
LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AMONG THE YORUBA: A STUDY OF ARGOT, CANT, JARGONS AND SLANG AS FORERUNNERS OF THE NEW IDIOMS AND IDIOMATIC EXPRESSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Dayo Akanmu (PhD)

School of Languages,
Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education,
Otto/Ijanikin,
P.M.B 007, Festac Town
Lagos – Nigeria

Ajetunmobi Rasheed .O. (PhD)

History Department,
Tai Solarin University of Education,
Ogun State – Nigeria

ABSTRACT: *Argot, Cant, Jargons and slang are phenomenal forerunners of the new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yoruba. They are universal phenomenon and aspect of social language that cannot be underestimated in every sense of functional human society where language and culture are seen as natural, divine and systemic in the 21st century. This paper attempts to discuss the historical evolution, definition, denotative and connotative meanings of these sociolects especially in relation to the existence and emergence of the new idiom and idiomatic expression in Yoruba with a view to expunging their similarities and differencia specifica.*

KEYWORDS – social language, Yoruba, language and culture, idiomatic expression, forerunners.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is another effort to bring to the fore in a fresh and concrete term, the historical perspective that is in tandem with the definitions, meanings (denotative and connotative), similarities, 'differencia specifica' and vitality of certain aspects of language which have not been given due prominence by linguists in this 21st century. It should not be under-stressed that, outside the borders of what is referred to as standard used in every conversation and other domains, there are other forms of expressions. For instance, there are special jargons of various trades, sports and occupations; there are also the rich vocabularies of imprecation and of ribaldry as well as argot, cant and new idioms, all full of vitality and interest. It is against this background that the paper focuses on the historical antecedent of these sociolects and how they serve as the forerunners for what is called 'new Yoruba idioms and idiomatic expressions' in this 21st century.

Language and culture among the Yoruba

The relationship between language and culture cannot be ignored in the history of the Yoruba. Language, a divine benevolence to man, is tied to the effective existence of man in society, for any

meaningful discussion of man must begin with it. The purpose of language is to enhance communication. If culture is seen as the sum total of man, then language is the tool for the expression of culture, the depository of culture and crucial mode of culture transmission. Therefore, it can be deduced that existence and development of the Yoruba race depends largely on the existence and development of language communication. Language is not just significantly fundamental to the existence of the Yoruba, but it also encapsulates every aspect of their lives, hence the interest of several scholars from different disciplines to this phenomenon. Sapir (1939) in his influential book 'language defines language' as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced speech sounds". In other words, language is an instrument by which humans communicate and refine their worlds. All human knowledge, the mysteries of science and man's ability for interpersonal and community relationships are predicated on language. In this regard, one of the most sustained uses of language is in invented words or expressions like argot, cant, jargons, slang and the new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yoruba which are the focus of this paper.

Culture, according to Ajayi (2005:2) is a relatively specific lifestyle and acquired experience that people employ to interpret occurrences which eventually engender communal behavior. Culture, in a clear and simple term, is a way of life of a people and cannot be separated from language. It is also not possible to teach language without recourse to its cultural substance as a result of their inseparable interconnectivity. One universal aspect of culture which is reflected in language is taboo. It is concerned with behavior which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden or regarded as immoral or improper. It deals with irrational manners or behavior which are prohibited in the culture. In language, taboo is associated with things which are not said, or, in particular, with words and expressions which are not used. The types of words/expressions which constitute taboo in a particular language are a reflection of, at least, part of the values and beliefs of the society in question. Among the Yoruba, for instance, traditional idioms that are considered as taboo expressions include those of the left hand, death and sex. It is forbidden in Yoruba culture to refer to the left hand as 'òwó òsì' because the word 'òsì' (left) is associated with 'bad luck' or 'bad men' rather 'òwó alaafia' (hand of peace) is favored. Also there are several euphemisms for death, as illustrated below.

