

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Youth Slang among Apprentices at the Onitsha Market

<https://doi.org/10.60787/jolan.vol28no1.442>

Kevin Egbo

Department of Linguistics & Nigerian Languages

University of Uyo

Kevinegbo90@gmail.com

Abstract

Slang play a vital role in the communicative practices of youths, fostering friendship, asserting identity, and reinforcing group solidarity. This study examines the various forms of youth slang employed by apprentices in Onitsha's marketplaces during everyday commercial transactions. These slang expressions, products of linguistic creativity, are developed to simplify and enhance interactions between buyers and sellers. The study also considers public perceptions of this youth language. The study employs Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which explains how metaphors transfer meaning by mapping concepts from a source domain onto a target domain. Since slang is largely metaphorical, it conveys experiences through other domains, generating distinct social meanings. A qualitative descriptive design was applied, with thirty purposively sampled participants interviewed across three markets in Onitsha where apprentices conduct daily business. Findings reveal that slang forms and expressions are creatively sourced from domains such as body parts, vegetables, money, football terms, and other sociolects. The analysis shows that slang functions as a vital communicative resource, facilitating smooth interaction and reinforcing solidarity among apprentices. The study further notes that slang use in informal marketplace settings bridges linguistic, social, and cultural divides, enhancing transactional effectiveness and sustaining group identity.

Keywords: Slang, Apprentice, Metaphor, Identity, Onitsha commercial city

Introduction

This study investigates how youth slang serves as a sociolinguistic tool for expressing identity, reinforcing group solidarity, and facilitating communication among apprentices in the Onitsha marketplace. Sociolinguistics examines language in relation to social factors

such as race, class, occupation, and gender (Wardhaugh, 2000; Mirvahedi, 2021). It also entails a descriptive analysis of how aspects of society including class distinctions, cultural norms, religious beliefs, expectations, and social contexts influence language use, as well as how language affects society in return (Bouchard, 2022). In other words, sociolinguistics is concerned with language in its social and cultural contexts, particularly how individuals from different social backgrounds speak, and how speech varies across situations. The individual speaker is of particular importance, as society comprises individuals, and it is through their linguistic choices that social meanings are constructed. This study is on the use of slang as a distinctive speech style among apprentices in Onitsha markets. It explores how informal linguistic forms contribute to interaction, social belonging, and identity formation within a commercial environment marked by diverse linguistic and cultural practices.

The system of apprenticeship in Onitsha is a traditional economic structure whereby a young person learns the mechanics of trade and business under the guidance of a more experienced mentor, often referred to as a “master.” The Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS) is a philosophy of shared prosperity in which participants are competitively nurtured towards achieving economic independence (Irene et al, 2024). Under this system, the master not only teaches the apprentice the secrets of the trade but also mentors him throughout the training period to ensure eventual success. An agreement is typically reached between the master and the apprentice’s family regarding the duration of the apprenticeship, which usually lasts between five to ten years.

The primary aim of the IAS is to alleviate poverty and provide equal economic opportunities. Among the Igbo people, it is believed that when a child is born, they belong to the entire community. This belief is revealed in personal name markers like *Nwaoha*, meaning “child of the community.” Parents bring children into the world, but the community ensures their welfare and success. If the parents are unable to care for the child, others in the community are expected to step in. Within this system, the apprentice lives with a new family and learns a trade for a specified period. Upon completion of this period, the master typically establishes a new business for the apprentice, thereby granting him financial independence as a reward for his service and dedication. Onitsha Market is one of the largest markets in West Africa in terms of geographical size, volume of trade, and range of goods and services (Chuks-Ezekwibe & Chukwu, 2023). It is located in the city of Onitsha, the commercial hub of Anambra State in South-Eastern Nigeria. The city lies along the banks of one of Nigeria’s most prominent rivers—the River Niger. Due to the high volume of trade, merchants travel to Onitsha from all 36 states of Nigeria as well as from neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Niger Republic, and Gabon.

