

8. Conclusion

Our attempt here has amply demonstrated the richness and diversity of the semantic roles of the particle *kV*. This description will not only help to inform how to write it in the orthography, but it sets the stage for comparative studies with related languages. It will be of historical interest to have a foundation from which to launch out for the reconstruction of such grammatical particles. Its potential as data for theoretical abstracts is the real strength of the paper.

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The Semantics of Yoruba Slangs

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is to examine the semantic structure of a variety of language use that is presently pervasive among the Yoruba's younger generation. This language variety is known as 'slang'. Three semantic modules: idiom, euphemism and paraphrase, are employed as eclectic conceptual frameworks for the study. The data analysed in this paper were obtained principally via researchers' observation and unstructured oral interview. The observation which spanned over a period of three months (February - April, 2017) was carried out by the researchers at football viewing centres, club houses and salons within the Ilorin metropolis during conversations involving the target language users. Ten (10) participants (7 illiterate youths and 3 students) were randomly selected for unstructured oral interview. Their conversations and responses were tape-recorded; the recorded data were eventually extracted, translated and analysed using a descriptive approach. From its findings, the paper establishes that virtually all the Yoruba slangs are idiomatic because their overall meanings cannot be predicted from the meanings of their component words. Also, it is found out that some of the slangs are euphemisms in themselves, as the speakers employ them to avoid taboo or unpleasant expressions in certain communication contexts. Finally, many of the slangs are synonymous with one another; hence, they are used to express paraphrase relations. Because of the semantic uniqueness of Yoruba slangs, the paper concludes that slangs, though are ephemeral linguistic expressions, often give a language a new look whenever they evolve. Hence, Yoruba is not an exception in this regard. The study therefore recommends a linguistic documentation of the contemporary Yoruba slangs as well as teaching them to foreign learners of the language in order to intimate the learners with the informal aspect of Yoruba communication.

Keywords: Yoruba slangs, idiom, euphemism, paraphrase, linguistic documentation.

Introduction

Sociolinguistics is a field which concerns itself with the study of the interconnectivity between language and society. It principally delves into how social forces influence the use of language among different social groups and in diverse communication situations. In the human society, one of the phenomena that diachronically evolve is slang. Slangy expressions have a way of connecting language users particularly the younger group. The youth tend to favor this medium of communication in order to entrench group

solidarity and reflect socio-cultural dispositions that are concealed in their worldviews.

In the words of González (1994), the study of slang is often overlooked or disregarded, due, in great part, to its ephemerality and the informal, humorous and taboo character of many of its expressions, which lead to the belief that it is a deviation from the standard language. However, a careful scrutiny of the current Yoruba slangs among the younger generation revealed that these expressions have a rich semantic structure that cannot be overlooked or glanced at in a hurry. Apart from the fact that the slangs normally portray the socio-cultural belief or inclination of the users, it is also observed that the speakers display 'semanti-cultural' competence when they use them in different contexts of communication. Therefore, it becomes paramount in this paper to subject them to semantic analysis with the aim of exploring the semantic features with which they are characterized. Yoruba is one of the three major indigenous languages in Nigeria; it is a kwa language of the Niger-Congo subphylum that is spoken in the south-western region of the country.

Conceptual Framework

To a large extent, of all the significant units of language (namely phone, phoneme, syllable, morpheme, etc.), the sememe (meaning) relatively appears to be the most difficult to study. This is partly due to its abstract nature, being a phenomenon which mainly resides in the mind of language users; or wholly due to the fact that decoding the meaning of a linguistic form in most cases transcends the literal realm but is largely governed by certain non-linguistic variables such as the socio-cultural context of discourse, socio-cultural background of the interlocutors, speakers' worldviews cum experiences, among others. However, despite that meaning seems somewhat challenging to study, language scholars and philosophers alike have tried as much as possible to do justice to the nature of meaning within the context of theories and models of semantics.

