ISSUES IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEVELS: THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIABLES IN THE SPEECH OF PORT-HARCOURT STREET GANGS

By

Prof. (Mrs.) Dolly Chinwe Ekpunobi

Email: dchinweekpunobi@gmail.com

08033905956

And

Sunday Ojonugwa Joseph

Email: ugwa4christ70@yahoo.com

08067223608

Abstract

It is increasingly apparent from study such as this that individuals exercise a considerable degree of choice whether conscious or subconscious over the linguistic variables or forms they use in their daily speech, within the constraint imposed by intelligibility considerations. These choices can make an essential contribution to the indexing of personal stance, identity, and communicative function. The freedom which the speakers have to define, use, change and move between different identity based sociolects starkly shows the pitfalls which sociolinguists risk by failing to take social variation into account when postulating functional explanation for patterns that may exist in standard variety. This paper seeks to find out how Port Harcourt Street gangs construct their social identity at all levels of language: phonetic, phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax. It also seeks to identify some of their linguistic behaviours and peculiarities such as specific forms of salutations, and other common fixed phrases. They often shift away from the society model in favour of high usage of nonstandard linguistic forms which result in new and typologically marked patterns. The paper will among other issues find out the nonstandard usage of linguistic variables or forms occasioned by the ideological objectives of the groups to which the street gangs belong and the implication of such belonging. The work recommends that there should be a scientific collection of these linguistic variables and that they should be added in the list of (English) vocabulary as a distinct form of language level in a second language situation.

Introduction

> *Generally speaking, the more central the place of an individual in a group, the stronger their adherence to the group's norms of behaviour and the greater the normative influence of linguistic variables or forms, associated with that group (Foulkes, Scobbie and Watt, 709).*

In childhood, lifestyle is dominated by the family pattern of norms and behaviours. Children receive the bulk of their linguistic input from the immediate family and they conform broadly to the norms of the input model(s). Research has proved that, there is a close correlation of linguistic forms of children between 2 to 4 year old and that of their immediate family. Linguistic choices are viewed as one

type of symbolic resource in the construction and maintenance of social identity. Buchoitz (98-99) demonstrates that "nerd" (students who consciously adopt an "uncool" identity) differentiate themselves from their peers through various social practices including phonetic and linguistic choices.

Linguists generally believe that speech is crucial in a number of social activities, including socialization and it is hardly necessary to stress the general importance of speech in social life. Speech according to Hudson allows us to communicate with each other at a much more sophisticated level than would otherwise be possible, and since communication is a social activity, it could be said that speech is social (106). But, if speech is mapped to a particular social group speaking now depends on a variety of factors, including a knowledge of the relevant rules governing that particular social group. Such rules are of various types, dealing with different aspects of speech and the rules chosen by members of the group or gang vary which makes it easier to see themselves as one and communicate within the contexts of their operational principles. Hymes (72) confirms this assertion when he says that, every language seems to have linguistic items that reflect social characteristics of the speaker, of the addressee or of the relation between them. Consequently, speech which contains such items tells a hearer how the speaker sees these characteristics, and misuse constitutes a violation of the norms that govern the speech.

The general and basic assumption here is that, language users adapt the properties of their language use such as intonation, lexical choice, syntax and other aspects of formulation to the current communicative situation. In this sense, language use may be called more or less, 'appropriate' in a given context. This explanation disposes of the problem of linguistic insecurity, but raises another question: "why don't all people speak in the way that they obviously believe they should" (Labov, 249). Hudson confirms this when hey says that:

> *A language prejudice is a characteristic which we expect people to have because of the way they speak, and the link between the speech and this characteristic lies through the type of person that (we think) speaks like that. An ideal world would presumably be free of all prejudice, whatever its*

> *basis, but it is important to remember that prejudices are a negative by-product of a much more positive mental process, the ability to form concepts by associating characteristics even where the associations have exceptions (208).*

The strength of social networks that binds members of the association or gang may be affected by a number of factors such as differences in geographical mobility as the nonstandard usage of core members will be relatively similar across the gangs, and considerably higher than that for peripheral associates of either gang (Britain, 97). Network strength and structure interact in complex ways with the more conventional demographic categories typically employed in sociolinguistic research.

