

HARARE SHONA SLANG: A LINGUISTIC STUDY

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Abstract

This article discusses the linguistic origins and forms of Shona slang and examines words and phrases that are used casually in Harare. It illustrates that slang is informal 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, the article seeks to demonstrate that most slang terms originate from borrowing, a result of language contact with English and other African languages.

INTRODUCTION

Harare Shona slang is the body of words and expressions frequently used by a rather large portion of the general Harare public but which are not accepted as formal usage by the majority. According to Flexner, 'Slang is vivid, forceful and [more] expressive than standard usage. It often avoids the sentimentality and formality older words often assume'.¹ For Eble, 'Slang is an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use so as to establish group identity and solidarity'.² In this article, the term is used to denote a non-standard language composed of metaphors and new words or words that take a new meaning. To put it differently, slang refers to non-standard terms or non-standard usage of standard terms.

Slang is a linguistic style that occupies an extreme position on the spectrum of formality. Slang is a kind of informal language that is regarded as being below standard and correct usage and is socially less acceptable. There are characteristics that have been used to delimit slang, but these may be often the result of prejudice and misunderstanding. For example, slang has often been referred to as 'colloquial' and has also been characterised as 'taboo, vulgar and derogatory'. It is often misunderstood as a substandard and unwholesome language that is associated with the lower classes of society. For Partridge and Foerster and Steadman, slang is 'a substitute for good diction, demonstrating poor vocabulary and

1 Flexner, S. B. and H. Wentworth (1975) *Dictionary of American Slang* (New York, Crowell), vii.

2 Eble, C. (1996) *Slang and Sociability* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press), 11.

critical ability'.³ It has also sometimes been regarded as subversive, even though, in reality, it may, often, simply encode a shared experience and normally functions as an alternative vocabulary replacing standard terms with more forceful or interesting versions, just for the fun of it. 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 criticised and condemned by 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.⁴

Despite the large number of slang expressions that the Shona know and the frequency with which slang expressions are used, Shona slang has received little empirical attention. Chimhundu briefly examines Shona slang and refers to it as 'Town Shona'. He notes that slang is transient and is generally used by in-groups, particularly among the youth.⁵

Speculating on why slang has not been subjected to serious scholarly analysis, Grossman argued that 'The neglect of slang as a topic for research may be the result of such factors as the belief that slang use changes rapidly or that slang is not standard language'.⁶ It is equally contented here that slang has not been subjected to serious scholarly analysis because it has been regarded as deviant vocabulary that is often associated with marginalised groups. This article analyses the socio-linguistic origins of Shona slang and attempts to offer insights into the structure of slang to reveal what is peculiar about slang and how it relates to the Shona phonological and morphological system. The slang lexicon analysed in this study comes from a number of conversations with speakers of Shona slang.

Research by Eble, De Klerk, and Chimhundu has established that the greatest number of slang terms are used by the youth, the group in society most inclined to celebrating heightened sensations and new experiences and to renaming features of their world. As Teresa Labov notes, 'Slang terms are the feature of youth culture through which identity within a subculture is advertised, if not also guaranteed'.⁷ Some linguists

3 Foerster, N. and Steadman J. (1941) *Writing and Thinking* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin); Partridge, E. (1993) *Slang Today and Yesterday* (London, Macmillan).

4 De Klerk, V. (1995) "Slang in South African English", in Rajend Mesthrie (ed.), *Language and Social History* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, David Philip), 265.

5 Chimhundu, H. (1993) "Adoption and Adaptation in Shona" (D.Phil thesis, University of Zimbabwe), 13.

6 Grossman, A. L. (1997) "Gender differences and sexism in knowledge and use of slang", in *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 37(2), pp. 101-110.

7 Eble, *Slang and Sociability*; De Klerk, "Slang in South African English", and Chimhundu, "Adoption and Adaptation in Shona"; Labov, T. "Social and language boundaries among adolescents", in *American Speech* (1992), 345.

also believe that men use slang more than women do. However, in appropriate situations, anyone of any socio-economic or educational status can use slang. Indeed, as Eble argues, 'Most slang words arise productively; that is, in conformity with patterns already established in the language'.⁸ Slang exploits existing forms and their current meanings in various ways, drawing on and often mixing resources from the sound system, the word building processes, paradigms and the speaker's knowledge of the culture.

