

SLANG AND MULTIPLE METHODS OF INTERPRETING SEX AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN THE NIGERIAN NOVEL

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Abstract

*Studies on the extent to which Nigerian novelists deploy slang expressions to navigate through the 'sacredness' of sex and sex related topics are yet to be undertaken. This silence is steeped in, first, cultural and religious paradigms where sex and sexual themes in the Nigerian sociocultural ambiance are considered taboo topics which are not to be discussed openly; and second, slang, within linguistic studies, is seen by many as an impolite and informal expression mainly used by deviant youths. This article investigates Nigerian novelists' use of slang in describing sex, sexual acts and identity. Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, Vincent Egbuson's *Love My Planet*, Abimbola Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* and Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain* are used as representative texts. The analysis indicates that, given the 'sacredness' attached to sex and sex-related issues, the sampled novelists deploy slang as euphemistic strategies to account for sex and sexual identity.*

Keywords: sex, sexuality, identity, culture, social norms

Introduction

For some decades now, studies on slang as an impolite and informal expression used and understood mainly by deviant youths have been the approach endorsed by many a scholar in linguistic discourse. While this is unjustifiable in the sense that slang is created and used by youths, it can also lead to unjustifiable negative conclusion about the category of people who use slang as well as the communicative functions slang can be put. Moreover, slang is one of the many linguistic strategies which Nigerian novelists deploy to capture the interconnectedness between language and social reality. This assertion is a furtherance of Griswold's claim that Nigerian novelists "...populate their novels...with a heterogeneous (and sometimes unlikely) cast of Nigerian characters, having their characters use slang expressions from several local languages..." (2000: 12). Griswold's claim, besides accentuating the fact that Nigerian novelists use slang as a linguistic modality, reveals a lingering gap in the study of slang: the fact that most studies on the use of language in Nigerian novels have not highlighted slang as discourse strategy deployed in the expression of sex and sexual identity. This silence is, of course, steeped in cultural and religious norms where sex and issues surrounding sexuality are not topics discussed openly.

The proclivity, therefore, of acknowledging and engaging the subject of sex and sexuality as it pertains to individuals' identity are near impossible, if not absent. The complexity and dynamism associated with the use of slang in terms of sexual discourse warrants a scholarly investigation since it is not only a means of communication, but a discourse strategy that opens a linguistic window into Nigerian novelists' use of language in dissecting sexually-oriented topics. Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (henceforth *Angels*), Vincent Egbuson's *Love My Planet* (henceforth *Planet*), Abimbola Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* (henceforth *Rusted Roofs*) and Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain* (henceforth *Arrows*) have been sampled for analysis.

Approaches to Slang

There are many different attempts to say what slang is or is not. The *World Book Encyclopedia*, for example, describes slang as "a special language used to describe ideas and things in a new and novel way, it may give standard words new meanings" (1992: 47). This definition tells us that slang is all about linguistic creativity i.e. inventing new meanings for existing words such that it explains old words with novel meaning (s). However, the *Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (1995) defines slang as "very informal words and expressions that are common in spoken language and are not thought suitable for formal situations". Implied in the definition above is the idea that slang evolves spontaneously. It is not a standard expression, but "very informal" expressions or words that discourse participants create in the process of interaction. This does not seem to be so because many slang terms are not only spoken expressions, but written. Moreover, Baugh and Cable argue that slang "is a peculiar kind of vagabond language" which as a matter of fact is "hanging on the outskirts

of legitimate speech” (1960: 87 cited in Babatunde & Folorunsho 2010: 134). On a similar thought, Babatunde & Folorunsho (2010: 134) aver that slang “is generally seen as a negative manifestation of language use”. While this article will neither derail into defending what is legitimate speech or illegitimate speech nor question the “negativity” that goes with the use of slang, it is important to stress that what is legitimate speech or “illegitimate speech,” or what is not “a negative manifestation of language” are not only relative and socially constructed, but can only be determined by the context of use.

The New Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language – International Version (1995) describes slang as:

n. currently widely used and understood language, consisting of new meanings attributed to existing words or of wholly new words, generally accepted as lying outside standard polite usage. Originating from the attempt to introduce fresh expression into language that is peculiar to a group, profession or social class...