Sociolinguistic variables

Lyons (267) defines sociolinguistics as a study of language in relation to society. And variable according to Hudson, is a collection of alternatives which have something in common; a set of alternative ways of saying the same thing, although the alternatives will have social significance (169). If these two concepts are married together, it will be defined as a linguistic feature which varies in its use by different social groups. With this, it is obvious that certain sociolinguistic variables or forms are treated, consciously or unconsciously, as socially diagnostic, meaning that, members of society make an association (conscious or unconscious) between the use of such a variable by a speaker and the social group to which the speaker using that variable or linguistic form belongs. According to Selkirk (1), most socially diagnostic linguistic variables among some of these social groups especially the Port-Harcourt street gangs are associated with lack of prestige.

The properties of social markers in sociolinguistic variables

1. Social stereotype

There seem to be two properties identifying linguistic features that constitute what Selkirt (12) refers to as social stereotypes. According to him these are "A language feature that speakers are aware of and comment on". Some features may be deemed prestigious and/or pretentious, e.g. the pronunciation of

vase with the same vowel as in ***father***. Other example are the use of negative features and stigmatization; they draw overt comment by teachers, etc, and are associated with lower class speech. The examples are:

ain't

1. They are all dead now, in one way or another, if they ain't found us.
2. The cards probably ain't in order, but help yourself.
3. I ain't even had a bath in more than a week!
4. Ain't going to ask how I answered?
5. You ain't running unopposed to more
6. It ain't the white whale to day!
7. Besides, I ain't insured
8. If that ain't bum luck
9. But there ain't no bus
10. Ain't ganna be any name for here on.

Double negative

The term double negative is used to refer to the use of two words of negative in a single statement. These two negative elements typically cancel each other out, making the statement positive. A double negative is formed by using "not" with a verb, and also using a negative pronoun or adverb.

Example:

I don't want nothing –

She didn't see nothing

He is not unattractive

I am not uncaring

I went there without no reason

I don't have nothing

They won't do you no good

I can't find key no where

She never goes with nobody

You can't see no one in this congregation

John says he has not seen neither Alice or Susan all day.

Lack of third person singular on the verb

1. He become very sad
2. He kill the goose
3. The boy get angry always
4. He teach us mathematics

A language feature that shows sharp ***social stratification*** (e.g. sharp class differences) in their use e.g. the complete absence of the 3rd person – s/es.

The above statements show that the speaker committed an error by the omission of 's' inflection from the third person singular verb in their attempt to make the verb agree with the singular subject like "he kill…" and "he become…".

2. Social Marker

Selkirt further identifies a ***social marker*** as "A linguistic feature whose usage correlates both with social group and with speech style: ***Speakers are aware of each forms and their group associations but do not comment overtly on them***". Example, variation in the of – in'l–ing in speech. Another property of social markers is that they show a ***gradient social stratification***, in other words no sharp distinction among classes in their usage. These social markers show variation across different styles of speech.

3. Social Indicator

Selkirt suggests there is a third sort of socially diagnostic linguistic feature which ***correlates with social stratification or social group, but which shows no variation across different styles of speaking***. They call these ***social indicators***. Speakers do not seem to be aware of such forms and make no overt comment on them. Examples of certain aspects of the Northern shift. ***Ben*** pronounced as ***bun***, ***busses*** pronounced as ***bosses***. But the "flat a" in ***mat, Kathy, black, laugh, that***, seems by contrast, to be a social

marker; it is commenced on as a part of the speech of the area, and tended to be avoided by the upper and upper middle class.

Sociolinguistic variables used by Port-Harcourt Street Boys at all levels of language (phonetic, phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax) at which the variables are different.

