

Tarok young people's speech



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1. Introduction

Knowledge of the grammar and lexicon of African languages has increased substantially in recent decades. What has advanced less is the detailed understanding of register and other types of heightened or distinctive speech. One area that remains under-researched is the speech of young people. Although there is a plethora of studies of English-based urban speech, especially in East Africa, these constitute an extremely small proportion of the repertoire of youth speech in Africa, since all the diversity is to be found in the rural areas. Under all circumstance, little has been reported on distinctive young people's language in Africa and its relation to adult speech. This paper describes the distinctive lexical and grammatical inventory of young people in Tarok, a Plateau language of East-Central Nigeria.

Tarok youth language has two main themes; the transformation of standard lexemes and arbitrary change to lexical forms. In this regard, there is some overlap with the women's register, described in Longtau & Blench (n.d.). Moreover, especially in the case of slang, it has a marked transgressive element, intended to challenge or offend the older generation.

By comparison with the other languages in its group, Tarok is relatively well described. The earliest publication on the Tarok language is by Fitzpatrick (1911) followed by Dangel (1929) who analysed an anonymous St. Mark's Gospel. These works are only of historical interest. The article by Robinson (1976) on possessives marks the advent of modern linguistic studies on the language. Sibomana (1980, 1981a,b, 1982) provides a useful summary of phonology, noun-classes, the verbal system as well as some short analysed texts. More recently, Longtau (1991, 1993, 1997, 2000a,b, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2010) has examined the linguistic evidence for the origins of the Tarok, an expanded phonology, a study of Tarok song-categories, an orthography review proposal, comparison with Chadic, intergroup relations and an overview of grammar. A general journal of the Society for Tarok Studies, *Nggapak*, is now in circulation. Longtau & Blench (in progress) is a major reference dictionary of the Tarok language. Conventions for transcribing Tarok can be found in Longtau (1993, 2008). The only counter-intuitive orthographic conventions are 'ə' for /i/ and 'ä' for /ə/. Tarok has three tone levels with mid-tone unmarked but the orthographic values are not employed.

2. Tarok society

The Tarok people live mainly in Langtang-North, Langtang-South, Wase, Mikang and Kanke Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Plateau State in central Nigeria. Their main town, Langtang, is about 180 kilometres southeast of Jos, the state capital. Until the colonial era, the Tarok lived in inaccessible hill settlements, partly as a defence against endemic slave-raiding. After the establishment of British rule, most villages moved to the plains, between Dangang in Kanke LGA and the Benue Valley. The Tarok call themselves oTárók, their language iTárók and their land iTàrok. Other names have been used in the literature, such as Appa, Yergam and the variants Yergum and Yergam. The Tarok have been poorly served by ethnographers. Fitzpatrick (1910) and Temple & Temple (1919) represent early sketches, while Smith et al. (1990) focuses only on kinship. Some local Nigerian publications deal with particular aspects of Tarok society, e.g. Famwang (1998), Lannap (2000), Vongdip (2000), Zwalchir (2007) and Lamle (2010).

The principle underlying Tarok social organisation is segmentary lineage system, based around extensive exogamous clans. Tarok society is strongly marked by the social separation of the sexes and age, although post-menopausal women are classified as male, and can, for example, be admitted to certain **orim** ceremonies. The layout of a compound is marked out as an arena for social discourse in the evening (Lamle 2005). For men and boys who have been initiated into the **orim** cult, discussion takes places in the **anungbwàng** 'outer courtyard' or the **ashé ñkilang** 'main entrance hut'. Women and younger boys must use the **ashé amulok** 'inner courtyard' or **ashé agilàn** 'private courtyard'. **Atak imol**, the 'bush social ground for children' is where young people who have reached puberty mimic adult life in a formal way. It is a place herdboys retire around mid-day to eat and rest.

Between birth and about five years old, children are not classified as linguistically competent. Blench & Longtau (ined.) explores the speech of Tarok children between birth and the age of five. Men, unlike women, are not really involved with their children and apparently derive pleasure in observing the mistakes

made by children until the period of initiation. Therefore it is not surprising that there is an overlap in the speech of women, children and young people. However, at the age of eight or thereabouts, boys become young adults, when they are considered old enough to go out and look after livestock during the day. Young people are thus referred to as **ován gí íbíl** 'herdboys'. For males, this phase of their lives ends when they are initiated and learn the secrets of the **orim**. As such they can and do challenge elders; speech manipulation is not here intended to exclude outsiders, but rather using a series of markers to express membership of the adult cohort, and age gradations within it. Women develop their linguistic competence in a rather different way, adopting a female gender register, which, however, does not have an age-related component (Longtau & Blench n.d.).