Although the above definition also sees slang “as lying outside standard polite” language, it suggests that slang provides a creative and different way of saying what can be perfectly well said, and embodies a kind of social criticism, which in the process of providing new names for everyday concepts, also says something about them. The definition also sees slang as a language everyone, their age and profession notwithstanding, uses.

In their study of students’ academic slang, Arua & Alimi insist that the position of slang as “...a prominent language variety is no longer contested” (2009: 4). In corroborating Arua & Alimi’s views, Odebunmi (2010: 47) states, “slang is a variety of language that is restricted in terms of linguistic choices and speakers”. Odebunmi’s perspective bifurcates into two. One, slang is a variety of language not “an informal language,” and two, slang is a language that is used and understood by a speech community. Also suggested by Odebunmi’s position is the idea that any study on slang presupposes the existence of a community of practice whose members are a part of a larger culture or society. In a related opinion, Ijaiya (2010: 12) writes of how “slang can be subsumed under social dialects, because it is also generally used for group identification”. Ijaiya’s definition of slang accounts for the various ways people can expand the frontiers of language to cater for their communicative needs.

Slang is not an impolite expression but a language variety that can be used by anyone “who wants to convey an attitude that the use of standard language word cannot convey” (Eriksen 2010: 22). It, then, implies that slang is an “alternative” language whose use points to people’s willingness to be free; to use words or expressions that describe them and their daily existence in a meaningful and apt manner. To sustain the idea that slang is an impolite or deviant language rather than a language variety for group identification is to undermine language as “a functional code for expressing valued feelings, attitudes and loyalties” (Oni & Oke 2010: 145).

Findings and Discussion

The table below presents some sex-related slang, their sources and meaning in the novels under the consideration of this article.

Table 1: Sexual Slang

S/N	Slang	Contextual Meaning	Source	Novels
1.	A gun	A functional penis	War	<i>Angel</i> (p.162)
2.	Favoured customer	Sexual partner	Style	<i>Angel</i> (p.85)
3.	Power Platoon	Girls that are reserved	Military	<i>Arrows</i> (p.115)
4.	Disvirgin	for sex	Style	<i>Arrows</i> (p.116)
5.	Standby	To uncork a drink	Military	<i>Arrows</i> (p.160)
6.	Bush meat	Concubine	Nigerian English	<i>Arrows</i> (p.217)
7.	Major Penis	Ladies used as flings	Military	<i>Arrows</i> (p.158)
8.	Service	Perfect love maker	Technology	<i>Planet</i> (p.274)
9.	Servicing	To have sex	Technology	<i>Rusted Roofs</i> (p.42)
10.	Bearded snail	To have sex/Vagina	Culture	<i>Rusted Roofs</i> (p.194)

The slang expressions in the above table are used to describe male and female reproductive parts, the act of sex, the instruments of sex and females. Except for *disvigin*, *service* and *servicing* which are used as main verbs in the context of use, all the slang in this category are noun phrases. While the verbs describe sexual acts, the nominal slang functions as names which discourse participants use to identify sexual organs as well as negotiate their sexual identity in specific contexts. The slang terms are replete with pronominal features (she, he, her, him and I), weak modal verbs (would, could, etc.) and definite article (the), which all collaborate to indicate discourse participants' involvement and identification with the people addressed. They are, therefore, cultural, social, symbolic and discursive formations that structure and are equally structured by the communicative needs of speech communities.

Moreover, the majority of the slang expressions in the data are euphemistic ways of describing the act of sex. For instance, *service* (taken from *Planet* p. 274) and *servicing* (*Rusted Roofs* p. 42) are euphemistic descriptions of sexual acts. The euphemisms incarnate people's employment of indirectness when referring to sex. In Nigeria, as in most cultures of the world, sex is upheld as a sacred activity exclusively reserved for married people.

The sacredness of sex, which prompts indirect reference, is steeped in cultural moorings and religious beliefs. This is why, in a gossip between Sikira and Alake, both sex and sex organs are euphemized:

"What will happen? What if she gets pregnant?"

"They will know at least I was not the one that slept with her, so why will they bother with me? Look, if she wants to pay for the way he is 'servicing' her, it is her problem. You don't stop a young girl from growing a large vagina, so far she can grow enough hair to cover it. If you tell those young girls not to fuck now, they grow restless."