Semantics concerns itself with the scientific study of the meanings of words and sentences (Saeed, 2003). When language is put into use, what speakers communicate to one another is meaning, that is, the semantic knowledge which resides in their mental faculty. It is this knowledge that semanticists attempt to study. Syal & Jindal (2007, p. 141) argue that "semantics is the most abstract level of linguistic analysis, since we cannot see or observe meaning as we can observe and record sounds". In order to give a systematic account of the nature of meaning, semanticists developed theories of meaning such as the referential theory, the imagery theory, the truth-conditional theory, etc. A theoretical account of meaning does not presuppose prescribing what the meanings of expressions should be but

boils down to describing the implicit semantic knowledge that speakers have about their language.

The study of meaning within the field of semantics is largely restricted to the basic, primary or literal denotation of an expression (Saeed, 2003). That is, the immediate impression a language user has in mind whenever he hears or reads an utterance. For example, the literal meaning of the English word 'dog' would constitute the picture/image of a certain kind of four-legged domestic animal which is conjured in the mind or the tactile referent to which the word refers in the real world. Thus, a level of interpretation of the word 'dog' which goes beyond the above natural tendency exits the boundary of semantics, it is taken care of in another meaning-based field known as pragmatics. Although semantics and pragmatics are theoretically interwoven, there is a noteworthy point of divergence between them which is succinctly captured by Saeed (2003, p. 101) as follow: semantics would deal with conventional meaning, those aspects which do not seem to vary too much from context to context, while pragmatics would deal with aspects of individual usage and context-dependent meaning.

In the light of the above enunciation, the study of Yoruba slangs in this paper is therefore situated within three conceptual semantic modules. Specifically, the analysis is premised upon three principal spectra of meaning: idiom, euphemism and paraphrase.

An idiom is a phrase where the words together have a meaning that is different from the dictionary definitions of the individual words (www.usingenglish.com/reference/idioms). In other words, an idiom is a fixed group of words with a special meaning that cannot be interpreted from the combination of the constituent words. Since idiomatic expressions usually have culturally understood meanings that differ from what their composite words' denotations would suggest, foreign learners of a language have to systematically learn this aspect of meaning of the language. In essence, a learner of English, for example, must acquaint himself with the idioms in the language rather than doing 'guesswork' about their meanings; otherwise, semantic predictions would generate wrong (or different) meanings altogether. Consider the following English idioms:

1. At the drop of a hat
(Without any hesitation; instantly)
2. Add insult to injury
(To worsen an unfavorable situation)
3. Bite off more than one can chew
(To take on more responsibilities than one can manage)
4. A wild goose chase
(A frustrating or lengthy task that accomplishes little)

In the above examples, one would notice that the corresponding meaning of each idiom is different and/or cannot be understood or deduced from the individual meanings of its component words.

Euphemism, as a literary term, refers to polite, indirect expressions which replace words and phrases that are considered harsh and impolite or which suggest something unpleasant. 'Unwanted' expressions such as vulgarity, linguistic taboo, offensive terms, and unpleasant remarks are better expressed using semantic permissible alternatives in the form of euphemisms. For instance, the expression 'kick the bucket' is an alternative way of reporting the death of someone. Thus, euphemism is an idiomatic expression which is deliberately employed by language users to mask rude or impolite expressions but to communicate the idea courteously, as shown in the following English examples

5. In the family way
(Expressing that someone is pregnant)
6. Temporary negative cash flow
(Expressing that one is broke)
7. Economically disadvantaged
(Expressing that one is poor)
8. Mentally challenged
(Expressing that someone is stupid or imbecilic)

A major function of euphemism, as implied in the examples above, is that it helps one to convey ideas which have become a social taboo or are too embarrassing to mention directly.

Finally, a paraphrase is a restatement of the meaning of a sentence using other words. In other words, to paraphrase a sentence is to convey the same message without losing the essential meaning. As a semantic relation between sentences in language, a paraphrase serves the purpose of explaining or clarifying the meaning of the sentence that is being paraphrased. A sentence can be paraphrased either by lexical items permutation as in converting an active sentence to a passive one or employing new words entirely. Consider the paraphrase relations in the following English sentences:

9. a) The police chased the burglar (active)
b) The burglar was chased by the police (passive)
10. a) Mary bought some jewelry from Susan.
b) Susan sold some jewelry to Mary

The (a) and (b) sentences in each of the above pairs are obviously very similar in meaning, in that once the first is true, the other is also true. In a nutshell, two sentences that can have the same meaning are said to be paraphrases of each other (O' Grady and Katamba, 2011). Therefore, as synonymy is to words, so is paraphrase to sentences.

