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Igbo Slang in Otu-Onitsha: Towards Enriching the Igbo Language (Pp. 83-94)

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Abstract

Slang expressions are “Terms that are made up or are given new definitions [by a social group] in order to make the terms novel or conventional [such that people outside the social group are excluded from the group’s discussions]” (Harris, 1994). Slang is, therefore, a sociolinguistic phenomenon. This chapter investigates the Igbo slang expressions used by members of Otu-Onitsha speech community. Many scholars have attempted the study of slang use in Igboland (see Anasiudu and Oluikpe, 1983; Oluikpe, Anasiudu and Ogbonna, 1984; Oluikpe and Ogbonna, 1987; Anasiudu, 1987; Okorji, 1998; Ebede, 2001; Oluikpe and Anasiudu, 2006; Nwoye, 2007). Although a few instances of Igbo slang appear in some of these works, none gives a detailed examination of Igbo slang expressions frequently used in an Igbo speech community. It identifies some Igbo slang expressions, their various users and contexts of usage. As Otu-Onitsha speech community comprises Igbo speakers from the different dialect areas of Igboland, we advocate that these slang expressions in use in Otu-Onitsha should consciously be made to permeate into the various Igbo communities as it is

customary for the speakers in Otu-Onitsha to visit their family homes/villages from time to time. This would, definitely, enrich the Igbo language in their respective communities.

Introduction

Slang is a common sociolinguistic feature found in every speech community. In the past, it was viewed as informal and associated with the less privileged and with persons of a low or disreputable character (cf. Bussman, 1996; Crystal, 1997; Johnson and Shirley, 2005; McGregor, 2009). According to Johnson and Shirley (2005), slang can be described as “informal, non-standard words or phrases (lexical innovations) which tend to originate in subcultures within a society”. For Crystal (1997:53), it is “A colloquial departure from standard usage; it is often imaginative, vivid, and ingenious in its construction – so much so that it has been called the ‘plain man’s poetry’.”

Presently, slang has taken another form. Slang expressions could add new meanings to existing words, thereby, enriching the lexicon of any given language (cf. Jowitt, 1991). Harris (1994) defines slang expressions as “Terms that are made up or are given new definitions [by a social group] in order to make the terms novel or conventional [such that people outside the social group are excluded from the group’s discussions]”. No wonder Winkler (2007: 142) says, “Slang often originates in a particular group and then may spread out to parts of the general population...Some slang words even become part and parcel of the common lexicon and may no longer be considered slang...”

Onitsha is located in Anambra State, and it is one of the major commercial cities which attracts the presence of people from various cultures across Nigeria, including Igbo speakers with different dialects. Igbo is the mother-tongue and the dominant language of the people of Anambra State. However, Otu-Onitsha dialect is spoken predominantly by the non-indigenes of Onitsha. The title, *Otu-Onitsha*, is based on the heterogeneity that is implicit in it. ‘Otu’ is the name of the main Onitsha market which accommodates people from other dialect and areas of Igbo (Ikekeonwu, 1987:186). This particular study is basically on the use of slang by Otu-Onitsha speech community. It should be noted that some of the Igbo slang expressions in use in this speech community are gradually penetrating into Enu-Onitsha speech community. Enu-Onitsha is the abode of the indigenes of Onitsha, and the place accommodates people from different dialect areas.

Methodology

The primary data were collected through tape-recording the speeches of different inhabitants of Otu-Onitsha. The tape-recordings were done in different places, such as the Onitsha main-market, motor parks, garages, mechanic workshops, bars/beer parlours, eateries, canteens, cafeterias, restaurants, shopping places, especially meat-preparing centres. Other pieces of information were collected through one-on-one contact with people. Normally, the informants were not aware of the tape-recordings. This facilitated the reliability of the data collected.

Igbo Slang among Otu-Onitsha speakers

The following are few instances of slang expressions collected from Otu-Onitsha inhabitants. We categorize them as Igbo since we view them as having originated from Igbo words and expressions. We have tried to group the slang expressions according to the context of usage. Within each context, we have explained the users. The contexts we have identified and under which we have grouped the slang expressions are:

- a. economic life; for example, trade, commerce, business
- b. social evils, like stealing, robbery, promiscuity, duping
- c. social talk, for instance, living in affluence, suffering in servitude
- d. transportation, for example, using old/new motorcycle, car, bus
- e. social relations, for instance, issues relating to participating/attendance at ceremonies, sexual encounters, romance, love-making
- f. eating and drinking
- g. social stratification
- h. miscellaneous

In our analysis, two meanings of each expression are presented. The first one is the literal meaning. It is enclosed in inverted commas and begins with a lower case. The second meaning, being the slang begins with an upper case and it is not enclosed in inverted commas. In cases where literal meanings are unobtainable, there are just the slang meanings of the expressions.

