# USEM

# The Use of Numerical Slang among Undergraduate Students in some Nigerian Universities: Implications for Language Use.

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## Abstract

Slang is a type of variation in language. It describes word or phrases that are used instead of more every day terms. The use of slang is known to be common among young people and groups of people with special interest in different geographical areas. In this paper the concern is with the use of numerical slang by undergraduate students in three Universities in Nigeria. The paper seeks to determine the extent to which the use of numerical slang is common in the University, the meanings of the slang expressions and the implications of these on the students' use of language, particularly, the English language. To achieve this, the Network Concept was used with the interview technique to elicit information from informants and for the analysis. The findings show that the use of numerical slang is common among the students but with far reaching implications on their language use. It is recommended that students should learn to exercise control over the use of numerical slang expressions, especially in academic contexts.

## 1. Introduction: Definition, Genesis and Growth of Slang

Slang is "a type of variation in language which is found in different geographical area: (Yule 2007: 205). Slang originates from different geographical areas. For

instance different countries have different slang, so there are French slang, English slang, German slang, American slang and Nigerian slang. Slang has its beginning "always by ingenious individuals to make the language more vivid and expressive" Slang made its way from military, scientific and technical circle into general parlance (Branwyn 2008). The use of slang is restricted to certain individuals or groups. These individuals or groups are observed to have a lot of things in common and therefore, their speech habit indicates variation, such as the use of slang which is peculiar to them and those associated with them. As was observed among some university undergraduates, slang "may be used implicitly or explicitly as indications of membership in different social groups or speech communities," (Yule 2007: 205, Crystal 1993, Osundare 1981 & Fromkin & Rodman 1978).

The concept of numerical slang cannot really be traced to a particular point in time but Soares (2005) asserts that slang "come in a variety of forms". He equally asserts that "the process of creation is constantly taking place". It is observed that numerical slang expressions have been in existence for quite some time and examples can be found in different places as illustrated in the following American example: the numerical slang 4:20 results from the National "smoke out" day of April 20th, a day that was originally intended to have everyone put down their cigarettes. However, it turned out to have a different meaning as "a group of high school kids who meet after school (at 4:20) to get high" used it to refer to their 'meeting time'. Other American examples are "Kizzcee 007 – *I'll be home for/after Christmas sales*" and "10-36 – *you were going off for the night*".

It is interesting to note that numerical slang in Nigeria has its origin in higher institutions. Actually, it is believed to have started off from higher institutions in Western Nigeria. A study by Okon (2003:167) asserts that the eating formula – 010 # 001 # 101 – came from the "Alli must go" protest by University students when the cafeteria system of feeding was abolished and the cost of feeding became expensive. One of the consequences of this was that some students could not afford three meals a day. In order to survive, they had to skip one or two meals a day as indicated by the numerical slang above. This meant that the meal for the day consisted of breakfast and dinner (101), lunch only (010), or dinner only (001).

Based on the foregoing, the use of slang among students in three universities namely: the University of Calabar and the University of Uyo in the South South Geo-political Zone and the Madonna University, Okija, in the South East geo-political zone of Nigeria was investigated.

## 2. Purpose of Study

Given the significance of numerical slang as a language of communication among undergraduate students, this study seeks to appraise the communicative and social functions of numerical slang with a view to proffering suggestions on the implications of this linguistic phenomenon on the language performance of the students. The specific objectives of the study are:

a. To investigate the use of numerical slang by undergraduate students.
b. To find out if the use of numerical slang appeals to the students.
c. To determine if there is commonality in the numerical slang used by the students.
d. To determine the domains for numerical slang usage.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

The Social Network Concept was used. Milroy (1980:46) views the social network concept as an important concept for both data collection and analysis. She opines that "people interact meaningfully as individuals in addition to forming parts of structured functional institutions such as classes, castes or occupational groups". Gal quoted in Appel and Muysken (1987:39) views the social network as an important sociolinguistic phenomenon. He asserts that "the networks of informal social interaction in which a speaker is enmeshed and through which, by pressure or inducement, participants impose linguistic norms on each other" cannot be overlooked. He has also observed the following as important factors in the network concept:

- Frequency of social contact
- The nature of the relationship between/among the contact
- The character of the contact
- The purpose of the interaction

This study made use of the social network framework because it allowed the researchers access to information and it was also used in their analysis of the data so collected.

