

**Original Research Article**

**Slangs as Registers: A study of Academic Slang Register use by Undergraduates**

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**ABSTRACT**

An extensive body of studies exist on the origin, occurrence, classification, functions as well linguistics and morphological properties of slangs. The focus of this study however is to justify slanguage as a variety of register using Mattiello's (2008) sociological properties of slangs. This is premised on the fact that slangs can be categorized by its nature and function which can be either speaker or hearer-oriented depending on the activity engaged in. This study therefore reviewed undergraduates' slangs used to describe academic activities. That is, academic slang register, the motivations for its use and generate a corpus of academic slang register used by undergraduates. The study adopted a quantitative and descriptive research design using a self- designed online questionnaire titled Survey on Academic Slang Register Use by Undergraduates (SASRU) which sought information on the age, institution, slang use, list of academic slang register as well as motivation of use of slangs from 230 undergraduates. Respondents were drawn from 8 higher institutions comprising of 5 federal and 2 private universities, as well as 1 federal college of technology. The data was thereafter subjected to statistical and descriptive analysis. Findings reveal that slanguage is a regular occurrence among undergraduates while engaging in academic activity generating a corpus of academic slang register grouped under academic ability, study habit, study techniques, examination malpractice, absenteeism, enrolment status, moral conduct and other daily in and out of class activities. The motivation for academic slang register amongst undergraduates were found to be social media influence, to generate a sense of comradeship with fellow students and exclude non-students or lecturers. Slanguage is also found to be used in and attempt appeal to emotions, achieve brevity and as a result of youthful exuberance. It is recommended that further studies should document slanguage registers of other student activities ranging from friendship, romance and life style generating a corpus of slanguage registers for these activities.

**Introduction**

The study of slangs and its use has in recent times taken on new dimensions metamorphosing from finding an appropriate definition, classification as a variety of language and usage to being described as a social media generated language. Slanguage, which is a variety of language characterized by slangs is defined as a variety used by speech communities for instance, university undergraduates, to create speech identity (Broom & Levinson: 1978). Although some scholars opine that slangs are an outright bastardization of language or some form of vagabond language often considered unconventional and vulgar (Allan & Burridge: 2009), others consider slangs as a rich source of language innovation, communicative effectiveness, apt expression with its own distinct prosodic and stylistic features. (Grossman & Tucker, 1997).

An attempt is made in this study to generate a corpus of slangs used to describe academic activities by undergraduates across eight higher institutions of learning with an objective to classify them by functions and motivations for use. To achieve this, this

paper reviews earlier research on slanguage as well as Mattiello's (2008) sociological properties of slangs drawing a link between slangs and registers thereafter generating three research questions. The response from the questionnaires were subjected to descriptive and statistical analysis were discussed in line with the questions guiding the study.

### Literature Review

Studies on the origin of slanguage posits that slangs dates back to the second half of the century when slang was seen as youth language and the research focus was on the vocabulary and grammatical features that evolve from its use (Shahraki and Rasekh: 2011). These features were considered in Edward's study as non-standard occasioned by linguistic carelessness and laziness (Edward: 1979). More recent studies however, characterizes slanguage as a subset of internet-generated language, the same reason that has proliferated its spread, acceptance and at the same time provide documented data for its study. More so, the internet and social media has broadened the concept of *speech community* in the definition of slangs.

Studies have also shown that slanguage is not gender specific as it is favoured by both males and females and identifiable with different social groups (Shahraki and Rasekh, 2011). Aside group inclusion, a motivational factor for slanguage is also to exclude outsiders. Terna-Abah finds that a primary communicative function of slanguage amongst university undergraduates is to 'open' or 'shut' doors against non-members of the group in an attempt to reinforce group bonding, show solidarity as well as serve as a criterion for group membership (Terna-Abah, 2016, p. 34).

Described as a product of youth culture, slanguage contribute to literary language as a result of the creativity, emotionality and figurative dynamics it infuses into the speech of its users. Aside these literary values, when subjected to morphological analysis, Widawski find examples of coinage, borrowing, back formation, derivation, acronym, reduplication as well as onomatopoeia in slanguage used by junior high school students in Bandung (Widawski, 2015).

