

Language Behavior in Lusaka: The Use of Nyanja Slang

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Abstract

The present article is aimed at discussing the various linguistic structures and lexical patterns of Nyanja Slang in the Zambian capital Lusaka. The article also examines words and phrases that are used mostly by the younger population, peddlers and call boys at bus stations, and to some extent by school going boys and girls. The study further illustrates that slang is unconventional, non-standard language that generally follows the grammatical patterns of the language from which it stems but reflects on an alternate lexicon with connotations of informality. Finally, this paper seeks to show that most slang terms stem from borrowing, a result of contact between languages; and in the case of Nyanja Slang, from contact with English and other Zambian languages.

Introduction

Social groups always tend to distinguish themselves from other groups by developing, among others things, a particular speech or language register of their own. This appears to be the sociolinguistic norm, which obviously applies to the young people. Different profession, or trade, sports or game, different cultural or social groups or even different families, have their own distinctive vocabularies which, in most cases, are incomprehensible or unfamiliar to the outsiders. So, too, a reasonable number of the Zambian public in the capital city Lusaka, particularly the younger population such as children during their plays, the call boys at bus stations, school going children among themselves, hawkers, and marketers – both young and adults, frequently use a particular body of words and expressions. These casually used words and phrases are not accepted as formal usage by the majority of Nyanja speakers, because they generally do not follow the grammatical patterns of the language from which it stems.

This phenomenon is neither new nor peculiar to Zambia. Spitulnik (1999) and Kiessling (2004) observe that throughout history, youth in African cities have been creating their own languages as a way to differentiate themselves from the older generation. In the same vein, quoting a research by Eble (1996), Mawadza (2000) argues that the youth, more than any other group in society, are “inclined to use slang terms as a way to celebrating heightened sensations and new experiences and to remaining features of their world” (Mawadza 2000: 94). And Teresa Labov (1992) notes, “Slang terms are the feature of youth culture through which identity within a subculture is advertised, if not also guaranteed” (Labov 1992: 345). From these points of view, it might be said that slang is a manifestation of youth or youthful spirit, and one might even speculate that almost all slang usages are an invention of the young.

Defining slang

Generally, slang has been referred to as “unconventional, substandard, colloquial and unwholesome language that is associated with the lower class of society” (Mawadza 2000: 93). For Partridge (1950), Slang is “a particular kind of vagabond language, always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech, but continually straying or forcing its way into the most respectable company” (Partridge 1950: 1). And Eble (1996) defines slang in terms of its social functions. She sees slang as “an ever changing set of

colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large" (Eble 1996: 11). A related but different definition is that of Fowler, who says that slang is "the diction the results from the favorite game among the young and lively of playing with words and renaming things and actions; some invent new words, or mutilate or misapply the old, for the pleasure of being in fashion" (Quoted in Partridge 1950: 2). Slang has also been regarded as subversive, although, in reality, it may simply encode a shared experience and normally functions as an alternative vocabulary to standard terms. As De Klerk argues,

Slang has until recently been neglected by linguists and romanticised by its supporters as creative and vivid, unrestricted by the chains of a standard, or viciously criticized and condemned prescriptivists as dangerously vulgar, non-standard speech. Yet it is a valid part of the linguistic competence of the individuals using it and as such deserves attention by linguists. (De Klerk 1995: 265)

It is fair to say that, though it is considered to be an 'illegitimate' and 'subversive' language or 'improper grammatical construction', slang plays the same social and communicative roles as any other language.

Reasons for slang use

Of all the fifteen reasons for slang use identified by Partridge (1950: 6-7), which include sheer high spirits, an exercise of wit or ingenuity, and many others; the one that stands out is, "the desire to break away from the conventions of the past, or even of the present, and achieve originality, if only in a small way, by using a new, or if not a new, an unconventional word or expression" (Marples 1950: 3). This reason is particularly relevant to youth slang, as it is used "as an acceptable deviance" for group members who display thereby an appropriate level of being in fashion (Harman 1985: 2). It is therefore fair to say that, for the youth, slang functions as a marker of their own identity.

Linguistic groupings in Zambia

A study by a prominent Zambian linguist Kashoki (1978a: 18) suggests that there are between 15 and 20 distinct "language groupings" in the country, the most widely spoken being Bemba, kaonde, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, Nyanja, Tonga and English. These languages are also the ones that have been officially sanctioned by the government for use in education, mass media, and government (Spitulnik 1999). English is the official national language, the primary medium of instruction in the school system, from third grade through to the University, and the daily newspapers. It is also the primary medium in the economic sector. English, Bemba, and Nyanja have the greatest number of speakers nationwide, and they serve as the country's major lingua francas (Kashoki 1978). In the Capital city of Lusaka, however, an urban variety known as Town Nyanja is pervasive (Spitulnik 1999); this variety includes "a lot of vocabulary of English origin but it also has a substantial number of loan words from Bemba, and mixes Nsenga with Cewa to a much greater extent than is commonly found in Eastern Province" (Serpell 1978: 147).