Apprentices in Onitsha use a unique form of language that diverges from conventional Igbo linguistic norms namely, slang. This in-group language is employed in day-to-day activities and serves specific communicative functions among apprentices. The research aims to explore the dynamics of apprentice slang and the perceptions of their mentors towards its usage. Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on youth language practices in informal economic settings. Due to the in-group nature of slang, customers often find it difficult to understand these expressions, which sometimes hinders effective marketing communication. In several instances, customers feel excluded or lost during bargaining exchanges. Additionally, mentors and others outside the apprentice circle occasionally struggle to grasp the meaning of the slang being used, resulting in communication gaps. Despite the importance of Onitsha as a commercial centre, the sociolinguistic features of youth slang among apprentices have not received substantial academic attention. This study, therefore, seeks to examine how apprentices in the Onitsha marketplace reengineer the structure and meaning of lexical items to establish group identity. It highlights the sociolinguistic impact of youth slang and its role in fostering in-group cohesion, identity construction, and communicative efficiency.

Previous Studies

Slang, as a linguistic phenomenon, has attracted increasing scholarly interest due to its complex role in identity construction, social belonging, and communication among diverse groups. Within the Nigerian context, several studies have explored the use and functions of slang among youth and specific communities, highlighting its sociocultural and pragmatic significance. Mensah (2021) provides an insightful study on contextual slanguage among female youth in Calabar, South-Eastern Nigeria. The research investigates how all-female friendship groups employ slang as a form of linguistic performance that challenges prevailing cultural and linguistic norms. Drawing on African feminism and linguistic ideology, Mensah argues that slang functions not merely as casual speech but as a strategic resource to negotiate social identities, resist gendered stereotypes, and reinforce solidarity within peer networks. The study's qualitative ethnographic data, derived from participant observation and interviews, reveal that young women's slang use is closely tied to their lived experiences, serving as a tool for social navigation and self-expression. In a different sociocultural setting, Uwen and Mensah (2022) explore how Nigerian Army expressively use slang. The study analyse how military slang serves to construct professional identities, enforce discipline, and facilitate solidarity among personnel. Through participant observation and interviews, the authors show that military slang functions as a marker of inclusion and exclusion, creating subcultural boundaries that

strengthen group cohesion. Importantly, this research illustrates that slang is not confined to informal youth contexts but also permeates structured institutions, where it acquires specialized social capital.

The linguistic creativity and fluidity of slang are also evident in educational environments. Okon (2004) studies slang use among university students in Calabar, emphasising that student slang is highly inventive and evolves rapidly in response to emerging social trends. Ukpong (2010) examines slang expressions in the Ibibio language, noting that slang induces humour, informality, and style. Ukpong's observation that slang often transitions into idiomatic expressions highlights the dynamic and self-revising nature of slang as a linguistic form. Mensah (2012) further underscores that settings with high concentrations of young people such as universities and marketplaces are key sites for slang innovation and propagation. In a semiotic investigation, Adamo (2013) work was on how students in Nigerian university create terms for different academic activities. Using models from Peirce, de Saussure, and Barthes, Adamo reveals that slang serves as a symbolic system encoding the ideological values and social realities of youth culture. This work demonstrates how slang functions as a complex semiotic resource through which students convey nuanced meanings relevant to their socio-cultural environment.

Aboh and Okpo (2022) conduct a comprehensive morphosemantic investigation of university student in Nsukka. Employing a microethnographic framework, they demonstrate that slang construction involves a range of morphological processes, notably reduplication, clipping and so forth. Moreover, their semantic analysis illustrates that the meanings of slang expressions are frequently reconfigured through different mechanisms. The study importantly expands the understanding of slang by showing how internal borrowing between indigenous languages within Nigeria contributes to slang formation, a phenomenon less emphasised in previous literature. Turning to studies beyond Nigeria, Hughes (2024) examines Australian slang usage among Victorian high school students. The study addresses concerns about the decline of traditional slang and its role in national identity. Hughes finds that while some older slang terms have faded, others are actively used often ironically or performatively highlighting slang's evolving nature and its significance as a cultural marker among youth

Despite these diverse insights, a notable gap remains in the sociolinguistic study of slang within informal economic contexts, especially among apprentices in Nigerian markets. Existing research tends to focus on academic, gendered, or institutional groups (Hughes, 2024; Aboh & Okpo; Mensah, 2021) with little attention paid to how youth slang operates in commercial hubs. The Igbo Apprenticeship System, a unique economic and social institution that blends communal values with individual enterprise, provides a rich context

