

A Linguistic Analysis of the Language of Sex Workers in Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper attempted a linguistic analysis of the language of interaction and negotiation among commercial sex workers in Port Harcourt City, Nigeria. It aimed at understanding the language of sex workers by first seeking to understand their lifestyle. To achieve balance, the paper anchored on Yule's English Word Formation Theory, Jakobson's Functions of Language Theory and Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory, as well as rested on the basic foundation of language-gender relations and feminist ideologies. The paper adopted the qualitative research method of data-gathering and investigated/interpreted the foregrounded features in the language of the sex workers and their clients, using the word formation process, functions of language, and the rhetorical analysis. The study finds that the language of commercial sex workers in Port Harcourt City, Nigeria, is largely pedestrian, pidginized and highly infused with slang, jargons and symbolic terms that are highly connotative but mutually intelligible among the sex workers and between them and their clients.

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Introduction

An effective speaker is one who employs different techniques and words that are appropriate in a specific context. This is to say, the context of language use determines the linguistic features and techniques that are employed in expressing the content that is shared by the language users. The context of language usage, most often, is a sociological, as well as a cultural, phenomenon. The culture of a society largely determines the nature of the language of the society. This is in line with Ferdinand de Saussure's notion, "language constitutes our world, it doesn't just record it or label it." From this, there is a paradoxical outlook in the relationship between language and society: Language is a product of society; society is a product of language. Whichever way you choose to look at it, the fact remains, "language...drives social attitudes, rather than simply expressing them." (inews.co.uk); and in the words of Rana and Moh (2011:51), "Language can also be talked as a medium to maintain cultural differences; it also acts as a major vehicle for the transmission of cultural beliefs and values."

Ogdoc-Gascon et al (2) observe, "One aspect of culture of a group of people that the foreign colonizer has taken influence of is their language." Thus, to understand a group of people is first to seek to understand their language; and to understand the language of a group is to understand the kind of life they live. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to seek to understand the language of sex workers by first seeking to understand their lifestyle. More specifically, the paper attempts a linguistic analysis of the language of interaction and negotiation among commercial sex workers in Port Harcourt City, Nigeria.

Language – Gender Relation in Linguistic Studies

While echoing J. Coates (1996) on the subject of language –gender relation in linguistic studies, Brzozowska (2002:2) extensively observes:

the first researchers were focused on the analysis of phonetic, phonemic, morphological and syntactic characteristics of the male and female talk. The essential approach and the qualitative methods dominated the 60s and the 70s. Class and age differences were studied and only then sex appeared as relevant and was examined more carefully.

On their part, Rana and Moh (2011:49) observe;

Since the mid 1970's research on language and sex has concentrated on the role

Language plays in the location and maintenance of women in disadvantage position in society. It also seeks to elucidate the role of language in defining, construction and reproducing gendered identities, as well as the role of gender in the perception and production of language.

This observation of Rana and Moh implies a bias examination of the role of language in gender issues. More balanced studies of the role of language in gender issues were later done by scholars, as observed by J. Coates and re-echoed by Brzozowska: "...in the 70s and 80s, the cultural aspects of gender began to become important, together with the preference of the use of qualitative methods." And,

In the last years of the 20th century social constructionism allowed to combine

quantitative and qualitative methods. Authors not only describe male and female languages but also tried

to find an explanation of the characteristics using such terms as ‘covert prestige’, ‘social and intergroup relations’, ‘economic factors’ or the needs of ‘linguistic market’. Conversational strategies such as politeness, comments, apologies, orders, swearing, silencing, interruptions or introductions of new subjects were analyzed leading to the conclusion of different communicative competence developed by men and women using separate conversational styles.

On their part, Rana and Moh (2011:4) observe:

More recent researches on sociolinguistic variation have revealed that sex was investigated as an independent variable, along with social status, style, age and ethnicity. For example, women’s language has been said to reflect their conversativeness, prestige, consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurture, emotional expressivity and sensitivity to others, solidarity while men’s language is heard as evincing their toughness, independence, competence, hierarchy and control.

In the same vein, Coates (1996) and Brzozowska (2002) also observe the more balanced studies and continuous evolution/metamorphoses of language in gender issues among scholars: “Later, their interests were concentrated on conversational strategies of mixed groups and finally the same sex discussion participants were observed.” (2).