This paper¹ explores linguistic aspects of the speech of Tarok young people. It discusses the various elements differentiating youth speech from standard Tarok, as well as describing both exclamations and slang typical of young men. It considers the extent to which this is a facet of broader language change.

3. Youth speech versus 'normal' Tarok

3.1 Manipulation of the existing lexicon

A typical strategy used by young people to make their speech distinctive is manipulation of the existing lexicon. Words are transformed in two ways, either syllable deletion or reduplication. In the first method there is a tendency to shorten long words as in Table 1:

Table 1. Elision in young peoples' speech

Gloss	Shortened	Complete
all	kpákták	kpáktíkát
near	dat	datkulung
elder	ùgbák	ùnìmgbàk

For example, a young person might say;

Ì mán wó mán pə kpákták
 I love you love INTR all
 I love all of you

and an older person;

Ba ká mbwài vó tà pə kpáktíkát
 Come with money the that INTR all
 Bring the whole money.

Similarly with **dat**, in young men's speech;

Ogá aTáí sing cít fá pə dat.
 They Tali move already come INTR near.
 Tali are now living close to us.

and older people;

OTáí rá òzhí pə datkulung kə òjì yí.
 Tali build house INTR near with it ours
 Tali built a house near ours.

¹ Paper to be presented at the Workshop 'Youth Languages and Urban Languages in Africa', Universität zu Köln, 31st May-2nd June, 2012

The short form **ùgbák** has a particular resonance when used by a young person. **Gbák** is the verb 'to be old' and in common speech the tone is lowered to reduce the psychological impact of the word². By using a short form and maintaining a high tone the intention is to be somehow offensive to elders. Thus a young person's sentence could be;

Ùgbák là pə ó bá.
old say that you-should come
The old man said you should come.

Whereas in the full form, **ùnəmgbàk**;

ùnəmgbàk a là pə ó gà.
Old-man he say that you-should go.
It is the elder that said you should go.

The following examples are relevant but do not exactly fit the above paradigm. The short form of the word for 'bride', **ùcárdəp**, also originating with young people, is derived from;

ùcár vâ bá tím pə dəp
woman who come stay INT briefly
A woman who came and stayed briefly.

This rather curious formulation is not reflective of a Las Vegas influenced culture with quick and easy divorce. In traditional Tarok marriage the bride initially only comes for seven days to the husband's home for a symbolic visit before going back to her own family. She will only come to settle in the household when the brideprice is paid in full.

Similarly, **ñkakacingbóng**, 'grasshopper sp.' is derived from;

ùkaka cəng gbóng.
grandmother give pleasure destroy pl.

The vowel shift from **cəng** to **cing** is characterised as typical of young people. The meaning of 'grandmother' comes about because the grasshopper is considered slow-moving like an old woman. The name thus means 'a slow-moving grasshopper that is easy to kill' [for food]. Plant and animal names of this type seem to originate in quirky or whimsical formulations by young people, but have displaced any more 'traditional' name.

A further example is linked to a social practice of young people, **ikàban**, a type of friendship relationship. This name is a nominalisation derived from **kát** 'entwine' + **ban** 'to challenge'. Young people in this relationship cross their fingers when they see one another, and whatever another person is eating must be given to the person greeting them thus. This notion of crossing the fingers has extremely similar connotations in English folk-culture and may conceivably be a borrowing from the colonial era. However, the preponderance of words that owe their origin to young Tarok people in the lexicon is never in doubt.

All these are examples of erosion and compression, but the opposite strategy also occurs, the insertion of extra syllables within short words. Table 2 gives some typical examples;

² This is striking for another reason; literature about African society is full of guff about respect for the elderly and the positive value of old age. But this example seems to suggest that not all societies see it that way.

Table 2. Syllable insertion in Tarok young people's speech

Gloss	Usual	Lengthened
snake	izwà	izùzwà
thorn	izù	izùzù
chaff	izùl	izùzùl
straw	akwà	akùkwà
again	kà dí	kà dídí
leather bag	igór	igùgór
reasonable	-kin	-kikin
roofing grass	izhàp	izhìzhàp
sky/heaven	ǎúr	aǎuǎúr
horizon	ǎkùm-ǎúr	ǎkùm-ǎuǎúr
evening	arôŋ	arúroŋ
kitchen	awôl	awúwôl

Shortening is meant to achieve intensity of impact and the same applies to its opposite. The longer form is perceived by the young people as 'stronger' and thus a highlighting device. The same principle applies to the examples in Table 3 where either reduplication or an unpredictable prefix or suffix is used.

