

**THE COMMUNICATIVE RELEVANCE OF SLANG AMONG UNDERGRADUATES OF  
NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA**

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**Abstract**

The communicative role of language serves as a unifying force among members of a speech community. This research intends to study slang usage among the undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria with the view to know its communicative relevance among the students. It seeks to know if slang could actually help a second language learner in achieving communicative competence in the target language. It also seeks to know it can help students to adapt to the university speech community, and to determine the efficacy of slangs in contributing to the students' specific identity. The survey research design was adopted for the study and the sample population comprised of 278 undergraduates from the Faculties of Arts, Engineering and Management Sciences of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria. Questionnaires were dispensed to the study participants through a purposive sampling technique. Results showed that respondents within the age range of 21-23 years use slangs most, followed by those within the age range of 24-26 years while the 29-32 years age group recorded the least usage. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the respondents said that they use slang. Two hundred and fifty-one (251) out of 278 respondents (90%) agreed that there is a UNIZIK specific student identity. There is a UNIZIK specific identity among the students and slang plays an important role for this UNIZIK specific identity among the students. Slangs were found to be patterned and play useful communicative roles in UNIZIK.

**Keywords:** Communication, Slang, UNIZIK, Undergraduate, Identity

**Introduction**

Language occupies an important position in the life of mankind. It is seen as a unifying force among members of a community. Language cannot be dispensed with if human aspirations are to be fully achieved. Some of its uses include influencing people, self-expression and embodying of thought. It has been categorised into formal and informal usage (Crystal 450), of which the concern of this paper is on slang, 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 ("Mattiello")

One of the features of slang is that it is intelligible to people associated with a particular group. The smartest and most communicative competent "freshmen" find it difficult to understand the language used on campus due to the fact that slang "provides different symbols from which communicated messages can be constructed" ("Megaessays.com" 1). Lastly, slang is more than just words as students resort to it especially in informal situations.

This research intends to study slang usage among the undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka with the view to know its communicative relevance among the students. It seeks to know if slang could actually help a second language learner in achieving communicative competence in the target language. It also seeks to know if it can help students to adapt to the university speech community. Lastly, if slang has any contribution to the students' specific identity. The study intends to answer the following questions: To what degree do the undergraduates use slang for communication in the university? To what extent does slang help students in adapting to their speech community? In what manner does slang promote social or group identity among the undergraduates?

### Defining Slang

Slang might not be beyond definition, but that it is “incapable of precise definition” (Partridge 69). In 1990, Lars-Gunnar Andersson and the dialectologist Peter Trudgill published their book *Bad Language*, in which they dedicated an entire chapter to slang. To put their definition (which extends over more than 10 pages) in a nutshell, only the subheadings from chapter four (4) in their book shall be enumerated here:

1. Slang is language use below the neutral stylistic level.
2. Slang is typical for informal situations.
3. Slang is typical of spoken language.
4. Slang is found in words, not in grammar.
5. Slang is not a dialect.
6. Slang is not swearing.
7. Slang is not register (they do not see the different stylistic levels of language [formal, informal, poetic, etc.] as register. They define register as the “specialised vocabulary” that “every occupation and activity” draws along [Andersson 76]).
8. Slang is not cant, argot or jargon.
9. Slang is creative.
10. Slang is often short-lived.
11. Slang is often conscious.
12. Slang is group-related.
13. Slang is ancient. (Andersson 69-81)

Andersson and Trudgill’s definition refers to a number of points that have already been mentioned in the definition above, for instance, slang is found in words; it is ephemeral and used consciously. But they also introduced new dimensions to the concept of slang. Instead of arguing, as prescriptivists would, that slang is a non-standard language, they are rather cautious about not bringing in linguistic prejudice, but they introduced the notion of informality and the point that slang is mainly used in spoken language. Spoken language is often more informal than written language. Of course, nowadays in the age of electronic communication, the borderline between written and spoken language is sometimes rather blurred. That is why text types like chat conversations or e-mails, which often show more features of spoken discourse than written text, are counted as spoken language too.