Despite the huge temptation, we may not pursue this line of argument any further due to constraints of time and space; but there is need for us to examine some supporting theories that may enable us to achieve a balance linguistic analysis of the language of commercial sex workers in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Theories for Linguistic Analysis

1. Yule’s English Word Formation Theory

“The ‘word formation process’, according to Yule, is the investigation of the steps on how new expressions evolve in language.” It “expand the array of terms, thereby generating new lexicons” (284). By extension to our present analytical exercise, Yule’s theory presupposes evolution or emergence of new terminologies in the expressions of any special people group. This is undeniable as far as the language of commercial sex workers is concerned. This is the very essence of our linguistic investigation. It follows therefore that we shall in our analysis investigate how new expressions and vocabularies evolve or emerge among sex workers.

2. Jakobson’s Functions of Language Theory

Jakobson’s function of language proposition recognizes certain essentials for facilitation of communication ...the context, the addresser or the sender, the addressee or the receiver, the contact, the common code, and the message. Each factor is the focal point of a relation or function that operates between the message and the factor. The functions are referential, emotive, conative, phatic, poetic and metalingual (Ogdoc-Gascon et al, 12). (284).

Jakobson’s theory presupposes that language is not used in a vacuum and for the fun of it, but for performing particular functions and that its usage are based on particular factors both of which go to determine the characteristic nature and features of the language. Thus, for us to carry out a plausible investigation of the language of commercial sex workers, we must put into consideration the function(s) that the language is meant to perform, as well as the factors that informed the language in the first place.

3. Aristotle’s Rhetorical Theory

“Aristotle’s Rhetorical Theory focuses on techniques of using language effectively and persuasively in spoken forms.” (13) (284).

Aristotle defines the rhetorical theory as a means of persuasion. It is the study of how audiences are affected by emotion and reason in the character of the speaker. Rhetorics evaluates a speech according to how effectively a speaker in a certain opinion or information to an audience is either one person or group of a certain situation. (285).

Aristotle’s theory apparently focuses on both the purpose and effect of language usage, in the sense that, for language to fulfill its dual responsibility of achieving its purpose and creating its expected effect, it must be appealing enough; and for language to be appealing enough, to make any impact, it must be persuasive enough; and this is where rhetorics come in. Thus, in our investigation of the language of commercial sex workers, we must also critically look at the rhetorical devices that sex workers employ in order to seduce and win over their clients for patronage.

Linguistic Research Methodology in the Analysis of the Language of Negotiation of Commercial Sex Workers

Rana and Moh (2011:49-50) observe that two methodologies of Linguistic enquiries have primarily been employed in the field of language and gender as a whole:

1. Investigation of phonetic and morphosyntactic variation; and
2. Discourse/conversation analysis

Our task here is not to say whether Rana and Moh are right or wrong regarding the number of methodologies that have been employed for linguistic investigation in language and gender issue; rather, we are to adopt a suitable methodology for analyzing the language of negotiation of commercial sex workers in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Ogdod-Gascon et al (2015) who carried out a similar study on the language of negotiation of sex workers in Cebu City, Philippines, adopted the discourse/conversation analysis methodology; and we are taking a cue from them along that line. Specifically, Ogdod-Gascon et al's (2015) research utilizes the qualitative research method in data-gathering and the structural analysis of conversations using the word formation process, functions of language, and the rhetorical analysis for interpreting data (285). Here, we are also adopting the qualitative research method in data-gathering in which we are investigating such features in the expressions of sex workers and their clients as pidgin, slang, cursing and swearing, and lewd and obscene language.

Ogdod-Gascon et al's (2015) sources of verbal data come through referral – 20 sex workers in Cebu City – recorded conversations during negotiations with customers. (285). On our part, we gathered our data by interacting with prostitutes and their clients in 6 brothels in different parts of Port Harcourt, and getting them to record the conversations of their negotiations for our study. Four of the recorded conversations are presented below for our study.

Data 1: Soliciting Scene

Sex Worker: Daddy/Old boy, come, I be good market. Fine man come, how far now, how you dey? Wetin you want; short time or day break?

