



Youths' Language and Resistance Identity

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Abstract. The emergence of globalization in the 21st Century has attendant challenges on language especially among youths. Youths have employed language in a most remarkable way to forge new identity for themselves. The most influential social group being youths have peculiar language which is in sharp contrast to the language of any other social group. In the content of this study, the term youth has special application to adolescents, which is not just a biological age but a social institution which has established itself in this modern era. They have made huge linguistic innovations hence they are viewed as linguistic “movers” and “shakers” (Kerswill, 1996). This paper attempts to examine different patterns of youth language, their vocabularies, structure and underlying meaning. The paper also makes effort to investigate ways in which youth language patterns or types are at variance with that of adults. The various expressions that are analyzed in this paper are representative of youth language and the researchers arrived at these by carefully paying attention to the discussions of some youths (students) in the College of Education, Warri.

Keywords: language, globalization, identity, youth, adolescents, innovations and linguistics.

1. Introduction

Youth language in modern times has drawn some attention to itself because language has served as a means of creating a new identity for youths of the 21st century. They have been able to establish themselves as a distinct class in the society. Youths, specifically adolescents as implied in the content of this study, are a social institution which undergoes a period of transition from childhood to adulthood. They undergo emotional, psychological and physical transformations that are often given expressions, most times in the form of language. It is therefore, a period when language change is unambiguously visible. Language, thus serves as a powerful tool for the expression of feelings, needs and concepts that are common to youths. Language is not static, for this reason, Entela Kazazi (2015) describes language as a socio-demographic phenomenon in constant evolution.

Youths use language that is almost strange, invented and at variance with adult language. This is so because of a compelling desire to create their own identity and redefine their position in the wider society. They therefore use a language that could be described as 'secrete' and customized. In doing this, they have flouted established order and invented their pattern of speech through different means which include; borrowing, linguistic manipulation, non-standard syntax, harsh speech rhythm, extreme semantic changes and lots more. The pidgin which has become popular language of wider communication in most urban centres in Nigeria has also undergone innovations among youths. It could be easily observed that the pidgin used by urban adolescents is different from the adult pidgin. Youth language in its various forms has serious consequence on not only the conventional English language but also on Nigeria's indigenous languages. Many Nigerian indigenous languages are now adulterated or even endangered.

Where you find few youths who make effort to communicate in the indigenous language, they rely heavily on words borrowed from the English Language for expressions they cannot render in their local tongues, so there is often either code mixing or code switching (Olagbaju, 2014). Youth language has seriously endangered both the English and indigenous languages in Nigeria.

Youths' social and communication networks appear to be very extensive and necessitated the creation of a new language which will leave a mark and create a social space which, only the youths can fit into. No wonder Mannheim, K. (1975) maintained that, to be part of this social group means more than just accept their values but also "catch" things in that sense, unbuckle the concepts in that contexts and 'catch' the psycho-intellectual components present and accessible to the group. It is truly difficult for one who cannot "catch" things and "unbuckle" youths' concepts to blend properly into the group. It is even more difficult for adults since youths purposely manipulate and invent language so that they may not be understood. Thus, maintaining their resistance identity.

2. Youth Language in the 21st Century

According to Svendsen and Royneland (2008:80), urban youth language is a new way of speaking which may be regarded as a new dialect. Kerswill (2013) sees it as a language that is liable, contingent and transient, subject to fashion, serving as a badge of "nonconformity". It also constructs for its users a complex identity for deployment as marker of different stance. Clearly, youth language is new, different from adult language and in sharp contrast to the language used by youths in the past. Every day it continues to experience innovations, new vocabularies and styles of expression are daily making an in-way to youth language. Youth language has come to stay as a mark of identity and a symbol of opposition to authority and existing order.

A close examination of different groups of youths over a period of time reveals that adolescents have various speech styles which could attract different ranges of description. Their scope include, code switching, style shifting, borrowing, college slangs, heavy vernacular use, non-standard vocabulary, vulgarisms, linguistic manipulations, improvisations, pidgin and a host of others.

The 21st century in Nigeria has witnessed rapid development of youth language due to a number of reasons. The media and social network play a major role in this regard. Music especially and movie stars have exerted great influence on every segment of youth language. There is also rapid urbanization occasioned by the influx of people of different social groups to the cities. This has caused cities to experience multilingualism.