'wọ àjà (enter the roof, for; death of a king)

Pa ipo dà (change position, for die)

Similar examples that can be found in the new idioms and idiomatic expressions include:

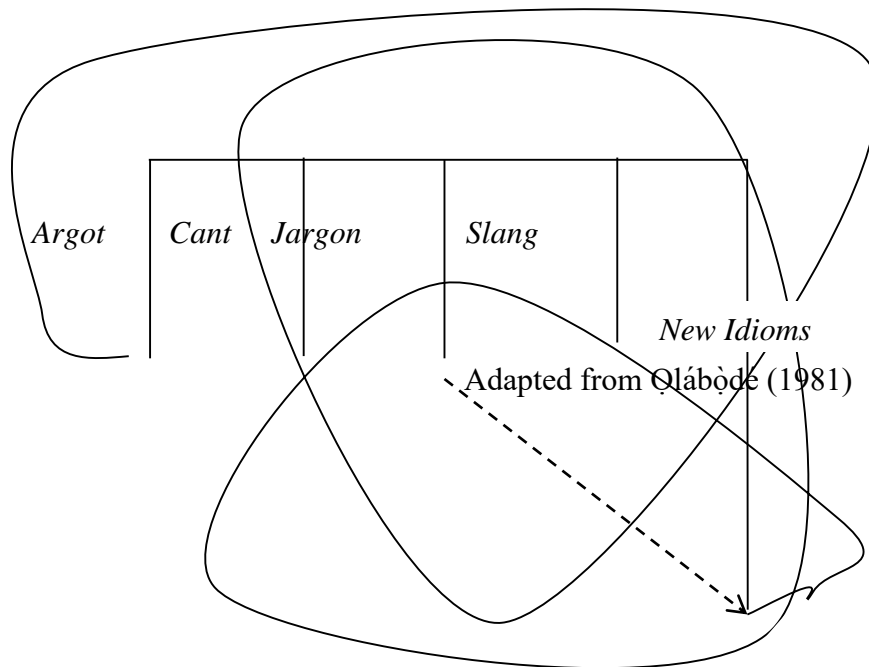
Èbu (local refinery/power, for; inferior/fake item)

Ètùtù (atonement, for; bribery)

Finally, the point here is that language is culture-specific and ordinary linguistic knowledge is not enough to give the actual meanings of the examples given above. Therefore, knowledge of Yoruba culture is imperative in this study as most of the sociolects discussed in this paper are culture based. As culture is reflected in language and society, social change can produce a corresponding linguistic change. The changes in the Yoruba society in the recent past (due to globalisation), just like the changes in the social culture of any society, are what brought about the new idiom and idiomatic expression which is the offshoot of other forms of expression discussed in this paper.

Historical Antecedent of Argot, Cant, Slang New Idiom and their Inter-Relationship

The way people speak may provide clues on the regional accent or dialect of an individual. Two people growing up in the same geographical area at the same time may speak differently because of several reasons. This social aspect of language may not be overlooked because, in many ways, speech is a form of social identity and is used consciously or unconsciously to indicate membership of different social groups or different speech communities. The chart shown below represents the inter-relationship of argot, cant, slang, jargon and new idiom.



Argot

According to Russell (1993), argot is the specialized vocabulary of some disreputable or underworld subcultures. It is the sublanguage of pickpockets, murderers, drug dealers and prostitutes. The term was first applied to the language of beggars and wrongdoers, who are said to have created a secret language of their own in order to avoid being understood by honest people. Argot words are sometimes of unknown origin and, in most cases, they are words which have been given special meanings other than their original meanings. Examples are given below:

<i>Askari:</i>	for 'police'
<i>Ojà:</i>	(market) for 'marijuana'
<i>Já:</i>	(tear) for 'run for dear life/ escape'
<i>Eja:</i>	(fish) for 'igbó' (marijuana)
<i>Ọpá:</i>	(stick) for cigarette
<i>Tajútajú:</i>	(peppery item) for 'alcohol'
<i>Sùbì:</i>	for 'a thief'
<i>Túálè:</i>	(greeting style) for 'with respect'
<i>Bùgá:</i>	for 'proud'

Argot expressions, often described as 'criminal argot', are a form of speech device and are mostly unintelligible to non-initiates or nonmembers of the particular group that uses them. Today, with the impact of globalisation in music, art and entertainment, some argot expressions are increasing in number and filtering into the language of ordinary discourse as new idioms. An example is the word (argot) '*dẹmu légbẹẹ*'. The difference between argots and new idioms and idiomatic expressions is that argots are not so popular as the new idioms because they relate more to criminal activities and other antisocial basic drives, such as sex and greed, which society abhors.