A) Economic Life

One of the most viable economic activities at Otu-Onitsha is trade. Traders use slang expressions during business hours. These expressions are used by generality of the traders, i.e. men, women, teenagers who are involved in trading activities. Some of the expressions we recorded are:

mmemme	“feast”	When many customers are in one’s shop
buba	“carry something inside”	Make much money
rachaa okwa	“lick the wooden plate”	Make much profit
mgbago	“going up”	Overseas, used by traders who usually travel overseas
i bugonu	“you have grown”	You have got much money
kpokom		Money
igbu ozu	“to kill”	To be rich, to make it big!, successful
piakaa	“open something by hitting”	Be rich
gbutoq	“kill in pieces”	Become exceedingly rich or wealthy
gbachaa aru		Give a tip to somebody
onwa i na-eti	“your moon is shinning”	You are wealthy
o suq	“it stabs”	Done, (of money) abundance
inye iru efi	“to give a cow’s face”	To show contempt for people, especially a seller who shows contempt for a buyer who prices his goods/products very low
owu ite	“pot’s thread”	Poverty, lack of money, hardship
mbada		Highly expensive
ahihja	“grass”	Indian hemp, weed, marijuana
imesi ife ike	“to do things with vigour”	Excessive spending, high spender, flamboyant
onye okuku	“a planter”	Spendthrift

chaa	Money
ote	An original product
ị nọ mma	“you are sitting well” You are rich
tatu aka	“bite off a hand” Spend someone’s money carelessly, extravagant
kpaputa ya	Bring out some money

B) Social Evils

The slang expressions that portray social evils such as robbery, drug addiction, and prostitution, are listed below:

eke	“python” The police, cops, law enforcement officer (used to refer to policemen)
ezi	“pig” Used by men to refer to a promiscuous lady
dọọ	“stretch” Run away
piakaa	“open something by hitting” Destroy
tikara	Run away
onye oru	“a worker” One involved in dirty business e.g. dupe, one who engages in extra marital affairs
umụ nnwa	Thieves
kpowaa	Run in the midst of a crowd, especially to avoid being caught by policemen (one cannot run away from the police unless one is involved in an evil act)
kwatuo mmadu	“push somebody” Kill somebody
ife	“something” Indian hemp, weed, marijuana
megharja	“re-do” Hide especially from the police (one cannot run away from the police unless one is involved in an evil act)
bochaa	“clear” Escape from the police
afja	“market” Armed robbery

onye afia	“a market person”	An armed robber
ị naghị ajọ njo	“you are generous”	A sexually liberal woman
chawaa isi	Smoke many wraps of Indian hemp, weed, marijuana	
isi ife	“to cook something”	To smoke (cigarette or Indian hemp, weed, marijuana)

C) Social Talk

Here we talk about slang expressions that are used casually or in social gatherings. For example:

ọ chara acha	“it is ripe”	Is beautiful
ife aka	“to wave a hand”	To die
saa isi	“wash the head”	Try to convince somebody
wugharja	“jump around”	Boast
zaa isi	“swell the head”	Pride, headstrong, stubborn person
ike	“buttocks”	A weak person (usually a man)
tọkọ		Useless
ihe ka nkụ	“things are more than firewood”	Matters are beyond control
ọ dja	“it is here”	It is inclusive, you belong
ị nọ n’ofe	“you are in soup”	You belong to a revered group; you are abreast with recent happenings
anyị ma onye ị bu	“we know whom you are”	We anticipate your spraying money in an occasion
onye mmacha		A pompous person
ka anyị nwee	“let us have”	Let us meet confidentially
ọgbanje na-agba		Great things are happening
kee ife I loo?	“what do you think?”	A compliment to someone

o nago	“it has gone”	It is lost
mpotoli	Enjoyment	
gwunye	“hammer something into the ground”	Stay at a place

D) Transportation

Below are the expressions used by mostly motor park operators. They are also used by general. Examples:

eke	“python”	Long vehicle, haulage truck
mgbachapu	(used by bus drivers)	Picking passengers along, not waiting to go with a full-loaded bus
akpuruka	An old, poorly maintained vehicle especially buses for public transport	
akanchawa	“a brightened hand”	The brand of motorcycles that are now in use by commercial motorcyclists
owa	Vehicles that are in good shape	
onye owa	A driver who drives on a very high speed	compliment from people who enjoy high speedy drive/ride
ikpa owa	To drive on a very high speed	
mangala	“dried fish”	A corpse taken from the place of death to the deceased’s hometown