for exploring this phenomenon. This study addresses this gap by examining how apprentices in Onitsha's markets creatively rework linguistic forms to produce slang that facilitates communication, asserts group identity, and negotiates social relations in a vibrant and multiethnic marketplace. Moreover, this research expands on previous literature by situating slang use within a highly structured apprenticeship system, where language is not only a tool of everyday interaction but also a marker of economic knowledge, mentorship relations, and social capital. It further investigates perceptions of slang use by mentors and customers, highlighting tensions that arise from in-group language practices in multi-stakeholder commercial interactions.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which provides a useful lens for understanding how young apprentices in Onitsha markets use slang metaphorically to communicate shared experiences, negotiate meaning, and assert identity. Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed in cognitive linguistics, argues that our understanding of abstract ideas is often grounded in physical or everyday experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Within this framework, metaphor is conceived not merely as an ornamental aspect of language but as a fundamental component of human cognition and communication. Central to the theory is the assumption that individuals project knowledge from one sphere of experience, termed the *source domain*, onto another, referred to as the *target domain* (Kövecses, 2010). For instance, a familiar domain like movement or space can be used to express more complex social or emotional experiences. In everyday usage, speakers often draw upon such metaphorical patterns to simplify abstract concepts or social realities in more accessible terms. This phenomenon is particularly visible in informal registers like slang, where figurative expressions are used creatively to mark group identity or to comment on lived realities.

In the case of Onitsha apprentices, slang functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a social practice embedded in their environment. Many of the slang expressions they use reflect underlying metaphoric thinking that frames their world in terms they find relatable and expressive. These linguistic choices allow apprentices to assign meaning to their roles, challenges, ambitions, and social hierarchies within the trading space. For example, expressions related to financial struggle, mentorship, loyalty, or aspiration are often described using everyday metaphors rooted in bodily, material, or spatial experiences (Gibbs, 2006).

The relevance of CMT to this study lies in its ability to account for how abstract social dynamics are encoded in figurative language. By examining the metaphorical structure of slang, the study shows how apprentices conceptualise their social roles, construct in-group solidarity, and maintain boundaries from outsiders. Unlike standard expressions that follow established linguistic rules, slang often evolves rapidly and reflects a collective way of interpreting daily realities. CMT thus helps to reveal the deeper cognitive and social patterns behind this evolving lexicon (Deignan, 2005). Furthermore, the theory provides insights into how speakers internalise and reproduce cultural values through metaphorical expressions. Since the Onitsha market environment is a blend of commerce, mentorship, and social interaction, the slang used within it often mirrors the complexities of navigating economic and personal growth. Conceptual metaphors embedded in slang offer clues about how these apprentices view themselves, their journeys, and their aspirations, making CMT a fitting tool for sociolinguistic analysis in this context (Lakoff, 1993)

Participants and methods

This study adopted a qualitative (ethnographic) design to collect and analyse data. Fieldwork was conducted in seven markets across Onitsha, Anambra State, South-eastern Nigeria: Onitsha Main Market, Ose Market, Relief Market, New Spare Parts Market, Nkpor Market, Emeka Offor Plaza, and Mgbuka Obosi Old Spare Parts Market. Data collection took place over a four-month period. Thirty-five participants were purposively selected for this study, with five apprentices drawn from each of the seven markets. All participants were young males aged between 18 and 30 years, actively involved in apprenticeship and trading activities within their respective markets. This demographic was selected because youth apprentices in Onitsha are widely known for their creative use of slang in everyday communication. Written consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity was protected through the use of pseudonyms. The study relied primarily on participant observation and semi-structured interviews for data collection. Through participant observation, the researcher engaged directly with apprentices within their everyday trading environments, which provided valuable insights into the socio-cultural setting and the interactive dynamics underpinning slang usage. Semi-structured interviews followed a face-to-face format and were guided by key questions aimed at uncovering the motivations behind slang use, the processes of meaning construction, and the social perceptions surrounding this language form. Questions included: What motivates the use of slang among apprentices? How do slangs reflect group identity? What societal values or tensions do they reveal? How are meanings created or understood within the group?

The researcher's familiarity with the Igbo culture and trading environment in Onitsha further enriched the ethnographic understanding of the phenomenon. An audio recorder was used to document interviews, while field notes captured contextual information and metadata. The recorded data were coded, transcribed, and translated where necessary. A descriptive method of analysis was used to interpret the data gathered. This approach allowed for a detailed examination of how apprentices construct and use slang in their interactions. The descriptive framework enabled the researcher to capture recurring patterns, lexical innovations, and sociolinguistic functions embedded in slang usage without manipulating the naturalistic data.

Data presentation and analysis

This section categorises and analyses youth slang used by apprentices in Onitsha commercial city through the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The analysis highlights how slang functions metaphorically to reflect social identities, relationships, and lived experiences in the marketplace. The slang terms are presented under three thematic groups: Address Terms among Youths, Slang Terms for Money, and Slang Terms Based on Apprentices' Situations.