In many cities, institutions of higher learning have been established and adolescents, the most innovative social and language group with diverse ethnic background are brought together. This group constitutes the highest percentage of the population in such academic environment and the growth of youth language in this peculiar environment is fostered and rapid. Among the youths of different ethnic and social background, there could be observed different attitudes ranging from being timid and conservative to being sophisticated and this to a large extent affects language of youths. But attitude is also subject to change due to exposure. Individual youth can strive to attain a new level of recognition and choose a new way of speaking in order to create for his or her self a new identity, one that is common to youth knowing fully well that one's speech pattern has a lot to reveal about oneself (Paul kerswill, 2010). A youth from a rural setting will be influenced by another in the urban area who has attained a level of sophistication. The former youth dumps the indigenous language for either the English language or pidgin in a bid to attain and maintain the same level of sophistication with the later youth. Where there are a number of adolescents of the same ethnic and language background, they manage to speak their local dialect, but it is done amidst shifting and borrowing from the language of wider communication. In this way, the indigenous language is adulterated. Language interrelatedness and interdependence is very common among youths. It is obviously an in-group mark which also adds to the user's complex identities of non-conformity.

Kazazi, S. Entela (2015) opines that youth language in the 21st century is a way to express the concepts, feelings and needs of young people in line with their stage of development which is often characterized by sensational psychic, emotional and moral crisis. He sees youth language as a means for adolescents to break away from the world of adults and not being understood by them. The goal according to him is to leave off the world of the adult and create for themselves a kind of independence and individuality. Adolescents have successfully created for themselves an identity through language use and their language has come to stay even as it continues to undergo changes daily. Its vocabularies continue to expand through adaptation, invention and innovation.

3. Youth Language and Innovations

The most susceptible social group to language change of course is youth. Language change among youths results from their being innovative. Innovation occurs in different ways in youth language. Sometimes, words are employed in an entirely different context to suggest meanings different from their normal usages, this is very common among youths or adolescents. At times, new words are coined and meaning created for such words in the new context of usage and most times words are borrowed from the indigenous language and are adapted to English context where their meanings can easily be deduced. The following conversation occurred between a male and female student as they leisurely walked out of the college premises and it illustrates the various levels of innovations in youth language.

- A1: Where are you going now?
B1: To the hostel of course
A2: You have food?
B2: Nothing O
A3: You will organize something for me now, let me come with you.
B3: No way, just going to crash first men, 'cos I am very tired now.
A4: Men, am dead hungry, I've got to arrange something for my tummy first. I no fit die.
B4: Later then
A&B: Cash you, bye.

The conversation reveals different ranges of language pattern among youths. 'A1' is an interrogative statement that observes the conventions of English. The statement is introduced with the interrogative pronoun 'where' followed by auxiliary verb, 'are' and a pronoun 'you' before the verb, 'going' and an adverb 'now'. B2 tends to flout the conventions of English by omitting 'I' the subject and 'am going' the verb elements. This is common in youth language. This is ellipsis which could be linked with youths' desires to be quick at everything, even their speech. The same situation is observed in A2, you have food? Which ought to be an interrogative statement with the introduction of 'Do' (auxiliary verb). But the verb Do is omitted at the beginning. The word 'organize' as used in 'A3' suggests cook as against its original meaning of arranging and putting things in order. The same pattern is used in B3 where the word 'crash' is used to suggest 'sleep' or 'rest' instead of its original meaning of to hit somewhere/something as in vehicle accident. 'Dead' in A4 is used as an adjective to qualify hungry showing how serious the hunger is and it deviates from its real meaning of not being alive. Another pattern of speech seen in this conversation is the quick switch from the regular English to pidgin as seen in A4 'I no fit die'. This is what we regularly find in youth language code switching/mixing. Youth language abounds with various speech patterns or styles with different descriptions which include the following:

Improvisation: This pattern of speech among youths occurs when strange words are formed, adopted and meaning is assigned to them according to how they are used. According to Idiagben Abdullahi (2011), improvisation is rampant among youths and it allows for enormous creative possibilities. The expression ‘wack’ (eat) ‘gbege’ (problem), ‘yawa’ (trouble) are examples of such strange words (strange because of not having English origin and not easily linked with any vernacular language) which are employed by youths. Surprisingly, these words have not only made an in-way to the youth language, they have gained popularity among adolescents of different ethnic backgrounds.