"Doesn't she know she can get pregnant?"

"What's my business? They said what does not fill a woman's eye will eventually fill her tummy... (*Rusted Roofs*, p. 42)

Servicing, as used by Sikira, indicates the proliferation of terms available to denote the same referent by the women's evaluation of the various alternative ways, both positive and negative. The slang, in its progressive tense form, invokes familiar characteristics of slang as a lexicon associated with taboo topics. But the interaction is also an act in the construction of identity. Sikira's use of the innovative term, *servicing*, constitutes a layer of identity construction. By drawing on the cultural notion of sex as a reserve for the married, Sikira and Alake are able to position themselves as adults in contrast to teenagers, Rafiu and Mulika, and particularly as adults who are familiar with the lexicon of sexual acts. The identity formation is to differentiate themselves from teenagers who are not knowledgeable enough to participate in sexual acts.

The question is: does one have to be knowledgeable about sex? From the Yoruba cultural background of the discourse participants, if one is not knowledgeable about sexual acts, it will result in unwanted pregnancy. This position is inferred from Alake's question: "Doesn't she [Mulika] know she can get pregnant?" (p. 42). Moreover, the adverb "now" clarifies that sex requires time, and "those young girls" are admonished to stay away from sex until they are married. The younger generation's impatience angers Sikira: the reason for her dysphemistic choice *vagina*, and the demeaning term *fuck*. Both Sikira and Alake invariably uphold the idea that sex is an exclusive reserve of adults.

In the next example taken from *Arrows*, Iyese uses a slang term to negotiate her sexual identity. She tells Ogugua:

'He raped me twice that night. When I threatened to report his unfaithfulness to his wife he laughed and said that his religion entitled him to four wives and any number of concubines. I became his stand by; whenever his wife went away he called me to warm his bed. Then three months ago he told me he had three daughters by two other women, but that he planned to marry any woman who gave him a son. I told him of my childlessness and he stopped coming around – until today.'
'You bore him a grudge, then? You felt he deserted you?'

'Deserted? No! I was relieved. I had tried to break off our relationship once before.'

'And?'

She laughed. 'He slapped me until my eyes saw lightening. Then he raped me, laughing' (*Arrows*, p. 160).

Standby is a noun that describes a state of readiness to act. In the context of the novel, however, the lexical item is used as slang, and its meaning extended to include a sexual partner who is only needed to warm Major Isa's bed when his wife is away. The time frame captured in the adverbial, *when*, and the noun clause, *whenever his wife went away*, brings out the depth of the meaning of *standby*: a sexual act that happens at calculated intervals, thereby reducing Iyese to a mere object that is used to satisfy a man's sexual urge. The slang, a common military term, is used in the discourse situation because the performer of the sexual act is a military officer. In other words, there is a symbolic conjunction between the act and the actor: the slang *expresses* the social identity of the referent. The slang, as used by Iyese, entails two discursive maneuvers, which requires some explication: first, it is resistant in the sense that she expresses a willingness to reconstruct her identity; and second, a corollary of the first, her self-identification triggers her questioning of Major Isa's transgression of her sexuality. Interestingly, Iyese understands the derogatory depth of the slang and her rejection of being a *standby*, someone who is only needed to satisfy a man's sexual urge, informs her rejection of such a demeaning sexual identity. There is a strong urge to reconstruct self, and to be free from the oppressive masculinity worldview.

It is also very important for us to look at the expression *he laughed and said that his religion entitled him to four wives and any number of concubines* vis-à-vis sexual practices and religion in the Nigerian context. Although slang is not her area of concentration, Azuah in her article, "Culture, Sexuality and Taboo in Nigeria," draws the attention of her reader to how religion provides the background for the sexual suppression of women. In her words, she writes "religious laws also dictate, define and limit sexuality". So even when Iyese threatens to intimate Major Isa's wife of her husband's extra-marital affairs, he only laughs, as he and his wife operate within a religious background that allows the man to oppress his wife sexually. This is an explication of how social norms inform identity construction: people's linguistic construction of sexual identity eminently derives its impetus from cultural practices.