Client: Short time.

Sex Worker: Come, let us go. I get rain coat/bullet proof.

Client: I don't like CD; I prefer skin to skin. How much you dey take?

Sex Worker: E dey your hand, how much you go pay?

Client: Na 1k I get.

Sex Worker: Okay now, no shaking.

Data 2: Negotiation Scene

Client: Ello, babe, I like you. I want to browse your network.

Sex Worker: Na day break or short time? If na short time, na 1k. If na day break, na 3k. I go pay for room, na him make. My body need pepper too.

Client: Please I no dey loaded. Take 2 carbadize for day break.

Sex Worker: Emba o, that one na moi moi. Abeg, come pay 3k, I go do you well. Money na hand, back na ground.

Client: Make I pay 2.5k.

Sex Worker: O ya na, pay. I dey gallant. No lele.

Data 3: Inside the Room

Client: Baby, I love your style, you dey kampe!

Sex Worker: You too you no dey bad; you too dey!

Client: I like your pointers as they stand like ripe mangoes.

Sex Worker: No, no, no touch my breast a beg. You no know say you go settle me extra? You no know say to touch breast no be free? Faci, abeg.

Client: Baby cool, you dey mega! Chill, I go empower you wella. Baby relax.

Sex Worker: Na extra N500 to touch.

Client: No yawa.

Data 4: A Crisis Situation

Sex Worker: Oga, oya settle me my sharp sharp. If you no pay me, blood go comot for here now.

Client: Ol girl, you no go leave my shirt? How much you and me talk? We no settle for price? Highest na police you go carry come. You know say me na sailor. Na we get Port Harcourt.

Sex Worker: Wetin you talk now wan scatter my brain. So you think say you go browse my network finish you go go free? Look at this mugu, look at this bombastic element. I know your plan. You sex me finish, still you wan beat me join before you give me my money. But bet me say I go clear your doubt.

Client: Wetin you talk? You go clear my doubt? I just wan empower you with the 1.5k to say I sex you; next time if you call me mugu...

Sex Worker: Wetin you go fit do me? You bombastic element, give me my cash. You think say ashawo work de easy? Go fuck your mother for free. Thunder fire you. You de craze, you de mad. Thunder go fire you!

TABLE I: EXPRESSIONS FOR INTRODUCTORY SIGNALS

Expression	Semantic Features	Description	Denotation/ Literal/ Meaning	Connotation/ Contextual Meaning
Old boy	+ aged + male + young + strong	A man (male) who is advance in age, though still looking agile.	An old or middle-aged man who has a boyish appearance.	A rather old or middle-aged man, but who is still appears to be vibrant.
Fine man	+ fine or good + handsome + male + adult + good to see	A handsome man.	A good looking man.	A handsome and good looking young man that is warmly received.
How far?	+ enquiry + distance + soliciting	An inquiry about destination.	An inquiry about destination.	An inquiry about destination and position or placement.
How you dey?	+ enquiry + state of being + soliciting	An inquiry about state of being.	An inquiry about state of being and positioning.	An inquiry about state of being, position, intention or desire.
Come, let's go.	+ invitation + acceptance + agreement + readiness + conclusion	A call or invitation to go ahead together.	An invitation to go together to a particular place or destination.	An invitation to go in for the agreed action or activity.

In Table I above, the sex worker expressed pleasure at seeing and receiving an old or middle-aged, but vibrantly looking man, solicited for patronage of her service and after reaching an agreement to the terms of the service invites him to go in with her for the sexual activity. 'Old boy' in this context, does not refer to the age of the man in question, neither does 'Fine man' refer to the handsomeness of the man; rather, both terms or expressions imply acceptance of the man and are mere appellations that the sex worker used for soliciting the patronage of the client in this context.