Slang that shows address terms among the youths.

Slang	Gloss
1. Alobam	- My friend
2. Eze Omoba	- Rich Person
3. Nticha	- Stealing
4. Onye ogbe	- Street boy
5. Ono ofuma	- He is comfortable.
6. Nleka	- Broke/lack of money
7. Kee ka osiada	- How are you
8. Kamu mesa gi.	- Let me entertain you.
9. Ka mu gbanyelu gi plasma surprise	- (Let me on plasma for you), Let me you.
10. Waa here	- Run away
11. Odi kpokoo	- It is pleasant
12. Udo	- All is well/fine

13. Koom - Leave me alone
 14. Nwoke bu ike - Rich Young man

General youth slang terms

- 15 Irish potato - Young girl.
 16 Tomato Jos /salad cream - A beautiful woman/ girl.
 17 Kupuru the girl - Leave the girl
 18 Akwanwa Okpeke - Sexy looking girl
 19 Nwa new ngabasi - The girl looks good
 20 Umu/guy - Young male and female.
 21 Mpa kee way - Brother, how are you doing?
 22 Nwanne Idigodi Okay - Brother you look good
 23 Nwa Okpansi - Young girl that is full of herself
 24 Eda mmanya - (Falling after being drunk) sexual affair with a woman.
 25 Ndi Mens - Rich young men
 26

Slang terms for money among the apprentices

26. White - Fifty Naira (₦50)
 27. 00, isi Awo. - Hundred Naira (₦100)
 28. Isi zik (zik head) - Five Hundred Naira (₦500)
 29. Isi Aboki - Two Hundred Naira (₦200)
 30. Isi Calabar/Onekpaa. - One Thousand Naira (₦1000)
 31. Ego Igwe - Foreign Currency

Slang terms based on colour.

32. Green card Peace
 33. Yellow card Suspension
 34. Red card Sacked

The examples in (1–14) illustrate a range of address terms employed by apprentices across different Onitsha markets. These expressions are uniquely constructed and largely restricted to youthful speakers, reflecting a creative linguistic response to their immediate communicative needs as well as a projection of their social identity and aspirations. For example, in data (1), the slang *Alobam* is metaphorically used to refer to someone who is

very dear, essentially a very close friend. The everyday English equivalent would be “good friend.” In terms of conceptual metaphor, *Alobam* maps the source domain of kinship/family relations onto the target domain of friendship, implying loyalty, intimacy, and a strong bond. In data (2), *Eze Omoba* is used by the youth to refer to a rich person who is very extravagant in wasting resources. *Omoba* is a part of Onitsha town known for its numerous drinking spots where people lavish their wealth. Hence, anyone who spends money indiscriminately or wastefully is called *Eze Omoba*. Here, the source domain of place (*Omoba*, associated with indulgence and excess) is mapped onto the target domain of individual behaviour, identifying such a person with the wasteful lifestyle for which the location is renowned.

Data (3) presents *Nticha*, which literally means “dusting out” or “cleaning,” but metaphorically conceptualises stealing. Just as a thief skilfully steals, pickpockets may take money from customers at the market without their notice. The victims only realise when they attempt to pay and find their money missing, sometimes leading to crying. In the apprentices’ language, this is expressed as *etichala onyea*, meaning “this person has been dusted out.” Within CMT, this represents a mapping from the source domain of physical cleaning/dusting onto the target domain of theft, where the act of removing dust is equated with the stealthy removal of money. In data (4), *Onye Ogbe* literally means “street boy.” The Igbo word *ogbe* typically refers to an interior village, and *onye* means person. Therefore, any person, especially a youth, who does not engage in productive activity is metaphorically conceptualised as *onye ogbe*. Just as some youths in villages without access to the city resort to crime such as stealing or fighting to survive, youths in Onitsha with no tangible occupation are labeled *onye ogbe*. This represents a mapping from the source domain of a village person with limited opportunities to the target domain of a jobless or idle youth in the city (Tsang, 2009). Data (5) shows *Ono Ofuma*, which literally means “he is okay,” but metaphorically implies that the person is comfortable economically. Here, the source domain of general wellbeing or contentment is mapped onto the target domain of economic comfort, portraying financial stability in everyday interactions.