FORMS OF ADDRESS IN SHONA SLANG AND THEIR LINGUISTIC ORIGINS

In a pioneering work on pronouns of address, Brown and Gilman defined social relationships in terms of power and solidarity. Forms that indicate power establish who has authority and how much that authority is.⁹ 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'.¹⁰ When these words are used in conversation, they convey not only their fixed meaning (for example, *mudhara* 'old man') but also a connotative meaning concerning the status of the person being addressed. Shona slang is able to mark status by the choice of pronoun in address, for example *mudhara*, 'lit: old man', *bigaz*, 'lit: big', *varungu*, 'lit: white people'. Passengers on a commuter bus are often referred to as *varungu* 'lit: white people' because they are regarded as "employers". This stems from the fact that white people were, for the most part, the employers in the colonial period. Thus without '*varungu*' on the commuter bus, there would be no business. The term *murungu* 'lit. white person' is sometimes also used to flatter an individual in order to elicit favours. Those who use the term in this manner expect that the person referred to as *murungu*, will feel flattered enough to offer a big tip for the service rendered. This is because, in the colonial period, 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.

Because, according to Mashiri, 'addressing practices are dynamic and they reflect linguistic, political and cultural changes in the way human relationships and identities are perceived',¹¹ male motorists parking their cars in parking lots in Harare are often referred to as

8 Eble, *Slang and Sociability*, 25.

9 Brown, R. and A. Gilman (1960) "The pronouns of power solidarity", in T. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press).

10 Geertz, C. "Linguistic etiquette" in J. B. Pride and J. Holmes (eds.) (1972) *Sociolinguistics* (Penguin Books).

11 Mashiri, P. "Terms of address in Shona: A socio-linguistic approach", in *Zambezia*, XXVI, (i) (1999), 93.

mudhara 'lit: old man', even though they may not, in fact, be old. The concept behind the usage of the term originates from the traditional notion that *mudhara* 'old man' works and fends for his family. In Shona slang, the concept of *mudhara* performs the same function because the motorist patron 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. The terms *mudhara*, *bigaz*, *varungu* are elevating in status and connote a higher status for the people so addressed. Women, on the other hand, are referred to as *sista* 'lit: sister' or *ambuya* 'lit: mother in law'. Neither of these terms is elevating in status, suggesting that slang may have gendered dimensions about which research still needs to be done.

BORROWING

Evidence suggests that most slang terms originate from borrowing, a result of language contact with English and other African languages. Languages and dialects normally do not exist in a vacuum. They, or more accurately their speakers, have come into contact with other languages and dialects. It is a well-established fact that, when two or more languages come into contact, they influence each other. Thus, because English was the language of government and business in pre-independence Zimbabwe, borrowing from English by indigenous languages was considerable during the colonial period and after. Shona slang has also been influenced by Ndebele, the second major indigenous language spoken in Zimbabwe by about 15% of the population, principally in the south-west of Zimbabwe. Haugen defines borrowing as 'the attempted reproduction in one language of patterns previously found in another'.¹² Examples of borrowing abound in Shona slang. The most common form is direct borrowing, a process whereby words are fully or partially assimilated to the Shona phonological and morphological system.

A major characteristic of borrowing is the "nativisation" of the borrowed term through integrating it more firmly into the linguistic structure of the receiving language. The most important 'nativisation' process involves phonology. Thus, when faced with a foreign sound that does not exist in the language, the most natural thing to do is to substitute it with the most similar native language sound. Phonological "nativisation" is sensitive to phonological structure. Thus Shona slang "nativises" some foreign borrowings to make them conform to constraints imposed by Shona syllable structures. As a result, slang borrowings in Shona are

12 Haugen, E. (1950) "The analysis of linguistic borrowing", in Hengerford, P., Saporta, S. and McCormick, W. (eds), *Ecology of Language* (California, Stanford University Press), 212.

consistently reshaped to conform to Shona syllable structure, which mostly tolerates the Consonant Vowel (CV) shape. However, some slang words do not conform to Shona syllable structure constraints. Such words end in a consonant for example, *finaz* 'funeral'. The following are examples of Shona slang words that originate from English and some African languages:

<i>bigaz</i> 'big'	<i>geliza</i> 'girl'	<i>boyz</i> 'boy'	<i>mafella</i> 'fellows'
<i>waya</i> '\$100'	<i>pini</i> 'pin'	<i>dhombi</i> 'dollar'	<i>monaz</i> 'morning'
<i>taimi</i> 'time'	<i>tonaz</i> 'town'	<i>dhawezi</i> 'down'	<i>Halemu</i> 'Harare'
<i>kulazi</i> 'cool'	<i>chilaz</i> 'chill'	<i>coldaz</i> 'cold'	<i>finaz</i> 'funeral'
<i>filaz</i> 'refrigerator'	<i>tolaz</i> 'tall'	<i>vhati vaat</i> (Afrikaans) 'water'	
<i>kugula ukugula</i> (Ndebele), 'be sick'		<i>kumala kumala</i> (Chewa), 'to die'	

METAPHORICAL EXTENSION

The use of metaphor as a linguistic tool is common in formal Shona as it is in other languages. Metaphor has the potential to push the boundaries of human thought and experience. According to Kittay,

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)conceptualisation of information that is already available to us.¹³

In Eble's view, 'Metaphor names one thing by something in another domain, calling forth a likeness or analogy between things that are fundamentally different.' Thus, in English, the data storage capacity of a computer is called memory because of its resemblance to the human mental faculty, while a list of alternative directives in a computer programme is referred to as a *menu* because the listing and choice of features are similar to the method of selecting food and drink in a restaurant.¹⁴

Similarly, in Shona, the most obvious set of metaphoric words applies to the linkage of animal characteristics to human ones. A clear example is the transfer of a name from an animal to a person such as *imbwa* 'dog'. In Shona, the term *imbwa*, when used metaphorically, connotes a debased personality, namely, one whose behaviour is akin to that of a dog. Thus,

¹³ Kittay, E. (1987) *Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* (Oxford, Clarendon Press), 2-3.

¹⁴ Eble, *Slang and Sociability*, 68.

words acquire new and broader meanings through metaphor. This is particularly so in Shona slang which, according to Mashuta, 'characteristically employs metaphor to describe many different kinds of events'.¹⁵

For example, the slang word *chidhina* 'a 'brick', refers to a cell-phone because the shape and features of a cell-phone resemble those of a brick. *Chidhina* refers to a physically big and cheap cell-phone. Conversely, a smaller and more expensive cell-phone is referred to as *chimbeva*. The term *chimbeva* originates from the Shona name for mouse, namely *mbeva*. Because *mbeva* is a highly appreciated delicacy in some Shona communities, its qualities are, thus, associated with the smaller, delicate and expensive cellular phone. The term is assigned into a noun class by being prefixed with /*chi-*/. Similarly, the term *madziro* 'wall' has been metaphorically extended to refer to the Automatic Teller Machine (ATM) because cash-dispensing machines are usually located on the wall of a building. The term is also used to refer to a film or a movie because it is shown on a screen mounted on the theatre wall. Another term for the ATM is *madyirapanze* 'lit: one who eats outside', implying that one can collect money outside, *panze* without having to enter the bank. In normal Shona usage, the word *madyirapanze* is a praise name for the Gumbo totem. In Shona slang, therefore, the metaphor *madyirapanze* enhances its meaning by a cultural allusion.

Yet another example is the use of the word *munda* 'field' to refer to the work place where one earns a living, just as a farmer earns his living from his field. Similarly, clear beer is referred to as *mafuta endege* 'fuel for the aeroplane'. Aeroplane fuel is expensive and so is clear beer. Conversely, opaque beer is called *mafuta etractor* 'fuel for the tractor' because it is cheap in much the same way as diesel is cheaper than petrol. Meanwhile, people of high social standing are often referred to as *province*, as in the expression "*Tatsikwa neProvince*" 'We have been visited by our superiors'. The term *province* refers to the highest level of the political hierarchy in Zimbabwe's ruling party's national organisational structure. In Shona slang, however, the word's meaning has been extended to mean those who are senior in terms of social standing. Lastly, *kusimuka* 'lit: to stand up' or, metaphorically, 'to ascend to heaven' is used to mean 'death'.