In most cultures of the world, except when used by adults, the act of sex is an unmentionable thing: it is a taboo to speak of sex in its real sense. It is the ideology of "unmentionability" which is embedded in the cultural ethos of most cultures that triggers Lomba's discursive strategy when a sex worker asks him for sex:

The girl is pulling at Lomba's arm, impatiently now. 'I get room behind.

Make we go.' (I have a room behind. Let us go there.)

'No,' he says.

She pouts. 'You no like me?' (You do not like me?)

He shakes his head. The news has left him confused. 'I like you...but I am impotent,' he says at last, 'I don't have a gun' (*Angel*, pp.161-2).

Lomba and his boss, James Fiki, were trying to escape from Abacha's killer-squad when they met Gladys in a bar. When the sex worker, Gladys, demonstrates desperation to have sex with Lomba, he conceives sex as war. *Gun*, used as slang, refers to the male organ. It presupposes that the male organ works in the same manner as the gun i.e. it can load a bullet and shoot at its target. In Lomba's case, he has the bullet (his male organ) but not the gun (a penis that has been rendered impotent by the prevailing circumstance of military hegemony). Thus, even when Lomba admits that he likes Gladys, he would not go to *war* with her without *a functional gun*. More importantly, Lomba's inability to *express* his manliness, to contest his sexual identity ends up questioning his self identity. As already highlighted in this article, sex and sex-related topics are taboo topics, more especially for women. Women are not expected to demand sex from men even when there is the strong urge to do so. Gladys' "unrestricted" *expression of her sexuality* – eagerness to have sex with Lomba – is simply tied to her personal identity – a sex worker.

However, in *Rusted Roofs* (p.194), *bearded snail*, an idiom that functions in a euphemistic way to refer to the vagina, is used to conceal the meaning of the referent. The slang is capable of

differentiating social belonging, as it is an expression that is only known to adults. This is why after listening to this song:

*It was in Lagos that I learnt to eat bearded snail.
With my banana, I eat bearded snail.*

A boy who does not know the meaning of *bearded snail* is forced to ask his mother:

“*Moomi*,” a boy tugged at his mother’s cloth, “What is bearded snail?” (p. 194)

The little boy’s inability to interpret the meaning of *bearded snail* strategically removes him from the sexual discourse. Implicitly, the use of *bearded snail*, even *banana*, categorises the discourse participants into two groups: the older generation who are familiar with the lexicon of sex and sexual organs and the younger generation who are “inexperienced” with the lexicon of sex and sexual organs.

Both Alhaji’s (the boy’s father’s) response: “*I don’t know what the world is coming to. Then, if this is the kind of music that sells in Lagos, then Lagos people know nothing about music* (p. 194), and the singer’s lexical choices – *bearded snail* (vagina) and *banana* (penis) – can hardly be differentiated from “the mystery that is wrapped around the theme of sex” which, by and large, “discourages any form of openness towards sex and sexuality generally” (Azuah 2013). More importantly, the slang exposes how the cultural practices of a people intercept with their linguistic choices. It must be stressed here that in the Nigerian sociolinguistic context, as can be inferred from the excerpts above, sex and sexuality is shaped and socially constructed sociocultural entities and concepts. One is considered uncultured, ill-trained and lacking in manners if one describes or talks about sex openly. This is why Motara cannot hide her discontent as she wonders: “*It is the alufansa talk that worries me. How can someone be talking about the matter of the penis and the vagina like that?*” (p. 194). *Alufunsa* is a Yoruba word for rubbish talk. Its use (*alufunsa*) magnifies the sacredness attached to sex and sex-related issues as well as condemns the singer’s direct reference to sex and sex organs. This, in a way, enacts the notion that identity emerges in the context of interaction along linguistic practices and cultural norms.