In data (6), the expression *Nleka* means broke or lacking money. This slang conveys the idea of something old and weak. It signifies that the person has no money at all and cannot afford their material needs. The apprentices creatively map the source domain of a weak, tearing cloth in standard Igbo onto the target domain of a financially weak or impoverished person, producing a novel lexical item with metaphorical meaning. In data (8), *Kamu Messagi* literally means “let me destroy you,” but in slang usage, it metaphorically describes someone who entertains their friends lavishly. The source domain of violent

disruption or scattering is mapped onto the target domain of generous social spending, highlighting how energetic or extravagant behaviour conveys social status among peers.

In data (9), *Kamu gbanyelu gi Plasma* involves the term *plasma*, referring to a high-quality television popular for its vivid colour and sound. Literally, the phrase means “let me put you on plasma television to watch.” Metaphorically, it implies “let me surprise you.” This reflects a mapping from the source domain of a high-quality entertainment experience (plasma TV) to the target domain of creating surprise or delight in a person. In data (11), the slang *Odi Kpokoo*, borrowed from Nigerian hip hop artist Flavour Nabania, metaphorically means “it’s fine.” Apprentices use this slang to describe young, beautiful girls they encounter as girlfriends or customers. The source domain of approval or affirmation is mapped onto the target domain of attractiveness or desirability, conveying positive evaluation through slang.

In data (12), *Udo* literally means peace but metaphorically implies tranquillity in business. In data (13), *Koom* means “leave me alone.” Meanwhile, in data (14), *Nwoke bu ike*, which literally means “a man who carries power,” is used metaphorically by apprentices to denote a rich young man. According to conceptual metaphor theory, this reflects a new correspondence where power (source domain) is mapped onto the concept of a ‘rich’ young man (target domain), resulting in the emergence of new meaning. The references to a young and attractive girl or woman as *Irish potatoes* or *Tomato Jos* in data (15) and (16) function as direct metaphorical expressions grounded in specific items and locations. The freshness and vibrant colour of these food products are conceptually mapped onto female beauty, thereby reinforcing culturally salient notions of attractiveness. Through such metaphorical usage, the lexical repertoire of the language is expanded, enabling the system to adapt to evolving conceptual frameworks and socio-cultural realities. The expressions in data (20, 21, 22, and 25) highlight a notable sociolinguistic phenomenon among youths in Onitsha commercial city: code-mixing and code-switching. The bilingual speakers use this linguistic strategy not merely to fill conceptual gaps or as random interference, but deliberately to manipulate, improvise, and distort normal language use, thereby promoting identity and fostering social integration. For example, in data (17), *kupuru* is an Igbo slang term meaning “forget” or “leave,” while *girl* is an English word referring to the animate object. Together, the slang means “leave” or “forget about the girl,” possibly due to her flashy lifestyle. In data (20), *umu guy* further exemplifies code-mixing and code-switching, combining the Igbo lexeme *umu*, meaning “numerous young children,” with the English slang *guy*, meaning young stylish youths. Apprentices in Onitsha market use this expression to refer to young males and females.

The data in (23) and (24) represent a highly codified sociolect used by apprentices to discuss their affairs with girlfriends. In (23), *Nwa okpansi* literally means a child whose leg is contaminated with faeces or excreta, which is a very derogatory remark. This term is used to diminish the ego of a girl believed to be overly proud or full of herself. Just as one would need to wash any part of the body or clothing contaminated with faeces due to the foul odor, the slang *Nwa okpansi* is negatively employed to belittle a flashy young girl who is arrogant because of her beauty and who does not allow friendship to develop. In (24), *Eda mmanya* literally means "falling after being drunk," referring to how a drunkard often falls to the ground when intoxicated. This slang is an in-group sexual metaphor used by apprentices to gossip about having sexual affairs with a girl, even in the presence of their mentors.

Apprentices in Onitsha markets have developed an in-group slang for currencies that enables them to express the amounts they want to sell their goods for, even in the presence of customers. Conceptually, they use names of colours, figures, or persons to form slang terms representing various amounts of money. For example, as shown in data (26) to (30), the 50-naira note is referred to as *white* because of its colour. The 100-naira note is metaphorically called *00* (data 27). The 500-naira note is described as *isi Zik* (Zik head) in data (28), referring to the image of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first President of Nigeria, that appears on the note. Similarly, the 200-naira note is called *Isi Aboki* (Aboki's head) because of the image of Sir Ahmadu Bello, the first Premier of the Northern Region, on the note. The term *Aboki* comes from the Hausa language, meaning "my friend," but it is also commonly used to refer to any person from Northern Nigeria. The 1000 naira note, which features the portrait of Chief Clement Isong, is metaphorically called *isi Isong* (head of Isong or Isong head) or *Calabar* (data 30). Here, *Calabar* is used metaphorically to denote the region where the former Central Bank of Nigeria Governor, Chief Clement Isong, originated from.