TABLE II: EXPRESSIONS FOR COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS

Expression	Semantic Features	Word Formation Process	Denotation/ Literal/ Meaning	Connotation/ Contextual Meaning
Baby	+ human + female + young		An infant or young female human being	A female lover, girl friend or sex partner.
Babe	+ human + female + young	Derived from 'baby'	An infant or young female human being	A female lover, girl friend or sex partner.
Old girl	+ human + female + aged + young		A woman (female) who is advance in age, though still looking young and agile.	A rather old or middle-aged man, but who is still appears to be vibrant.
Ashawo	+ female + woman/girl + prostitute/sex worker + money/changer	Derived from Yoruba language 'ashewo' or 'ashe owo'	Money changer or one who does money business.	A prostitute or commercial sex worker

In these modern days, as a result of civilization, people try to avoid using the words 'prostitute', 'sex worker', 'ashawo', etc, except in a crisis situation where the parties concerned (sex workers and their clients) resort to abuses and curses, using these terms to insult one another. Rather, young people, sex workers and their clients prefer to use the euphemistic and presumably mild terms like 'babe', 'baby', 'chic', etc, to refer to their girl friend, lover, sex partner or commercial sex worker.

TABLE III: EXPRESSIONS FOR MONEY/PAYMENT

Expression	Description	Word Formation Process	Denotation/ Literal/ Meaning	Connotation/ Contextual Meaning
1k, 3k, 1.5k	A number or figure followed by the alphabet "k"	It is not a word; but the 'k' that follows the Arabic numeral means 'kilogram'.	The 'k' stands for 'kilogram'.	The 'k' stands for 'kilogram', which also represents 'thousand'
Pepper	A word/noun	It is a word on its own.	Pepper is a kind of spice that adds taste and savour to soup.	'Pepper' is a slang for 'money' in the sense that money adds taste and savour to life.
Carbadize	Has close resemblance to carbide or carbamide	Seems to be 'carbide' + the suffix '-ize' or a conversion of carbamide to carbadize	Carbide is a compound of carbon with an element, esp. 'calcium'. Carbamide is urea or carbon + acid.	Carbadize is a slang for money infers that just as carbide is explosive and corrosive, so also is money.
Settle	A verb	A word which functions as a verb	Settle means to appease, take care of, or to put beyond dispute.	Settle in pidgin means pay as earlier agreed.
Empower	A verb	A word which functions as a verb	'Empower' means give power to or confer power to.	'Empower in the context of usage here means pay or give money in the sense that money gives economic power to the person who has it.
Yawa	It is not an English word	It is a pidgin slang		'Yawa' is a pidgin slang that is used for money.
Cash	It is an English word	It is an English word that functions as a noun.	Cash literally means money.	Connotatively, cash is also a pidgin slang for money.

TABLE IV: EXPRESSION FOR CONTRACEPTIVES

Expression	Semantic Features	Word Formation Process	Denotation/ Literal/ Meaning	Connotation/ Contextual Meaning
Rain coat	+ clothing + covering + protection	A compound word from 'rain' and 'coat'	A thick leather jacket worn when it rains to protect one from getting wet.	Condom worn on the penis or inside vagina during sexual intercourse to protect sex partners from contacting STDs and from pregnancy.
Bullet proof	+ amour tank or car or jacket + covering + protection	A compound word from 'bullet' and 'proof'	An amour tank, car or jacket that protects from being hit by bullet during shoot out.	Condom worn on the penis or inside vagina during sexual intercourse to protect sex partners from contacting STDs and from pregnancy.
CD	An abbreviation	An abbreviation	It could be an abbreviation of the word 'compact disc' or 'condom'	An abbreviated form of the word 'condom' worn on the penis or inside vagina during sexual intercourse to protect sex partners from contacting STDs and from pregnancy.

