

**STUDENTS' SLANG IN NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY (UNIZIK) AWKA,  
NIGERIA: ANY POSITIVITY?**

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**Abstract**

The use of "slangs" as a language of communication among students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria was investigated to ascertain the communicative pertinence of slang among undergraduates and the extent to which slang positively affects communicative performance of the students. The survey research design was adopted for the study and the sample population comprised of 278 undergraduates from three faculties of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria: Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Management Sciences. Questionnaires were dispensed to participants who were drawn from the faculties through a purposive sampling technique. Among other things, the study showed that among different text types in which slang is used, almost all the respondents use slang in spoken language, in chat and messenger and in emails to friends, some of them in email, and some also in private letters. One hundred and eighty-nine (189) respondents are Igbos while 58 respondents are Yorubas and Hausas. All the respondents use slang in English, 169 respondents use it in Igbo while 143 respondents use it in other languages other than Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa. Slang positively affects the communicative competence of undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Slang, positivity, Unizik, undergraduates, Nigeria

**Introduction**

It becomes obvious that no human society can exist without language. Wallwork summarised the uses of language below:

- i. For Phatic communication i.e. as a social regulator;
- ii. For ceremonial purposes;
- iii. To keep records;
- iv. As an instrument of action;
- v. To convey orders and information;
- vi. To influence people;
- vii. To enable self-expression; and
- viii. To embody and enable thought (12).

Language has been broadly categorised into formal and informal usage. Emenanjo (5) categorised language into formal usage which consists of the standard expressions not restricted to any register, and informal usage which comprises colloquialisms, slang and pidgins.

Standard language refers to a prestige variety of language used within a speech community (Crystal 450), and is perhaps the most difficult to "denaturalise" (Roth-Gordon 4). It conforms to an institutionalised norm which can be used in the mass media, in teaching the language to foreigners and so on (Crystal 450).

Under informal usage, we have colloquialism, which is used in everyday informal conversation. There is also pidgin, which is normally not the native language of any of its speakers, but emerges from people of different linguistic backgrounds who have come together for one purpose or the other. Lastly, slang is an informal language because it uses informal words and expressions that are not

considered standard in the speaker's language or dialect but are considered more acceptable when used socially ("Wikipedia").

Students at universities often develop their own in-group vocabulary which only members can understand. A number of such students' slang expressions and the degree of their use vary from university to university.

As in any language, slang reflects the experiences, beliefs and values of its speakers. Yet college/university slang is not a complete language ("Slang in College" 1). College/university slang is also descriptive and contains many symbols for food or eating, effective or ineffective performance, money, intoxication and college places.

College/university slang has its share of criticism due to its effects on the English language. Writers and language experts have come out against the use of slang saying it is "wrecking the language" and have called its users "vandals" (Humphrys 1). Linguistic traditionalist worry that slang will reduce users' ability to write correct English sentences, and will harm their spelling and vocabulary (Holloway 1). Others say that slang (including texting or internet slang) simplifies and abbreviates language, thereby robbing language of its subtlety and complexity (Trevett and Houlahan 2).

In contrast, in an unscientific pool conducted by Edutopia.org, some educators feel that slang has positive effect on the students (Russell 6). They feel that anytime you can get students to write, it is positive (Russell 6). They believe that students are writing more than ever before because of slang (especially internet slang) (Russell 6). Educational researchers discovered that students are writing more and revising more ("NY Times").

One of the features of slang is that it is only intelligible to those people associated with the group or groups who use it. New students (even the smartest and most communicative competent "freshmen") find it difficult to understand the language used on campus. This is due to the fact that slang "provides different symbols from which communicated messages can be constructed" ("Slang in colleges" 1). Slang is more than just words. Like communication in general, slang is a process that characterises a communication environment as casual and familiar. Students use it when they talk with their friends and in informal situations like when chatting in social networks.

This paper intends to study slang usage among the undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria with the view to know its communicative pertinence among the students. A lot of studies have been directed towards reiterating the negative influence of slang on a second language learner's communicative competence. Very few studies have been directed towards finding out if slang could actually help a second language learner in achieving communicative competence in the target language. Can slang among undergraduates be just another sign that their communicative competence is deteriorating? Or can slang help to enrich their vocabulary or language experience? This paper aims to find out the communicative pertinence of slang among undergraduates, the extent to which slang positively affects performance of the students. The study intends to answer the following questions: to what degree do the undergraduates use slang for communication in the university? to what degree does slang positively affect the academic performance of students in the university?, to what extent do students use slang expression to enrich their vocabulary?