Although the late Chief Clement Isong was a native of Akwa Ibom State, the majority of people from Onitsha and the southeastern region generally group both the people of Cross River State and Akwa Ibom State together as *Calabar* people. In data (31), foreign currencies are metaphorically conceptualized as *Ego Igwe* among the apprentices whose masters or mentees deal in high-profile commodities such as guns, double-barrels, and single-barrel firearms. Some of these apprentices occasionally attempt to sell such commodities using foreign currencies like dollars, euros, and pounds sterling. They believe that anyone who wants to purchase such commodities must be very wealthy. Although their mentees have licenses permitting them to trade these goods and services, they admit that it remains a secretive business. Consequently, they quote prices in foreign currencies to some

customers. Foreign currency is therefore metaphorically conceptualized as *Ego Igwe*, which literally means "iron money." According to one respondent, an apprentice named Chinedu, foreign currencies are called *Ego Igwe* for two main reasons: (1) just as it is very difficult to break iron with bare hands, so too is it difficult to acquire foreign currencies even abroad; people must hustle or work long hours daily to earn such money; (2) the strength and exchange value of these currencies over the Nigerian naira is very high. If someone manages to earn just one or two million dollars, euros, or pounds sterling and exchanges it into naira, they would need cartons to pack the money due to its volume. That person would never be poor again if they manage the money well because it translates into millions of naira. According to Chinedu, this is enviable capital to start a business here in Nigeria.

Another domain of slang usage among Onitsha apprentices involves lexical items primarily borrowed from Nigerian Pidgin. These expressions are commonly employed in casual conversations among the youth. The three colours of cards used by referees in football matches green, yellow, and red have been metaphorically adopted by apprentices in Onitsha to describe the status of relationships between an apprentice and his mentor. In data (32–34), the football register of “card issuance” is conceptually applied to reflect the dynamics of this relationship. In data (32), a *green card* symbolises a peaceful and healthy relationship between an apprentice and his mentor. One respondent explained that the colour green signifies life, and in Igbo sociocultural context, green vegetables are referred to as *akwukwo ndu* (leaves of life). Therefore, an apprentice who maintains a positive and harmonious relationship is said to be “on a green card.”

In data (33), a *yellow card* represents a troubled or strained relationship. Just as a healthy green leaf turns yellow when it begins to wither or die, the colour yellow metaphorically captures a deteriorating relationship between the apprentice and his mentor. Data (34) shows that a *red card* semantically implies the termination of the apprentice’s service. The colour red, commonly associated with danger, conflict, or death, is used to indicate that an apprentice has been expelled or dismissed by his mentor. Thus, the football register of card issuance is metaphorically employed to represent the mentor-apprentice relationship. Describing these relationships using green, yellow, and red cards conceptualises the relationship as a football match. There is a conceptual mapping between the source domain (the mentor-apprentice relationship) and the target domain (football cards), whereby the relationship is understood through the lens of cautioning and expulsion, as seen in football. This metaphorical attribution enables apprentices to interpret and communicate the dynamics of their relationships using familiar and contextually meaningful imagery. The

ontological correspondence between both domains highlights that the master-apprentice relationship is metaphorically understood as a football match.

Semantic extension

Semantic extension occurs when a word originally associated with a fixed meaning develops additional senses or incorporates new layers of interpretation. Shindo (2009:1) therefore argues that meaning should be understood as both a psychological process and a communicative act. Among youths in Onitsha, such semantic shifts are evident, reflecting a process of cognitive transfer in which they reconceptualise experiences and encode them through language. Examples of semantic extension in the slang used by Onitsha apprentices include:

- 35(a) crier - handset
- (b) main - to beat
- (c) production - money
- (d) bottle - beer
- (e) waist - vagina
- (f) cowbell - large breasts
- (g) machine - (new) car
- (h) lick pepper - eat
- (i) tanker - heavy drinker

In data (35a), the term *crier* originally denoted a messenger responsible for conveying announcements from the king's palace to the broader community. With the advent of mobile telecommunication technologies, however, this traditional role has undergone considerable transformation. In contemporary settings, information concerning communal welfare and social well-being is now predominantly accessed through mobile phones, effectively replacing the duties once performed by the town crier. Consequently, youths have extended the meaning of *town crier* to metaphorically include mobile phones. This semantic shift exemplifies what Shindo (2009, p. 2) refers to as the link between perception and cognition, reflecting a consistent pattern of semantic extension across sensory modalities.

