

## A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF IGBO SLANG EXPRESSIONS: A CASE STUDY OF AWKA SPEECH COMMUNITY

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### **Abstract**

Slang is the informal vocabulary of language, and it is used in informal situations, especially by particular groups of people. Slangs act as solidarity markers. They can indicate membership of close-knit social groups. Like jargon, slang makes use of regular word formation devices to create new words. By employing qualitative modes of enquiry, the researcher attempts to investigate the Igbo movement slang as used in Awka speech community. The research looks at how these words are created based on word formation processes as well as their functions, and to describe the social factors influencing the existence of slang. It aims at finding out movement slang terms used in Awka speech community; analysing them by describing their word formation processes, and stating their implications. Data for the study were collected by direct observation of speakers from football viewing centres, street joints and motor parks without knowledge of the speakers and for the purpose of no interference from the researcher on the collected data. Word formation process of Yule (1985) was used for analysis of the data. The research revealed that there are movement slang terms in Awka speech community. They are: wàa, kpòli ē, p̄ià tayà, gbòwaa dọ̀, tido, gbàdo anyā, mèghelie, bọ́chaa, nalie, t̄uò daùn, tie aru, k̄àyi l̄uò, k̄àyi nwee, k̄àyi duò kii, àwaawà, d̄ò, k̄ò. Affixation, multiple process, borrowing, clipping and coinage are word formation processes discovered to be used in the formation of these slang terms. This study is very beneficial to Igbo language experts, security agents as well as parents and society at large.

### **Introduction**

Slang is an informal language consisting of words and expressions that are not considered appropriate for formal occasion. They are often vulgar. They are words or phrases used instead of more conventional forms by those who are typically outside established higher status groups. It is one of the most creative areas of language use. Slang is no longer used as secret expressions but also used commonly by teenagers and young adults. They often use them in their daily communication. When using slang expressions, teenagers and young adults feel free among themselves, everywhere and any time. They do this to feel comfortable and arrived. They also tend to keep their activities away from their parents by using slangs in their discussions. This could also pose a problem to security as security agents would be in the dark when they are ignorant of the slang terms. Many scholars have attempted the study of slangs used in English and Igbo (see Anasiudu and Oluikpe, 1983; Anasiudu, 1987; Okorji, 1998; Oluikpe and Anasiudu, 2006; Nkamigbo and Eme 2011 and Odogwu, 2018). Although a few instances of Igbo slang appear in some of these works, many did not give detailed examination of Igbo slang expressions frequently used in an Igbo speech community. Only Nkamigbo and Eme (2011) tried to do a more detailed study of the slang terms used in Otu-Onitsha speech community. However, this is not enough as their study does not include slangs used in other parts of Igbo land.

Movement slang terms are slang expressions that evoke a change of place, position or posture in the person being addressed. In other words, they are words that demand some kind of motion from the person addressed. In this paper, the researcher is interested in analyzing the movement slangs in Igbo, using Awka speech community as a reference point. The researcher chooses to understudy this as it is fast permeating into the formal language of the community. The research purposes to find out movement slang terms used in Igbo, analyse them by describing their word formation processes, and state their implications. This, no doubt, would give a positive contribution to language experts and users. For instance, when security agents understand these expressions, it will aid their work. Parents also would know when their wards derail or begin to foment crime. It is a common knowledge that tone plays a

significant role in the Igbo language. In this work, the researcher has adopted the tone marking convention proposed by Green and Igwe (1963) which leaves high tones unmarked and low tones marked with grave accent [ ` ] and down step marked with the macron [ - ].

### **Definition of concepts**

Basic concepts used in this paper are reviewed and defined as used in this work.

### **Slang**

The study of language starts with the examination of one of the most fundamental units of linguistic structure: the word. Words play an integral role in the human ability to use language creatively. Far from being a static repository of memorised information, a human vocabulary is a dynamic system. We can add words at will. We can even expand their meanings into new domains. This explanation implies that language is dynamic and accepts the creativity of its uses, Akmajian et al (2008:11). This assertion of the creativity of language speakers is concretized by the ability of young people of every generation and language to create words that are intelligible among them. These intelligible words they create to close or guard their conversations against intruders is called slang.

Also, Goodword (2006) sees slang as a crucial part of a young person “coming of age”, one of the first detectable signs of their breaking away from their parents and their parents’ values. It is a cheap second language that expresses as the differences between young people who are about to enter adulthood from his or her parents’ generation. The teenagers are very creative to create new slang expressions to colour their world.