Slangs

According to Dozie & Madu (2012, p. 99), "the origin of the socio-linguistic phenomenon 'slang' dates back to 1800 and was used in English as a 'special vocabulary' by any set of persons of low or disreputable character". In time, its use gained access, acceptance and spread to other parts of the world. In the words of Ellis (2002), slang is a variety of language used by members of a group to express their sense of belonging. Following McGregor (2009), slang refers to an informal word or expression that has not gained complete acceptability and is used by a particular group. A defining feature of slang is that it is usually associated with a particular group of language users and plays a role in constructing group identity and identifying individuals as members of groups. Therefore, using the slang of a particular group will associate an individual with that group. The aim of slang users is to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within their group.

The younger generation of speakers constitutes the major group with which the use of slangs is mostly associated. This is because the youths are dynamic individuals who can invent novel expressions in order to satisfy their communication desires. González (1994) echoes these sentiments by asserting that of all social groups, the young are the most prone to the use and renovation of slang because they exhibit great social dynamism and are receptive to changes in fashion such as clothes, look, style, and also in speech. Furthermore, slang is not only a vocabulary that is specific to a particular generation of younger speakers but also an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases (Eble, 1996), so informal that many people view it as a deviation from or subversion of the standard variety. In the light of this enunciation, Mathiello (2008, p.11) gives an example of the terms "foxy" and "shagadelic". The author explains that neither term makes sense given a standard interpretation of English. For instance, the slangy form 'foxy' does not make sense semantically, as it is a synonym with the word 'sexy' and has nothing to do with foxes.

For an expression to qualify as slang, it must meet at least two of the following conditions (Dumas & Lighter, 1978):

- It should be used informally.
- It should be used in such a way that the use is familiar with its referent or its co-users.
- It should be considered forbidden in casual conversation involving people of a higher social status.
- It should serve as a substitute for a popular conventional synonym.

Therefore, once an expression fulfils two or more conditions out of the above, it is given a linguistic license to be recognized as slang in the language. In the literature, several features have been attributed to slang.

Anderson and Trudgill (1990) provide a comprehensive list of the features of slang: it is typical of informal situations; it is found in the lexicon not in the grammar; it is not dialect, swearing, register, cant or jargon; it is creative and often short-lived, and so on.

Finally, there are a lot of reasons for which people use slangs (see Crystal, 1997 & Adamu, 2014). Some of those reasons include the following:

- To be different
- To be picturesque
- To reduce seriousness in speech or writing
- To induce intimacy among users
- To enrich the language
- To escape from clichés
- To catch fun
- To enhance easy communication
- To demonstrate a sense of belonging
- To be secretive

Methodology

The data analysed in this paper were obtained principally via researchers' observation and unstructured oral interviews. The observation was carried out by the researchers at football viewing centres, club houses and salons within the Ilorin metropolis. The conversations of the members of the social group (illiterate Yoruba youths and tertiary institution students whose native language is Yoruba) who used Yoruba slangs frequently were documented using a tape recorder. The observation spanned over a period of three months (February - April, 2017). Ten (10) participants (7 illiterate youths and 3 students) were randomly selected in the final month of the investigation for unstructured oral interview. Among other things, they were asked to explain the semantic technicalities enshrouding some of the slangs, as well as give reasons behind the choice of some slangy expressions in certain contexts of communication. Their responses were also tape recorded. All the recorded data were eventually extracted, translated and analysed using a descriptive approach within the context of three semantic modules: idiom, euphemism and paraphrase.