This phenomenon is attributed to the fact that, Lusaka being the capital city and the center of all national and international activities, it has naturally received people from different parts of the country, particularly from the rural areas. It should also be mentioned that, in line with the country's motto 'One Zambia One Nation', there has been since independence, a deliberate Government policy to send civil servants to other parts of the country, away from their home areas, in order to discourage ethnic cleavage.

Linguistic patterns of Nyanja slang

Like any language, slang is innovative (Eble 1996). Hence, speakers tend to create new words to refer to things, processes, and ways of behavior, for which words or phrases were not available, and in conformity with patterns already established in the language. This can be evoked to account for a substantial number of words and phrases in Nyanja Slang characterized by different grammatical patterns.

Modes of address in Nyanja slang

Although Nyanja Slang may be considered as a highly colloquial language that is below the level of standard educated speech (Partridge 1950), the youth in Lusaka, both educated and non-educated, tend to use it in order to address people. The pioneering work of Brown and Gilman (1960), which focus on pronominal forms of address, defines social relationships in terms of power and solidarity. Forms that indicate power establish who has the authority over the other. It should be noted that “power is asymmetrical because two people may not have power over each other. [In addition,] power may be demonstrated by social factors like age, status, occupation, or other fixed attributes” (Mutunda 2006: 4).

According to Geertz, “a number of words may be made to carry, in addition to their normal linguistic meaning, what might be referred to as status meaning” (Quoted in Pride and Holmes 1972: 1). When these words are used in conversation, they convey not only their fixed meaning – for instance a-mdala ‘old man’ – but also a connotative meaning concerning the status of the person being addressed. In Nyanja Slang, status can be expressed by the use of pronoun of address, for example a-mdala, ‘lit: old man’, biggy, ‘lit: big’, a-zungu, ‘lit: white people’. At bus stations or on commuter buses, attendants also known as call boys or ngwangwazi, often refer to the passengers as a-zungu ‘lit: white people’ because they are regarded as “employers”. This is due to the fact that prior to Zambia’s attainment of independence in 1964, white people were the main employers. Thus, without ‘a-zungu’ on the commuter bus, there would not be any business. The term a-zungu ‘lit: white people’ is sometimes used by peddlers or women and children hawking vegetables in the streets, in order to entice potential customers into buying their merchandises, or it may also be used to flatter an individual in order to elicit favors. Those who use the term in this way expect that the person referred to as a-zungu, will feel flattered enough to offer a reasonable tip for the service rendered. This is because, “in the colonial era, the term was associated with the popular image of the white person as being wealthy and powerful, and, therefore, likely to give generous tips to those who provided services” (Mawadza 2000: 95). It should be noted that, in Zambian languages, the prefix ‘a-’ used with a term of address is a second person plural marker used “honorifically” (Mutunda (2006).

It should be mentioned that since language is dynamic, so are the address practices. In addition, these practices often reflect linguistic and cultural changes in the way human relationships and identities are perceived. Thus, male motorists parking in Lusaka city center parking lots are referred to as a-mdala ‘lit: old man’, even though they may not be old. The concept behind the use of the term stems from the traditional notion that a-mdala ‘old man’ works and takes care of his family. Similarly, in Nyanja Slang, the motorist performs the role of ‘old man’ because he looks after the boys who take care of his car by giving them tips and is, therefore, in the same category as the head of the family who fends for his children. While male motorists are referred to as a-mdala ‘old man’, a-zungu ‘a white person’ or bigy ‘big man’, their female counterparts are rather referred to as a-mami ‘mom’, a-anti ‘aunty’, a-sisi ‘sister’ or a-pongozi ‘mother-in-law’. It may, however, be argued that these terms are gender biased and not as elevating in status as those used to refer to male motorists.

Lexical borrowing

Perhaps the apt introduction to the content of this section of the paper is to look at the concept of linguistic borrowing. Eble (1996) sees borrowing as a process in which “one language variety acquires a new lexical item from another language variety, either a dialect or a foreign language” (Eble 1996: 74). Kashoki (1978b) underscores this point when he states that, “by ‘loanword’, ‘borrowed word’ or ‘adoptive’ (terms which are used interchangeably), reference is here made to that item borrowed or adopted from one language (whether similar or dissimilar) into another which has a reasonable degree of permanence in the recipient language” (Kashoki 1978b: 82).