1. Phonetic variables

Phonetic variability is associated with particular interactional, grammatical and lexical systems useful for and used in speech understanding. According to Hudson (170), phonetic variables occur where the same phonological pattern has different phonetic realizations. The examples abound in the literature. For example, the English phoneme |t| has a range of alternative pronunciations (gottal stop, an r–like flap, a d–like tap, alveolar stop, alveolar aspirate with an s–like ending and so on), all of which count as pronunciations of the same phoneme.

A careful auditory analysis of Port-Harcourt street gangs' speeches revealed that, there is a resurgent use of the traditional stops |t| and |d| (for |θ| and |∂| respectively) by members of the different street gangs studied.

Some of the examples of phonetic variability among Port-Harcourt Street gangs are:

Standard	**Nonstandard**
Weather	Welter
Tear	There
Three	Trees
Tan	Thank
Those	Toes
Thick	Tick
Tank	Thank
Thin	Tin

Ten	Then
With	Wit
Leather	Letter
Path	Pat

Phonetic variation seems in general to be more sensitive to social group and social differences than grammar and vocabulary, so we make a distinction between versions on language particularly English language. This enables the researchers to distinguish between the standard and nonstandard phonetic variations, while making separate statements about pronunciation in terms standard-nonstandard, because, phonetic and other items play different roles in the individual's acts of identity to which we referred above.

2. Phonological variations

Phonological variability among the street gangs of Port-Harcourt is obvious and prevalent. This happens when the same lexical item has alternative phonological structures. Variation occurs when changes affect some varieties of a language but not others, or affect different varieties to different degrees. The varieties affected may or may not include the standard. Among Port – Harcourt street boys, word – final consonant cluster are simplified by deleting a coronal stop, e.g. cost me – cos' me, get him – ge' him. Other phonological variation examples abound in the following concepts:

1. – Sound shifts (one sound replaces another) e.g. |⊃| to |a| (box).
2. – deletion e.g. loss of |h| is some of the street boy's dialects.
3. – Insertion (sound added) e.g. girl 'g3:l| to girlu – |g3:lu|.
3. – Assimilation (devoicing of voiced sound such as plosives or fricatives) e.g. big tale, wide trousers, live performance.

We can interprete phonological variation that exists in the speech of gangs in terms of the model of acts of identity in much the same as for dialect differences. Each time we speak or write, we not only

locate ourselves in relation to the rest of society to which we belong, but we also relate our act of communication itself to a complex classificatory scheme of communicative behaviour as exemplified above.

3. Morphological variation

Morphological variation occurs where the same lexical item has alternative morphological structures. These certainly exist among the Port-Harcourt street boys as well, as witness well-known examples like the presence or absence of the suffix – s on present – tense verbs. These street boys form unnecessary plural verbs from singular verbs. The morphological variation developed by these members a street gang helps protect them from law enforcement invasion and also the ripping them off by non-members. Gangs have their own language, using morphological structures to represent who they are and to show their way of life including their appearance in public places using 'gang related signs, signals and other expressions that do not share affiliation with the Standard English'.

Some of the examples of morphological variation that abound in the speech of the Port-Harcourt Street gangs are:

Unnecessary pluralization

Blacks – More than 1 policeman

Sheeps – More than 1 girl

Informations – Too many foods at a time

4. Lexical variation

This type of variation is prevalent among street gangs. This variation is tied to specific meanings which are unlikely to be expressed over and over by a non-gang member. Members of this gang are known bilinguals as they can freely express themselves in their own "set apart" language and the language of their immediate community; they posses the ability to press the two languages into effective

service as lexical variables are particularly essential commodities in distinguishing register, as ***salt*** and ***get*** represent as alternatives to sodium chloride and obtain (Hudson, 171).