Data Presentation 'on Yoruba Slangs'

11. Mǎ á tẹ ojú yín mole
I will press eye your (pl) to-ground
'I will trample your eye under my foot' (literal meaning)
'I will insult you' (implied meaning)

12. Tẹ ẹ sójú ẹ
press it in-the-eye it
'Press it to the actual point' (literal meaning)
'Do it in the normal/right way' (implied meaning)
13. Mo fé jẹ ìgbín
I want eat snail
'I want to eat snail' (literal meaning)
'I want to have sex' (implied meaning)
14. Tìbẹ fún bọbọ yẹn jọọ
close-place for guy that please
'Close the place for that guy please' (literal meaning)
'Shun/ignore that guy please' (implied meaning)
15. Bọdẹ ti padà sí ọmọ yén lẹ
Bọdẹ has later open child that ground
'Bọdẹ has finally opened that child to the ground' (literal meaning)
'Bọdẹ has finally abandoned/divorced the girl' (implied meaning)
16. Mo ya dànù
I tear pour-away
'I tore away' (literal meaning)
'I haphazardly ran away' (implied meaning)
17. Mo gbé e ró
I carry it bend
'I carried it and bent it' (literal meaning)
'I hastily ran away' (implied meaning)
18. Mo ká a rílẹ
I roll (up) it from-the-ground
'I rolled it up from the ground' (literal meaning)
'I speedily ran away' (implied meaning)
19. Wálẹ na/to iṣẹ ọmọ yẹn
Wálẹ stretch/arrange work child that
'Wale stretched/arranged that child's work' (literal meaning)
'Wale wooed the girl' (implied meaning)
20. Bọbọ yẹn ti jẹgò
guy that has eat-bottle
'That guy has eaten bottle' (literal meaning)
'That guy has run into trouble' (implied meaning)

21. Bàbá Jídé ti fúndìí
father Jídé has close-buttocks
'Jide's father has closed his buttocks' (literal meaning)
'Jide's father has died' (implied meaning)
22. Èyìn ọmọ yẹn bad
back child that bad
'The back of that child is bad' (literal meaning)
'The girl's buttocks are big' (implied meaning)
23. O ò ní fẹ fi ata gígún lé tìròò
You neg will want use pepper ground paint antimony
'You will not want to use ground pepper in place of antimony' (literal meaning)
'You dare not do the impossible' (implied meaning)
24. O ò ní fẹ fi ọmọ-odó tayín
You neg will want use child-mortal pick-tooth
'You will not want to use a pestle as a tooth-pick (literal meaning)
'You dare not do the impossible (implied meaning)
25. O ò ní fẹ kirun lórí express
You neg will want perform-Salat on express
'You will not want to perform Salat on the express road (literal meaning)
'You dare not do the impossible' (implied meaning)

Data Analysis

From the data presented above, it could be deduced that the Yoruba slangs have a semantic structure which encompasses three inter-connected modules: idioms, euphemisms and paraphrases. With respect to idioms, it could be observed that all the slangy expressions presented are strictly idiomatic because their overall meaning cannot be construed on the basis of the intrinsic meanings of their component words. For instance, saying *Bọbọ yẹn ti jẹgò* 'That guy has eaten bottle' in example (20) is idiomatic as one would be wrong if one interprets it literally as given in the parentheses. This is because *jẹ* 'eat' and *ìgò* 'bottle' have been used in a sense that transcends their literal interpretation. Since eating a bottle connotes something dangerous or weird, the intended meaning of the expression is 'That guy has run into trouble'; hence, it is idiomatic. Something similar applies to the expression below:

26. Orí ẹ fọnká síbẹ
head your scatter there

- 'Your head is scattered there' (literal meaning)
- 'You are an expert' (implied meaning)

If one goes by the basic interpretation of the above expression, wrong meaning would be presupposed because its implied meaning has nothing to do with *orí* 'head' and *fọnká* 'scatter'. Thus, it is best to say that the expression is idiomatic.

Also in example (13), the transitive verb *jẹ* 'eat' and the nominal complement *ìgbín* 'snail' have meanings that do not contribute in any way to the intended meaning of the expression *Mo fẹjẹ ìgbín* which literally means 'I want to eat snail'. Because what is implied in the mind of the speaker of the expression is 'I want to have sex', it suffices to infer that the expression has an idiomatic meaning.