Borrowing: By borrowing, youths deploy words of vernacular origin into their speech while using English language. This also occurs while using their indigenous languages or pidgin, they borrow words of English origin. Borrowing during conversation helps to establish the informal nature of the conversation so it serves for private issues of friendship and domestic needs. It is observed that a reasonable number of Yoruba and a few other indigenous Nigeria language words have found their way into youth language through this method of borrowing. This to an extent could be attributed to the influence of the media or press in popularization. Schools namely, institutions of higher learning are a micro-society which draws or bring together people (youths) from different parts of the larger society.

The result of borrowing is code mixing which is the insertion of vernacular/English words into the English or pidgin/vernacular used by adolescents. This of course is a very common feature of youth language.

Instances of such words are:

| Word | Meaning | Origin |
|----------|--------------------|----------------|
| ‘wahala’ | trouble | Pidgin |
| Yanga | show off | Pidgin |
| Chineke | God | Ibo |
| Ose | Father (older man) | Urhobo |
| Ekpa | fool | Urho |
| Oya | get started | Yoruba |
| Iyawo mi | my wife | Yoruba |
| Orobo | big/fat | Yoruba |
| Ashawo | Harlot | Yoruba |
| Yeye | make jest | Yoruba |
| Omo/babe | child/girl | Yoruba/English |

Slang: According to Dozie, P. and Madu, L. (2012), slang which is a facet of youth language is an evidence of their creativity because slang is metaphorical, it presents a colourful image of a word in use. They also claim that it is limited to a group that is the adolescent group and it differentiates them from any other social group. They maintain that the use of slang is different from one speech environment to another.

Slangs are used to discuss a wide range of subjects among youths, issues of eating, drinking, dressing, love and more. Ayide, O. and Opuidi, T.I. (2015) in examining the use of slang among youths observe that, slangs are English words that are used in a specialized way to embellish the pidgin commonly used by youths. The result is that, youths' form of pidgin becomes quite different from that used by adult. According to Ayide and Opuidi, adolescents resort to use of slangs to freely express their bottled-up emotion, vulgar and taboo expressions and they are shielded from adults' watchful eyes by the use of slangs. It could be seen from several studies on the use of slangs that the sole purpose is for adolescents to carve out for themselves and maintain an identity. The use of slangs no doubt affects the use of proper English among youths, as slangs gain ground among them especially in institutions of higher learning. They rename things and actions, introduce new words or give new meaning to words and for this reason, slangs flout the rule of grammar. However, it is very common among youths, most especially students, and it shows that they are innovative as they can come up with new coinages and lucid patterns of expressions. Although, Dozie and Madu see slang expressions as something that differ from one community to another, it is not uncommon to find items of slangs that are similar in a number of speech communities. There are a wide range of slangs employed by adolescents but a few of them are examined below to gain an insight to their usage and meaning.

| S/N | Slang expressions | Meaning |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--|
| | We get runs this weekend | we have an engagement this weekend |
| 1 | Download the babe's data | get the girl's information |
| 2 | Hunger dey waya me | I am hungry |
| 3 | Lets wack | let us eat |
| 4 | Please raise me with few fibre | please lend me some money (little amount of money) |
| 5 | Control me please when it is time | call me when it is time |
| 6 | Maintain I beg | behave well please |
| 7 | How runs? | How is work? |
| 8 | Lets yarn | Let us talk |
| 9 | Yawa don gas | There is danger/trouble |

It is very obvious that slangs are significant part of youth language because adults and children barely use slangs. It is a 'secrete' and at the same time deviant vocabulary Kerswill, P. (2010). It is most times employed by members of secret cults/gang and criminals to be discrete and incomprehensible.

