

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

Dayo Akanmu¹ and Ajetunmobi Rasheed O.²

¹School of Languages,
Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education,
Otto/Ijanikin, P.M.B 007, Festac Town, Lagos, Nigeria

²History Department,
Tai Solarin University of Education,
Ogun State, Nigeria

Copyright © 2015 ISSR Journals. This is an open access article distributed under the *Creative Commons Attribution License*, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

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

KEYWORDS: social language, Yoruba, language and culture, idiomatic expressions, new idioms.

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 usage in every conversation and other domains, lie other forms of expressions. For instance, there are special examples of jargon of various trades, sports and occupations; there are also the rich vocabulary of imprecation and of ribaldry as well as argot, cant and new idioms, all full of vitality and interesting area of study. It is against this background that the paper focuses on the historical antecedent of this sociolect and how the items discussed serve as forerunners for what is called 'new Yoruba idioms and idiomatic expressions'.

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; 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 (1939:7)

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 world. 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, jargon, 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 or 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 ‘*q̄wọ̀ òsì*’ because the word ‘*òsì*’ (left) is associated with ‘bad luck’ or ‘bad men’ rather ‘*q̄wọ̀ alaafia*’ (hand of peace) is favored. Also there are several euphemisms for death, as illustrated below.

‘*wọ̀ àjà*’ (enter the roof, for; death of a king)

Pa ipo dà (change position, for die)

Similar examples that can be found in idiomatic expressions include:

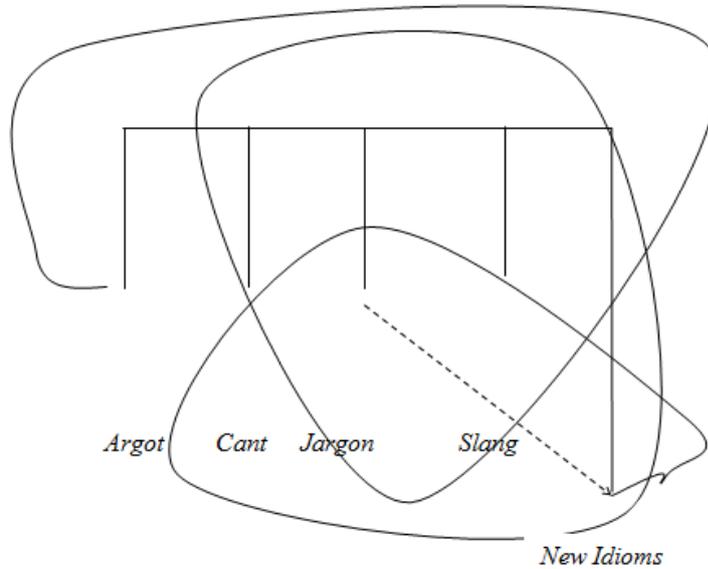
Ẹ̀bu (local refinery/power, for; inferior/fake item)

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 examples of sociolect 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 other society around the world,, are what brought about the new idioms and idiomatic expressions which is the offshoot of other forms of expressions discussed in this paper.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF ARGOT, CANT, SLANG NEW IDIOM AND THEIR INTER-RELATIONSHIPS

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 among argot, cant, slang, jargon and new idioms.



Adapted from Oḷábòdé (1981)

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, are words which have been given special meanings other than their original meanings. Examples are given below:

<i>Askari:</i>	for 'police'
<i>Qjà:</i>	(market) for 'marijuana'
<i>Já:</i>	(tear) for 'run for dear life/ escape'
<i>Eja:</i>	(fish) for 'igbó' (marijuana)
<i>Òpá:</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) '*dému lẹ̀gbẹ̀ẹ̀*'. 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 (Eble 1998: 67, Metiello 2008: 102). Also like argot, it refers to the language used by destitutes and miscreants. In short, cant and argot overlap greatly. Below are examples of words in this category:

<i>Túálè</i>	-	your Highness
<i>Séńpé/Séńpé</i>	-	relax, calm
<i>Òpá</i>	-	Cigarette
<i>Ojà</i>	-	weed
<i>Pilot</i>	-	driver
<i>36 kinnihún</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 síbẹ̀</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), *séńpé* (relax), *túálè* (your highness/with respect) and *gbà síbẹ̀* (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 jargon, 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 (Folsom 2005: 91). Generally, people’s leisure time, and interests, whether sports or hobbies or religious observance or some other activities, have their own jargon. Hence, there are forms of journalistic jargon, political jargon, medical jargon, 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 lọmọ'</i>	the child is Taribo (a skilful defender)
<i>'Ròńádò lọmọ'</i>	the child is Ronaldo (a skilful striker)

The above are examples of jargon 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 *Ròńádò*.