E) Social Relations

The expressions that fall within this sub-heading are basically those pertaining to physical appearance, romance and sexually related issues or love-making themes. They are:

gbado nwaanyi	“toasting, trying to convince or talking to a woman”	Try to gain a lady’s love for friendship only
okpu nnabuenyi	“nnabuenyi’s cap”	Condom
anyali	“albino”	Used to refer to a pretty and well dressed lady

ibu	“load”	Expensive items of clothing
onye nko		An unfaithful person
nnwa	“child”	A man’s girlfriend
asa	“a kind of fish (catfish)”	A man’s girlfriend
o ji ife	“s/he is holding something”	He is having a sexual intercourse with a lady
ipia oku	“to flog fire”	To have sexual intercourse
o donyee		A lady/woman that has fat buttocks
o na-abu aso n’aka	“s/he spits saliva in the hand”	He spends so much on a woman
nwanne ozu	“a corpse’s sibling”	A friend
ibe okwe		To have sexual intercourse
o gbadao	“s/he has gone down” (of a person)	Old age
wusa aru	“keep the body”	Relax

F) Eating and Drinking

Expressions relating to eating and drinking are as follows:

ichawa anya		To smoke cigarette/Indian hemp, weed, marijuana, and drink alcohol at the same time
kwaa	“push”	Eat (food)

G) Miscellaneous

gwadangwa		Do something hastily
gbado anya	“put a stop to the eye”	be careful; Continue what you are doing
kwechiri		Persist in something
nkonuko		Trouble making
wusa aru	“keep the body”	Relax
gbakoo n’anya		one realizes one’s fault

kusuo	Harass
jaa	Beat severely
igwilo	One who remains at a particular place without making an attempt to leave
onye uwa	“a person of the world” An unbeliever; (jokingly) an unserious person
legwoo	“decay excessively” Remain at a place
kuo ọru	“hit a work” Reveal a secret
o jue afo	“fills one’s stomach” One is happy
nye gi ọso	“gives somebody a run” Harass somebody
daputa	“fall out” Come out
chikọọ	“gather” Quarrel
na-egoli	Enjoy
mmaja	Threat, harassment
onwu ya	“his/her death” Being fond of something or somebody
gbara ọgwu gi ñuọ	“take your drug and drink” Behave yourself
onye nko	An unfaithful person
tuo	“throw” Reach a place
usu enwerọ onu	“a bat has no mouth” One who is being intimidated
fichaa	“wipe” Move out of a place
kpa	Pretend to have forgotten something
ugba	“oil bean” Problem
ka o yie ife	“let it look like something” Let something look good or attractive
o bego	“it has ended” Someone has dead

o gbakaa	To be overwhelmed by feelings of joy
igba mmadu ogwu	“to inject somebody” To convince somebody
ka o kaa akaa	Let it be superb, to be hurt
ire ogwu	“to sell drugs” To confuse somebody
ima ukwa	“to wash off the slimy part of breadfruit” To be sluggish
ite ude	“to rub cream” To do something sluggishly
tuu	Nonsense, meaningless
o na-awu	“it is jumping” It trips
obi akpo	“dried heart” Wickedness
onye obi akpo	“one with a dried heart” A wicked person
kwanta	Problems, trouble-making
dei	Acceptable, attractive
ngwodo	Manage things

Summary and conclusion

This chapter attempted to present some practical Igbo slang expressions used in Otu-Onitsha speech community. We have shown the different contexts of usages of the slang expressions and their users. In line with the claims of Partridge (1894-1979), cited in Crystal (1997:53), that enrichment of language is one of the basic uses of slang, we are convinced that most of the slang expressions operating in Otu-Onitsha would go a long way in the enrichment of the Igbo language, especially the Standard Igbo. Our investigation reveals that some of these slang expressions in Otu-Onitsha have slipped into Enu-Onitsha where a few of them are now used as ordinary words of the speech community.

Moreover, as we have seen above that some dialectal words, for example, “owu ite” (no money, hardship, poverty) (Ezza dialect) are employed as slang expressions with meaning modifications in Otu-Onitsha, the slang expressions could, conversely, permeate the different Igbo dialects, and with time, lose their status as slang expressions in line with Winkler’s (2007) assertion. Since slang is used to enrich a language, the Igbo slang in Otu-

Onitsha will enrich the Igbo language. It is pertinent, at this point, to assert that the expressions that are discussed in this chapter will spread over all other dialect areas of Igbo because people from various Igbo speech communities converge on Otu-Onitsha. They use the slang in their day-to-day activities. When they return to their different dialect areas or community, they will continue the use of Otu-Onitsha Igbo slang, thereby, enriching the Igbo language.

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