The examples of lexical variation under WORD are:

Nonstandard (street gang)	**Standard**
Biscuit	Gun
Crab	Disease
Elbow	Drugs
Queen	Female
Racking	Stealing
Stacks	Symbols
Uryting	Killing
Slippin	Disgrace
Banging	Fighting

The examples of lexical variation under PHRASE are:

Nonstandard (street gang)	**Standard**
On point	getting ready to fight
Back up	to shoplift
All is one	a salutation
Jumped in	an initiation
Fat Boris	organization of members
Drinking milk	killing of a river gang

All languages change over time and vary according to place and social setting. We can observe lexical variation – differences in words and phrases – by social groups. Despite the belief that level or version words are no longer widely used, there remains a great deal of lexical diversity among users of these levels of English particularly street gangs.

Syntactic variation

Linguists who analyse syntactic variables of street gangs have often commented on the challenge that it poses for conventional analysis of syntactic structure because it is fundamentally misconceived (Crystal, 166). This is done where the same meaning can be expressed by two different lexical syntactic functions or structures. As in the case of lexical variables, there are clear and agreed examples, but there is also a great deal of uncertainty (Milroy, 150). These are clearly alternative syntactic ways of expressing the same meaning, because syntax has rich synonymous constructions. He further said that,

> *Pursuing this 'social' comparison of the major divisions of language, there is no evidence for the view that syntax is more resistant to variation that either morphology or vocabulary. But it is certainly the case that examples of syntactic differences within a variety are much less frequently quoted in literature than differences in either pronunciation or morphology.*

The examples of syntactic variation are:

Nonstandard (Street gang)	**Standard**
Didn't nobody see it	Nobody saw it
The sheep cornered me	The lady laughed at me
Can we wakk?	Can we eat?

The Street Gangs

The gang is a group of recurrently associating individuals or close friends or family with identifiable leadership and internal organization, identifying with or claiming control over territory in a community, and engaging either individually or collectively in violent or illegal behaviour. Though, in early usage, the word gang referred to a group of workmen. In the United Kingdom, the word is still often used in this sense, but is later underwent pejoration, but the current usage typically denotes a criminal organization or else a criminal affiliation (John, 20). The word gang often carries a negative connotation;

however, within a gang which defines itself in opposition to mainstream norms, members may adopt the phrase as a statement of identity or defiance. They go about creating new lexemes that are mainly used and understood by the generality of the members (Mike, 40). Many types of gangs make up the general structure of an organized group. According to Miller (92), street gangs are people with similar behavioural backgrounds and motivations. He further said that "street gangs is a self-formed association of peers, united by mutual interests with identifiable leadership and internal organization, who act collectively or as individuals to achieve specific purpose with the use of learned linguistic variables as may be considered fit and accepted by the generality of the members". According to O'Dean, Matthew (8), gang membership is generally maintained by gangs as a life time commitment, reinforced through identification such as tattoos, and insured through intimidation and cohesion. Gang defectors are often subject to retaliation from the deserted gang as they believe that, the only way one could leave the group is through death.

Street Gangs and the Social Change

Extant literature on the subject has usually defined street gangs as loose associations of individuals engaged in some type of delinquent or criminal activity. Yet researchers have failed to sociologically differentiate street gangs from other types of collective behaviour. But this work understands street gangs as organizations influenced by the social structure of the urban areas in which they operate. On the other hand, social change is the alteration of mechanisms within the social structure, characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behaviour, social organizations, or value systems.

Street Gangs and the Linguistic variability

The street gangs arise from a specific set of circumstances, a particular configuration of social, institutional, economic and political contexts with high degree of extremism in their actions and they result in consequences that affect all people, have their own language to represent who they are and to

show their social identity, constrict list of vocabularies understood by all members and strange to a non-member. Most times, they make hand symbols, and sometimes gang members talk to each other using just symbols. This is known as 'staking' (Jab, 72). And in other cases, a word may have more than one slang translation, such as gun. A generic gun according to Dailer, (24), becomes a 'biscuit', or a 'gat'. Recently, the researchers interviewed a member of one of the gangs on the streets of Port-Harcourt on why they speak the way they speak, he responded that, when he joined the group as a young man, his gang always chose a designated grammarian before they hit the streets. He further said that, their mission is to loot, harass and destabilize neigbourhood with impeccable linguistic variables that have significant bearing to all the members of the gang. He described all members of the gang as extremists, people who are able to stire a destructive ship who mostly use double negative everywhere. For example, a gut–wrenching penchant for the use of slang over the standard variation. These slangs they develop help protect them from law enforcement and they don't want other criminals ripping them off.