Kridalaksana in linguistic dictionary (2000) defines slang as non formal style that is used by young people or particular social class to communicate internally as an effort in order to make other people do not understand, both of by adding new vocabularies or changing existing words. This means that slang is the informal vocabulary of language and it is used in informal situation especially by particular group of people. This is one of varieties of language in sociolinguistics. Most of the people who use slangs are teenagers to speak in their community. Actually, people used slang language in their own community in order to keep the secret of what they are talking about because generally, slang is produced by the speaker itself. So, the other people cannot know what they talk because it is just used in their community. Every people have their own perspective about what slang is. According to Swan (1995: 510), slang is an informal kind of vocabulary, used mostly in speech by people who know each other well. This means that slang expressions are considered very informal.

In their opinion, Allan and Burrige (2006) say that slang is language of a highly colloquial, that improper to use in formal speech. In addition, slang language usually used to make an intimacy between one people to another so they can feel more closed each other. Slang is also called a colloquial language because it is usually used as the daily language when people communicate to each other. Based on definitions above, we can conclude that slang language is a new vocabulary that is related to informal conversation and used by a particular group of people in informal situation.

Like fashions in clothing and popular music, slang changes quite rapidly. Slang expressions can enter a language rapidly then fall out of fashion in a matter of a few years or even months. This rate of turnover is much greater than for other areas of the vocabulary of a language. Specific areas of slang are often associated with a particular social group and hence one can speak of teenage slang, underworld (criminal) slang, the slang of the drug culture and so on. In this respect, slang is a kind of jargon, and its use serves as a mark of membership and solidarity within a given social group. To use outdated slang, or to use current slang inappropriately is to be ‘out of date’ and to be excluded from an ‘in-group’.

Slang is sometimes referred to as vernacular (especially when it is associated with a particular social group) and some forms of slang fall under the term colloquialism, referring to informal conversational styles of language. These terms do not carry negative connotations, however, for convenience we will continue to use the popular term, slang. Slang vocabulary often consists of regular vocabularies used in

specific ways. For example, the use of words *ewu* and *aturu* are regular vocabulary items in Igbo but in slangs they can be used as insults (referring to foolish people).

### **Movement**

Martin (1977) defines movement as a change of position. He further states that physiological movement is the voluntary movement of the upper limbs. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, movement is the act or process of moving, especially change of place or position or posture. Also, Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines it as a change of position. However, in this research, movement is seen as any change in position or posture.

### **Movement slang**

Movement slang terms are slang expressions that evoke a change of place, position or posture in the person being addressed. In other words, they are words that demand some kind of motion from the person addressed.

### **Word formation processes**

Word formation rules were understudied by Yule (1985). He defines word formation process as a way of forming and creating new words from the use of old words. Bauer (1983:1) argues that the use of word formation is of value when the rules for the formation of words are not identical with the rules for the formation of sentences. This means that word formation is specifically formed words with the certain processes. According to Yule (1985), there are many types of word formation processes. They are coinage, borrowing, compounding, blending, clipping, backformation, conversion, acronym, derivation, prefix and suffix, and multiple processes.

1. **Coinage:** Coinage process as the way of creating the new word with referring to the most topical sources which are invented to the trade names for certain commercial products. Then it is become the general terms used in society. As the examples are the commercial products such as Aqua, Indomie, Soklin, Honda, and so on. People tend to call any noodle "indomie", although the brand may be Chicki Chicki or Dangote.
2. **Borrowing:** Borrowing process is a way of creating new words by taking over of words from other languages and using them continually in the society. For example the word *bɔl* in Igbo was borrowed from English and igbonised.
3. **Compounding:** Compounding process as a way of creating new words by joining two separate words into a single form to describe something new. For example the two words *umu* (children) and *nne* (mother) have different meanings but were brought together to form a single word, *umunne* (siblings) which has a different meaning from those two words.
4. **Blending:** Different from compounding process that is joining two separate words into a single form, blending process has a little difference. Blending process is a way of creating new word from the combination of two separate words to produce a new term. Typically blending process is accomplished by taking only the beginning of one word and joining it to the end of the other word. For example the term *brunch* for breakfast and lunch and the term *modem* for modulator and demodulator.
5. **Clipping:** Clipping is the process of reducing the elements of a word. This process occurs when a word of more than one syllable is reduced into a shorter form. As the example the word advertisement becomes *ad* and the word brother becomes *bro*.
6. **Back formation:** It is a specialized type of reduction process. Typically a word of one type (example, noun) is reduced to form a word of another type (e.g verb). For example the word *babysitter* becomes *babysit* and the word *donation* becomes a verb *donate*.
7. **Conversion:** This is the process of changing the function of words. For example the words in the form of noun changes become verb. It sounds similar with backformation process but actually it is different. In conversion process, it is without the occurrences of reduction process. Yule (1985) says that conversion also can be mentioned as category changes and functional shift. For example a noun, *chair* becomes verb in the statement "we have to chair this meeting" and a verb, *stand up* (to rise from a lying or sitting position) changes to become a noun, "stand

