

A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Toilet Graffiti among Male Students of the University of Ibadan

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Abstract. This study examines the construction of toilet campus graffiti as an alternative communication channel and opportunity for male students of the University of Ibadan. The writing of graffiti is deemed an illegal activity in the University of Ibadan, making its prevalence on toilets doors and walls an intriguing issue. Foucault's theory of power is applied in this analysis to demonstrate how student graffiti may be read as a significant form of rebellion and resistance. This study relies on the qualitative content analysis technique to analyze and categorize the graffiti collected from the toilet walls of Nnamdi Azikiwe and Independence halls of the University of Ibadan. The findings in this study support the argument that while graffiti is a banned network of communication for students of the University of Ibadan, students continue to resort to writing on toilet walls to express subdued opinions, to re-affirm self-identity, to intimidate others through hostility and to indulge sexual needs. The findings reveal that there are heterosexual male students and homosexual male students, employing graffiti as communication. Homosexual male students use graffiti on the toilet walls to network and share information with other homosexual students and reach out to sexual partners. Furthermore, graffiti offers them secrecy, and enjoyment. Discourses constructed through graffiti

inscriptions in male toilets of the Nnamdi Azikiwe and Independence Halls reveal how power is constructed through debate on the suitability of marginalised sexualities such as homosexuality.

Key words: Graffiti, Power, Sexualities, Social Constructionism

1. Introduction

The word graffiti means “little scratchings” and it comes from the Italian *graffiare*, which means to scratch. For several thousand years, ancient cultures have engaged in this type of written expression (Abel & Buckley 1977). These scribbles have been said to provide a unique insight into society, because messages written through graffiti are often made without the social constraints that might otherwise limit free expression of political or controversial thoughts. From a historical standpoint, graffiti has been used by epigraphologists to reconstruct a history of both the people of Pompeii and the ancient Athenians (Abel & Buckley 1977). Archaeologists have also examined graffiti to learn more about the history of writing. Graffiti can also be traced back to the ancient Egyptians, who developed one of the oldest and most

remarkable forms of writing in the world (Shillington 1989:97).

In the past psychologists, sociologists, linguists, anthropologists, and geographers have studied graffiti. It has been examined and interpreted to understand adolescent personality (Peretti et al. 1977), sexual attitudes, gender differences (Stocker et al. 1972), behavior, communication, female suppression (Bruner & Kelso 1980) and territoriality. Graffiti is typically perceived as vandalism; a public nuisance to be dealt with prohibitively by measures such as banning the sale of spray paint and making graffiti writing a criminal act (Hutchinson 1993:138).

Graffiti is as a type of discourse; in addition, a distinct type of social practice (Litosseliti, 2006). This means that it is a discourse or inhibited by the social context in which it is practiced. When graffiti is approached from this perspective, we are better able to distinguish graffiti practices according to their spatial and contextual distribution. While there are existing studies on graffiti, it needs to be pointed out that differences in social orders in which these practices are situated entail differences in discursive practices. The present study examines male toilet graffiti at the University of Ibadan with a view to showing how male students deploy graffiti as a communicative outlet.

2. Statement of the Problem

Many scholars have written on graffiti, but not many studies have attempted to investigate toilet male graffiti in relation to the Nigerian context. Those that have investigated graffiti have mostly done so in the light of their social roles and functions (Jimoh 1983). Further, writers seem to have different approaches to studying graffiti: youth subculture (Dennant 1997; Kan 2001), and graffiti as a signifier of social disorder (Piqueo 1999). This study argues that graffiti is communication that might result from youthful resistance in some social situations. This study explores and investigates the student graffiti subculture from a communication perspective. In particular, the study regards graffiti as an unsanctioned communicative channel for male students of the University of Ibadan. The major

concern of this study is to know why students of the University of Ibadan choose to write graffiti and what needs do they gratify through the graffiti. This study explores toilet wall graffiti among male students of the University of Ibadan as a communicative opportunity, considering student graffiti as communicative outlet. The study clearly confirms the fact that graffiti has long been used as a means of communication among students who are aware of the communicative freedom offered through graffiti. This, therefore, provides the thrust for the sociolinguistic investigation of graffiti writing in relation to how male students deploy graffiti to (re)produce social relationships of power.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Foucault 'Theory of Power'