TABLE V: EXPRESSIONS FOR SEXUAL SERVICES

Expression	Semantic Features	Word Formation Process	Denotation/ Literal/ Meaning	Connotation/ Contextual Meaning
Short time	+ duration + brevity + time	A compounded word from 'short' and 'time'	Happening within a brief moment.	A sexual intercourse that takes place within a brief moment.
Day break	+ duration + night + prolonged + time	A compounded word from 'day' and 'break'	Happening throughout the night till break of day.	Sexual activities that last all night long till break of day.
Skin to skin	+ body + flesh + Contact		Body contact as in the bodies of two people touching each other.	Making love without the protection of contraceptive or condom.
To browse network	+ searching + signal + network		The act or process of searching for signal or network in telecommunication.	Slang or jargon for making love to or having sex with someone; especially, a man's penis penetrating or navigating a female's vagina.
Money na hand, back na ground	+ money + hand + ground	Pidgin expression	To put money into a person's hand and thereby induce him or her to lie on the ground.	A demand to pay before service.
To touch pointers	+ tactile + hand + contact + feeling + head lights + trafficators	Slang and idiomatic expression	To touch or feel the head lights or trafficators of a car.	To touch or fondle a breasts and nipples of a woman's breasts.
Fuck	+ make love + have sex	Slang and jargon	It could be an American English expression for shunning or deriding someone, e.g. 'fuck you' or 'fuck off'	Slang, jargon or pidgin for making love to or having sex with someone.
Sex	+sexual intercourse	Used in verse form	It is normally a noun, meaning sexual intercourse or the sex (or gender) of a mammal, e.g. man or woman, male or female, he or she	Sex is used in the discourse as a verb, which infers, 'make love to' or have sex with'

TABLE VI: EXPRESSIONS FOR SEXUAL SERVICES

Expression	Word Formation Process	Denotation/ Literal Meaning	Connotation/ Contextual Meaning
Good market	Adjectival ‘good’ qualifying the noun ‘market’	A market that is good where a buyer would be satisfied with his/her purchases.	The sentence “I be good market” Implies that the referred is a good product from which the buyer (the client) would derive much satisfaction.
I dey gallant	A pidgin expression	The word gallant means brave, heroic, chilvarous, charming, adventurous, etc.	The pidgin sentence “I dey gallant’ implies that the referred sex worker sees herself as being brave, charming and adventurous enough to give utmost satisfaction to her prospects.
No lele	A pidgin expression.	Most probably derived from Yoruba language, ‘lele’	
No shaking	Pidgin slang	A stable state of being.	A stable state of being; not ruffled or bothered or disturbed by anything. It also means, “I’m equal to the task.
I no dey loaded.	Pidgin expression	Literally, it means “I’m empty or I don’t have much.	It implies, “I don’t have much money or I’m broke.
That one na moi moi	A code mix of pidgin and Yoruba languages.	Moi moi is a Yoruba word for a delicacy prepared with grounded beans, oil, pepper and other ingredient.	It means that the referred is as small as the small or flat end of moi moi.
Baby cool or Baby chill		It means, “Baby be calm or quiet.”	It means, “Baby be calm or quiet.” It could also mean, “Baby wait or hold on”
I dey mega	A pidgin expression	Mega means something big.	It means, “I am available”, “I am fully on ground”, or “I am equal to the task”.
Wella	A pidgin word	A pidgin word for “well”	It means, “very well”.
Sharp sharp	Pidin repetition or reduplication	It means very sharp.	It means “very fast” or “very quick”.
Blood go comot	A pidgin expression.	Blood will flow.	A threat that the speaker will commit murder.
You know say me na sailor.	A pidgin expression.	You know that I am a sailor.	You know that I am a cultist.
Mugu	A pidgin word derived from Yoruba language.	A fool.	A fool or a foolish person or an idiot.
Bombastic element	Adjectival phrase	High sounding, inflated element.	A proud, arrogant, pompous or haughty person.
I will clear your doubt.	Pidgin slang	I will convince you beyond reasonable doubts.	I will deal with you and bring you back to your senses.
You sex me finish	An elliptical verb phrase; a combination of English and pidgin. Sex is used as a verb.	You have had sex with me.	After you have had sex with or made love to me...

Conclusion

So far in this paper, we have attempted the linguistic analysis of the language of commercial sex workers in Port Harcourt City, Nigeria. This is done against the backdrop that, understanding a group of people requires first seeking to understand their language; and understanding their language also requires seeking to understand the kind of life they live. Commercial sex workers are peculiar people in a peculiar profession with a peculiar language which reflects their peculiar lifestyle. The study finds that the language of commercial sex workers in Port Harcourt

City, Nigeria, and probably in other places, is largely pedestrian, pidginize and highly infused with slang, jargons and symbolic terms that are highly connotative but mutually intelligible among the sex workers and between them and their clients. This is to say, their language is coded language, and for anyone to be able to decode their language, he or she must try to become familiar with their trade and lifestyle.

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