Table 3. Lexical extension by young people

Gloss	Usual	Lengthened
to knock s.o./s.t. down with one blow	shín	díshín
to consume completely	rí	dirí
remainder/remnant	abó	aboshí
softly	ǎíli	ǎíliǎíli
big	-cum	-cumcum
hanging game of children	mǎbèrè	mǎbèrembèrè
jumping game of children	ǎdǒng	ǎdǒngdǒng
swinging game of children	nyègè	nyègèyègè

Typical examples of these words in sentence context are;

Children's speech**díshín****ÚTálí díshín****ǎkùmbàk pə gbaa.**Tali knocked down the wall with a piece of wood *gbaa*.**aboshí****Má yàk ovánzám cít aboshí wó ó le ñzhí.** 'The fighters have been selected, the rest of you can return home.'**Adult****shín****ÚTálí shín ǎkùmbàk.**

Tali knocked down the wall with a piece of wood.

abó**Má yàk ovánzám cít abó wó ó le ñzhí.** 'The fighters have been selected, the rest of you can return home.'

Singers can use these additional syllables to give their songs an 'edge' to encourage young people to identify with them. Sometimes the texts may have numerous Hausa loanwords embedded in it, but with **-shi** suffixes, resulting in awkward formulations such as **barishí** from *bari* 'let's' and **tarishí** from *tarihi* 'history'.

Surprisingly, there is also an example of what appears to be conservation of an archaism merely alluded to in Longtau (2007). Tarok words are typically CVC and CVt. Some distinctive forms used by young people conserve a syllable-final -t which has disappeared in normal adult speech, as in the examples in Table 4;

Table 4. Archaic forms preserved by young people

Gloss	Usual	retaining -t
fish like tilapia	acacat	acatcat
three	ùshádǐng	ushátǐng
to entangle	káci	kátci
to pull down	wúci	wútci

3.2 Sound-shifts

In third person pronouns, a unique sound-shift occurs;

he **ùzó/ùvó** instead of **ùzó**
 they **ozó/òvó** instead of **òzó**

For example;

ùzó fé ñcàng m̃ba ɸu bét
 he be happy coming you much
 He's very happy you've come

would become **ùvó fé ñcàng m̃ba ɸu bét**.

This is phonologically a highly unnatural sound-change and is not reflected in other parts of the lexicon. As a consequence, it is best treated as an arbitrary shift. The same can be said of the substitution of the following pronouns, especially by young people in the urban diaspora:

his **ná** instead of **wò**
 theirs **ozo** instead of **wó**
 him in reported speech **ùzó** instead of **ùpín**
 them in reported speech **ozo** instead of **opín**

Another unnatural sound-change is the term **idongkong** 'a group (of humans or large animals)' becoming **idonggot** in young people's speech. The word itself is becoming archaic and being replaced by **nggàtòk**. These may be arbitrary but they have gained currency amongst many women.

3.3 Tonal change

At least one case of tonal shift has been recorded. In the construction **kè dĩ** 'again', the tone of **dĩ** becomes a rising one to **kè dĩ**. In this example, the tone is rising, and the verb **wuwóng** is an extended form used by younger people;

Ìpìrìpìrì cir rú gwak té a wuwóng kè dĩ
 his horse run fall gwak then it get up again
 His horse ran and fell gwak and then got up again.

kè dĩ has an alternate form used by young people, **ka dĩdĩ** noted in §3.1.

3.4 Neutralisation of noun class plurals

Tarok has an elaborate system of prefix alternation to denote noun classes, similar to Bantu (Sibomana 1981/82a). Sibomana (1981) sets up 6 singular and plural noun classes for Tarok as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Tarok noun-class pairings

1.	ù-	→	2.	o-
3.	ì-	→	4.	i-
5.	m/ñ-	→	6.	m/n-
7.	a-	→	8.	agá -
9.	i-	→	10.	igá -
11.	m/n-	→	12.	m/nggá -

The order of the numbers seems less than ideal, but since it is reprised in Longtau (2008) it is also used here. Young people have the habit of dropping all the morphological affixes of the plurals and instead using **ogá** for all noun classes. As well as affix alternation, Tarok has significant stem-tone change marking number, so in a young person's speech, the tone of the singular is retained, together with the monolithic plural prefix.