According to Dowe (34), some of the slangs regularly used during their operation and their meanings are:

Adidas:	All days I Destroy a slob – a slogan worn on t–shirts as a boast to their rivals, the bloods, who they are.
Discount	What the Bloods call Crips, referring to crabs of the sexually transmitted variety.
Drinking milk:	Used by Crips term to mean targeting or killing a rival.
Elbow:	A pound (lb) of drugs.
Fat Boris:	A term used to organize members
Jumped in:	An initiation beating usually organized for newly initiated members
Lapping:	Hanging out under a street – light, usually where drugs are sold.

Nicked:	A variable meaning five years in prison, a badge of honour among gang members as it indicates incarceration for a serious crime.
On point:	Getting ready to fight.
Picasso:	As in; He is so good with a knife, he will do a Picasso on you. The mark of a serious slashing is also called a 'buck fifty' meaning at least 150 stitches.
Queen:	A linguistic term meaning a female member of the gang.
Back:	To shoplift.
Stack:	Communicating using only slang and hand symbols.
Urgt:	To kill or bury a body
All is one:	A gang member greeting a gang member.
Five in the sky Six must Die:	A term to mean that one person must die.
Slipping:	A gang member letting his guard down.
Og:	Original gangster.
Banging:	Gang fighting/shooting.
S.O.S:	Shoot on sight.
B.O.S.	Beat on sight
T.O.S.	Terminate on sight.

From the above, we can crystally see the nature of linguistic variation that exits among members of the street gangs. These terms, slang and graffiti/tattoos vary from set to set, from nation to nation, and geographically with commonly identifiable signs, symbols, clothing items or styles of dress, colors, alphabets and traditions.

Speech according to Aitchison (91), is not only used to convey messages, that with speech we signal our identities and groups belongings. He further stressed that, with spoken language, we create boundaries to other people who do not speak like us, or toward people we do not want to sound like, for whatever reason.

This segregating function of spoken language virtually exists in all speech communities, and the cause are largely social. People normal form groups, both temporary and long – lasting ones, large and

small, one of such social groups is the street gang that forces all her members to maintain in group specific linguistic behaviours such as specific forms of salutations and other fixed phrases, common technical terminology, peculiar pronunciation of certain words, and whatever else. Their specific peculiarities/ variations further, are part of what define the street gang also known as deviant group which enforces the groups identity and signals such identity towards a non member.

The implication of this speech variation on the speech community

The use of non – standard language varieties in the society with special reference to the language of the Port Harcourt street gangs is conceived against the background that the variety developed and used by the street gangs is not accommodated in the environment. This is because of its non – conformity with the social values and norms of society.

Hudson (33) indicates that, non – standard varieties differ from standard in their manner of acquisition and their specialized functional roles. Non – standard varieties are learned as first language at home, through intensive everyday contacts. Street gangs' speech/language is distinguished from acceptable standard on the basis that it is unlike the standard variety. The street gangs language is different from other varieties that exist in the society including the standard because it defers in terms of grammatical form/vocabulary. The street gangs display some grammatical forms and some terms of vocabulary which usually shift away from the society models in favour of high usage of nonstandard linguistic form which resound in new and typologically marked patterns.

Widdowson (94), describes this aptly:

- In addition to national variation, English has sub-groups. One of these is the street gangs who are alike in education or social standing. Features of pronunciation and grammar are used to link

members together as members of the same social group and are part of the social identity of the members.