## 4. Instrumentation

The instrument for data collection was a set of fourteen (14) items questionnaire. This was divided into two sections: section A dealt with questions which sought to elicit responses on the communicative use of numerical slang. The questionnaire items were formulated around five clusters with twelve (12) items in this section. Some of these questions: 8, 9 and 10 required determining the domains of

numerical slang use and indicating instances of the influence of numerical slang use on the students' language performance. The response to each of the items was graded using a two-point scale of yes (2 points) and No (1 point). Section B, on the other hand, dealt with the bio-data of the respondents; (see Appendix 1). Two hundred (200) copies of the questionnaire were distributed but one hundred and eight (180) subjects completed and returned same. The responses are as follows:
- University of Calabar – 70
- University of Uyo – 60
- Madonna University– 50

## 5 Population

Some students of the following Universities: University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, University of Uyo, Uyo – Akwa Ibom State and Madonna University, Okija – Anambra State, were interviewed. The participants comprised students of different sex and age. The variation in age and levels of education was to enable the researchers discover the effectiveness of numerical slang in communication among students who belong to the same peer group. It was also intended to establish the extent to which other people who are not students make use of numerical slang in communication.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Section A

Simple percentages were used for the calculations in order to prove our findings.

Table 1: Reponses on Items 1 – 12

| Items | Frequency of Responses | | Percentage for each item | | Total No. of Respondent | Total Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes | No | Yes | No | | |
| 1 | 147 | 33 | 81% | 19% | 180 | 100 |
| 2 | 69 | 11 | 38% | 62% | 180 | 100 |
| 3 | 113 | 67 | 63% | 37% | 180 | 100 |
| 4 | 45 | 135 | 25% | 75% | 180 | 100 |
| 5 | 135 | 45 | 75% | 25% | 180 | 100 |
| 6 | 129 | 51 | 72% | 28% | 180 | 100 |
| 7 | 60 | 120 | 33% | 67% | 180 | 100 |
| 10a | 33 | 147 | 18% | 82% | 180 | 100 |
| 11 | 55 | 125 | 31% | 69% | 180 | 100 |
| 12 | 98 | 82 | 54% | 46% | 180 | 100 |

The result as presented in table 1 shows that both the male and female subjects in the three Universities make use of numerical slang in communication. The table further shows the differences in the responses of both the male and female subjects regarding their recognition, acceptance and the use of numerical slang in communication among University students. Both groups do have access to listening to and speaking numerical slangs. The results affirm our earlier assumption that the use of numerical slang is quite extensive as it is quite informative as well as confirm issues within the University environment (among students). A look at table 1 attests to the fact that numerical slang has adapted to the current social conditions in the Universities. Item 1, 3, 5, and 6 are significant in the responses of the informants that numerical slang is exclusive to the University campus.

## 6.2    Section B

Table 2: Percentage of Subjects by Age

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------|-----------|------------|
| 17 – 21 years | 82 | 46 |
| 22 – 26 | 60 | 33 |
| 27 - & above | 38 | 21 |
| Total | 180 | 100 |

The subjects were categorized into three levels of age distribution. There were 17 – 21 years old who are moving from adolescent to young adults which numbered 82 and constituted 46%. On the other hand, those from 22 – 26 reflected the adults in the University campus with a frequency of 60 and 33%; whereas the age group 27 and above constitute the matured students with a frequency of 38 which constitute 21%. The age range constituted one of the variables to find out if both the young and the adults appreciate the use of numerical slang as a language of communication.