Furthermore, apart from the fact that the slangy utterances are idiomatic, it is also observed that they are euphemisms. This is because some of them are used to politely express certain ideas which would ordinarily be taboo in Yoruba language. For example, it is completely unethical in Yoruba culture for a younger person to warn an elderly person against being disrespected or insulted by literally saying: *E má jẹ kí n fí yín wọlẹ tàbí kàn yín lábíkù* 'Don't let me insult or disrespect you'. Rather, the speaker will make recourse to a permissible alternative in the form of slang below:

27. Ẹ má jẹ kí n gbéná wójú yín
You (pl) neg let that I carry-fire look-eye your
'Don't let me carry fire to look at your eye' (literal meaning)
'Don't let me disrespect/insult you' (implied meaning)

Though the above slang is idiomatic in itself, it has been used euphemistically in order to avoid being verbally rude to an elder. A similar scenario is witnessed in example (11) in the given data. Instead of telling an elderly person directly that 'I will insult you' with the statement *Mà á kàn yín lábíkù*, a younger Yoruba speaker would rather employ a slangy equivalent: *Mà á tẹ ojú yín mọlẹ*. To him/her, this latter expression is more polite than the former, bearing in mind that it is verbally impolite rendering the former to a Yoruba elder.

Also, it is a linguistic taboo in Yoruba culture to say *Mo fẹ ẹ ibáldpọ* 'I want to have sex' in the public, as it is strictly against the moral inclination of the people. A possible strategy that can be employed in avoiding this forbidden expression is using a euphemistic slang (as in example (13)): *Mo fẹ jẹ ìgbín*, which literally means 'I want to eat snail'. From oral interview, it was reported that *ìgbín* 'snail' in Yoruba slang stands for the female genital. Therefore, the custodians of this slang use *ìgbín* metaphorically as a result of the observable similarity between snail and the vagina. According to the

young Yoruba ladies interviewed, both resemble each other in two ways. One, the vagina has almost the same physiological shape as a snail, and two, as the vagina is always moistish, so also a snail. For this reason, the Yoruba version *òbò* 'vagina' is euphemized as *ìgbín* 'snail' in the expression *Mo fé je ìgbín* whose intended meaning is 'I want to have sex'. By implication therefore, sex is portrayed as food in the slang.

Moreover, it is unpleasant reporting the death of an elderly person literally by saying, for example, *Bàbá Jídé ti kú* 'Jidé's father is dead'. Alternatively, the younger generation of Yoruba speakers would use a slangy expression such as the one in example (21): *Bàbá Jídé ti fúndi*, literally meaning 'Jidé's father has closed his buttocks'. In this way, the unpleasantness inherent in the direct announcement of the death of a Yoruba elderly person is avoided using the slang. In essence, the slang is euphemistic.

Another example of how Yoruba slang is used as a euphemism is given below:

28. *Iwájú ọmọ yẹn gàzà*
front child that (meaningless)
'The front of that child is big' (literal meaning)
'The/That girl has big breasts' (implied meaning)

According to the users of the slangy expression in (28), the word *iwájú* 'front' represents the breasts (*ọyàn/ọmú*) of a lady. Therefore, instead of vulgarly saying that a lady has big breasts using the Yoruba expression *ọyàn/ọmú obìnrin yẹn tóbi* 'The breasts of that girl are big', a permissible alternative is employed to avoid being verbally unrefined as in example (28) above. What only sounds weird in this slang is the form *gàzà* which is not semantically coded in English but is attributed with a meaning known as 'big' by the users of the slang.

Finally, some of the Yoruba slangs are paraphrases of one another. For instance, examples (23), (24) and (25) roughly mean the same thing which is 'You dare not do the impossible' even though their literal meanings differ. The same semantic relation applies to examples (16), (17) and (18) despite having different literal interpretations. It is, however, important to point out that despite the paraphrase relation among these sets of slangs, one notices that they are mutually exclusive in terms of contextual usage. That is, while one may be considered appropriate in a particular context, the other may not, but may be preferable in another context. For instance, context of communication is the factor that will determine the expression to be selected from among the synonymous slangs in (29), (30) and (31). According to the male participants interviewed, example (29) is uttered in the face of danger or pandemonium; example (30) is preferred mostly when the speaker is

guilty of a crime and is being targeted for arrest at a place; whereas example (31) is the choice when the speaker is late for a particular appointment.

29. *Mo ya dànù* - 'I haphazardly ran away'
30. *Mo ká a ríṣẹ* - 'I speedily ran away'
31. *Mo gbé e ró* - 'I hastily ran away'

Although the manners of running away in the above utterances differ, it is still tenable to say that they convey the same message, i.e., taking to one's heels.