- up” (a short meeting), an adjective, stand-up (upright), stand-up comedy (comedy performed while standing) (eg.), stand up (verb).
8. **Acronym:** Acronym is the process of creating new word using the initial letters of a set of other words. For example the long word Automatic Teller Machine becomes ATM.
  9. **Derivation:** Derivation process is a way of creating a new word that is accomplished by means of a large number of small bits (example, affixes) of a language which are not usually given separate listings in dictionaries. For example, in English, the word elements un-, mis-, pre-, -ful, -less which appear in words unhappy, misinformation, prejudice, meaningful, and careless are called affixes. Prefixes and suffixes processes are included into affixes. Prefixes are the affixes which are added at the beginning of the words (example un-, mis-, im-). While he defines suffixes are the affixes which are added at the end of the words (example -less, -ness, -ish). As the example of prefixes are unforgettable, misunderstanding, and impossible. While, the examples of suffixes are useless, loneliness, boyish, and so on.
  10. **Multiple processes:** This is a process of creating a new word with more than one process at work in the certain word. For example the word waspish is coming from the word White Anglo-Saxon Protestant as the acronym process because it is abbreviated into the initial letter “wasp” and then, it is added with the suffix -ish as the derivation process.

### **Empirical review**

Some scholars have carried out researches in this area of study. Nkamigbo and Eme (2011) researched on Igbo slang in Otu-Onitsha: Towards enriching the Igbo language. They identified some Igbo slang expressions, their various users and contexts of usage and also advocate that these slang expressions be consciously made to permeate the various Igbo communities. This is different from the current research because this paper purposes to look at the formation processes of movement slang expressions used in Awka speech community and their implications.

Odogwu (2018) also undertook a qualitative sociolinguistic study of slangy expressions in Nigerian pidgin. Using referential theory of semantics, the study was able to identify Nigerian pidgin slangy expressions in sentences as used in the Warri-Sapele-Ugheli axis of Delta state, Nigeria; interpret the identified slang expressions using context as cue and to identify slang expressions whose surface meaning correlate with their referents. The paper concluded that every speaker poses a variety of slangy expressions and tends to choose among them in accordance with the social situation that calls for their use and that the expressions are fully intelligible to the speakers. This is different from the present work as it deals only on the Igbo movement slangs. This also is not the same with the work under consideration as they do not study the same language.

### **Summary of literature review**

Relevant literatures have been reviewed and it is obvious that the topic under discussion is not an entirely new one. This means that some researchers have carried out researches in this area of study. However, enough has not been done in the study of slang expressions, especially in Igbo as this is a recurring decimal in human language. Also none of the researchers studied the movement slangs in Awka speech community. This makes the current study very important and a great contribution to existing knowledge. The studies presented thus far provide evidence to indicate that there is still need for more studies on slang terms.

### **Data analysis**

Here the researcher analyses the data using Yule’s 1985 processes of word formation. The data are purely from Awka dialect.

### **Igbo movement slang expressions in Awka speech community**

The underlisted data were collected on Igbo movement slangs in Awka speech community:

Waa, kpolie, p̄a taya, gb̄owaa d̄o, ntido, gbado anya, mmegheli, b̄ochaa, nalie, t̄o n’ogbe, tie ar̄u, kayi l̄o, kayi nwee, kayi d̄o kii, awaawa, d̄o, k̄o.