## 6.3    Sex distribution of the subjects

Table 3 gives a summary of the sex distribution of the subjects. There is a slight difference between the two groups of subjects. The male respondents outnumbered their female counterparts. The female constituted 46% while the male constituted 54%. The difference does not in any way suggest that the males

make use of numerical slang more than the females. Both groups have accepted the use of the numerical slang in communication.

Table 3: Percentage of Subjects based on Sex

| Variable — Sex | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 98 | 54 |
| Female | 82 | 46 |
| Total | 180 | 100 |

## 7.    Discussion

Numerical slang among students in some Nigerian Universities is a language variation which is accepted and recognized by the students. The responses to item twelve (12) in the questionnaire show that 54% of the students agreed that the use of numerical slang contributes to non-verbosity in their use of language whereas 46% disagreed. This agrees with the findings of other scholars which show that this form of slang has been found to be effective for communication (cf Okon 2003: 171; Fromkin, Rodman and Hymans 2007: 440) among others. In spite of the positive response towards its use, and its effectiveness in communication notwithstanding, many of the students – that is, 75% are of the opinion that numerical slang should not be used by all the members of the university community since no secrets would be kept if everyone knew all the coded numbers. These subjects are of the opinion that if every member of the University understands the code, then it would no longer be slang. Whereas, 25% do not see anything wrong if other members of the University community understand the code. However, not all of the students understand the different usage of slang except those who are socially inclined to its use.

Numerical slang like any other type of slang is used to explain issues and is the language for a particular group of people who understand its meaning (cf item 4). From this study, the ranking of domains in the use of numerical slang is as follows: Hostel, recreational centres, restaurant, lecture hall, laboratories and the library. The deduction here is that students restrict the use of numerical slang to domains where non-students will not visit often.

## 7.    Implications for Language Use

The use of numerical slang introduces new words into the English language by combining numbers to produce new meaning. As a means of communication, the

use of numerical slang among undergraduate students has been found to be effective, particularly for the following reasons:

- They are useful codes for remembering what one has read or heard
- The students tend to view numerical slang as a convenient medium of communication
- They are useful in sending text messages which make them concise and precise.
- Students find numerical slang interesting because they have no syntactic restrictions

The use of slang by the students is not without its challenges. The problem is that some of these slang words can become fossilized and as such do not augur well for the learning of English spellings and pronunciation in particular. It may compound the already existing difficulties associated with the spelling and pronunciation of some English words.

Slang has been known to be one of the "productive sources of lexical items" in a speech community. This is true of the use of numerical slang on our campuses. It has been found to be a veritable source of the production of lexical items in English in the Nigerian environment and in other environments. For instance, Fromkin et al (2007:440) observe that slang words and phrases are often "invented" in keeping with new ideas and customs. In addition, they assert that many slang words have entered English from the underworld. The interaction between the students and other members of the university communities under investigation, and indeed, the wider speech community has enabled the spread of numerical slang. To this extent, we have observed that the lexical items derived from numerical slang have permeated the larger Nigerian society and have thus become a part of the linguistic resources of the society. Instances of this innovative use of language can be drawn from common local expressions such as "6 to 6" to describe fufu (a local cassava meal which takes a long time to digest), "24" (a whole day), "10-11" to describe someone/something that is over used as in 10"/ 11" spanner which is the tool that is readily used by mechanics, "419" to describe a fraudster or fraudulent activities, to mention but a few.

## 8.    Conclusion

In this study, we observed that students in the different institutions we investigated were not only familiar with numerical slang but also used it frequently. As indicated in the students' positive responses, the use of numerical slang functions

as the "marker of group identity" and it also facilitates communication. As already stated, the use of slang has permeated the larger Nigerian society; therefore, these researchers call for a more extensive study of slang words and phrases in order to show their applicability and acceptability in our everyday language use and its incursion into our lexicon.