Evidence suggests that most slang terms originate from borrowing because languages do not exist in a vacuum. They, or more accurately their speakers have come into contact with other languages and dialects. It is also a well-established fact that when two or more languages come into contact, they influence each other. As Robins (1971) opines, “Whenever there are cultural contacts of any sort between the speakers of different languages, and this means virtually everywhere, speakers will make use of words from other languages to refer to things, processes, and ways of behavior, organization, or thinking

for which words or phrases were not available or convenient in their own language hitherto” (Robins 1971: 235). In their study on street language in the Netherlands, Appel and Schoonen (2005) make a similar observation; they argues that, “Generally, when languages are in contact, they influence each other [although] this influence is not always bidirectional. The direction is in most cases from the prestigious, dominant language towards the nonprestigious, subordinate language” (Appel & Schoonen 2005: 87). Thus, I can say that because English was the language of government and business in pre-independence Zambia, borrowing from English by indigenous languages was considerable during the colonial era and after. As a matter of fact, the incorporation into indigenous languages of a large corpus of English loanwords was considered by most individuals in urban cities as “a social device for asserting their superiority” (Lehmann 1973). Nyanja Slang has also been influenced by not English only, but also Bemba, Nsenga and Cewa (Kashoki 1978b). In a paper on borrowing, Haugen (1972) defines it as “The process of adoption, for the speaker does adopt elements from a second language into his own” (Haugen 1972: 81). Examples of borrowing abound in Nyanja Slang, the most common being the assimilation of English words and others from Zambian or African languages. This results from linguistic and even cultural contact with the British colonialists as well as immigration of people from different provinces into the capital in search of employment or a better future.

Nyanja Slang has numerous phonologically and morphologically assimilated words from English. Most of these words carry very minimal or no social significance as “new” or “urban” (Spitulnik 1999: 45). Their adoption into Nyanja Slang follows the widespread and well- known pattern of borrowing words that denotes “material objects and/or concepts of the lending culture [which] have been accepted by and become widely familiar to the speakers of the language in the recipient culture” (Kashoki 1978b: 87). The following are examples of Nyanja Slang words that stem from English and some Zambian languages:

<i>bigy</i> ‘big’	<i>gelo</i> ‘girl’
<i>trauzi</i> ‘trousers’/ ‘pants’	<i>deda</i> ‘be dead/die’
<i>sistele</i> ‘sister’	<i>bokosi</i> ‘box’
<i>talalizo</i> (Bemba ‘talala’) ‘cold/iced drink’	<i>gaiz</i> ‘guy’
<i>ndimba</i> (Bemba ‘cilimba’) ‘radio’	<i>hafu</i> ‘half’
<i>pini</i> ‘pin’	<i>motooka</i> ‘motorcar’
<i>boi</i> ‘boy’	<i>draiva</i> ‘driver’
<i>geta</i> ‘get’	<i>sate</i> ‘thirty’
<i>chi-kopo</i> ‘cup/cane’	<i>trasita</i> ‘trust’
<i>fastele</i> ‘fast’	<i>igoigo</i> ‘eagle-eagle’ (a hawker)
<i>bondi</i> ‘bond’ (a house)	

ba- some of us ‘the some of us’: this term is used by uneducated youth to refer to university students who, often time, address anyone in English.

To put this pattern of borrowing into perspective, consider the following conversation between two friends, one is asking his friend to pay back the money he borrowed. The loan words have been underlined:

Nyanja Slang

A. boi, uli bwa?

B. *ah, slow slow, nanga ma-hafu yanga?*

A. *nikalibe ku-geta, ukabwele pa sate nizaka ku cashinga.*

B. *iyai, sini ku-trasita.*

Standard Nyanja

A. *Boy* ('lit: friend'), *how are you?*

B. *pangono pangono, nanga ndalama zanga zili kuti?* ('lit: a little bit fine, but where is my money?').

A. *nikalibe kulandila, ukabwele pa kusila kwa mwezi nika kupase.* ('lit: I haven't been paid yet, come back when I get paid on the 30th so I can give/cash you the money.