Apart from its length, another problem with Andersson and Trudgill’s definition is that they seem to equate slang with colloquialisms, vague words, and vulgarity. However, not all slang is vulgar, and colloquialisms and vague words are not group specific. The last definition of slang is the one Connie Eble provides in her book *Slang and Sociability: In-group Language among College Students*. Her definition is much more extensive than the others considered together. At the very beginning of chapter one (1), Eble argues that:

Slang is an ever-changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large. The existence of vocabulary of this sort within a language is possibly as old as language itself, for slang seems to be part of any language in ordinary interaction by a community large enough and diverse enough to have identifiable sub-groups. (11)

In a footnote to this, she adds that “[its] presence will markedly lower, at least for the moment, the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing” (11). Like Andersson and Trudgill, this definition also refers to the notion of informality and to the fact that slang is “ancient” (Andersson 80), and that it seems to be a natural development in human society at all times. Later on in chapter one (1) of her book, Eble describes various other characteristics of slang. She says for example that “slang is ephemeral” (12) and that “slang is also not ‘improper’ grammatical construction” (21), as has been stated by Andersson and Trudgill earlier. Furthermore, she argues that “slang is not geographically restricted vocabulary” (19).

In addition to the definition cited above, she argues that slang is strongly connected to social or group identity. When she discusses the “group-identifying function” of slang, she emphasizes that “it is well documented that social groups are fertile breeding grounds for an idiosyncratic vocabulary to enhance their solidarity” (18). This is a very important characteristic of slang which has been neglected in the other definitions mentioned earlier. She is also the first to clearly state that sub-groups can exist within the speech community which uses a certain slang.

Eble, like all the linguists and lexicographers before, notes that a clear demarcation from other vernacular forms is necessary. She writes, “slang must be distinguished from other subsets of the lexicon such as regionalisms or dialect words, jargon, profanity and obscenity; colloquialism, and cant or argot – although slang shares some characteristics with each of these and can overlap” (19). When all the above definitions are compared with one another, an increase in the complexity and yet a better understanding of the concept, slang, is perceptible. Nevertheless, a short and clear definition has still not been found. Richter attempted to summarize all the different notions related to slang and included the term “sociolect” in her definition:

Often also including smaller sub-varieties, slang is a sociolect providing group identity and clearly excluding “outsiders”. Its vocabulary is continuously subject to change and often only has a short life-span. Its use increases the informality of the situation and is usually restricted to spoken language or written text types whose style is close to that of spoken discourse. (11)

To her understanding, a sociolect is a variety of language spoken by a certain speech community. The term speech community itself needs a clear definition and Hudson (25 – 30) shows that, much like slang, it is a term which is difficult to define. So, he sees a speech community as a group of people connected to each other by the variety of language they speak which demarcates them linguistically from the larger society surrounding them (Richter 11). Speech community is the locus of all sociolinguistic investigation. It can be as small as a town, village, or even a club or as large as a nation or a group of nations. The important characteristics of a speech community are that its members share a particular language (or variety of a language) as well as the norms (or rules for the appropriate use of their language in social context), and that these speakers are distinguished from other comparable groups by similar sociolinguistic criteria.

Any group of speakers uses a language or a form of language which is technically called speech variety. One particular type of speech variety is social speech variety (also called social dialect or sociolect). Sociolects are sub-divisible into several smaller categories, largely as a function of the type of social groups that share the particular speech variety (“Wikipedia”). Most often, one thinks of sociolects in terms of the socio-economic status of the speakers. Other sociolects, however, may be associated with ethnic gender, occupational, or age groups.

An idiolect is a subset of the social dialect. It is a language which is “special” to an individual or group (“Everything2.com”). It is an individual dialect – the idiosyncratic way that a particular person speaks. It is not restricted to just word known, but preferred word choice, grammar used and commonly used turns of phrase (“Everything2.com”). A specific subset of idiolects is “family slang”, which is used in nearly all families to some degree. Often people are surprised that others do not share their idiolect if words were shared by other family members. For example:

Don’t ask my “brudder” what this is like.

This example shows that one of the characteristics of slang users in the speech community is the ability to conceal things (secrecy). This feature is peculiar to all community or group of slang users.

Other subsets of idiolect (as adopted from Crystal [53] functions of slang) include:

1. Children slang
2. Students slang
3. Lovers slang (peculiar to individual lovers)
4. Members of political secret societies slang
5. Criminals slang

6. Innocent persons (in prison) slang, and so on.  
For this paper, we shall examine students' slang.

### **Empirical Studies**

Studies by Tony Thorne are efforts to sustain a scholarly examination of slang. He examined students' slang in the United Kingdom and showed that some semantic clusters correlate with students' preoccupations. In a subsequent study, he categorised slang amongst students in Kings College and various other higher institutions in the Greater London area. His findings confirm that slang terms are a reflection of "actual students' behaviour" (Thorne 4). In terms of their forms, he reported the presence of re-lexicalisation, over-lexicalisation, figures of speech and some word formation processes (Thorne 4).