Cant

Devito (1998), asserts that cant is a specialized sublanguage of touts or social miscreants. The use of cant is also common, not only among members of driving professional groups, but also among members of such groups as peddlers and tramps. This is because drivers, peddlers and tramps share some basic characteristics, especially in their behaviours as drug addicts, alcoholics and as social miscreants. As is the case with argot, cant will ideally not be understood by non-members because of its restricted use. Cant is also sometimes defined as false or insincere language. Also like argot, it refers to the language used by destitute and miscreants. In short, cant and argot overlap greatly. Below are examples of words in this category:

<i>Túálè</i>	-	your Highness
<i>Sénpẹ/Sénpẹ'</i>	-	relax, calm
<i>Ọpá</i>	-	Cigarette
<i>Ojà</i>	-	weed
<i>Pilot</i>	-	driver
<i>36 kìnìhún</i>	-	notorious/pick-pocket group of 36 in Lagos Island
<i>Jamblan/jambla</i>	-	nonsensical utterances

<i>Lala skibò</i>	-	consummate
<i>Ìṣa/ẹbu</i>	-	fake, not original, of low quality and value
<i>Gbà sībẹ</i>	-	let's shake hands

Globalisation and changing social circumstances may also stimulate the spread of cant and its interconnectivity with new idioms as some examples of argot are now visible in the new idioms. Prominent among these examples are *ẹbu* (fake/inferior), *sénpẹ* (relax), *tuálẹ* (your highness/with respect) and *gbà sībẹ* (lets shake hands). The use of cant as a form of expression is also restricted as a sub-culture language, it is not meant for the general populace, unlike new idioms and idiomatic expressions which have become an acceptable speech form used in both routine and literary communication.

Jargon

The term jargon is described by Russell (1993) as specialist vocabulary items associated with occupations that people engage in, either as a mode of employment or as a leisure pursuit or for some other purposes. In other words, jargon is a technical vocabulary associated with a special activity of group of people and which is difficult for others to understand. In social terms, jargons are connectors between “insiders” and exclusion for “outsiders”. Every social group, profession or occupation has access to a number of jargons, which could be passively understood to members and used more or less ‘actively’ as a consequence of the routine of daily life they engage in. Their daily work, whether in paid employment in the home, government or with a voluntary agency engenders its own vocabulary. Generally, people’s leisure time, and interests, whether sports or hobbies or religious observance or some other activities, have their own jargons. Hence, there are journalistic jargons, political jargons, medical jargons, which are peculiar to or characteristic of the language of journalism, politics and medicine, respectively, and so on. The jargons below are from various professional groups

Sports (football)

<i>'Tàribò lòmọ'</i>	the child is Taribo (a skilful defender)
<i>'Rónádò lòmọ'</i>	the child is Ronaldo (a skilful striker)

The above are jargons among football fans in the southwest region of Nigeria. *Tàribò* is an ex-Nigerian international footballer whose position in the team was defense (back), while *Ronaldo* is a Portuguese international footballer whose attacking prowess is unrivalled in the whole world. Based on the positions of the above mentioned players (back player and forward/attacking player), idioms are made of them through semantic extensions. For example, a beautiful lady with big buttocks is admirably described or tagged 'Taribo', while a lady with attractive boobs is described idiomatically as *Rónádò*.

Kegite's Club

<i>Sòngító</i>	-	singer
<i>Kàpító</i>	-	cap
<i>Zoo</i>	-	non-initiates
<i>Sambalidate</i>	-	give/tell

The above jargons are peculiar to members of the Kegite Club found on the campuses of most of Nigerian higher institutions, like the polytechnics, colleges of education and universities.

Other examples of jargons, especially those found among artistes and some other professionals are the following:

<i>Gbàbèskin</i> (drivers)	- Take/belief it
<i>419</i> (legal profession)	- Fraudster
<i>Skin bọbọ</i> (musicians)	- light skin
<i>Sánkó</i> (drivers/musicians)	- (<i>Kékeré</i>) small/shriveled

One can conclude that there is a marked difference between jargons and new idioms. As reflected in the chart, jargons is the only form of expression that has no link with new idiom. While jargons are used as technical terms by professionals or members of a particular group; new idioms and idiomatic expressions have universal appeal and application.

Slang

Slang 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. (Crystal, 1997) It especially attracts those who, for reasons of personality or social identity wish to be linguistically different, such as the kegites members of palm-wine drinkers' social club), actors, footballers, area boys (social miscreants), prisoners, musicians, students, gays or pop singers.