Discussion of Findings

Using idiomatic and euphemistic expressions basically illustrates the degree of semantic competence 'unconsciously' possessed by this group of language users. Even though the majority of them are uneducated let alone having any knowledge of semantics, they still have the semantic initiative of using slangy idioms and euphemisms to communicate, rather than using ordinary terms which might sound offensive or unpleasant in certain situations. It is logical to say, for instance, that the users of these slangs possess a cultural competence that certain lexical items or sentences are forbidden in the language and should therefore be alternatively expressed using euphemistic equivalents. For example, they substitute *òbò* 'vagina', *ọyàn* 'breast' and *ídí* 'buttock', which are taboo terms, with *ìgbín* 'snail', *iwájú* 'front' and *eyìn* 'back' respectively, as permissible alternatives.

Also, the speakers' innate knowledge of paraphrase relation is quite phenomenal. Knowing that the same idea can be communicated in different ways using slangs testify to their semantic intuition. Thus, the speakers make a choice from among the synonymous slangy expressions that is suitable for their contextual communicative need. This indeed corroborates the universal claim that language users, whether educated or not, have a perfect knowledge of their language, notwithstanding the flaws that occasionally surface in their linguistic performance.

Concluding Remarks

Recent survey reveals that the study of slangs has not enjoyed much research interest if relatively compared with other sociolinguistic fields such as language conflict, language shift, language choice, maintenance or endangerment, language planning and policy, multilingualism, among others. However, this paper has advocated the study of slang owing to the semantic intricacies that are enshrouded in the 'semanti-cultural' competence possessed by the younger generation of Yoruba language users. Although slangs are ephemeral linguistic expressions, they often give a language a 'new look' whenever they evolve. On the premise of this observation, this

paper hereby recommends that the Yoruba slangs currently in use be documented before they wear out or pave way for new ones in the language. Also, they should be made pedagogically relevant by teaching them to foreign learners of the language so as to furnish them with adequate knowledge about the informal aspect of Yoruba communication.

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Kru as Kru, Kru as Kwa, Kru as Kruan

John Victor Singler

Abstract

At various points across the past 250 years and leading to the present, there have been Kru mariners, crewmen on European ships; Krumen/Krooboys, migrant workers along the West African coast; the Kru/Klao ethnolinguistic group, one of sixteen recognized by the Liberian government; and Kru languages, a constituent of the Niger-Congo language family. Apart from three isolates, the Kru languages are spoken in southern and eastern Liberia and southwestern Côte d'Ivoire. Greenberg placed Kru languages within the Kwa branch of Niger-Congo but said that "the affiliation of Kru . . . to the Kwa group is to be considered tentative" (1966:39n). Beginning in the 1970's, a procession of scholars examining Greenberg's classificatory scheme have concurred that the Kru languages do not belong within Kwa. The post-Greenberg classifications from 1974 to 2000 divide as to whether Kru should be grouped with Gur (or Gur-Adamawa) or treated as a separate branch of its own, but they are in agreement that it should not be placed within Kwa. Nevertheless, Liberians and Liberianist social scientists—apart from linguists—continue to refer to the Kru languages spoken in Liberia as "Kwa."

To understand the persistent application of Kwa to languages that aren't Kwa, it is useful to examine the emergence of the term Kru in its various applications and then to consider how the status of an ethnolinguistic group was imposed upon the people who are called Kru today. Once that is done, it becomes possible to explore various explanations for the aberrant application of the term Kwa to Liberian languages. One explanation is inertia—or indifference. "Kwa" had become a term that includes Liberia's Kru languages, so why change it? A second is scholars' desire to link their own ethnic heritage to the groups of southern Nigeria, especially to Yoruba speakers. The third—and ultimately the argument that seems to carry the most weight—is that Liberians and Liberianists employ Kwa in order to obviate ambiguity between the language and ethnolinguistic group Kru and the larger set of Kru languages and their speakers. Ingemann (1973) proposes an alternative; however, Kwa continues to prevail, as illustrated by its recent use by, for example, Shellum (2016) and Ballah (2017).

1. Introduction

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