Another comprehensive scholarly examination of slang is found in the works of Connie Eble. She focused on the University of North Carolina slang repertoire. The importance of her treatment of slang is that it highlights the fact slang is intricately woven into college students' academic and social life. Her works showed that slang can be studied in multi-dimensional ways. Thus, in examining its formal and functional characteristics, she showed its relationship with grammar, morphology, lexicology, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis and other important fields of study. In so doing, she vigorously argued that slang is part of everybody's everyday life and that it is not confined to the hallowed walls of universities.

Coming down to slang studies in ESL environments in Africa, Yusuf analysed two related expressions, "motherless babies" and "babiless mothers" (Yusuf 31) amongst Nigerian university students. The structures of the two terms reveal the productive use of the -less suffix to denote two types of deprivation: "maternal care" in the first and "maternal joy" in the second. Alimi and Arua identified and discussed the labels with which students describe their academic life at the University of Botswana. The labels revealed students' primary academic preoccupations: excellent and poor performance, good and poor teaching, difficult and easy courses, truancy, illegitimate relationships, cheating and passing and failing. The study also revealed a rich and extensive variety of students' labelling of various aspects of their academic life. In another study, Alimi and Arua (51) investigated gender bias in the slang expressions that students at the University of Botswana use to "describe female and male lecturers, on one hand female and male students on the other hand, based on the sexual relationships they contract across teacher-student boundaries". Their findings showed that in terms of endearing slang terms, female students and lecturers are discriminated against while both genders are treated alike in terms of disparaging slang expressions.

In the course of reviewing the relevant literature to this paper, it has been established that slang is a sociolect providing group identity and clearly excluding "outsiders". Despite attempts to define the concept, a short and clear definition has still not been found. The empirical studies showed works of previous research on slang as to its value and functions. This paper intends to show the communicative relevance of slang among the undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework on which this research is based is the Communication Accommodation Theory which states that a person seeks either to emphasize or to minimize the social differences between himself/herself and the other person in conversation. This theory was first proposed by Giles. It argues that "when people interact, they adjust their speech, their vocal patterns and their gestures to accommodate other" (Turner and West 8). It explores the various reasons why individuals emphasize or minimize the social differences between themselves and their interlocutors (those with whom they are communicating) through verbal and non-verbal communication.

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)

Communication Accommodation theory focuses on the interactive aspects of communication and highlights its “negotiative” nature (Thanasoulas 1). One reason for slang is to ease social discourse or interaction. This is to induce either friendliness or intimacy of a deep or durable kind. The theory explains that speakers alter the way they communicate towards goal achievements.

There are two basic accommodation strategies - convergence and divergence – “the linguistic realisations of deeper goals and orientations that individual tacitly negotiate” (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 order to reduce social differences” (Giles and Coupland 35).

Giles and Coupland (35) believes that when speakers seek approval in a social situation, they are likely to alter or shift their speech to resemble that of those they are interacting with, and this is in terms of the language of choice, accent and dialect used in the speech event. One function of slang which relates to the convergent strategy is that slang is used to show that one belongs to a certain group and thus, establishes contact. Therefore, convergence strategies may well point to people’s perennial need for social approval and mutual intelligibility (Thanasoulas 2), which is the underlying assumption proposed by this theory that “the more similar our attitudes and beliefs are to certain others, the more likely it is we will be attracted to them” (Byrne qtd in Giles and Clair 47) . For example, when an acquaintance of ours pronounces “room” as “loom” (because of interference problem), it is probably the case that, out of politeness and because of the need to maintain solidarity and rapport, we will ignore his/her mistake and go on with the conversation. The same applies to affective language and phatic expressions such as “hello! How are you this morning?” or “I’m awfully sorry”, where two or more persons converge towards one another both verbally and nonverbally (e.g. by mutual gazing or smiling and so on), in order to signal that they are on the same wavelength and wish to maintain good relationships.

Unlike the convergence strategies, speakers might engage in divergent speech, with which an individual emphasizes the social distance between himself and other speakers by using speech of linguistic features of his own group. Slang is used to exclude others so that a speaker would not be understood by those around him. Therefore, divergence can be a tactic of inter-group distinctiveness at the disposal of people seeking a positive social identity (Thanasoulas 3).