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## Appendix I

## University of Calabar, Calabar
## Questionnaire

Dear Respondent,

We are conducting a research into the "use of numerical slangs in some Nigerian universities". We shall therefore, be very grateful if you could respond frankly to the statements below. Your responses will be treated in strict confidence.

Background information

i. Date of interview ..................................................................
ii. Name of Interviewee (optional) .............................................
iii. Questionnaire No. ...............................................................
iv. Department .......................................................................

Please tick the boxes that represent your view on each statement/question below. "Questionnaire on the use of numerical slangs in some Nigerian universities.

### Section A

| S/N | Items | Options | |
|-----|-------|------|------|
| 1. | Do you use numerical slangs on campus? | Yes | No |
| 2. | Would you like to use numerical slangs in all social gathering on campus? | Yes | No |
| 3. | I like using numerical slangs on campus | Yes | No |
| 4. | Would you like all members of the university community to use numerical slangs? | Yes | No |
| 5. | Do you communicate with your mate using numerical slangs? | Yes | No |
| 6. | I enjoy listening to people communicate using numerical slangs? | Yes | No |
| 7. | Should the use of numerical slangs on campus be formally enforced? | Yes | No |

8. The following domains are where numerical slangs are used on campus. Rank them in order of importance. Lecture halls, laboratories, restaurant, hostel, library, recreational centre.

(a) ...................................................................
(b) ...................................................................

(c) ............................................................

(d) ............................................................

(e) ............................................................

(f) ............................................................

9. List some examples of the numerical slangs

    (a) ............................................................

    (b) ............................................................

    (c) ............................................................

    (d) ............................................................

10. Does the use of numerical slangs affect your academic work?

    Yes [ ]    No [ ]

10b. If yes, is it positively or negatively? ..................................................

10c. Why? ...............................................................................................

11. Will you recommend the use of numerical slangs in teaching?

    Yes [ ]    No [ ]

12. Do you think the use of numerical slangs contributes to the non-verbosity in your writing exercise? Yes [ ]    No [ ]

## Section B

Age:

(a) 17 – 23 years    [ ]

(b) 24 – 29 years    [ ]

(c) 30 – 35 years    [ ]

(d) 36 and above    [ ]

Gender:

(a) Female    [ ]

(b) Male    [ ]

## Appendix II

**Numerical Slangs**

|  | UNICAL | UNIUYO | MADONNA | Gloss |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 001 | √ | √ | Student Union President |
| 2. | 001 + 010 + 100 |  |  | Eating once a day |
| 3. | 24/2, 4, 7 | √ | √ | Daily, weekly, regularly |
| 4. | = | 4 + 4 | = | AIDS |
| 5. | 5 and 6 | √ | √ | Too close, (especially close |

| | UNICAL | UNIUYO | MADONNA | Gloss |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | persons or friends) |
| 6. | 1 + 1 | √ | √ | 1. Married couple 2. To have it one-on-one either during a fight, contest |
| 7. | 3 in 1 | = | = | Three things in one |
| 8. | 6 to 6 | √ | √ | 1. Fasting, fufu or eba 2. A gossip or slanderer |
| 9. | 1 in town | √ | √ | Latest thing |
| 10. | = | = | 143 | I love you |
| 11. | = | = | 18r | Later |
| 12. | 9ice | = | 9ice | Nice |
| 13. | G8 | = | 8 | Gate, ate |
| 14. | 2nite | = | 9t | Tonight and night |
| 15. | = | = | 10x | Thanks |
| 16. | Gr8 | = | Gr8t | Great |
| 17. | H8 | = | = | Hate |
| 18. | L8 | = | = | Late |
| 19. | 50, 50 | √ | √ | 1. Being Strong, 2. Share equally |
| 20. | 4rm | √ | √ | From |
| 21. | 9:Ja | √ | √ | Nigeria |
| 22. | 2ru | √ | √ | True |
| 23. | 2moro | √ | √ | Tomorrow |
| 24. | +ve | √ | √ | Positive |
| 25. | -ve | √ | √ | Negative |
| 26. | B/4 | √ | √ | Before |
| 27. | In2 | = | = | Into |
| 28. | Ovr 9$^{th}$ | = | = | Overnight |
| 29. | Str 8 | √ | √ | Straight |
| 30. | Sum x | = | = | Sometimes |
| 31. | 19 boys | √ | √ | Cheat, fraudster, dubbing |
| 32. | 4.40 | √ | √ | 1. Race/very fast, 2. To take to his heels. |
| 33. | 2 timer | √ | √ | Double Dating |