Pidgin

Pidgin is a language form that was once held as bastardized (Holm, 2000), unacceptable and disapproved, but today, it has gained ground and has come to stay. Amao (2012) opines that pidgin has emerged as a people's linguistic

‘sweetheart’. This is especially so when its usage among youths is considered. Youths deploy the pidgin not necessarily as a medium of business transaction but most often as a secrete language to discuss issues of love, sex, drugs, music, dress or even to run down an individual. The pidgin as an aspect of youth language reveals to a very large extent the revolutionary spirit among adolescents, their desire to stand out separate from other speech and social group and create for themselves a peculiar identity. Abudullahi (2000) views the use of pidgin among youths as a sign of intimacy and unseriousness. He adds that it shows youths are full of exuberance. According to him, pidgin has expanded and stabilized due to borrowing and coinage to cover every subject of youths’ discussion.

Words are borrowed from the indigenous languages, and English words are modified or used to suggest new meaning (in new context).

The lexical register of pidgin swells due to the use of slangs as an alternative source of words used in the Nigerian pidgin. It is very common for youths to shift swiftly from the use of pidgin either to English or even local language. But this is not the case with adults who appear to be more consistent. Abdullahi identifies three types of pidgin and he groups them as:

- (i) Ordinary Nigerian pidgin – which is used by the majority which include especially the adults.
- (ii) Wafy-ranky – which according to him is used by students and it has its origin with Ajegunle (Lagos Suburb) boys. He identifies musicians such as Daddy Shokey, Lagbaja, Charlie Boy as the apostles of Wafy-ranky. This of course is the type of pidgin described in this study as a form of youth language which has enjoyed tremendous patronage by youths.
- (iii) Hooligans’ version is associated with touts, area boys and the “agberos”.

Examples are given below to illustrate how innovative youths are in their use of pidgin.

| S/N | Pidgin Expression | Meaning |
|-----|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Wetin de sele | What is happening |
| 2 | Joo comot from road | Please excuse me |
| 3 | I go come sha | I will come anyway |
| 4 | Na baba God do am | It is the work of God |
| 5 | Everybodi don tule | Everybody has escaped |
| 6 | Yansh don dey back no be today | It is not new / strange |
| 7 | Yawa don gas | There is trouble |
| 8 | See me see wahala | I am in trouble |
| 9 | You dey make yanga | You are proud/showing off |
| 10 | You dey para | You are begging |

| | | |
|----|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 11 | You dey feel | You are pompous |
| 12 | I wan lem | I want to eat |
| 13 | You wan pai | You want to die |
| 14 | Wetin be your logo” | What is your identity/position? |
| 15 | Shine your eye o boy | Be watchful, young man |
| 16 | I beg fashy that babe | Please ignore that girl |
| 17 | Alam de blow me | I don’t have money |
| 18 | I beg maintain | Please be calm |
| 19 | We get runs | We have engagement |
| 20 | Wetin be your prize? | What do you want (as compensation) |
| 21 | Na the way you package yourself | It is the way you compose yourself |
| 22 | Wetin you dey yarn | What are you saying |
| 23 | E don tule | He has escaped |
| 24 | Si this legbere | Look at this imbecile |

The various pidgin expressions given above demonstrate how pidgin is realized. Items 1 – 5 show a fusion of English and local words or lexical items. The words ‘sele’, ‘joo’ ‘sha’ ‘baba’ and ‘tule’ as used in 1-5 are Yoruba words but have been borrowed and incorporated into the pidgin language and commonly found in youth’s pidgin. In this way, the pidgin like English and other languages locally is subjected to code mixing. There are also slangs that are incorporated into the pidgin and these especially makes the pidgin employed by youths a symbol or mark of resistance identity. Expressions such as ‘para’, ‘logo’, ‘yarn’, ‘fashy’ are examples of slangs which have crept into the pidgin and expand its lexical register.

4. Conclusion

Youth language as shown in this study has evolved through several methods which include, code mixing, code switching, lexical manipulation and borrowing. Youths also have different speech forms amongst which are, pidgin, vernacular and English. However, they are inconsistent in their use of a particular form since they easily switch from one to the other. In all, youth language has been constructed to suit the need of its users creating, for them a resistant identity which is at variance with the mainstream language. Youths have successfully redefined their position and maintained this innovative variant forms. There is therefore, a new generation of revolutionaries who are in touch with modern realities and have used language to depict the development and changes the globe is undergoing. Youth language has come to stay.

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