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. It creates an immediate sense of belonging among the students and excludes outsiders who are familiar or unfamiliar (as the case may be) with the “special language”. Lastly, it gives a special kind of identity and creates social bond within the university speech community.

### **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 slang among the undergraduates of UNIZIK. 105 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to each of the selected faculties.



The questionnaire 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 organized into various statistical representations. The formula for the analysis was:

$$\frac{\text{Number of respondents}}{\text{Total number of students}} \times \frac{100}{1}$$

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
Total	315	278

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.

Regarding the answer to the question with whom do you use slang, a majority of respondents use slang with all their friends both inside and outside UNIZIK, Awka. A possible problem with these data is that some respondents might not have seen the difference between points 3 (with everybody inside UNIZIK except lecturers) and 4 (with UNIZIK students only) when responding to the questionnaire quickly, because they might have misunderstood that point 3 includes non-academic staff. However, this difference is probably not very significant for the students as only academic staff seem to be considered as superior, while non-academic staffs are often overlooked entirely.

It is interesting that 115 respondents said that they use slang also with people outside UNIZIK Awka. They might be referring to colloquial language in general here. Concerning the distribution of responses for the questions whether there is a UNIZIK specific identity among the students and if yes, how important is slang in providing and supporting this UNIZIK specific identity, 251 out of 278 respondents (90%) agreed that there is a UNIZIK specific student identity. 8 respondents answered there is no such identity, and 19 said that they do not know whether such an identity exists. Out of these 251 respondents with positive responses, 65 said that slang is very important in providing and supporting this UNIZIK specific student identity. 106 respondents said slang is fairly important for this, 55 considered it not very important, and 25 stated that it is not important at all. If the first two points are added up, two thirds of the respondents agreed that slang is important for a UNIZIK specific identity among the students.

Also, the distribution of responses for the question whether the respondents are members of students' club that use slang during meetings showed that 163 respondents (59%) said they belong to such group while 115 said no. The analysis showed that either slang is spoken by almost everybody in UNIZIK or 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 first theory that almost every student speaks slang at UNIZIK. Also, the analysis showed that slang helps the students to adapt very well on campus as they use the slang terms to create rapport within and outside the school. Another reason why they also use slang with people outside UNIZIK is that they use it to show that they are students from UNIZIK, Awka, which will earn the respect or even envy from people outside.

The analysis showed that slang is important for a UNIZIK specific identity among the students. This clearly proved that the language the students use is a marker of their social identity or group identity. Also, as earlier pointed out from the analysis, another possible reason why the students use slang with people outside UNIZIK is to show this UNIZIK specific identity.

In summary, the researchers observed that:

1. Slang is spoken by almost every student in UNIZIK or that a greater number of those who use slang or associate with it are students of the university. Also, the analysis of those who do not use slang shows that they use slang occasionally. This shows that almost every student speaks slang at UNIZIK. The students use slang not only among themselves but also in classroom situations during presentations and when they write exams.
2. It helps the students in the social adaptation of the UNIZIK speech community as they settle very well with other students on campus. They use the slang term to create rapport within and even outside the school.
3. There is a UNIZIK specific identity among the students and slang plays an important role for this UNIZIK specific identity among the students. This clearly shows that the language the students use is a marker of their social identity. Also, various groups help to promote slang terms in the university to sustain this social identity.
4. It is worth mentioning that the use of slang by undergraduates in UNIZIK is not discriminative or exclusive, it is rather one way for the students to identify themselves in their multilingual society.

### **Recommendations**

Slang has been observed to have communicative relevance 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 students' communication needs, the following recommendations were made by the researcher:

1. Since the language the students use is a marker of their social identity and means by which they adapt well in campus, those who do not use slang terms should learn a bit of these terms in order that they won't be excluded by their fellow students. Knowledge of these slang terms would help them to improve on their communicative competence thus helping them to use language in a contextually appropriate way.
2. 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.
3. This identity should be encouraged to increase rapport and friendliness among the students. Also, the use of slang is a deliberate effort by the students to acquire the best of all that will help them to integrate into the society after their studies as they learn to socialise and become members of one social group or the other while in school.

### **Conclusion**

This paper showed the relevance of slang to students' communicative competence. 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. It helps the students in the social adaptation of the UNIZIK speech community as they settle very well with other students on campus clearly asserting that communication

must take place in a social context involving transmitting not only information but also in communicating social values and interpretational relationships. 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. Lastly. The UNIZIK specific identity clearly shows that the language the students use is a marker of their social identity.

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