### **Defining Slang**

Slang might not be beyond definition, but it is "incapable of precise definition" (Partridge 69). An early definition of slang is found in *the Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

...in what is now the usual sense a general name for the class of words, more or less artificial or affected in origin or use, which are not recognised 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 value themselves on properties of speech. (207)

The above definition mentions four major points. Firstly, it says that slang is in the “words” or the “vocabulary”. A linguist may describe this as belonging to the lexicon (as opposed to the grammar). Secondly, it states that the word “slang” does not belong to the standard variety of language spoken in the larger society. Later on in the same page it is claimed that “...slang is a conscious offence against some conventional standard of propriety” (207). This statement clearly shows a general prescriptive view towards language which was common at the beginning of the 20th century, but this part of the definition also expresses that a speaker who uses slang does so intentionally. Thirdly, the quote refers to “some section of society” – a speech community - which, fourthly, has something to conceal or wants to be secretive. The notion of secretiveness is a function of slang that is unique in its nature.

*The Encyclopaedia Britannica* also mentions another feature of slang that is not included in any of the later definitions, namely “that slang is neither a part of ordinary language nor an attempt to supply its deficiencies” (207). Productivity is a well-known feature of language. However, newly coined expressions are usually only needed when there is a lack of words for a certain concept or invention or otherwise only lengthy descriptions for the concepts exist. In contrast to that, slang is not absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, slang continuously produces and uses new words.

An eminent authority in the field of slang and the author of *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* is Eric Partridge, who dedicated many years of his life to the collection of slang expressions. However, when he wrote the entry for the term slang in *Collier’s Encyclopaedia*, he did not attempt to write his own definition for it. He refers to, and seems to favour, the definition in *Webster’s Third (New) International Dictionary* which describes slang as:

... a non-standard vocabulary composed of words and senses characterised primarily by connotations of extreme informality... composed typically of coinages or arbitrarily changed words, chapped or shortened forms, extravagant, forced or facetious figures of speech, or verbal novelties, usually experiencing quick popularity and relatively rapid declines into disuse. (Gove 2137)

This definition raises the notion of informality as a feature of slang. Slang is not used in formal speech or writing. In fact, in his list of functions of slang, Partridge even goes as far as claiming that slang is intentionally used to decrease the formality of spoken, as well as written discourse (70).

The Webster definition also hints at two points that are related to each other: the creativity of slang and its rapid change. Some slang expressions which were frequently used by UNIZIK students five years ago are only known to a few students today or sometimes to nobody anymore. Normally, language change is a very slow process, but – maybe due to its restriction to a relatively small speech community or to its creativity – slang alters more quickly. The creativity of slang can have many reasons, for example, the fact that slang is often used to be secretive or to portray wit. There are more reasons or rather functions of slang enumerated by Partridge and later referred to by Andersson and Trudgill (87) and Crystal (53).

For this paper, we shall examine student slang.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework on which this research is based is the Communication Accommodation Theory which states that a person seeks either to emphasise or to minimise the social differences between himself/herself and the other person in conversation. According to Giles and Coupland,

accommodation is to be seen as a multiple-organised and contextually complex set of alternatives, regularly available to communicators in face-to-face talk. It can function to index and achieve solidarity with or dissociation from a conversational partner, reciprocally and dynamically. (61)

There are two basic accommodation strategies - convergence and divergence – which are deployed by individuals to signal identification with, or dissociation from, the communication patterns of others (Thanasoulas 1). Divergence “refers to the way in which speakers accentuate speech and non-verbal differences between themselves and others” (Giles and Coupland 36), and convergence is “a strategy

whereby individuals adapt to each other’s communicative behaviour in terms of a wide range of linguistic/prosodic/non-vocal features, in other to reduce social differences” (Giles and Coupland 35). According to Miller, “convergence and divergence may be upward, by means of a shift toward a prestige variety, or downward by means of a shift away from it” (169). For instance, consider a student (possible a fresher) who wants to make new friends when chatting in social network like Facebook may converge upwards towards his intended friends by using slang; or when a communicative competent student converges downwards towards his friend when asking him to lend him some money in order to win his approval.