B. *iyai, si-ndi ku-kulupilila* ('lit: No, I do not trust you').

Some Nyanja Slang words exhibit a highly productive pattern of incorporating

English words with the generic plural prefix *ma-*; for example, *marulz* (rules), *magaiz* (guys), *mageuz* (girls), *maflawaz* (flowers), *maegesi* (eggs). The double plural forms can be contrasted with other assimilated loan words such as *matrabo* 'troubles', *mashati* 'shirts', *maglas* 'glasses', *maseting* 'settings', which do not retain the English plural suffix. Sometimes, English language phonology tends to be preserved more, rather than undergoing a fuller assimilation to Nyanja phonological patterns. Consider the following utterances:

Bana mu cita discharge mu maten awas 'They discharged him at ten hours [today]' or 'he was discharged this morning at 10 hours'

Sometimes cifunika kukonka tradition 'Sometimes it is necessary to adhere to tradition'

However, not all borrowed or loaned words are English based, others originate from local languages such as Bemba. For instance: *ana-gula ndimba* 'he bought a radio'; *ndimba* is a lexical transformation of the Bemba noun *ichilimba* (radio).

Finally, besides loaning and mixing, Nyanja Slang also has a great deal of linguistic innovation within Nyanja itself. The following are examples of innovativeness:

Iyi motoka ni ikali

'This car is really beautiful!' [lit: 'This car is really fierce']

Nagwamo

'I am leaving' [lit: 'I am falling down.']

Kalazi (in standard Nyanja: mukazi)

'beautiful and attractive girl'

Banazo

'thief' (from the Nyanja infinitive form *kuba* 'steal')

These innovations follow standard Nyanja grammatical patterns. Many involve creating metaphorical extensions of existing words. For example, an adjective that is applied to animals in standard Nyanja (-kali 'fierce') becomes a praise word for commodities in Nyanja Slang. The idea of "falling down" (-gwa) is metaphorically extended to capture the way one disappears from sight as one leaves.

Metaphorical extension

As a fundamental aspect of the human communication (Beck 1978), metaphor is common in Nyanja slang as it is in other languages. Metaphor has the potential to push the boundaries of human thought and experience. According to Kittay (1987):

Metaphors are conceptual and provide members of a linguistic community with structure for perceiving and understanding the world. The cognitive force of metaphor comes not from providing new information about the world, rather from a (re)conceptualization of information that is already available to us. (Kittay 1987: 2-3)

Having claimed so much for the metaphor, I must now attempt to define it and describe the process involved in its formation. In Ogden and Richard's view, a metaphor is a primitive abstraction. It involves referring to a set of concrete relationships in one situation for the purpose of facilitating the recognition of an analogous set of relations in another situation. Metaphorical language thus borrows a part of one context, by identifying its abstract form, and applies it to another group of things that is less easily understood (Ogden and Richard 1960: 213). Metaphor can thus "provide . . . new sudden and striking collocations of references for the sake of the compound effects of contrast, conflict, harmony . . . or [be] used more simply to modify and adjust emotional tone . . . through association" (Ogden and Richard 1960: 240). In a similar vein, Kittay (1987) posits that "metaphor is a primary way in which we accommodate and assimilate information and experience to our conceptual organization of the world. In particular, it is the primary way we accommodate new experience. Hence, it is at the source of our capacity to learn and at the center of our creative thought" (Kittay 1987: 39). According to Bonvillain (1993), "Metaphors are based on unstated comparisons between entities or events that share certain referential features of similarity while ignoring those of contrast." (Bonvillain 1993: 72). The essential nature of metaphor, then, is that it juxtaposes elements of a concrete image in order to formulate some set of more abstract relationships.

In Nyanja, the most obvious set of metaphoric words applies to the linkage of animal characteristics to human ones. A clear illustration is the transfer of a name from an animal to a person such as galu 'dog'. In Nyanja, the term galu, when used metaphorically, connotes debased personality, namely, one whose behavior is similar to that of a dog. One other illustration is the use of word igoigo 'eagle-eagle' to describe hawkers because they solicit business by moving from place to place – like eagles – in search of customers. In the same light, a person who has been sold some thing at a much higher price will tell the peddler mufana, w-a-ni luma 'young man, you have bitten me'. In this case, the high price of the merchandise is likened to the bite of say a snake. Thus, words acquire broader or extended meaning through metaphor; this is particularly so in Nyanja Slang. In one other instance, the slang word kapeta 'a bender', refers to a physically strong man with a well built up body, and who can easily beat up or "bend" a person like a piece of steal. In the same light, one may hear a call boy saying niza ku naya 'I will cook you', meaning 'I'll beat you up'. The term bokosi yamfa literally means 'the coffin of death'. This term is used for any vehicle, because it is assumed that one may die in a car crash while driving, thus a vehicle is associated with "a moving coffin". In another instance, one may say of a drunk person a-yaka 's/he is lightened up'.