Foucault (1991) examines the structure of power in *The History of Sexuality*, and claims that the way society is structured determines whose voices are heard, and the positions and viewpoints from which they speak. Foucault (1991:307) traces the manner in which the French population became subject to the 'techniques of power' – particularly through the 'incitement to discourse' (Foucault 1991: 201) – exercised by the institutional requirement to speak in detail and at length about their sexual practices (Foucault 1991: 304).

The intensification of public discourse on sex is Foucault's case study. The study emphasizes the pressure exerted on private individuals to disclose personal information for the benefit of the state. Foucault underscores the materialization of the concept of population and its control as 'one of the great innovations in the technique of power' (ibid: 307). To Foucault, the incitements to divulge personal information, which in some ways is connected to Bourdieu's theory of systems of practice, required conformity and thus enabled the extension of government power. Therefore, Foucault establishes a link between discourse, knowledge and power with the result that 'power is no longer simply repressive, but also *productive*' (Doyle and Fraser 2010: 227).

The link to the theory of Foucault is its emphasis on the power to influence people's beliefs. Power is not applied in a physical sense, but is exerted to influence people's thoughts and behaviours. This study examines how this is manifested on students' toilet walls of the University of Ibadan.

3.2 Social Constructionism

Language as the product of society is shaped by society and, in turn, shapes society. The above explains the dialectical association that exists between language and society. Social constructionism (SC) opines that there is a dialectical link between language and society. SC as used in this study reveals that language, though a social practice is not universal. Every society where language is used shapes it. The fact that there are different ways to express the same ideas and propositions in several societies clearly demonstrates this.

To Burr (1995), social constructionism is a social psychology perspective, drawing its influences from a number of disciplines such as psychology, sociology and linguistics. Boghossian (2001) is of the opinion that things that are socially constructed are contingent on aspects of social life. This signifies that the existence of the social aspect is solely predicated on society. To proponents of the social constructionist perspective, no privileged relationship exists between the world and the word (Gergen, 1999). For every given situation, multiple descriptions are potentially possible, and there is no upper limit to our forms of description. The meaning of our world is generated through the way we use words together.

Social constructionism itself is premised on two major notions of social constructs and the understanding of social reality. A social construct is defined as anything that is in existence as a direct or indirect result of social interactions. Such things or notions as graffiti and language are aspects that are in existence as integral parts of our social functioning. Their existence is contingent upon social interaction. Berger and Luckmann (1971) argue that social

constructs are both epistemologically objective and ontologically subjective. Their meanings are intertwined with the context of production and consumption. Their importance cannot be fully appreciated outside their socio-cultural environment. Thus, social constructs can be alleged to be artefacts, i.e. objects that are produced and comprehended only within the background of the social reality in which they exist. According to Raskin (2002: 9) 'social constructs are constituted within the boundaries of culture, context and language.' If transported into a different social milieu, they may, at best, mean something completely different or, at worst, may not carry any meaning at all.

The role of language in the social construction of reality is indispensable. Corroborating the claim above, Wilkinson (2001) opines that all knowledge is both mediated and constructed through intrinsic language properties. This fact is further supported by Raskin (2002) who opines that the way members of a society talk about themselves and their world in general plays a very big role in determining the nature of their experiences. Social constructionists are interested in the role played by language in the institutional formulation of social problems, (Sandstrom, Martinand, Fine, 2001). 'There are many different ways of talking about the world within any given society's many subcultures' (Raskin, 2002: 10). To Raskin (2002), there exist ways through which reality is constructed by language which become dominant over others. Every given society or context contains some accounts that are dominant whilst others become either ignored or suppressed. Therefore, power relations become an essential concern for analysts within the social constructionist paradigm.