This paper fits into this theory because slang is seen as an alternative to standard language by the students as they understand the language due to the impression that the form of the language is not considered important. Slang is regularly available to students when they interact face-to-face or when they chat in any of the social networks. Also, it is an exercise either of wit, ingenuity or humour. Students coin words and phrases to describe their special experiences and beliefs.

**Methodology**

This paper is a survey research. The design is considered suitable since it seeks information on the positive effect of slang among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

The population of this paper covers the undergraduates from three faculties: faculty of Arts, faculty of Engineering and faculty of the Management Sciences. Participants are drawn from the faculties through purposive sampling technique. The reason for this is that the researchers believe that these faculties have vast number of students that resort to informal use of language. From the investigated area, 278 students were selected for the study.

A structured questionnaire was used to elicit responses from the studied population. The questionnaire contains 17 items sub-divided into two (2) sections “A” and “B”. Section “A” contains four (4) items designed to obtain personal information of the respondents. The items have options and blank spaces to enable the respondents to tick or complete as appropriate. Section “B” comprises 13 items to determine the frequency of the slanguage among the undergraduates of UNIZIK. 105 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to each of the selected faculties.

The research instrument was administered to the respondents by the researchers and some of their friends. Returned copies were analysed and used for the presentation of data. A frequency of occurrence was established from the copies of the questionnaire returned and the data collected were organised into various statistical representations. The formula for the analysis was:

$$\frac{\text{Number of respondents}}{\text{Total number of students}} \times 100$$

Therefore, the percentage method was used as a statistical tool. The data collected and analysed were used in answering the research questions.

**Presentation and Analysis of Data**

Below are responses of students from the different faculties as obtained from the questionnaire.

<b>Name of Faculty</b>	<b>Total Number of Distributed</b>	<b>Total Number Returned</b>
Faculty of Arts	105	102
Faculty of the Management Sciences	105	88
Faculty of Engineering	105	88
<b>Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>278</b>

Out of three hundred and fifteen (315) copies of the questionnaire distributed to the students, a total of two hundred and seventy-eight (278) was duly completed and returned, and the percentage of the questionnaire returned is as follows:

$$\% = 278/315 \times 100/1 = 88\%$$

Therefore, the percentage returned is 88%.

### **Discussion**

The percentage of the respondents within the age range of 17-20 is 27%; 21-23 is 33%; 24-26 is 30%; and 27-30 is 10%. This indicates that respondents within the age range of 21-23 are more in the university followed by those within the age range of 24-26. This supports the assertion that teenagers and youths or young adults use slang more and thus the population is appropriate for this study. Eighty eight percent (88%) of the respondents said that they use slang. For those who don't use slang, 21 out of 34 respondents gave the reason that they don't know how to use slang terms properly denoting they have some interest in it. Those who chose others specified that they were not brought up with it.

Concerning the different text types in which slang is used, almost all the respondents use slang in spoken language, in chat and messenger and in emails to friends, some of them in any email, and some also in private letters. The number of people who use it in private letters might be so small because hardly anybody writes letters anymore in the age of email and messenger. Eighteen (18) respondents admit that they use slang during presentations in class while 17 respondents also admit that they use slang in exams. In contrast to this, when asked in which types of communication they have heard or seen their fellow students use slang, 63 respondents stated that fellow students use slang in presentations in class. Some even read it in papers (54) and exams (12).

Regarding the answer for why the respondents use slang and why they think their fellow students use slang, the response shows that to some extent slang is used for all the functions listed in my answer options. Nevertheless, some choices were given priority over others. The first choice, saying that slang is used for the fun of it, received the highest quantum of agreement. 189 respondents said that they and others use slang because it is fun.

The main point "to change the situation towards informality" and its sub-point "to be informal/colloquial" were the choices with the second highest agreement. When a person uses slang, the entire situation becomes informal or even colloquial depending on the quantity and quality of slang use. Of course, among fellow students slang use is almost necessary or unavoidable if the person does not want to be ridiculed for speaking too formally. The choice "to reduce seriousness" was also seen as sub-point to changing the situation towards informality and it was regarded as important by 135 respondents when asked about their own reason why they use slang and by 117 respondents with regards to other people's reason for slang use.

