Given the contact situation between Nigerian languages and the English Language, even a cursory survey of the Nigerian novel will reveal the many linguistic practices that Nigerian novelists utilise in narrating their experience. Slang is among the many linguistic strategies Nigerian novelists employ in their narratives. However, studies on the use of language in the Nigerian novel are yet to pay critical attention to the multi-discursive functions of slang expressions. This neglect is mostly steeped in the canonical supposition that slang is an impolite linguistic expression, invariably proposing that slang is unworthy of scholarly investigation. Such a supposition undermines the creative and discursive function for which slang as a language variety is utilised in the Nigerian novel. To fill this research gap and, using three selected Nigerian novels: Waiting for an Angel, Arrows of Rain, and Under the Brown Rusted Roofs, this paper investigates the use of slang in order to illustrate that slang is a linguistic device that youths create and deploy to negotiate and construct resistance identity. Drawing significantly from Manuel Castells’ identity theory which accounts for how language is deployed to construct resistance identity, the analytical method involves textual and extra-linguistic analyses. Such an analytical methodology offers
insights into the intricate bond between language and identity construction in literary situations.

Introduction

Nigerian novelists employ diverse linguistic strategies in their narratives so as to capture the wide-ranging dimensions of their literary engagement. Given the various linguistic strategies deployed by Nigerian novelists in their works, the Nigerian novel has enjoyed a gamut of scholarly interpretations from the linguistic flank. However, slang, being one of the many linguistic strategies Nigerian novelists engage in presenting Nigeria’s social experience in a picturesque manner, is yet to interest many a linguistic critic of the Nigerian novel. While this neglect tends to undermine the discursive functions of slang in a multilingual community such as Nigeria, especially as a creative linguistic tool which language users rely upon to indicate resentment to actions and activities of others – actions that either lean towards being inimical or hostile to the slang users’ existence, the neglect seems to be mostly steeped in the canonical conjecture that slang is an informal language for impolite discourse. If slang is taken as an inappropriate language facility, it devalues the meta-discursive significations that are embedded in the deployment of slang in interactive or conversational situations, as this paper seeks to explain.

Despite some linguists’, even non-linguists’ negative perception of slang, it is a core element of social group mobilisation and a defiant gesture of resistance. It is an emblem of group identity. Other manifestations of a generation's identity are the clothes they prefer (fashion), the hair-do that makes them belong, the tunes they rock to (music/dance), among others, but these can be easily regulated by authorities. In some Nigerian universities, for instance, authorities have prohibited dress style that exposes sensitive body parts, but language can hardly be regulated and restricted. This tells us that even the most watchful attempts by authorities cannot eradicate slang and its use within speech communities. Although language can be scrutinised and controlled in some places at some times, it can challenge universal regulation, allowing its revolutionary nature to prevail. This is very true of the use of slang.

Resistance is the most powerful stimulus for the creation and distribution of slang. Invariably, people use slang as a form of identity, group solidarity, and as a linguistic tool of resistance, as this paper demonstrates. Although it is not every member of a group that is oppressed by a dominant pattern of life, people are naturally influenced by situational imperatives to invent a slang term which they consider theirs, resisting the linguistic as well as social behaviour of non-members of their group. Oppression, then, is one major factor which provides an impetus to coin and use slang for the purpose of resistance. This is the focus of this paper. Using Abimbola Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, and Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain*, the paper provides insights into how the selected Nigerian novelists deploy slang as a linguistic device of resistance identity construction. Looking at slang within the magnified context of discursive enactment of resistance offers an ideal means for investigating this linguistic modality.