In *Arrows*, there is an explicit sexification of drink, through the slang *disvirgin*, in:
A few seconds later the servant handed Ata an unopened bottle of Hennessy.
The minister passed it to me.
‘Disvirgin it,’ he said to me. ‘It’s all yours.’
‘A full bottle of cognac for me? I am not really much of a drinker, sir.’
‘Hah! You’re the first journalist I’ve met who frets before alcohol. As for me, I really like my cognac,’ boasted the minister.
‘I can see.’
‘And I like cigars’.
‘I guess they go well with cognac,’ I said.
‘Absolutely. And I love women.’ He paused. ‘Beautiful women, of course.’
(*Arrows*, p. 116)

Even when the slang term is used to mean to uncork a drink, it has a meta-meaning that can only be explicated when the sociocultural context of the speakers is taken into consideration. It explains how human activities are sexified. To *disvirgin* a drink, perhaps is like having sexual intercourse with a virgin. From the above conversation, it can be tracked that the minister, Reuben, has sex and women in mind when he tells his guest, the journalist, to “disvirgin” the drink. Moreover, the slang term does not only open a linguistic window into the identity of the user, Reuben, a promiscuous top government functionary who has a reserve of *power platoon* (a group of thirty girls solely reserved to provide sexual satisfaction to top government officials), but also an expression of the oppressive patriarchal subjectivities and ideologies that try to construct a sense of what is normal for women in the Nigerian context. While the Nigerian sociocultural linguistic milieu forbids women to openly discourse sex, their male counterparts are at liberty to do so. In this case, the patriarchal order “hinders” the Nigerian woman from *expressing* her sexual identity.

However, the slang *favoured customer* as used in Habila’s *Angel* shows Lomba’s sympathetic gesture at a woman who is compelled by harsh economic realities to indulge in the commercialisation

of sex. Lomba tells his readers:

... She sold *ogogoro* (local gin) and whisky. Her loud and quarrelsome customers were a trial to me in the nights when I sat down to write. Sometimes a favoured customer would stay behind after the others had left, and deep into the night when I sat down to write, her exaggerated moans and the creaking of the bed beneath them were sore trials to me (*Angel*, p. 85).

From the above excerpt, expressions such as *favoured customer*, *her exaggerated moans* and *the creaking of the bed beneath them* all signify sexual intercourse. While these indirect significations to sex characterise the linguistic behaviour of many a Nigerian user of language in relation to sex and sex-related topics, hidden in the slang is Lomba's warm identification with a nameless woman who because of unavoidable circumstances keeps *favoured customers* in order to earn a living. By not naming the woman, the effect of her promiscuous behaviour is weakened. In other words, the use of *favoured customer* is semantically loaded: it is neither condemnatory nor chauvinistic as in the preceding example. Rather, it expresses Lomba's solidarity, as the slang has an associative move of involvement and understanding of the woman's predicament. Invariably, the woman is encouraged to keep as many as possible *favoured customers*, as Lomba himself becomes a *favoured customer*. He says:

When I returned to the tenement house, she was there by the door. I almost passed her like I always did, but her voice stopped me. 'You no go come inside?' (Won't you come in?)

I looked at her wise, wise eyes, then I went in. I sat down on the rumpled bed. The warmth of the bed rose up like welcoming arms and hugged me (p. 89).

It seems clear why Lomba's slangy description of the unnamed woman is mild for "...there is a tendency to keep a minimum intra- or ingroup differences, and to exaggerate inter- or outgroup differences" (Matu & Lubbe 2007: 406). Also worthy of note is Lomba's refusal to name the woman. Being without a name does not pin her to any form of identity, because "Names and other terms of address often serve as a means of expressing feelings, and they can run the whole gamut from love to hatred" (Windt-Val 2012: 278). The non-assignment of name, therefore, articulates Lomba's positive emotion as well as affiliation with the woman. In other words, there is no condemnation of the woman's sexual identity.

Conclusion

As hitherto purported, the analysis shows that slang is not constitutively a deviant language. Rather, slang is a functional language that is created to satisfy the communicative needs of a speech community. It is also revealed that some slang demonstrate the euphemization of language by speech communities of vices or taboo expressions by tagging those taboo expressions with less offensive or more pleasant expressions. Thus, slang illustrates the ways users of language capture their experiences in line with social and cultural norms. Slang, then, becomes carriers of more than one pieces of information about people's sex and sexual identity, offering inexplicable glimpses into practices that surround sex and sexuality in the Nigerian context. The study of slang, therefore, requires multiple methods of interpretation, because neither the social nor the linguistic meaning of slang is fixed and determinate; and what counts as slang, or even as a discourse strategy, can only be negotiated in discourse.

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