A sociolinguistic approach to studying slanguage which focuses on the origin, characteristics, motivations as well as communicative import rather than a clear-cut definition form the basis of this study. Pertinent here is Mattiello's sociological properties of slanguage which classified slangs premised on the nature, functions as well as speaker-hearer orientation (Mattiello, 2008, p. 60). The sociological properties of slangs is classified under four categories: (a) group or an individual's group membership (*group-restriction, individuality, culture-restriction, and prestige*); (b) specific occupation or activity (*technicality, learners*); (c) high or low cultural or societal status; as well as (d) individual or collective age group. In other words, slanguage is a frequent phenomenon amongst group members of same age group, belonging to the same societal status, as well as engage in the same occupation or activity. Consequently, a similarity can be drawn between slangs and registers which describes the focus and approach to slanguage in this paper.

According to Halliday, registers are functional classification of language choices made depending on the situation, participants and functions. The concern here is not however to belabor Halliday's definition but to concentrate on his approach to registers as a *variety according to use* establishing the relationship between slanguage and *specific use, user and function*. In other words, as a variety of language used for a particular communicative situation (Halliday, p. 1989). Although some scholars argue for strict use of the term register (Wardhaugh, 1986), studies have shown the interconnectedness of registers to slangs, jargons and argots. This theory sees argot more as a coded language created to be understood only by the initiators. Argots however, as usage becomes wider, is transformed into a slang.

Since the interconnectedness of slang and registers using the criterion such as age, groups, social class and activity exist, slangs can consequently be described and studied on these individual criteria. Furthermore, according to Burdová's (2009), slangs can be categorized under different school and out of school activities students engage in while Terna-Abah identified slanguage for different activities ranging from description of females, sex, university staff and school activities. (Terna Abah, 2016). The concern of this study is to review undergraduates' slangs used to describe school/academic activities. In other words, academic slang register and the motivations for its use among undergraduates. Although there have been numerous studies on use of slanguage by undergraduates, the objective here is to create a corpus of academic slang register used by undergraduates. Premised on these objectives, the questions guiding the study are:

### Research Questions

1. Do undergraduates use slanguage during academic activity?
2. What slangs are used by undergraduates in this domain of activity?
3. What are the motivations of slanguage during academic activity?

**Methodology**

The study adopted a quantitative and descriptive research design using a self- designed online questionnaire titled: *Survey on Academic Slang Register Use by Undergraduates (SASRU)* with link <https://forms.gle/ViZANhvoZzYYzADc6> . The questionnaire sought information on the age, institution, usage of slangs, list of slangs related to academic activity as well as motivation of use of academic slang register by undergraduates. The respondents consisted of 230 undergraduates from 8 higher institutions comprising of 5 federal and 2 private universities, as well as 1 federal college of technology (Table 1). The data was thereafter subjected to statistical and descriptive analysis.

**Table 1: Participating Universities**

1.	OAU	Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife (F)
2.	UNIBEN	University of Benin, Benin (F)
3.	UNILORIN	University of Ilorin, Ilorin (F)
4.	UI	University of Ibadan, Ibadan (F)
5.	LASU	Lagos State University, Ojo (F)
6.	LCU	Lead City University, Ibadan (P)
7.	ACU	Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo (P)
8.	OSCOTECH	Osun State College of Technology (C)

**Diagram 1: Institutional Spread of Respondents**

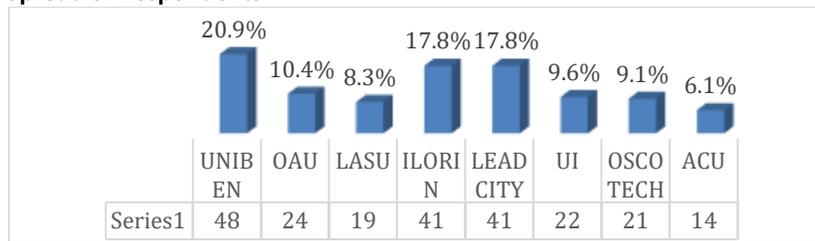


Table and diagram 1 both show the list of institutions who participated in the study and the percentage spread of the respondents across the universities respectively. UNIBEN have most respondents (20.9%), followed by ILORIN and LCU with 17.8% each. OAU, UI, OSCOTECH, LASU and ACU have 10.4%, 9.6%, 9.1%, 8.3% and 6.1% respectively.

