Sharp Sharp: beyond slang to social cohesion among youth

Ndivhoniswani Aaron Tshidzumba

Senior Lecturer

School of Communication

North West University

OrcID: 0000-0002-4219-3010

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Abstract

Slang is widely viewed in pejorative manner, as substandard expression yet this genre of expressions are used by different groups in different societies, each group creating its own register of slangs and their meanings. Traditionally, slangs are jargons restricted to the context they were used; however, it is not unusual for some slangs to defy the boundary of their original coinage and adoption, enter mainstream oral use and become popular. Sharp Sharp is a traditionally black, urban male South African slang that is now popular and frequently used by almost all racial and linguistic orientations in the country. This study examines the place of Sharp Sharp in the South African society and its potential as a strategic communication expression for social cohesion; a conceptual approach was used to provide perspective to slang within which Sharp Sharp was situated and examined. The study is executed using a combination of observation of the slang in use and a literature study was done to aggregate knowledge on language and slang interaction especially the place of slang as an oral tradition. It was found that contemporary thought frowns at labeling slang in the classical derogatory perspective but, instead, argues that slangs serves functional purposes.

Keywords: slang, sharp sharp, social cohesion

Introduction

Except for South Africa, probably no other country in Africa has a complex history of language interaction between an array of indigenous mother tongue languages and those enduring from settler and colonial legacies. Not even Nigeria, the continent's most populous nation, contends with as much language complexity as South Africa; 'the language situation in South Africa is characterized not only by the number and variety of African, Asian and European languages that coexist, but also by alternative varieties of these languages (Reagan, 2004:421).' With a total of eleven official languages (Mesthrie, 2004:23), nine indigenous mother tongues, Afrikaans and English, the language terrain of the 55.9 million strong nation is, not surprisingly, chequered. In such a multicultural and multilingual landscape, at least three non-mutually exclusive consequences will ensue: potential for language struggles for more social relevance, political and economic access (de Klerk, 1999:312; Epstein, 2012:84; Silva, 1997:20), languages will almost inescapably interact and the interacting units will influence one another although the influence may not be balanced, and alternative strains arising from mixture of two or more standard languages is inevitable.

 Alternative varieties of oral styles arising from interaction and mixture of languages considered mainstream is a normal social currency globally. Such varieties arise for a number of factors such as defiance or protest to status quo, a compromise to bridge communication constraints or for the purpose of bonding a counter culture. Within standard languages and varieties resulting from interaction between mainstream tongues, 'an ideological framework' and 'class of deviant registers…exist with varying degrees of intensity, ubiquity, and institutionalized force within a language community. (Agha, 2015:306).' Agha's description is of the class of words known as slang.

South Africa is affectionately called The Rainbow nation because of its multi-racial composition – blacks of African descent, whites originally from Dutch extraction, Indians, and colored who, through inter marriage with other races in the country have acquired light skin, all co-habit as citizens of the country. The challenge though has been, *inter alia*, language hence the state policy of eleven official languages. Over the years the languages in the country have interacted within

and between constituent races with the result that words from a race are acquired by non-native speakers and slang expressions formed.

The nature, evolution, and use of slang is a fascinating subject that has, and is still, attracting investigations from researchers in different social contexts. Slang generally has the tag of being ephemeral, contextual and substandard or bad grammar. This may be interpreted to mean slangs have no far reaching value for society as a whole expect, probably, within the particular enclave it is used.

The purpose of this study is to examine prospects of *sharp sharp* slang in South Africa as a potential tool for social cohesion strategy owing to its popularity, frequency of use and substantial acceptance of the expression into the vocabulary of almost all cultural and lingual orientations in the country.

The conceptual approach for this study is drawn from Agha's tripod 'ideological framework', 'deviant registers' and 'communal institutionalization' description of slang. Therefore, it is within the ambit of these three labels that this study situates and examines the standard language-slang interaction and makes a case for value based recognition and functional use of a body of enduring slang registers for communication development policies. Except for short explanation on its meaning and contextual use, there is very little information available on the subject matter because, to the best of researcher's knowledge, there is no research done specifically on *sharp sharp* slang as used in South Africa, its present state and prospects for social cohesion.