3.5 Sound shift in particles

Some of the expressions using short particles appear to be changing, although in no very regular or predictable fashion.

kə tó 'here' is becoming **kə tó** especially in younger people and women's speech. Thus the adult command;

ba kə kə tó
come it at here
Bring it here.

has **tó** in final position for young people.

kós, meaning 'no, not', is replacing **kót** in the speech of young people. The final -s is intended to indicate to the hearer that the speaker is familiar with English phonology. Final -s in Tarok otherwise only occurs in ideophones.

pe part. that. Used to introduce quotes in young people's speech, corresponding to **pə**

In the bracketing construction 'with' **ki...pi**, there is a tendency to replace the second **pi** with a repeated **ki**. Thus:

m ba ki ivá pi ipàrim
I came with dogs of two

is now becoming;

m ba ki ivá ki ipàrim

4. Exclamations

There are some exclamations characteristic of younger people which partially overlap with those of children;

Solísoo! Mhm! 'Enormous!'

Solísoo! is an exclamation occurring quite widely in North-Central Nigeria, indeed there was an airline with this name for a short time. However, for Tarok youth it has a particular context, mocking an elder who walks

around with testicles exposed. This remark can potentially cause great offense. The second element, **Mhm!**, mimics the sound made by a bird in the forest which by convention absolves the speaker from responsibility for the comment, pretending that it is the bird that has observed the social *faux-pas*. One way of 'softening' the impact of the remark is to whistle it instead of speaking aloud. An adult might say; **sol iyám fu** 'please cover [it] well'.

Lákdíri kitikáu ká ñján 'What a pity!'

The broad sense of this exclamation is 'What a pity!' but in context it means 'too bad, but I will still punish you'.

Wácigei/mácigei 'What are you up to?'

This exclamation is used by young people when one of them has done something bordering on rudeness. It is a compressed form of **wá/má aci ñgei**, literally, 'to drink/suck the egg of the red-bishop bird'. The sense is; 'Are you so crazy as to drink the raw egg of the red-bishop bird?' In context, an older boy will punish a younger one for a transgression.

5. Youth slang

The concept of slang in an oral culture is problematic to define unambiguously. Slang in large pluralistic societies is largely defined by class differences; speakers define the usages of others as slang and their own as shortened forms or picturesque expressions. In an oral society with little class differentiation, comparable definitions do not always work. Nonetheless, young Tarok men have particular expressions which are used in the context of taboo or socially problematic areas. Some examples of these are;

iyám-ñkpà lit. 'thing for grinding' is slang for 'prostitute'

dùng amíng lit. 'to smoke faeces' is used for 'to fart (excessively)'

ñcèn 'walking'

Used as a metaphor for dying, for example in the following sentence;

Ìpín	té	ùzò	kà ñgà	ñcèn
Tomorrow	then	he	FUT	walking
Tomorrow he is going to die				

ñgátgàñ is slang for 'circumcision dressing' which is usually **ñgàkci**

This term appears in a song of youth who taunt a younger boy who has just been circumcised. They sing;

gátgàng solísoo, gátgàng solísoo.

at the same time mimicking how a boy in pain walks.

ñgúbàl is a slang term for 'porridge' thought to an appropriate accompaniment to draw (mucilaginous) soup. **bàl** is an ideophone which suggests sticky draw soup sliding down the throat and is considered by adults a transgressive image.

pím literally means 'to gnaw', but refers to adultery that has become public knowledge. Elders cannot talk openly about such matters, but young people may use this form of comment to offend the relatives of those involved.

cì kó ñm̀kpàng
refuse of porridge

has the implication 'to refuse porridge in annoyance' but is slang for 'to die'. The logic is that if someone dies, young people will have more food to eat.

cì asìm má cì asìm á ná ka asàp
wash back he will wash back for inject with whip
He was thoroughly whipped

This rather intricate metaphor supposes that being whipped is like the back being rubbed intensively with water, using two hands instead of one.

6. Conclusions

Rural youth speech in Africa exists in contraposition to normal adult speech. In the case of Tarok it is certainly a distinctive register, to be separated from the broader processes of language change, although part of the compression and erosion which characterises it may well persist as the language evolves. There is a certain overlap with the speech of children, but some of the more transgressive aspects would result in severe punishment if children were to use them. Language change undoubtedly evolves through compression, phonological shift and compounding and it may well be that some of the changes noted here will finally become 'normal' Tarok to be challenged in turn by a new generation of speakers. The neutralisation of plural nominal prefixes which is occurring in Tarok today has happened repeatedly in other branches of Plateau and may well be a part of a cyclical process of affix renewal. This suggests that both the processes and the actual synchronic forms in young people's speech are worth much more attention than they currently receive.

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