Understanding Slang

Literature is replete with diverse and varied definitions of slang. *The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, for example, sees slang as:

currently widely used and understood language, consisting of new meanings attributed to existing words or of wholly new words, generally accepted as lying outside standard polite usage. [Slang originates] from the attempt to introduce fresh expression into language that is peculiar to a group, profession or social class…
Though the definition above addresses the solidarity thrust and group-oriented nature of slang, it undermines the status of slang as a language variety as well as overlooks how slang finds expression within the parameters of polemics. E. Martiello, cited in Modupe Alimi and Arua Arua, defines slang by drawing on two broad categories: the general and the specific. The general slang terms, according to Martiello, are used deliberately by speakers to break with the standard usage, and therefore are not group-restricted, and specific slang terms are used by people of common age and experience (15). Specific slang, then, functions as in-group markers. Corroborating Martiello's argument, Mads Holmsgaard Eriksen writes “...slang is not confined to particular groups of people, but...it rather can be used by anyone who wants to convey an attitude that the use of standard language word cannot convey” (22). Eriksen's position implies that the use of slang and its popularity with social groups should not come as a surprise. Slang, by its nature of existence, is wittier and cleverer than standard English. As a variety of language that is naturally inclined to linguistic creativity, slang is quite engaging because of its infinite resourcefulness. With slang, each speech community or group has the chance to shape and propagate its own lexicon, and in so doing exercises originality and imaginative ingenuity. The result is always a lively, playful body of language that is at times used for no other reason than that it expresses the users' feeling and perception in an apt manner.

It then implies that slang, “can be studied from one group to another denoting the membership of a social group” (Ijiya 125). Because group identity is eminently important, slang functions as a powerful and explicit means of expressing groups' consciousness. Slang is an emblem of a community of practice. A community of practice, according to Brian Paltridge, “is a group of people who come together to carry out certain activities with each other” (77). Since people come together to carry out certain activities together, they naturally evolve a language variety that gives expression to those activities. Slang is the easiest and simplest language variety that can evolve in a community of practice to cater for the communicative needs of the community. As a corollary, it is within a community of practice that the meaning of a slang expression is much understood.

Also, Alimi and Arua discuss slang from the social-function perspective as, "the informal and highly expressive products of students' creativity which are used to describe their cultural, academic or social lives" (39). Their definition is not without some shortcomings. Besides the fact that the University is not one closeted community, some slang expressions are borrowed into the University by students owing to their interaction with speech communities outside the University community. Neither are slang's creativity and usage restricted to college students nor confined to the hallowed walls of universities. Rather, it is a part of everybody's everyday life.

For Akmajian et al, slang, “is a set of expressions that is characteristic of informal language style, tends to change rapidly, and often serves to indicate solidarity within a given social group” (588). Adopting this definition and considering the polemic function to which slang can be put will provide insights into how slang is an important communication code which people, regardless of their age, education, profession, among others, use to resist perceived domination. Given the flexibility and creative potential of slang “as a variety of language” (Odebunni 47), it establishes a sense of commonality among its users. The implication is that when slang is used, there is a subtext to the primary message. That subtext speaks deeply to the speakers and listeners who belong to the same community of practice. The meaning of slang, therefore, may not necessarily be realised in the
slang term itself, but in its use in specific discourse contexts.

Theoretical Perspective

The discursive analysis of slang as a linguistic device of resistance identity construction is anchored on Castells' identity theory. The “network society,” the term that was coined by Castells, is the main concept and focus of his theoretical postulation. Castells defines “network” as a set of interconnected nodes and argues that the prospect of change and domination indicates how people's search for meaningfulness can trigger various forms of identity construction. For Castells, identity is the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning. For a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities. Yet, such a plurality is a source of stress and contradiction in both self-representation and social action. This is because identity must be distinguished from what, traditionally, sociologists have called roles, and role-sets. Roles … are defined by norms structured by the institutions and organizations of society (6-7).

Although, as Castells argues, identities can originate from dominant institutions, they eminently “become identities only when and if social actors internalise them, and construct their meaning around this internalisation” (7). Following the processes of social adoption and interaction, identities transform into stronger sources of meaning than the roles people play in community of practice because of “the process of self-construction and individuation that they involve” (7).