**Results and Discussion**

**Usage of Academic Slang Registers by Undergraduates**

The first research question seeks to establish usage of slanguage during academic activity. This is important as there has been debates on the use of slangs in formal domains. All 230 participants responded in the affirmative to the use of slanguage in academic domain. They also affirmed that academic activities have slangs that are used during academic activity reinforcing findings by scholars on usage of slangs during formal activities. (Lenhart: 2012, Ogunyale: 2016 & Robbin: 2020).

**Compilation of Academic Slang Registers used by Undergraduates**

The focus of research question two is to identify and classify the corpus of the academic slangs register that are used across the universities. These slangs are highlighted below under different groupings:

**Table 2: Slang Register for Intelligent**

Jack
Igi iwe
Brainiac
Sanaspirin
Marking scheme
Jackphite
Omniknowest
Bookola
Brain box
Scholar
Legend for ever
Guru

The respondents have different slangs to refer to intelligent students (table 2). Some of the slangs like *braniac*, *scholar*, *brain box*, *guru* have conventional meanings while others like *Jack* and *Jackphite* are ideally names but in academic slanguage mean intelligent. *Marking scheme* which means a range of obtainable marks for a test or examination is used as slang for a person intelligent enough to score the most obtainable marks. *Jack* can also be used as a verb to mean study. Some of the compounded slangs here are *onmiknowest* and *bookola* with prefix *omni +know(est)* to mean all-knowing. In *bookola*, *book* is compounded with *ola* a Yoruba word meaning wealth. In the same vein, *igi iwe* is Yoruba literarily translated as *tree of books* and *shanaspirin* from *sa na* (to spark) + aspirin likened to a lightning bulb.

**Table 3: Slang Register for *Bookworm***

Jacko
Jackometre
Bookie
Efico
Efiwe
Iwe
Jacker
Bibliophile
Iwelabi

Respondents indicated the slangs in table 3 to mean a bookworm. While *jacko* and *jackometre* are variants of *jack* from table 2 used to refer to being studious, *bibliophile* is a conventional word (booklover) turned slang. *Efico* and *efiwe* are variants of *iwe* the Yoruba word for book. *Iwelabi* is compounded from *iwe+labi* that is book+birth a humorous play on the Yoruba name *owolabi*.

**Table 4: Slang Register for *Unintelligent***

Ozuo	Benin
Mumu	Yoruba
Wawa	Hausa
Mugu	Pidgin
Eso odo	
Ignoramus	
Scholar	
JJC ( Jonny Just Co me)	

Basically, the slangs on table 4 are words to denote a fool in some Nigerian languages which are used across the universities irrespective of their origin to mean the same thing. *Ozuo*, *mumu*, *wawa*, *mugu* are all words used to describe a fool in Benin, Yoruba, Hausa and Pidgin languages respectively. They are used across the universities sometimes with users oblivious of their original meanings. *JJC* is used as a slang in its conventional sense while *eso odo* is Yoruba language which literarily means *fruit of failure*. *Scholar* is however used sarcastically to describe a fool.

**Table 5: Slang Register for *Study/Exam Technique***

La cram, la pour	To memorize just for an examination
Dub/dubbing	To copy someone else's work
CAP (Copy and paste)	To use a material verbatim
Spread	Fill up examination booklets with irrelevant information
TDB (Till day break)	Study all night long
Tear book	Study hard
Hyper-jack	Study excessively
Formation	Sitting close to friend(s) during an examination
Giraffing	Peeping into someone else's work

Tables 5 show the slangs used to describe different study or examination techniques and their meanings respectively.

**Table 6: Slang Register for *Material(S) Sneaked Into Examination for Cheating***

Expo
Pampa
Chukuli
Egun
Bomb
Microchip
Bullet
Statistics

**Table 7: Slang Register for *paying for grades***

Sort
Block
Scam
Align

Listed in tables 6 and 7 are academic slang register used for examination malpractice, cheating and paying for grades. The slangs for sneaking materials into examination halls are words whose literary meanings are different from the intended slang meanings. While *chukuli* and *pampa* are coined, *expo*, *bomb*, *microchip*, *bullet* and *statistics* have special intended meanings. This is also the case with *sort*, *scam*, *block* and *align* as shown in table 7.