- English can also be analysed into subsets based on the language of particular types of communication discourse types. The language of applied linguistic. For examples, or of the street gangs. Generally, these types are identified with specialized vocabulary.
- English can also differ depending on whether if is written or spoken. We teach and help learners learn to use language appropriate to the communication setting.
- An analytical system with just two categories… standard vs nonstandard helps us very little in specifying the many different sub-grouping of English based on features of vocabulary/pronunciation/grammar used by members of identifiable social sub-groups.
- Finally, as students of English language, we recognize that, no single feature of grammar or vocabulary or pronunciation is the defining characteristics of any version would include sets and cluster of features.

The effects of this speech variation

- The negative implication of different levels or version of English is that, it gives the speakers a sense of belonging to a unit. What this means is that, members receive a sense of identity and recognition from being in a gang. The levels/version of language they use sets them apart from their peers and gives them a sense of power and success, they look to other gang members who share the same linguistic affiliations with them as people who will pay attention to them.
- Crime language plays a big role in gangs. Most gangs related crimes are committed between members of opposing gangs whose ways of communication differs from their own, another innocent citizens are often hit by stray bullets. They may also be victims of gang crimes such as robbery, burglary, and

auto theft. They participate in all crime activities with their graffiti ways of communication, either for personal or economic gains, for revenge against another gang or out of hate for the victim.

- Based on the observation during this research, it was observed that Port Harcourt street gangs use graffiti to advitise its existence and its claim on a particular territory. His panic gangs are known for display and the most sophisticated and artful graffiti.
- It was also observed that their writing is often in block letters or in something similar to Old English. Black gangs prefer graffiti that is spray painted or written in either red or blue.

According to Kinnear (96), graffiti and throwing signs are forms of argot used within and between gangs. So, certain words gang members use, each often unique to the group of which they belong.

Finally, understanding how gangs members communicate, allows us to understand what they are communicating. For example, if a gang member's name/Moniker is painted on a wall and is later crossed out, may be danger from another gang. Likewise, if the number 187 is used, it may be communicating in formation about a murder (the number "187" is the California State Panel Code number for murder.

Conclusions

This work has surveyed what has probably been the main growing point in sociolinguistics, which is 'quantitative sociolinguistics'. The central notion is the sociolinguistic variable, a list of alternative forms which are alternative ways of expressing the same content and which are chosen according to how well they fit the sociolinguistic context rather than how well they fit the intended meaning.

The researchers have discussed how sociolinguistic variables of the Port Harcourt street gangs are sensitive to the degree to which the gangs belong to a particular social network or group. This determine the extent they accommodate their linguistic peculiarities no matter the informality or formality of the situation.

From the foregoing, therefore, it was found that language played a pivotal role in the coordination and sustainability of the gangs. It was observed that, gangs communicated using signs and graffiti that only the members understood. This is because many speech phenomena are learned and used as part of the construction of social identity, making sociolinguistics a key to variation sciences. It is therefore important to note that this is a distinct level in language use which should be explored further.

Recommendations

It is obvious that street gangs have their own language to represent who they are and to show their identity, there should be an effort to develop a comprehensive plan for addressing the threat of their linguistic behaviours on the language that conforms with the values and norms of society and to fully determine if these gangs are actively planning to create specific language level.

It is recommended that the following intelligence areas should be addressed:

- Determine means of communication and emerging technologies used by the street gangs and possibly identify the arising alliances between other versions or levels of communication.
- Determine their operational morphological process (determine in terms of roots and affixes) since we certainly know it exists, so as to be informed and correct the wrongs.
- Comprehensively identify evolving technological tactics that promote their linguistic peculiarities as commonly advocated by gangs.
- Identify and monitor web forums and social networking site of gangs as a way to guide their linguistic behaviours through the available and accessible means.

Gathering information based on these recommendations will allow linguists at all levels/versions of language and other linguistic constituents the ability to moderate the vocabulary already developed by gang members so as to solve emerging conflicts in the linguistic domain.

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