Kegite's Club

<i>Sòńgítò</i>	-	singer
<i>Kàpítò</i>	-	cap
<i>Zoo</i>	-	non-initiates
<i>Sambalidate</i>	-	give/tell

The above examples of jargon 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 jargon, especially those found among artistes and some other professionals are the following:

<i>Gbàbèskin</i> (drivers)	- Take/belief it
419 (legal profession)	- Fraudsters
<i>Skin bòbò</i> (musicians)	- light skin
<i>Sáńkó</i> (drivers/musicians)	- (<i>Kékeré</i>) small/shriveled

One can conclude that there is a marked difference between jargon and new idiom. As reflected in the chart, jargon is the only form of expression that has no link with new idiom. While jargon is used as a technical term 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 (Crystal 2008:56, Coleman 1978:34). 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>Ikú Ijo'</i>	- for a versatile or skillful dancer
<i>Igi Ìwe'</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>Àgbékọ</i>	- carry-over of paper in exam
<i>Ọpá</i>	- cigarette
<i>Ọjà</i>	- weed or marijuana
<i>Chacha</i>	- new car
<i>Olúayé</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 new idioms and idiomatic expressions, which are primarily from the aforementioned sociolect 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 on 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 m̀òní</i>	carry passenger
<i>Ọ̀bẹ̀ lọ̀mọ̀</i>	a well fed/beautiful/fresh lady
<i>Lẹ̀pa</i>	slim person
<i>Kò sí ẹ̀rì</i>	no qualms
<i>Ẹ̀gúnjẹ</i>	bribe
<i>Sọ̀lọ̀ Mákíndé</i>	gossip
<i>Ẹ̀wà lọ̀mọ̀</i>	a paragon of beauty)
<i>Palẹ̀mọ̀</i>	consummate
<i>Yàúyàúú</i>	(internet fraud)
<i>Múgùn</i>	stupid/rustic person
<i>Na gere</i>	to be stupid/idiotic
<i>Ẹ̀jẹ̀ mi</i>	my bosom friend/blood relation
<i>Jẹ̀ lọ̀/kari go</i>	move on
<i>Fẹ̀jẹ̀ sí 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 òlá</i>	big nylon
<i>Má fọ̀şẹ̀ yími</i>	don't embarrass me
<i>Làkàsòrò</i>	corrupt coinage of a soft drink called lacasera' now used as no comment
<i>Şérékódé</i>	uncivilized person
<i>Kò halẹ̀</i>	not catchy
<i>Ayérayé ilé</i>	solid mansion
<i>Já wọn sí i</i>	keep them informed
<i>Rẹ̀ wọn sí i</i>	inform them
<i>Jùrù bẹ̀nbéle'</i>	dance with your buttock
<i>Sùfútù</i>	trouble
<i>Oşòdì Òkè</i>	busty lady
<i>Jẹ̀un sá̀pò</i>	collect money/rich/embezzle money
<i>Kéré sí nọ̀mbà</i>	inferior
<i>Tùrayà lọ̀mọ̀</i>	sophisticated person
<i>GSM lọ̀mọ̀</i>	resourceful person

<i>Tẹ mi sí i</i>	inform me.
<i>Irin tútù</i>	gun
<i>Gbaju e</i>	dupe/defraud him
<i>Àṣíkè Qlà</i>	cocaine/heroin
<i>Ègúnjẹ</i>	bribe
<i>Àgbàlágbi</i>	corrupt coinage of 'àgbàlágbi', 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 forms of jargon of various trades, sports and occupations; there are also the rich vocabulary 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 sociolect 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, this study is very important especially in this 21st century as it exposes us to the fact that other forms of expressions that can help to solve a lot of linguistic problems are in existence.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ajayi, S.A. 2005. *African culture and civilisation*. Ibadan: Atlantic Books
- [2] Coleman, J. 1978. *A history of cant and slang Dictionaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- [3] Crystal, D. 1997. *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language, 2nd edition*. Cambridge University Press
- [4] Crystal, D. 2008. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Eble, C. 1998. *Slang and sociability: In-group language among College students* : Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- [6] Folsom, W.D. 2005. *Understanding American business jargon*: Greenwood Press.
- [7] Devito, J.A. 1997. *Interpersonal communication book, 4th edition*. New York: Addison Wesley Educational Publisher.
- [8] Matiello, E. 2008. *An introduction to English slang: A description of its morphology, semantics and sociology*. Momza: Polimetrica.
- [9] Olabode, A. 1981. *The semantic basis of metaphor and related tropes in Yoruba*. Diss., Linguistics, Arts, University of Ibadan.
- [10] Russell, C. 1993. *Interpersonal is between consideration and application of interpersonal communication*, U.S.A.: Bugress Publishers.
- [11] Sapir, E. 1974. *'Language in grip bunt (ed) Language, culture and society*, Cambridge: Winthrop