Literature Review, Conceptual Approach and Theoretical Framework

Language and Slang - clarification

Language and slang are two non-mutually exclusive elements on the same continuum of cultural orientation of verbal communication. Although the relationship is a co-dependency, slang is dependent on a mainstream language or interaction of mainstream languages to coin its set of registers. Nine mother tongue languages in South Africa (Ndebele, Venda, Xhosa, Zulu, Setswana, Sepedi, Tshonga, Swati and Sotho) are official including Afrikaans and English all, in addition to each having peculiar slangs, interact and produce several hybrid slangs. Slang, according to

Dictionary.com (2017) is 'very informal usage in vocabulary and idiom that is characteristically more metaphorical, playful, elliptical, vivid and ephemeral than ordinary language.' By qualifying slang as 'very informal', 'playful' and 'ephemeral', all descriptions which are indeed characteristic of slang, this definition provides a narrow, classical perspective and implies slang has no functional use and, consequently, diminishes, or at best limit, its value as an oral style. The American Heritage Dictionary (cited by Ogura, 2015:82) definition adds two important dimensions 'in attempt to show the social effect of slang.'

1. *A kind of language occurring chiefly in casual and playful speech, made up typically of coinages and figures of speech that are deliberately used in place of standard terms for added raciness, humor, irreverence, or other effect.*

2. *Language peculiar to a group; argot or jargon; thieves' slang.*

Since 'race' and 'language' are permanent social variables that predisposes on-going effects, the inclusion of 'raciness' and 'language peculiar to a group' in this particular definition bears clear social implications that is enduring unlike superficial and narrow definitions that reduces the functionality of slangs, for instance professional slang, in societies. The foregoing distinction is necessary because slang is usually differentiated from 'standard' language such that any potential value of slang register for social cohesion can be lost as a result of reductionist label yet ' "standard" is subject to interpretation and remains complicated to define. In addressing this complex concept, one might begin from what is regarded as non-standard, which is likely to include slang (Burke cited by Ogura, 2015:81).' Burke further delineated 'standard' language into three categories namely: *public form*, *most authoritative form* and *most current and prevailing form* under which slang falls and, by implication, accorded 'standard' appellation where it is used. Although slang expressions are generally fleeting but while they last they are standard expressions and 'many expressions also cross repertoire boundaries over time so that expressions that began as slang contractions often find their way into the standard language, sometimes even replacing the terms from which they were derived (Agha, 2015:307).'

Sharp Sharp conveniently fits into the class of South African urban slang registers that have escaped the frivolous and ephemeral boundary of their kind; the expression has found its way into significant portions of daily mainly mainstream interactions, both in urban, cosmopolitan townships and rural areas. For instance, *sharp sharp* is used on business signages in Johannesburg and Leon Visser anchors *Sharp Sharp,* a ten minute children educational programme on SAfm every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. In a multicultural milieu as South Africa, this is remarkable because, if nothing, it shows that an expression that obviously derives from standard English but, as a slang, is rooted in tsotsitaal slang culture 'primarily used by young urban black men (Hurst cited by Hurst&Meshtrie, 2013:04), 'and…links historically with a 'criminal' identity construct (Hurst&Meshtrie, 2013:04)', has defied racial, sectional and derogatory labeling, entered mainstream social interaction and, thus, wields potential for cohesion.

Deviance, Ideology and Institutionalization: A conceptual view of *Sharp Sharp*

The English root of *Sharp Sharp* is apparent but its form and meaning are parallel to its origin. *Sharp sharp* is used to mean 'fine, alright or goodbye' (Hurst & Meshtrie, 2013:09) and, form wise, is either spoken singularly as '*sharp or shup*' or doubled for effect as in '*sharp sharp or shup shup*.' Agha's description of slang as deviant register, ideological framework and institutionalizations is widely held view of the genre both in academia and public, either impliedly or unambiguous terms. For instance, Green (2015:19) wrote that 'slang does not, of course, exist as description of a form of language prior to 1756; prior to that, its collection focused largely on criminal jargon, cant. It was the language of the gutter and many felt that there it should stay.' And while writing on 'Ebonics' as a distinct form of black American English, Epstein (2012:84) condemned labeling of the oral genre as 'slang'. It is evident then that slang, and by extension its registers, have long been viewed pejoratively yet modern realities like media proliferation, freedoms of expression, association and human rights among others necessitate a review of the old paradigm. This need perhaps led Greene (2015:14) to ask: 'Is slang invading, nowadays, public space, and are the traditional frontiers between slang and the generally accepted literary language getting more and more blurred?'

In face of postmodern global community social realities the view of slang in the rigid deviant interpretation is no longer tenable; rather a bi-conceptual view is necessary. As a postmodern deviant genre, this study views slang as falling into two broad groups namely: *functional deviant slang* and *dysfunctional deviant slang*. The *functional deviant slang* category will include slangs which are used fairly reasonably in public sphere and are neither deemed foul or offensive by society nor does it offend ethical sensitivities; this category covers slangs that were historically abhorred by mainstream societies but now reconstructed and embraced. Consequently, a conceptual definition of functional slang for this study is a set of alternative registers institutionalized within a group or fairly common to the entire population which does not irritate ethical and public sensitivities. It is in this class that *Sharp Sharp* falls. *Dysfunctional deviant* slang on the other hand need no elaboration expect that it is those set of slang registers that can be conceptualized in the rigid, connotative meaning of deviant; those, as Greene put it, society frowns at and view as 'language of the gutter.'