Another example is the use of the word munda 'field' to refer to a place of work where one earns a living, just as farmer earn their living from cultivating their fields. Yet another example is the word tulo 'sleep' which is used negatively to refer to someone whose reasoning ability is low or somebody who is not smart enough. Thus, after stealing from somebody, a pick-pocket may say uja gayi niwatulo 'that guy/man is sleepy (not careful, dumb), he couldn't even see me stealing his money'. One other metaphorical instance is when, after having a successful deal, someone says yapasa which literary means 'it has passed'. Meanwhile, people with high social status are referred to as apamwamba, which literally means 'those on the top of the social ladder'. This term is used to refer to the wealthy people who live mainly in affluent residential areas known as mayadi (the yards), they include companies' Chief Executive Officers, managers and the like. The term apamwamba also refers to the highest level of the political hierarchy in

Zambian government structure. Alternatively, the term akulu akulu 'lit: big people' can be used to refer to people occupying high positions in government or a political party. The term apamwamba has replaced the colonial period's term azungu, which applied to those who used to live in the yards – the Europeans or whites in general. Lastly, ku-siya 'lit: to leave behind' is metaphorically used to mean 'die'. For example, one time I heard a high school student asking his classmate why he had not been coming to school, the latter responded: tenze na malilo, a-mbuye ana-ti siya 'we had a funeral, my grand-father/mother left us'. Nowadays, several businesses are run by Asians who are referred to as a-mwenye which literally means 'aliens' or 'strangers'.

Use of metonymy

Another common feature of Nyanja is the use of metonymy. According to Bonvillain (1993: 75), metonymy is a type of semantic transfer in which one entity is taken to stand for another on the basis of contextual relationship. In Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) opinion, metonymy allows us to make reference by association. It makes us conceptualize one thing by relating it to something else (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:30). For example, in ordinary Nyanja language, the word kwanja means 'hand', but when used metonymically, the word signifies 'help someone perform a certain task'. In the same way, mulomo means 'a lip', but when someone says ndiwe wa mulomo, it does not mean 'you have a lip', it rather implies that the person being referred to is talkative or s/he 'has a big mouth'.

Phonological innovation

Equally evident in Nyanja slang is the use of phonology. Eble (1996) points to the fact that "the role of phonology as a productive impetus in slang should not be underestimated. Manipulating sounds for fun is consistent with the flippant, venturesome spirit of much slang use" (Eble 1996: 39). In other words, in any language, merely putting sounds together can form new words. One such phonological innovation is onomatopoeia.

Onomatopoeia or imitation of sound accounts for some slang terms in Nyanja. The following examples are offered illustrations of echoism: vaya 'car'; boma 'policeman'. The slang term vaya stems from the sound produced by a car; while the word igoigo derives from the shout that peddlers make to attract the attention of potential customers. Thus, particular sounds may themselves correlate with particular meaning. Onomatopoeia is an attempt to replicate the perceived sound phonetically.

Other forms

Another interesting facet of Nyanja slang is affixation by prefixes and suffixes. According to Eble (1996: 32), affixation allows language opportunities to develop open-ended sets of words. The following words are a good example of this pattern in Nyanja slang:

Affixation	Origin	Gloss
Madalaz	Madala	Elderly people
Talalizo	Talala (loaned from Bemba)	Cold/iced
Jobaz	Job	
Luzek	Lusaka	Lusaka (city name)

Equally evident in Nyanja slang is how, sometimes, in the words of Eble, "sounds are eliminated from words without an immediate change in meaning" (Eble 1996: 35). Here are a few illustrative examples:

Shortened Form	Origin	Gloss
Stone	Livingstone	City name
Chez	Matches (Eng.)	Object name
Uli bwa?	Uli bwanji?	How are you?
Nicha?	Nichani?	What?
Ali ku?	Ali kuti?	Where is s/he?

Conclusion

This article has attempted to discuss some of the most common ways in which slang words evolve in Nyanja as well as the various forms they take. Most words are formed from the already existing ones. These include, among others, lexical borrowing or word mixing, phonological process, metaphorical extensions, metonymy, affixation and word shortening. It has been found that slang words in Nyanja generally stem from English, the phenomenon attributed to colonization. However, other words originate from contact between Nyanja speakers and people from different parts on Zambia who come to Lusaka mainly for economic motives. This phenomenon supports earlier studies by sociolinguists, which argue that each time two or more languages come into contact, they tend to impact on each other. It is also worth mentioning that the use of slang by young people in Lusaka is not discriminative or exclusive, it is rather one way to identify themselves in their multilingual society. Finally, the description of Nyanja slang is not exhaustive because, language is dynamic and, like every young people anywhere in the world, the youth in Lusaka will continue creating new slang vocabulary.

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