

# Pragmatic Markers of Common Ground in Tertiary Institution Students' Sexual Discourse in Lagos State, Nigeria

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## 1 Introduction

Common ground relates to “sharedness” which should usually exist between interlocutors for them to operate on the same wavelength. Participants in any conversational encounter operate on the assumption that there are certain aspects in their encyclopedic knowledge that should be a common denominator in assessing understanding and interpreting any ongoing subject. Common ground is ‘co-constituted’ by the participants in any given instance of language use (cf Stalnaker, 2002; Enfield, 2008; Jaszczolt, 2008). The importance of common ground in tertiary institution students’ sexual discourse (henceforth TISSD) will suffice in this paper.

## 2 Methodology

Forty purposive tape recordings of students’ conversations were made in two universities. Two hundred structured interviews were conducted with 50 students in each of the institutions, and four focus-group discussions were held with six students each in the institutions. Participant observation was randomly undertaken on the students’ interactions. The corpus was examined for the linguistic and pragmatic resources inherent in the students’ interactions using a mix of pragmatic act theory, a contextual belief model and cognitive metaphor theoretic elements.

## 3 Theoretical Orientation

This paper benefits from Mey’s (2001) Pragmeme, Odebunmi (2006) Contextual belief model and Conceptual metaphor theory.

### 3.1 Pragmatic Act theory

Mey’s (2001) theory of pragmeme consist two broad categories: activity part and textual part. The activity type encompasses possible acts: speech acts, indirect speech acts, conversational acts etc that can be performed by interactants. The textual part covers both textual and contextual considerations. These are captured in the features: INF (inferencing), REF (reference), REL (relevance), VCE (voice), SSK (shared situational knowledge) and MPH (metaphor). M refers to any “metapragmatic” element that surfaces on the text and that directs our attention to something beyond the text – something on the “metapragmatic plane” (Mey 2001:221).

### 3.2 Contextual belief model

Odebunmi (2006) explains that “beliefs or assumptions held prior to or during occasions of interaction come into and facilitate the communicative process.” Basically, there are two levels of beliefs: language level and situation level. Shared contextual beliefs as highlighted by Odebunmi include shared knowledge of topic, shared knowledge of word choices, referents, and references, and shared socio-cultural experiences, previous or immediate. We shall adopt Odebunmi’s idea of shared cultural knowledge (SCK) in addition to Mey’s shared situation knowledge (SSK) in this paper.

### 3.3 Conceptual metaphor theory

Conceptual metaphor theory is one of the contemporary metaphor theories; others include mental space theory, frame semantics, cognitive blending theory, metaphor power

theory, space discourse theory and Lexical concept of cognitive metaphor. In cognitive mapping, correspondences are made between domains in terms of structural, ontological and orientation mappings. Kovecses (2006) explains that variation in the use of metaphors can occur along a number of dimensions including social, regional, ethnic, style, sub-cultural, diachronic and individual dimensions. In essence, understanding metaphoric language use, especially as it relates to TISSD entails taking all of these dimensions into perspective.

## 4 Findings

Using our theoretical orientation, we have grouped the observed common ground in TISSD into three: shared cultural knowledge (SCK), shared situational knowledge (SSK) and shared experiential knowledge (SEK).

### 4.1 Shared cultural knowledge (Shared Knowledge of culture-tainted slang)

Slangs are used in TISSD on the basis of shared belief that explicit mention of taboo concepts is regarded as immoral in mainstream Nigerian culture.

- Shared knowledge of Indigenous language expressions” e.g apako and kerewa
- Blending of foreign and indigenous language words: Chickala, chickito
- Foreign language words used differently: collabo
- Shared knowledge of indexicals. Examples include: there’s this girl (in my hostel), (there’s) this guy, the guy, that uncle, that my baby, that chikala etc. By so doing, outsiders lack the initial reference and also lack the grounding for inferring.

### 4.2 Shared situational knowledge

This is indexed by the students’ use of slang words, indexicals and ellipsis. Here, we discuss only the use of indexicals:

#### 4.2.1 Indexicals

Unclear antecedents (it), underspecified descriptions (their thing).

## 4.3 Shared Experiential knowledge

This bifurcates into Shared personal co-experiential knowledge and Shared extrapersonal co-experiential knowledge. We discuss them in turn:

### 4.3.1 Shared personal co-experiential knowledge

This feature in the following ways: use of attitudinal markers, anticipatory completion and anticipated utterance clue because as far as the narration is concerned they can also be ‘potential tellers’ (Liddicoat 2011). We discuss use of attitudinal markers only:

#### Attitudinal markers

The attitudinal markers that are identified in TISSD include “you know”, “yeah/yes. These are also discourse markers but they function pragmatically as attitudinal markers.

### 4.3.2 Shared extrapersonal co-experiential knowledge

This features in the use of linguistic and cognitive mapping. Linguistic mapping involves using words arbitrarily to match any aspect of sexual discourse just because the words have some sort of resemblance or sound with the source domain. Cognitive mapping, on the other hand, only uses the experience from one domain to match another in order for the experience to be vividly understood by the hearer. In TISSD, the vagina is conceptualised as a house. It has the feature of a door.

## 5 Conclusion

In TISSD, common ground trifurcates into SCK, SSK and SEK which are characterised by the students’ coded use of metaphors, slang words, indexicals, linguistic and cognitive mappings. Thus, understanding the language of sex among the students requires background knowledge of the social, linguistic and culture-specific interactional resources the students draw upon in their sexual discourse.

## Appendices- Sample of Conversations

### Extract 1

A: I'm not lying! I'll tell you, I like playing,  
Ere ipa (Rough play), Ma fun e lese( I'll  
give you blow..

B: So you were doing that too?

A: Seriously, so from there before you know  
it, eye contact and all, then „gen gen!”

C: Gen gen! gen gen!

@

A : gen gen /gen gen/, that very thing!

### Extract 2

A: Umugi(/humugi/) is when uncle head me  
badly!

B: Yeah, when he nods you.

### Extract 3

A: when we finally got home, we talked, we  
were talking

B: On that particular day!

A: On that particular day, we were talking  
about experiences, you know, me I like  
playing o

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