconsciously into their written work. It then behooves educational planners to study closely these forms such that they decipher if these slangs and deviant forms can form an effective and acceptable means of encoding meaning in a given culture, since creation of new words is usually a product of context and circumstance.

Recommendations

- It is recommended by these writers that further research and extensive documentation of these slangs be made. This will vice any standardization committee which could be set up for the purpose of language engineering to have a study part.
- Studies in youth language is a relatively new area of study in contemporary language learning. Those of the students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education have formed a base for further research as these writers have only scratched it. It requires an in-depth study which its result can form a bridge in communication among different demographic groups emerging in the face of new communication needs in Africa.

References

- Amadi G.U (2011) Rethinking Language in Education in achieving Socio-economic development in *CIRSD International Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol 3 No 2, 2011 pg 59-72.
- Ammon. U. (2005). "Socio-linguistic Assimilation in Lagos" Adefuye, O; Agiri, D. and Osuntokun, A (eds) *History of the peoples of Lagos State*(pp 160-186). Lagos: Lantern Books.
- Apakama, L.M. (2006). Engligbo. A Playwright's Approach towards the Modernization of Igbo Drama: An Analysis of Akuebiokwu. *The Nigerian Journal of Literal Arts and Business Studies (NIJOLABS)*. Vol. 1. No. 3; 64-67.
- Bloomfield L. (1933) *Language*. New York: Holt.
- Dozie C.P. and Madu LI. (2012). Language and Communication among University Students in Nigeria. A Study of Slangy Expression in Federal University of Technology Owerri Nigeria 3. *Communication*, 3(2); 99 — 103.
- Elezanya I. (2005) A Sociological Comparative study of slang terms used by students of Imo State University (IMSU) and Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri. M.A Thesis unpublished Imo State University.
- Finegan E. (2012). *Language: Its structure and use*. Wadsworth; Language Learning.
- Litossehti L (2006) *Gender and Language*. London; Hodder Education
- Mbata C.O. and Ajileye M.O. (2009) A Sociolinguistic Survey of slang terms used by students of AIFCE Owerri. *Nka: A Journal of Languages and Arts* Vol. 8; 1-14.
- Njemanze Q.U. (2010) Creativity in Language usage in Nigerian Universities: An extension of Linguistic Platform for Universities Freshman. *Annals of Humanities and Development Studies* Vol. 1 264 - 272.
- Samovar L.A. Porter R.E. and McDaniel E.R. (2007) *Communication between Cultures*. Belmont; Thomson Higher Education.
- Spencer D (1985) *Man Made Language*. London; Routledge Kegan Paul PLC
- Tomori O. (2005). *The morphology and Syntax of Present Day English: An introduction*. Ibadan; Heinemann Educational books Ltd.