**Table 8: Slang Register for *Absenteeism***

Ditch
Ja pa
Stab
NAS Non Academic Student

**Table 9: Slang Register for *Student's Enrolment Status***

Tsunami
Road 1
Erosion
Professional Student
Odunmala Felicia Omoyemi

As listed in Tables 8 and 9, students who are usually absent in classes are said to be *Non Academic Students (NAS)* while truants are said to *stab*, *ditch* or *ja pa* (runaway) from classes. *Tsunami* and *road 1*(peculiar to only OAU) are used to describe expulsion from the institution while *erosion* refers to when a student is advised to change department as a result of poor academic performance. *Odumola Felicia Omoyemi* is a non- existing mythical name which is used to refer to individuals who though pretend to be students are yet to obtain admission into the institution while *professional students* are those who have had several extra years without graduating.

**Table 10: Slang Register for *Being Caught During Malpractice***

Get questions wrong
Loose guard

**Table 11: Slang Register for *Cheats***

Spider man
Giraffe

Cheats as shown in table 11 are humorously called *spiderman* or a *giraffe* while *getting the question wrong* and *to loose guard* (table 10) are slangs for being caught cheating.

**Table 12: Slang Register for Examination Success**

Scatter
ABA
Ace
Spank

**Table 13: Slang Register for Examination Failure**

Bang
Thrash
EFCC
Gbe gba gi

Tables 12 and 13 are slangs used to refer to examination success or failure. A student is humorously said to *scatter* or *spank* an examination haven done excellently and *bang* or *thrash* haven failed woefully. *ABA* is used to refer to an A/B grade or an A /B course respectively. *EFCC* on the other hand is used to refer to an E, F or C grade or an outright failure. *Gbe gba gi* is a Yoruba expression which means *hit a tree* meaning woeful failure.

**Table 14: Slang Register for Moral Conduct**

Marlian
Churchy
Saudi
NFA No future Ambition

Table 14 shows the slangs used to depict the moral conduct of students. While *churchy* and *Saudi* refer to overtly religious Christian or Muslim student respectively, *marlian* refer to students who are generally irresponsible or of bad behavior. *NFA* is used to mean to students who do not take academic activities seriously.

The following is a list other academic slang registers used by undergraduates and their meanings.

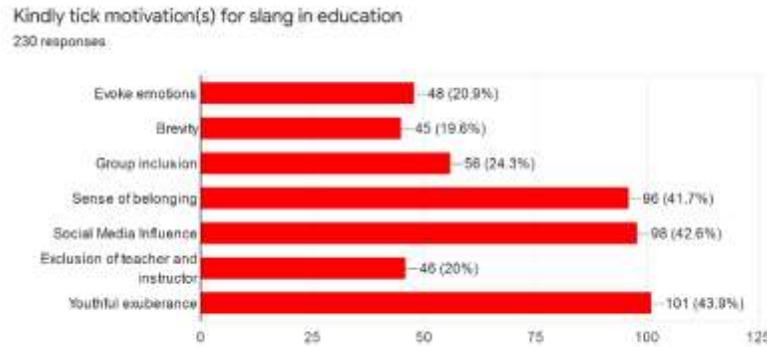
**Table 15: Slang Register for other Academic Related Activities**

Dope	Very good
Crash	Sleep/sleep over
Cast	Boring ( especially classes)
Lit	Impressive
Whine	Flatter/lie
Fab/Tab	Steal
Baff-up	Well dressed
South paw	Left handed
Koro	Tough
Grab	To understand
Cram	Memorize
Number Six	Brain
Echo	Sense
H	Hunger
Ma Fo	Don't give up
Mad	Surprise/d
FYB	Final year Students
Scam	Fund
Shot gun	Impromptu Test
Mad o	Exciting
Guel	Food
TK	Too Know
Songito	Snitch
Over Sabi	(Sabi-Pidgin meaning to know)
Frontier	Students who sit in front row
Back Bencher	Students who sit at the back

### Motivations for Language in Academic Domain

Research question 3 sought to find answers to the motivations for slanguage during academic activities. The 230 respondents were asked if they use slanguage as a result of social media influence, generate a sense of comradeship with fellow students and exclude non-students; appeal to emotions, achieve brevity or as a result of youthful exuberance

Diagram 2: Student’s response to motivations for slanguage in academic activities