Whether *functional deviant* or *dysfunctional deviant*, slangs are generally ideological and institutionalized to the people or society in which the particular type is spoken. As an ideology slang reflects the values and lifestyle, a way of life the class of people who use it and a strong, institutionalized oral tradition, a means of communication, shared meaning and expression to the outer society. Central to the idea of strong ideological and institutionalized slang culture, dysfunctional or not, is the creation of a distinct identity bound by similar values and aspirations, a right which has gained impetus in our age.

Sharp Sharp: **A functional deviant slang**

Even if its root was dysfunctional and deviant, *Sharp Sharp* has broken into mainstream South African expression and has even found acceptance in professional circles as evident in the SAfm (a public radio station in South Africa) children programme. The once black South African urban youth male slang has gone cosmopolitan being spoken by almost all cultures including foreigners making it a common social property. If *Sharp Sharp* is fast becoming a widely used social expression, then, it wields potential to foster social cohesion through the various strata of the society and, consequently, any derogatory labeling is inappropriate. Communication planners of

government need to test this potential and design developmental communication schemes around the expression. The key is in the expression's meaning: 'fine, alright or goodbye'.

Theoretical Framework

The Actor Network Theory (ANT) is a constructivist paradigm that 'emphasizes and considers all surrounding factors – no one acts alone… Actor Network Theory does not typically attempt to explain why a network exists; it is more interested in the infrastructure of actor-network, how they are formed, how they can fall apart' Davey (2007). The framework provided by the ANT aligns with present realities of slang as a potent genre of oral expression. The natural infrastructures entities depend on are people and society for its formation, use and dis-use; the implication of this relationship, especially for social activities, is that collaboration in construction, collective acceptance and use and common gratification is important for success. *Sharp Sharp* slang reflects the social network infrastructure of collaboration, collective use and common gratification in its daily use in multicultural and multilingual South African society which underscores its communicative potency.

Drawing a link between collective roles of actors in a setting and fostering of social cohesion, integration and diversity, Verhoeven (2008:129) wrote that building social cohesion from individual to society is a matter of communication strategy and how the strategy is deployed. This further underscores the actor network or collective role in building social cohesion, firmly affirms communication strategy as central to that objective and since communication is essentially a network of social construct, *Sharp Sharp* slang, as an expression construct in a nation of diverse lingual orientations can be deployed as a communication strategy for social cohesion.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative enquiry which is executed through the combination of observation and literature study. The researcher, though aware that there are other slang expressions that are also well used, through observation noticed the frequency, which is almost subconscious, with which individuals use *sharp sharp* in their conversations; indeed, it will seem *sharp sharp* has evolved from being a slang to regular word. Following the observation of the expression's use in social

interactions, literature on language and slang was conducted to synthesize knowledge and situate *sharp sharp* as an emerging functional expression in South Africa.

Findings

This study found that the origin of *Sharp Sharp* is the tsotisaal urban township language. The study further found that though slang and its registers were historically thought of pejoratively, new paradigms of views are being proposed by scholars especially as it relates to functional context value of slang in different societies. Surprisingly though, despite new paradigms of slang view being proposed, the popularity of *Sharp Sharp* in South African societies and benefit it can bring, both in terms of development policy and its state as an expression, scholarly study that focuses strictly on the expression are not available to the best of researcher's knowledge.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, this study concludes that *Sharp Sharp* is conceptually a functional deviant slang because it has transcended group and race in South Africa. For this reason, therefore, since communication is the major tool of designing and implementing development strategies and such is best achieved, or faster achieved, through spheres of shared meanings, it is concluded that *Sharp Sharp*, because its positive meaning is understood across all demographic strata, has the innate potential to build cohesion in the society.

Recommendation

The recommendations of this study are twofold: one, for development communication policy planners and two, for scholars in academia. Specifically, the recommendations are as follows:

1. That government development communication policy planners realize the cross-cultural appeal of *Sharp Sharp* and exploit it to promote social cohesion in rural and urban

townships in critical national life as security awareness, economic participation and empowerment, race and cultural issues, youth and teenage concerns among others, and

2. That scholars in the academia devote more study to *Sharp Sharp,* and other linguistic elements that have development and cohesion potential and advice government on policies based on their findings.

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