From the foregoing, we can deduce that slang is borne out of the desire by people to be linguistically different in their interactions. However, in the attempt to be linguistically different, they coin expressions which give them identity that have group or professional peculiarities. Language variety of this type is 'slang' and is drawn from the language of everyday usage. Slang is the most general sublanguage consisting of vocabulary items derived particularly from cant and argot that are understood by most persons but are not necessarily used in 'polite society' or in formal written communications. Slang is usually short-lived. Some are rarely used in contemporary time; and when they are used, they conjure up an image of an antiquated, out-of-touch-with-reality type of person. However, some slang terms have been around for decades and remain classified as slang. *New Webster's Dictionary* notes that "slang is currently widely used and understood language consisting of new meanings attributed to existing words or wholly new words generally accepted as lying outside standard polite usage". In spite of its characteristics, slang is the only form of expression that has some degree of semblances with the new idioms. This explains why a lot of slang filter into everyday language use and thus become new idioms. Some examples are given below:

<i>Iku' Ijo'</i>	- for a versatile or skillful dancer
<i>Igi Íwe'</i>	- for an extremely/ brilliant student/person
<i>Orin Lomọ</i>	- for a talented or accomplished singer/musician
<i>Ẹwà Lomọ</i>	- for an extremely beautiful lady.
<i>Ọpákà</i>	- young man
<i>Ọpékè</i>	- young lady
<i>Bùgá</i>	- proud

<i>Túálè</i>	-	your highness or with respect
<i>Sonbí</i>	-	police)
<i>Igbó</i>	-	bush/ marijuana, for criminal implication
<i>Àgbékó</i>	-	carry-over of paper in exam
<i>Òpá</i>	-	cigarette
<i>Ọjà</i>	-	weed or marijuana
<i>Chacha</i>	-	new car
<i>Olúáyé</i>	-	popular Yorùbá deity-god of small pox, for a person that is 'known worldwide

From the examples cited above, it is clear that there is no clear-cut distinction between the various language forms, as the line of demarcation between the users and contexts of usage is very tenuous. Cant, argot jargon and slang are so important in this paper especially as the forerunners of the new idioms and idiomatic expressions, which are primarily from the aforementioned sociolects and other sources and have crystallized to become part of the Yorùbá vocabulary, thus expanding the Yorùbá lexicon.

New Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions

New idioms and idiomatic expressions, which are part of the focus of this study, constitute another distinctive and vital aspect of language use. The term *new idiom* is a modern stock expression, formed in response to the needs of the moment arising as a result of the linguistic constraints of the users which consequently necessitates creation of new words and expressions. New idioms and idiomatic expressions are so called not only because of their complexity which necessitate the overlapping tendencies of their semantic realizations, but also because of their distinctive difference from old, traditional idioms. As a matter of fact, they straddle metaphor and euphemism and also serve as replication of the established Yorùbá idioms both in form and meaning. They are in spoken and written forms, and mainly operate at the lexical and phrasal levels. They are also multi-functional because of their semantic unity. They may equally function as nouns, verbs and adjectives.

New idioms and idiomatic expressions are created by members of the society or language community either through coining, (creating and recreating of new words and expressions) or by investing old words and expressions with new meanings. New idioms are new, strange, fresh and creative by nature. They are not vague expressions and their origins are also known to the users who are always dazzled whenever they come across them in any context unlike slang, argot and cant whose origins or identities disappeared after creeping into the language as new idioms.

Unlike argot, cant, jargon and slang, whose formations are borne out of the desire by the people to be linguistically different in their interactions, new idioms are used in literary discourse and in daily conversation by a sizeable number of people, especially youths, and by extension, elderly ones who always hear them on radio, television, home video and in buses. New idioms and idiomatic expressions don't fade out or change meaning with time and to resurface with new meaning like slang, argot and cant. It may suffice now to give a list of some of the new idioms and

idiomatic expressions collected and which constitute the data for this study. The list, however, is in-exhaustive:

	<i>Kárí mọní</i>	carry passenger
<i>Ọbẹ lomo</i>		a well fed/beautiful/fresh lady
<i>Lẹpa</i>		slim person
<i>Kò sí gírì</i>		no qualms
<i>Ègúnjẹ</i>		bribe
<i>Irin tútù</i>		gun
<i>Soló Mákindé</i>		gossip
<i>Ẹwà lomo</i>		a paragon of beauty)
<i>Palẹmó</i>		consummate
<i>Yàúyàúù</i>		(internet fraud)
<i>Mùgùn</i>		stupid/rustic person
<i>Na gere</i>		to be stupid/idiotic
<i>Ẹjẹ mi</i>		my bosom friend/blood relation
<i>Jẹ lo/kari go</i>		move on
<i>Fẹjẹ si i</i>		do it with strength
<i>Fàyà gbé e</i>		dance with breast
<i>O wé</i>		you are not strong enough)
<i>Wà wọn</i>		lie to them
<i>Pátá nlá</i>		big nylon
<i>Má fọṣe yími</i>		don't embarrass me
<i>Làkàsórò</i>		corrupt coinage of a soft drink called lacasera' now used as no comment
<i>Ẹrérékodé</i>		uncivilized person
<i>Kò halẹ</i>		not catchy
<i>Ayéráyé ilé</i>		solid mansion
<i>Já wọn sí i</i>		keep them informed
<i>Rẹ wọn sí i</i>		inform them
<i>Jùrù bẹnbéle'</i>		dance with your buttock
<i>Sùrutù</i>		trouble
<i>Oṣòdì Òkè</i>		bustly lady
<i>Jẹun sápo</i>		collect money/rich/embezzle money
<i>Kéré sí nọmbà</i>		inferior
<i>Tùràyà lomo</i>		sophisticated person
<i>GSM lomo</i>		resourceful person
<i>Tẹ' mi sí i</i>		inform me.
<i>Irin tútù</i>		gun
<i>Gbaju e</i>		dupe/defraud him
<i>Àtíkè Ọlà</i>		cocaine/heroin
<i>Ègúnjẹ</i>		bribe
<i>Àgbàlagbì</i>		corrupt coinage of 'àgbàlagbà', an elderly person now used to mean 'an influential person'

The place of new idioms and idiomatic expressions among the Yorùbá

Among the Yorùbá people, outside the borders of what is referred to as standard language used in every conversation and other domains, there are other forms of expressions. For instance, there are special jargons of various trades, sports and occupations; there are also the rich vocabularies of slang of imprecation and of ribaldry as well as the new idioms under study. The use of new idioms and idiomatic expressions is fast becoming a popular phenomenon among Yorùbá people, especially youths, artisans and politicians, who are fond of communicating their thoughts, ideas experiences emanating from globalisation.

New idioms and idiomatic expressions are contemporaneous and part of modern communication employed to instruct, persuade, exhort, abuse, extol and entertain in practically all areas of the life of the Yorùbá people. For example, new idioms and idiomatic expressions are used by radio and television presenters, who anchor different Yorùbá programmes on radio and television, journalists in Yorùbá newspapers, musicians, politicians, commercial bus conductors, films practitioners, artisans, students and literary artistes. Sometimes, their expressive powers pave way for their accommodation into the lexicon of the Yoruba language.

Unlike the traditional idioms, many of the new idioms and idiomatic expressions are from the youths, artisans, musicians, politicians and other users of the language who are versatile and conversant with the latest developments in technology, science, engineering, politics, trade and commerce, which invariably manifest in several spheres of life. The youths are the engine room and hope of any country in terms of growth and development; through them, other members of the Yorùbá community get used to the new idioms.

CONCLUSION

This paper has established with concrete examples, the true nature of evolution and inter-relationship of the sociolects under study in this 21st century as well as given explanation on how they are culture specific. It has also emphasized that, even though, it is new, new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yoruba can be seen to be an offshoot of argot, cant, jargon and slang whose main goal, according to their users is to be different linguistically from the other members of society. It has been reiterated that new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yoruba are created and employed not only by some section of the Yoruba community but by all and sundry as a result of certain changes or latest developments in technology, science, politics, education and engineering which manifest in all sphere of the society to communicate any form of ideas like the language of ordinary usage. Finally, study of this nature is very important especially in this 21st century as it exposed us to the fact that other forms of expressions that can help to solve a lot of linguistic problems are in existence.

REFERENCE

- Ajayi, S.A. 2005. *African culture and civilisation*. Ibadan: Atlantic Books
- Crystal, D. 1997. *The cambridge encyclopedia of language*, 2nd edition. Cambridge University Press
- Devito, J.A. 1997. *Interpersonal communication book*, 4th edition. New York: Addison Wesley Educational Publisher.
- Olabode, A. 1981. *The semantic basis of metaphor and related tropes in Yoruba*. Diss., Linguistics, Arts, University of Ibadan.
- Russell, C. 1993. *Interpersonal is between consideration and application of interpersonal communication*, U.S.A.: Bugress Publishers.
- Sapir, E. 1974. *Language in grip bunt (ed) Language, culture and society*, Cambridge: Winthrop