Given that for Castells the information age is characterised by a dominance of social structure over the human agent, it is and the system colonising the dominated are always updated by the colonising agents to meet their needs. Castells' vision of the social agency, as an analytic counterpart for the social structure in the age of information can be expressed with the words identity, identity policy and new social movements. The new social movement primacy is given to a different kind of category of social agency–identity and identity based movements. Identification as such, is, of course, a historical and a universal socio-psychological phenomenon but rises to the centre of social change and change-making. This, Castells argues, is the true meaning of the primacy of identity politics in the network society. The search for meaningfulness, according to Castells, triggers specific kinds of identity-formation processes:

- **Legitimising identity**: introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalise their domination vis à vis social actors, a theme that is at the heart of Sennett's theory of authority and domination, but also fits with various theories of nationalism.
- **Resistance identity**: generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society, as Calhoun proposes when explaining the emergence of identity politics.
- **Project identity**: when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure. This is the case, for instance, when feminism moves out of the trenches of
resistance of women's identity and women's rights, to challenge patriarchy, thus the patriarchal family, and thus the entire structure of production, reproduction, sexuality, and personality on which societies have been historically based (8).

For Tayo Lamidi and Romanus Aboh, “Legitimising identity is a strategy employed by the dominant identity to sustain its hegemony over the dominated” (38). The duo further state that in Castells' view, there are people who struggle for, and use, the power of the state for various goals, both democratic and progressive, and identify themselves as agents of civil society. This category of identity supports the institution with the legitimisation that it requires. It is often integrated into social institutions as a way of maintaining a status quo.

Resistance identity is a device employed by the minority to question the dominance of legitimising identity. This level of identity-formation has the imprints of grassroots at the level of collective identity formation that does not mobilise itself within the civil society, but is materialised as community-building. These communes bring together the excluded, the stigmatised and the anguished to gain a collective experience that gathering around a common meaning can offer. What is characteristic of such commune-building is resistance against the surrounding society and against other communes. This gives it the name “resistance identity” (Lamidi and Aboh 38). This kind of identity construction is the core for the formation of social identities. Resistance identity seems to be the most influential identity category of the present age because societies would not stop at in their fragmentation. It then follows that the dominated group may encounter difficulties in negating the symbolic power of the dominant group, but they can symbolically resist the power by adopting linguistic practices which oppose the behaviour of the

don dominant group and articulate the innate desire to be free. Implicitly, through active engagement and creative use of language, groups do express their dissonance with hegemonic norms. Resistance is therefore hidden somewhere in-between the seams of dominance.

Project identity “is a step further in terms of resistance identity, as it involves evolving from the passivity of resistance to action which calls for a change in social dominance” (Aboh 58). This kind of identity construction emanates as a result of the communes' (resistance identity) reconstruction of legitimising identity. Aboh goes on to clarify that “project identity is the consequence of resistant/defensive identity” (58). Castells holds the view that these will be the identity construction of the future.

**Discursive Articulation of Resistance**

Slang terms, as can be inferred from the selected novels, are used to represent discourse participants' points of view. Mainly, the slang items operate as linguistic tools which literary characters explore in expressing their resentment with the activities of dominant groups, groups whose actions either conduce to or tend towards oppressing/suppressing the slang users' views or ways of life. Broadly, these slang terms originate from education, journalism, military dictatorship and Nigerian Pidgin expressions. Significantly, the slang terms are explications of the oppressed evolution of a language variety which enable exchange of ideas within communes, but to also “essentialise the boundaries of resistance” (Castells 9).

In *Waiting for an Angel*, for example, the expression *pure water* is a slang term for alcohol with a metaphoric signification. Nancy tells Kela:

She makes enough from the restaurant. More than enough, but she spends most of it on drink. She calls it “pure water,” Nancy said grudgingly, as if I was
forcing the words out of her mouth. She was that way: she hated to dwell on anything that threw a bad light on my auntie. Nancy feared no one, respected no one; she was self-destructively belligerent…. (Waiting for an Angel, p. 108)

Before the function of the slang term is discussed, it is expedient to note that pure water is a Nigerian pidgin expression that describes sachet water. In the context of the novel, however, the slang term has not only been semantically shifted, but also relexicalised to bring out the intended meaning. Nancy explains to Kela that his auntie, Auntie Rachael, makes a lot of money from her restaurant, but she spends most of the money on pure water. In the above example, Nancy’s attitude distances her from Auntie Rachael. She says, “she calls it pure water.” It is what Auntie Rachael calls it but not she, Nancy. The syntactic inclusion of the agent 'she' creates a discourse of the antagonistic 'other'. The direct reference to the agent expresses Nancy’s identity construction in resistance to those who spend their earnings on pure water. Two things are noteworthy of explication up to this point. First, Nancy uses the slang to “dismember” herself from Auntie Rachael’s group that spends its earnings on pure water. Second, she uses the slang to sensitise Kela to Auntie Rachael’s spending as well as her alcoholic habit. The expression achieves Nancy’s aim as she persuades Kela to see the reason Auntie Rachael has to give up her pure water.