| | UNICAL | UNIUYO | MADONNA | Gloss |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 34. | Catch 22 | = | = | Achieving something beyond expectation |
| 35. | O O level | √ | √ | No money/cashless |
| 36. | OO | √ | √ | Pure/sachet water |
| 37. | 1980's | = | = | Olden days |
| 38. | 11 | √ | √ | Draw |
| 39. | No. 6 | √ | √ | Brain/IQ |
| 40. | = | 9, 11 | = | Indian Hemp |
| 41. | = | 2, hour | = | Intercourse |
| 42. | = | Ga 4 | = | Go |
| 43. | 5,5,5 | √ | √ | Stainless steel |
| 44. | = | 6, 4 ma 2 | = | Come |
| 45. | = | 2, 7 | = | A stand for prostitutes/harlots |
| 46. | 404 | √ | = | Dog meat |
| 47. | = | 7, 8, 9 | = | You |
| 48. | 411 | √ | √ | New Information |
| 49. | 13:14 | √ | √ | Spanner, to use someone |
| 50. | 1,0 | √ | √ | Defeat |
| 51. | 360 | √ | √ | Round the globe |
| 52. | I | √ | √ | Cigarette, slim person |
| 53. | 15% | √ | = | Niger Delta |
| 54. | Under 16 | √ | √ | Very young girls |
| 55. | OOO | = | = | Fasting |
| 56. | 4ton | √ | √ | Four Thousand |
| 57. | Y2k | √ | √ | Year 2000 |
| 58. | 911 | = | = | Thief |
| 59. | Figure 8 | √ | √ | Good shape |
| 60. | Item 7 | √ | √ | Entertainment |
| 61. | 11-11 | = | = | Recreational centre |
| 62. | 20 leave | √ | √ | Taking one's leave |
| 63. | 003 | √ | √ | Student Union's Secretary |
| 64. | 2h | √ | √ | Two hundred |
| 65. | 10 grand | √ | √ | Ten Thousand |

| | | UNICAL | UNIUYO | MADONNA | Gloss |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 66. | 48 hrs | √ | √ | | Two days |
| 67. | 240 | √ | √ | | Being strong |
| 68. | 999 | √ | √ | | Police |
| 69. | 111 | √ | √ | | Report to the authority |
| 70. | Take 5 | = | = | | Shake me |
| 71. | 0 mind | = | = | | Make up your mind |
| 72. | 10% | √ | √ | | Bribery |
| 73. | 2k2 | = | = | | Two thousand two hundred |
| 74. | 6-6 | √ | √ | | Morning till evening, night |

**Appendix III cf item 10c**

This is a follow-up on item 10b

- Sometimes when writing exams one tends to be tempted to use it either mistakenly or purposely for substitute
- Does not allow for comprehension
- It is not everybody that understands it
- Because of the slangs, students cannot make simple correct sentences.
- Because I do not find it as a part of English Language
- Because constant use of slangs makes you to forget simple English words.
- It affects the learning process
- It distorts my spelling exercise
- It brings about confusion whenever I am writing
- It affects your ability to speak good English
- It does not increase ones' vocabulary in English Language
- It is easily remembered
- It prevents one from being acquainted with the Queen's English rather it affects our academic work.
- It explains some events
- It does not allow for smooth writing.