OTHER FORMS

Another common characteristic of Shona is the use of metonymy. According to Bonvillain, metonymy refers to a type of semantic transfer

15 Mashuta, A. (1997) "The Linguistic Structure of Slang in Shona Discourse" (MA Dissertation, University of Florida), 21.

whereby one entity is taken to stand for another on the basis of some contextual relationship.¹⁶ Metonymy triggers semantic shifts of various types and degrees throughout the lexicon. Associations between entities may be of various types, including substitution of part of an object to represent the whole. An example in ordinary language is the use of the body part *ruoko* 'hand' to signify 'help in performing work'. In Shona slang, metonymy accounts for the term *muface* 'acquaintance', as in *muface wangu*, 'my acquaintance'. This is one example in which case one object 'face' stands for another, 'acquaintance', with which it is contextually related. Thus metonymy narrows the semantic focus by highlighting one aspect of an entity.

Equally evident in Shona slang is the use of phonology. Eble states that, in any language, merely putting sounds together can form new words. Consequently, '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.'¹⁷

Onomatopoeia or imitation accounts for some slang terms in Shona. The following are examples: *mungonjo* 'policeman'; and *vhuzhi* 'car'. The slang term *vhuzhi* originates from the sound produced by a car, while the word *mungonjo* derives from the sound produced by policemen's handcuffs as they are affixed to one's wrists. Thus, particular sounds may themselves correlate with particular meanings. Onomatopoeia is an attempt to replicate the perceived sound phonetically. Meanwhile, some Shona slang originates from reversal of meaning of standard Shona words. For instance, *kuipa* 'to be bad' has undergone a reversal of meaning in slang to mean 'to be good'. This denotes opposition in meaning and is often referred to as antonym. The use of *kuipa* as a transliteration of 'to be bad' meaning 'to be good' is similar to the use of the term 'bad' in Black American English to mean the opposite, as in Michael Jackson's popular song 'I am bad'. Although the nature of the correlation is not easy to establish, this may be a general characteristic of African slang shared by slang and Ebonics. It is believed that Ebonics is a language with roots in West African linguistic forms.

Another interesting facet of Shona slang is how, sometimes, in the words of Eble, 'sounds are eliminated from words without an immediate change in meaning'.¹⁸

The following words are a good example of this pattern in Shona slang:

16 Bonvillain, N. (1993) *Language, Culture and Communication* (Prentice Books), 75.

17 Eble, *Slang and Sociability*, 39.

18 *Ibid.*, 35.

Shortened Form	Origin	Gloss
Kulez	Sekuru	Grandfather
Gulez	Amaiguru	Mother's elder sister or elder brother's wife
Kambum	Kambuzuma	Kambuzuma (place name)
Fiyo	Highfield	Highfield (place name)
Bluz	Bulawayo	Bulawayo (place name)
Mfombi	Mufakose	Mufakose (place name)

The shortened forms are less formal than the longer sources from which they originate. As such, they convey a casual attitude towards the subject. When terms are shortened in Shona slang, parts of words are eliminated from the beginning, as in *sekuru* > *kulez* and *amaiguru* > *gulez*. A frequent patterning with the shortened form is the change of /r/ to /l/ and the addition of /-z/ word finally.

It has also been observed that some Shona slang words originate from standard Shona words and they do not shift in denotation in slang usage. However, they occur with some structural changes as is illustrated below.

Slang	Origin	Gloss
Kudhambi	Kudhara	Long ago
Sikateni	Masikati	Afternoon
Chinhaweni	Manheru	Evening
Bhaleki	Bhawa	Bar

While most new words recycle words or parts of words that are already in the language, some Shona slang words seem to have originated through coinage.

Slang	Gloss
Masororo/masolazi	Cents
Chimoko/chikoso	Girl
Mudhoni	Child
Jest/jembi	Sadza
Katidza	Tea
Mbongo	Money

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to show some of the ways in which slang words originate in Shona as well as the forms that they take. Its findings generally support earlier studies, which argue that in language, most words are formed productively, namely, through processes already established in the language. Borrowing, phonological processes, semantic shift, metaphorical extensions, metonymy, and antonym play a crucial role in the formation of the slang lexicon in Shona. The description of Shona slang given in this article is by no means complete. There remain several issues that still require analysis. For instance, the question of gender differences in the knowledge and use of slang, which was referred to only in passing in this article, needs to be investigated in order to provide fuller understanding of variations in the use of slang between men and women.