Similarly, Kela uses weed, a slang expression for marijuana, to describe his father’s outdatedness. He reports:

I caught him smoking weed, in my car. Weed, at his age. He failed his exams, now he is smoking weed! I wondered in a detached, clinical way why my father kept referring to it as ‘weed’. It sounded so old-fashioned. My friend had over ten names for it, all so

Again, one sees how slang functions as a commune’s communication code, aimed at excluding non-members or non-initiates of a group. While Kela's father uses weed, an old and familiar name for marijuana that most know, Kela with his younger generation of friends has several “creative” ways of referring to weed. Whatever Kela and his friends call weed, it embodies his group's dissonance with the other's use of language. And thus, it is more or less the reason different groups at different times and periods have constructed their own slang as language variety only members of the in-group can identify with or be identified with. Kela's amazement at his father's inability to create names for marijuana is an act of resistance: indicating the differences that exist between two distinct groups. It is a rejection of the old other. Kela rebuffs his father's generation's inability to create newer names for existing things, and so he projects the idea that linguistic creativity and fluidity are common with his own commune. Invariably, Kela's resistance to the use of weed expresses his affiliation with his generation, and disaffiliation with the other (his father's) group whose linguistic repertoire is insufficient in naming things. In the end, Kela succeeds in projecting the linguistic identity of his group who has “over ten names for weed”.

Also, there is the use of bust the lecture to express resistance to perceived domination in the conversation between Lomba and Alice:

'Sorry. But you don't need me anymore. You can see the building from here'. He pointed. 'Just go through that door and ask for the cash clerk'.

'But the lecturer said you have to take us there…,' Jeans began.
'I heard what the lecturer said, but I have a lecture to catch. Bye.'

'Bust the lecture' (Waiting for an Angel, 65).

Alice tells Lomba to bust the lecture. To bust a lecture means to deliberately forgo a lecture. In the context of the novel, Lomba tells Alice that he cannot take her round as Dr Kazeem would have him do because he has a lecture to attend. But Alice asks him to bust the lecture. Alice's use of the slang is polemical and it has an empathy-establishing tactic: it is aimed at making Lomba see the need why he has to forgo his lecture. Though the slang projects Alice as an unserious student, as Lomba later reveals, the expression shows that slang is, as it is with students of other cultures, a part of Nigerian university students' communicative behaviour. Bust the lecture shows a correlation between what the slang connotes and the actual theme or aspect of the students' lives on campus, their commune. Bust the lecture, a linguistic feature of semantic shift characteristic of most slang expressions, works effectively as an ingroup communicative code which is meaningful to Alice and Lomba because they share the same social identity as students of the same university. Its use significantly leaves a representation in the mental architecture of Lomba that lectures, at the university level, are not compulsory. Alice's illocutionary act or force generates an implicature. The implicature that she demonstrates a desire to live her life the way it suits her rather than have her university, the legitimising identity, represented by Dr Kazeem, dictate her life. This kind of resistance, in Castells' views, will conduce to project identity. It is expected that in the future members of the resistance commune will take control of society.

This kind of resistance to perceived dominance is also seen in Rafiu's use of I don't send anybody. He angrily tells his father:

“Look, Alhaji,” he said, rising up to his father, “you don't want me to look you in your eyes?”

“You will abuse me?”

“I can! I don't send anybody!” So saying, he pushed Alhaji aside and left the house. He didn't come back home for another two days (Under the Brown Rusted Roofs, 92).

I Don't send anybody roughly translates as, “not to have regard for anyone, irrespective of the person's age or status.” The slang is basically used by the younger generation of Nigerians to show disagreements with other people's opinions. However, in Under the Brown Rusted Roofs, Rafiu uses the slang to imply that he does not care what either his father or his uncle, Lamidi, thinks about his being a political thug. When he uses the expression with his friends, they understand because, as in the use of bust the lecture in the preceding example, I don't send anybody functions as an ingroup communicative code. Importantly, the slang exposes Rafiu's conscientious effort targeted at dislodging himself from the control of his family, the legitimising identity. More importantly, the semantic value of the slangy expression is something one will only know if one is an insider to the use of this unusual expression.