In data (35b), the term *maim* has undergone a form of semantic narrowing, being used specifically to denote the act of beating. Here, *maiming* is conceptualised as *beating*, reflecting a shift in experiential understanding. Similarly, Onitsha youth refer to *money* as *production*, drawing on the idea that money is earned through the manufacture or production of goods. This represents a conceptual metaphor where a concrete domain (*money*) is understood through a more abstract domain (*production*), in line with cognitive semantics. Additionally, the term *beer* is derived from the association with a *bottle*, leading to the extension of *bottle* to encompass all types of alcoholic beverages. This metaphorical usage illustrates how one lexical item is employed to represent a broader category that it does not literally denote. According to McGlone (2007, p. 109), such figurative expressions reflect “unconscious metaphoric correspondences that structure human concepts.” These examples demonstrate how apprentices creatively manipulate language to express contemporary realities through metaphorical mappings.

The depiction of the vagina as a "waist" in Onitsha youth slang illustrates a conceptual contrast, in which one concept is interpreted through the lens of another (Romero & Soria, 2003). Likewise, the portrayal of human breasts as branded powdered milk specifically Cowbell milk reflects a metaphorical mapping between related experiential domains. This connection is grounded in their common function of milk production, linking the source domain (Cowbell milk) metaphorically to the target domain (human breasts). Likewise, the representation of a *new car* as *machine* in data (35g) reflects a semantic extension. Historically, the term *machine* referred to factory equipment and later to motorbikes due to their role in reducing manual labour while increasing speed and efficiency. In this context, *machine* is metaphorically transferred to describe a new car, which is similarly associated with optimal performance and mechanical efficiency. Another instance of semantic extension is observed in the phrase *licking pepper*, which, although originally a minor aspect of eating, is used by Onitsha youth to denote the broader activity of eating. In this case, the part (licking pepper) stands for the whole (eating), reflecting a synecdochic form of metaphor. Furthermore, the term *tanker*, which traditionally denotes a heavy-duty vehicle designed to transport liquids such as water, petrol, or kerosene, has been metaphorically extended to describe an individual who consumes alcohol excessively. This metaphorical shift is based on parallel equivalence: the vast capacity of a tanker is mapped onto the large volume of alcohol consumed by such an individual. These metaphorical usages showcase how Onitsha youth employ conceptual mappings to express social realities through creatively extended meanings.

The use of phrasal verbs

An important grammatical and semantic feature identified in the slang of Onitsha youth is the frequent use of *phrasal verbs*. These constructions, consisting of a main verb and one or more particles (typically prepositions or adverbs), form single semantic units whose meanings are not directly deducible from the individual components. This phenomenon illustrates the non-compositionality of meaning in slang, as the figurative sense of each phrase must be understood holistically rather than analytically.

Based on our data, the following examples illustrate how Onitsha apprentices creatively manipulate English phrasal verbs to express culturally specific meanings:

- | | | | |
|-------|-----------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| 36(a) | shutdown | - | sleep |
| (b) | ball out | - | go out |
| (c) | show background | - | come to the house |
| (d) | no send | - | be unconcerned |
| (e) | free me | - | stop talking (what I do not like) |
| (f) | jazz down | - | lie/kneel down |
| (g) | pull over | - | stay aside |
| (h) | park well | - | be careful |
| (i) | fall hand | - | mess up |
| (j) | buy market | - | be in trouble |
| (k) | dey bam | - | calm down |
| (l) | fall mugu | - | act foolishly |

The meaning of these phrases cannot be derived from a straightforward combination of their lexical elements. For example, in standard English, “ball out” may suggest playing basketball, but among Onitsha youth, it means *to go out or have fun*. Similarly, “jazz down” is not a recognised expression in conventional English, but here it metaphorically denotes an act of submission such as lying or kneeling down possibly suggesting obedience or yielding.