### Analysis of Igbo movement slang terms in Awka speech community

1. **wàa**  
This word is formed by suffixation. The suffix ‘a’ (indicating an imperative) is added to the verbroot *wa* (break). This is an imperative. It means *break*. The meaning of the word is changed to mean *get out*. This implies that the speaker is telling someone to break away from a place. However, an older people find it insulting when a younger uses it on them among slang users.
2. **kpòli ē**  
The word formation process here is conversion where there is a functional shift in the usage of the words. The words ‘kpolu’ (verb meaning take to oneself (of grains or something that is in pieces)) and ‘ya’ (pronoun meaning him/her/it) are given extensions in their individual meanings. There is a change in meaning, from ‘take’ to *get out*. It implies discharge from a meeting with a person.
3. **p̄ià tayà**  
The formation of this expression is a multiple process that involves a verb *p̄ià* and a borrowed word *taya*. This word, *tyre* is borrowed from English and igbonised. In proper Igbo, it means to hit a tyre on a surface forcefully. But as a slang it is used to mean, ‘leave’, equating human legs to tyres.
4. **gb̄owaa d̄ō**  
This phrase involves a multiple word formation process, affixation and borrowing. It is got by a combination of the verb ‘gb̄owaa’ (blow up) is formed by suffixing ‘a’ (indicating imperative) to the verb stem *gb̄owa* (blow up) and the word ‘d̄ō’ (door) borrowed from English and igbonised. In the standard Igbo, it means break the door using one’s feet but in slang usage it means, *leave finally*. This could be used as a result of quarrel between people or someone travelling to mean “leave finally”, implying a severity in relationship or going far away or going away for a long time.
5. **tido**  
This verb stem primarily means stitching against a fabric or something of a heavy weight falling on something or someone. However, among young people it is used to mean ‘start going’. The word formation process involved is narrowing. The human leg is perceived as a heavy object hitting against the ground in the process of walking or running.
6. **gb̄ado anyā**  
This phrase in the standard Igbo means “be careful” but in slang expression it means ‘you can go’. The process in the formation is conversion.
7. **mèghelie**  
The standard meaning of this word is *shake*. The process involved in the formation is conversion. This could be used as information to someone to escape as in *nnaa meghelie*, *meghelikwee* or to inform one’s host that one is leaving. For example, ‘Ka m meghelie’ (Let me go).
8. **b̄ōchaa**  
This word means clear a farm in the standard Igbo. Meaning extension is the word formation process used in its formation. Though this is an imperative, it is used in an informative sense among slang speakers. It means ‘run away’ or ‘escape’.
9. **nalie**  
This expression is got from the clipping of two verbroots *na* and *li* with the suffix ‘e’ to the verb *nalie*. This means *to go very far or out of sight*. This could be used to imply *escape to a far place, run out of sight, one is out of sight*.
10. **t̄ūō dānū**  
The phrase involves suffixation and borrowing in its formation. The imperative marker ‘o’ is suffixed to the verbroot ‘t̄u’ (throw). The verb *t̄ūō* means *throw* while ‘down’ is an English word borrowed and igbonised to *dānū*. They combine to mean *throw down* in a plain language. But in slang terms in means *come over*.
11. **tiē ar̄ū**  
The word formation process involved here are clipping and meaning extension. ‘Tie’ is the short form of the word, ‘tinye’ (put) while ‘ar̄ū’ means body. In plain Igbo, the verb phrase means ‘put body’. But in the slang usage they are combined to mean *come here or come to a stated place*.

12. **kàì lụọ**

Kàì is a shortened form of 'ka anyị', meaning *let us*. Lụọ is a verb that means work. The phrase is formed by the clipping in the first and second word and suffixing 'ọ' to the third word. It is used to mean *let's meet privately* by slang users.

13. **kàì nwee**

This is another variant of *kàì lụọ* but with an indication that the two people are in different locations or scheduling an appointment to meet in a said location.

14. **kàì dụọ kii**

This phrase has three words, the first is formed by clipping two words, 'ka' and 'anyị', the second is got from suffixing 'ọ' to the verbroot 'dụ' (poke) and the third word 'kii'(key) is borrowed from English and igbonised. In standard Igbo, it means 'Let's poke key'. But in slang usage it means 'Let's go'.

15. **dọọ**

The formation process in this word is suffixation. The imperative marker 'ọ' is suffixed to the verbroot 'dọ' (drag) to mean *drag*. There is also meaning extension. Instead of using it to mean drag, slang users use it to mean *dodge* or *hide from someone*.

16. **kọọ**

There is the suffixation of the imperative marker 'ọ' to the verbroot 'kọ' (cultivate/scratch). This expression is verb, which means to cultivate or cratch. Slangs users extend the meaning to *ignore* or *leave him or her*.

### Summary of findings and conclusion

The result of this study indicates that there are movement slangs in Awka speech community. They are: wàa, kpòlì ē, pịa tayà, gbòwaa dọọ, tido, gbàdo anyā, mèghelie, bọchaa, nalie, tịọ daụnụ, tie arụ, kàì lụọ, kàì nwee, kàì dụọ kii, dọọ and kọọ.

It is revealed that the movement slangs used in Awka speech community have their word formation process as affixation, multiple process, borrowing, clipping, coinage and conversion. It is also observed that there is an observation of hierarchy or seniority in the use of these expressions. It is also discovered that these slang expressions could imply command, information against high powers or insubordination. From the above findings, it is apparent that this work has made an interesting contribution to the study of the Igbo language and security cautiousness. The sole aim of language is communication. That is to say that without intelligibility of language, there is no communication and once there is intelligibility, there is language. Slang is intelligible among its users and therefore a very important area of language that should be paid attention to.

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