Similarly, in Okey Ndibe's Arrows of Rain, slang functions as a sociolect: a linguistic creation that meets the communicative needs of a social group. When Ogugua attends one of Reuben's weekend parties, Reuben introduces him to his fellow ministers, one of them calls Ogugua a rat:

…The other ministers murmured and grumbled that they did not want press boys at their parties (Arrows of Rain, 113).

Press boys, as used in this context, has a derogatory discourse-semantic value. Most politicians can hardly hide their disdain for a journalist because of the latter's exposure of their heinous
activities. The use of *press boys* reiterates an earlier position that slang mirrors social conflict. The ministers are angry that Ogugua, who is a journalist, has written an article about a minister's corrupt actions. So the use of *press boys* creates a confrontational discourse, a battleground of *we* against *them*. It is a strategic *legitimisation* of the ministers' ideological value and a demonstration of resistance aimed at disregarding as well as linguistically disvaluing the identity of journalists. The ministers' pragmatic sub-act of insulting has a perlocutionary effect on Ogugua, as he reacts to their vituperation. Symbolically, the slang term meta-pragmatically portrays the ideological divide that holds between politicians and journalists. In activating the slang, the ministers create distance to the antagonistic other (the journalist) and establish the membership of their ingroup (the political group). *Press boys*, therefore, functions as an antagonistic discourse move which the ministers activate to resist the proliferation of their group. In resisting Ogugua, the ministers legitimise the ideological positioning of their group.

Moreover, in Abimbola Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*, a *decree* which generally refers to military laws has been recontextualised to refer to the antagonistic-dominant identity, the military that oppress ordinary Nigerians:

“Both of you had better shut up your mouths.” *Iyawo* said. “Can't you see that WAI man going? You want a decree to carry you?” (119)

Generally, the expression captures the people's dissonance with military laws that made them prisoners in their own country. The term, *decree*, is re-lexicalised to go beyond a term for military laws to capture policies and programmes that dehumanised Nigerians. This discursive strategy draws attention to the neatly edgy relationship between the *legitimising* identity and the *resistance* identity. A *decree* in the context of the novel does not only refer to military laws, but also to a set of people who use the instrument of power to inflict hardship on the Nigerian people—*that WAI man*. The situation is so bad that even children are restrained from playing. Critically, the slang narrates the people's resistance to situations that are inimical to their freedom. The slang term has a resistance undercurrent as it indicates that a *decree* has a sinister connotation. *Decree* is given a human figure, thereby making condemnation of military hegemonic dominance more visible and resentful.

**Conclusion**

The discussion of slang indicates that while the majority of the slang terms are “conventional” English words whose meanings are semantically extended/shifted to cater for the communicative needs of speech communities/communes, others are formed/derived from Nigerian pidgin expressions. These pidginised slang expressions speak to members of a commune in an acute manner, presupposing a tacit agreement among users in their community of practice. The implication is that the pidginised forms may not be accessible to non-members of a speech community. This act of linguistic “dismembering” is an ultimate reason for the social construction of slang in the first instance.

It can, therefore, be surmised that the slang terms function as discourse strategies which discourse participants work upon to resist people and situations they consider inimical to their existence, on the one hand and a pragmatic act of articulating a desire to do things the way one wants, on the other. This unveils the dynamic ways in which slang can be calibrated for the expression of dissent and the polemic contestation of identities. Slang is a concept that has social implications for the speaker and the listener. This goes a long way to counter the belief in certain linguistic quarters that slang is an impolite language used mainly by deviants. The investigation of slang words, as evident in the
sampled Nigerian novels, shows that slang expressions differ considerably from standard language since there are obvious social, non-informal intentions of using slang. The use of slang in the Nigerian novel draws attention to the myriad of linguistic strategies Nigerian novelists rely upon in capturing the multi-faceted themes of their literary engagements.

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