This form of slang shows a creative adaptation and expansion of English phrasal verbs into a new sociolinguistic context, where meanings are reconstructed through metaphor and

shared cultural experience. Many of these expressions rely on metaphorical thinking. For instance, “buy market” is metaphorical, equating involvement in a problematic situation to an irreversible purchase highlighting the youth’s tendency to express abstract social concepts through vivid, concrete language. Likewise, “fall hand” expresses disappointment or failure using the imagery of physically dropping something from one’s hand, which connotes a loss of control or capability. Furthermore, these phrasal constructions serve not only a linguistic function but also a social one, they signal group membership, in-group solidarity, and youth identity. Their use fosters a sense of belonging among apprentices, marking them as part of a distinct speech community with its own communicative norms. The high frequency and innovation in the use of phrasal verbs within Onitsha youth slang underscore the dynamic and expressive nature of language among young people in urban Nigerian settings.

Conclusion

This study has examined the sociolinguistic features of youth slang among apprentices in Onitsha markets through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff, 1993). The findings demonstrate that slang expressions are largely metaphorical, reflecting how apprentices map concrete or familiar experiences (source domains) onto abstract social concepts (target domains), such as friendship, wealth, status, and social behaviour. Through this process, youth creatively construct meaning, maintain in-group identity, and navigate the social realities of the marketplace. Slang expressions reveal systematic cognitive patterns, where every day phenomena like physical actions, places, or objects are used metaphorically to describe human behaviour, financial situations, or social interactions. This metaphorical mapping not only facilitates communication among apprentices but also encodes shared cultural knowledge and reflects broader socio-economic pressures in the urban commercial environment. Ultimately, the study shows that youth slang in Onitsha is a dynamic system of meaning-making, deeply rooted in metaphorical thinking, cultural cognition, and social negotiation. These insights underscore the relevance of CMT in understanding how language, culture, and cognition intersect in the lived experiences of Nigerian youth.

ORCID iD

Kevin Egbo iD <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4436-7743>

References

- Aboh, S. C., & Okpo, J. C. (2022). Morphosemantics of slang expressions by students in a Nigerian university. *African Identities*, 22(4), 875–893.
- Adamo, G. E. (2013). An analysis of students' slang terms for academic activities in a Nigerian university: A semiotic approach. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 31(1), 89–96.
<https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2013.793954>
- Bouchard, J. (2022). Sociolinguistics as scientific project: Insight from critical realism. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 22(2), 173–194.
- Chuks-Ezekwibe, O. M., & Chukwu, D. O. (2023). Markets and its origin in Onitsha before 1900. *Ochendo: An African Journal of Innovative Studies*, 4(4), 317.
- Deignan, A. (2005). *Metaphor and corpus linguistics*. John Benjamins.
- Gibbs, R. W. (2006). *Embodiment and cognitive science*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hughes, D. S. (2024). Australian slang in Victorian high schools. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 44(4), 390–410.
- Irene, B., Chukwuma-Nwuba, E. O., Lockyer, J., Onoshakpor, C., & Ndeh, S. (2024). Entrepreneurial learning in informal apprenticeship programs: Exploring the learning process of the Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS) in Nigeria. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2399312>
- Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction* (2nd edn.). Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1993). *The contemporary theory of metaphor*. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (pp. 202–251). Cambridge University Press.
- McGlone, M. (2007). Semantic productivity and idiom production. *Journal of Semantics*, 31(2), 105–121.
- Mensah, E. O. (2012). The morphosyntax of code-mixing: The Efik-English perspective. *Concentric: Studies in Linguistics*, 36(2), 235–256.
- Mensah, E. O. (2021). Contextual slanguage as linguistic performance among female youth in Nigeria. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 39(4), 338–351.
- Mirvahedi, S. H. (2021). What can interactional sociolinguistics bring to the family language policy research table? The case of a Malay family in Singapore. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 45(2), 257–272.

- Romero, E., & Soria, B. (2003). Communication by metaphor. *Philosophical Analysis*, 22(2), 167–192.
- Shindo, M. (2009). *Semantic extension, subjectivization and verbalization*. University Press of America.
- Tsang, S. (2009). Metaphor, culture and conceptual system: A case study of sex metaphors in a Hong Kong Chinese newspaper. *LCOM Papers*, 2, 1–16.
- Ukpong, I. (2010). Variation in language use: Slang expression in Ibibio. MA Thesis. University of Calabar.
- Uwen, G., & Mensah, E. (2022). Tomorrow may not be yours: Military slang and jargon as linguistic performance in Nigeria. *Language Matters*, 53(3), 91–111.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2000). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Blackwell.