#### Evoke Emotions

48 of the respondents (20.9%) opine that slanguage evoke some sort of emotions when used among undergraduates. These emotions vary from excitement, anger, happiness or humour. For instance, slangs like *iwe*, *omniknowest*, *jackometre*, *EFCC*, *short gun* all generate feeling of excitement. Guitar (1968) as cited in Widawski (2015) posits that students assume a more acceptable way of expressing anger is by using slangs. Furthermore, a feeling of calmness is generated by using slangs as a euphemistic way of saying things. For instance, cheats described as *Spiderman*. Also, Eble (2008) stated that slangs is usually used to achieve in-group humour an attempt to resolve social conflict and create social control. In other words, slanguage has the capacity to mask personal or social discomfort.

#### Brevity

According to Widawski, young people use slangs to achieve brevity of expression as they especially prefer saying a lot in a few words. This is usually exhibited in the use of acronyms, coinages and special loan creations (Widawski, 2015). Brevity accounts for 19.6% of the respondent’s motivation for slanguage. Slangs like *tsunami*, *erosion*, *NAS*, *ABA*, *EFCC*, *NFA* are all examples of acronyms, abbreviations and special loan creations.

#### Group Inclusion and Sense of Belonging

Statutorily, language is not only a means of passing on information, it also a means of creating group inclusion, exclusion as well as reinforcing group identity. Also, slanguage creates a sociolect or stylistic choice for group identification. According to Eble, the arching purpose of slangs is to affirm a sense of belonging which is created and maintained by in-group vocabulary. (Eble, 2008, p. 119). In addition, slangs provide labels for a subgroup in this case, a linguistic label which validates and enhances internal solidarity. This accounts for why 56% of the respondents subscribe to the use slanguage as a result of the need to generate a sense of group inclusion while 42% use slangs to create a sense of belonging to the group. Although this phenomenon is not only limited to slangs, it is a major function within the context of study where there are two systems and operators: students versus academics making it obvious and very significant for undergraduates to, from time to time, identify with and crave to be accepted in a group.

#### Social Media Influence and Youthful Exuberance

43% and 44% of the respondents associate social media and youthful exuberance as a major motivation for academic slang register amongst undergraduates. Social media and youthful exuberance as motivations for slanguage are clearly related as one influence another to a very large extent. This is because a large percentage of social media users are youths who communicate on social media platforms using internet language of which slanguage is a major component. More so, internet language is fueled by social interest of youths leading to the adoption and spread of popular internet slangs. Internet creates, motivates and sustain slangs among online communities with its highest population of users between ages 18 and 24 years (Barseghyan, 2013). Although Coleman emphasizes that slang users are not creative as they are often old word accruing new

meanings in another group, he identifies youthful exuberance as an important factor in the creation and adoption of slangs (Coleman:2004).

### **Exclude Instructors/Lecturers**

Only 20% of the respondents opine that slangs are used to exclude instructors or lecturers. A possible explanation for this can be found in the examples of slangs that are seemingly 'coded' or meant to exclude the instructors. These are mostly slangs related to examination malpractice: *expo, pampa, chukuli, egun, bomb, microchip, bullet, statistics*; paying for grades: *sort, bribe, align*; and examination sitting arrangement like *formation*. These slangs are supposed to exclude both instructors and students who do not understand these *we slangs*. Another possibility is stated by Malmkjær (2010) who posits that the origin of slangs can be traced back to use by hooligans and bandits who do so to carve a niche for themselves and wade off law enforcements.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this study is to (a) justify slanguage as a variety of register using Mattiello's sociological properties of slangs which identifies group membership, social class, specific activity and similar age group as criteria for classification of slangs and (b) generate a corpus of academic slang register used by undergraduates engaged in academic activity.

Findings reveal that undergraduate's slanguage is a regular occurrence among undergraduates while engaging in academic activities. Such academic slang register can be grouped under academic ability, study habit, study techniques, examination malpractice, absenteeism, enrolment status, moral conduct and other daily in and out of class activities.

The motivation for academic slang register amongst undergraduates is found to be as a result of social media influence, to generate a sense of comradeship with fellow students and exclude non-students. Academic slang register is also used in and attempt appeal to emotions, achieve brevity and as a result of sheer youthful exuberance.

An opportunity for further studies will be the documentation of slang register on other student activities ranging from friendship, romance and life style generating a corpus of slanguage register for these activities.

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