From the responses "for the fun of it", "to change the situation towards informality", "to be informal/colloquial" and "to reduce seriousness" had high frequencies showing that slang positively affects the students' communicative competence as they use it to adapt in informal circumstances when there is need.

The mother tongue of the respondents and in what languages slang is used was analysed. 189 respondents said they are Igbos while 58 respondents said they are from other tribes of the country other than Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa. Coming to what language in which they respondent use slang, definitely all of them use it in English. 169 respondents use it in Igbo while 143 respondents use it in other languages other than Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa. This increases the respondents' choice of words when speaking or relating with other students in campus.

Also, the frequency of the respondents' slang use according to their own opinion was elicited. 26 respondents admitted to using slang in almost every sentence. 125 respondents say they use it frequently but not excessively. 82 respondents admitted to slip in a slang expression from time to

time. All the answers are almost normally distributed around the maximum of the choice “frequently, but not excessively”. This maximum can be interpreted as a statement that slang is used frequently among UNIZIK students and that it may go as far to become a general part of the students’ vocabulary, which is difficult to avoid in formal situations.

Again, the respondents seem to agree that slang belongs to the informal or colloquial register of language. According to the data collected, 103 respondents said it is informal, 90 stated it is colloquial. One feature of informal language is that it is used more in everyday speech (especially conversations) than in writing. The vocabulary use of informal register of language is somewhat liberal. Also words that express rapport and familiarity are often used in informal speech. So, as the students relate with other students in the university, we hear more of words that expresses rapport and familiarity. The data also shows that 71 respondents classified slang as poetic. This becomes reasonable for the functions of slang according to Crystal (53) to be taken into consideration. For these respondents to see slang as being poetic shows that their vocabulary (both active and passive) is enriched with slang, and the use it for creative purposes e.g. to be more picturesque.

The analysis showed that a greater number of those who use slang or associate with it have filled in the questionnaire. Also, the analysis of those who do not use slang showed that the respondents use slang occasionally which would support the notion that almost every student speaks slang at UNIZIK.

The analysis has shown that students use slang not only amongst themselves but also in classroom situations (Alimi and Arua 20). This I believe is not just an exceptional case but a general tendency. This tendency can be explained from three points of view: first, English is the medium of instruction at UNIZIK, Awka but the mother tongue or primary language of only a very small minority of the students and not all students have been educated at schools where English is the medium of instruction before entering UNIZIK. Second, poor mastery of the English language could be a reason; and last, carelessness or laziness on the part of the student to proof read their work or paper.

It also made it clear that when a person starts learning how to use the slang term, it soon becomes a habit to use the slang with friends for mere enjoyment. Since communication is “a social interaction through messages” (Fiske 58), it must take place in a social context involving transmitting not only information but also in communicating social values and interpretational relationships (Thompson 38). As clearly pointed out by Hymes (281), a competent language user needs to know more than just a set of rules for forming grammatical sentences; he/she also needs to know how to use language in a contextually appropriate way.

From the analysis, most of the respondents agreed that they use slang frequently but not excessively, and this was interpreted as a statement that slang is used frequently among UNIZIK students. It also showed that this may go as far as to becoming a general part of the students’ vocabulary. Thus, as the students use slang expression, it inadvertently helps in their social adaptation of their speech community.

### **Recommendations**

Slang has been observed to have communicative pertinence among the undergraduates of UNIZIK owing to the fact it is taken as a convenient language of communication among students. Since it is vital for university student’s communication needs, the following recommendations were made by the researcher:

1. Slang is a style of its own. Since the students resort to it frequently, it can be studied by linguists. This is to know its total or holistic features in helping the students in their communicative competence.
2. Users of slang who use slang in very formal situations can strive for mastery in the English language first before using the slang terms. This can be achieved by students’ consciousness in the use of the English language.
3. The second language learner cannot be discouraged from using slang as this research has shown that young adults/youths/teenagers’ preferences in their speech with their peers result

in rich variation in language use and to a large extent, the development of their communicative competence.

### Conclusion

This paper discovered how slang positively affects the students' communicative competence. Man needs language to control his environment; the more he uses it, the better his control. Therefore, the students should note that language is the basis of any society they find themselves in life.

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