There are essentially two versions of social constructionism: the weak and the strong versions. The weak, Siebers (2001: 738), 'contends are dominant ideas, attitudes, and customs of a society which influence the perception' of social phenomena. Advocates of the weak version accept 'the existence of objective conditions, while focusing on the social processes through which these conditions enter public debate' (Sandstrom et al, 2001:

223). This version of social constructionism constructs society on the basis of facts or beliefs that are seen as primitive in any give society. Because this version of constructionism assumes some pre-condition on which reality is constructed, it is also known as ‘contextual constructionism or cautious naturalism’, (Sandstrom et al, 2001:223).

To strong constructionism, it is believed that sociological knowledge is the same as the rhetoric or ideology of any social group (Sandstrom et al. 2001). Strong constructionalism relies ‘on a linguistic model that describes representation itself as a primary ideological force’ (Siebers, 2001:738). This means that whatever is referred to or regarded as ‘reality’ is in itself also a social construct. The present study agrees with the claims by advocates of the strong social constructionist movement who argue that our language and social practices, to a greater extent, determine how we perceive and make sense of what we refer to as reality. In the same way, Berger and Luckmann (1967) observe that reality is earnestly constructed as an unswerving result of the creation and shaping of the world in social interactions. To Berger and Luckmann (1967) language is an indispensable instrument in the social construction of reality in the sense that it influences people’s understanding of what is real, possible or impossible. There are four key assumptions on which social constructionism is predicated (Burr 1995). The assumptions are discussed below:

- (i) Social constructionism refers to critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge. This means that reality is not a result of a nature which people do not have control over. This first assumption interrogates the view that knowledge is built upon objective and impartial scrutiny of the world. What is said to be in existence is what people have essentially perceived to exist.
- (ii) From the social constructionists’ perspective, analysis should be based on specifics from history and culture. How social phenomena is

perceived by a person is connected with where and when in the world one lives. The implication of this is that ‘all ways of understanding are historically and culturally relative’, (Burr 1995: 4).

- (iii) Social processes sustain knowledge. Social interaction is answerable for the construction of knowledge. To Burr (1995:4), ‘it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated.’ There are numerous ‘versions’ of knowledge and people ‘fabricate’ this knowledge to achieve different aims.
- (iv) Knowledge and social action are complementary of each other. Burr (1995) opines that some social constructions are targeted at supporting some patterns of social action while excluding others.

In this line of argument, graffiti, because it is taken as a social practice, is regarded as a social phenomenon that exists as a direct result of human interactions. The language that is used in, or to talk about, graffiti is also by implication also taken to be a social construct in the sense that it is the people who actively decide the language to use in ‘practicing’ graffiti as well as deciding what to and what not to discuss in it. This would obviously call into question claims made by scholars such as Othen-Price (2006) and Ouzman (2010) who characterise graffiti as a predominantly adolescent male activity and as the modern language of the underprivileged and peripheral, respectively

4. Methodology

Given that graffiti as a practice is generally frowned upon at the University of Ibadan, the researcher first had to carry out a preliminary survey designed at establishing the incidence of graffiti at the University of Ibadan. The researcher was very much mindful of the broken windows theory, stating that once instances of graffiti are seen in the community, ignoring them is equivalent to relaying the message that

the community does not care (Graham, 2004). This is particularly the case at the University of Ibadan where any graffiti in the institution is considered a gigantic undermining of school authority as well as a sign of the perpetrators' moral standing. The researcher made use of a research instrument, namely, a camera. Inscriptions captured by the camera from toilet walls at two halls of residence (Nnamdi Azikiwe Hall and Independence Hall) were thematically analysed and categorised according to the central issues they addressed.

5. Data Analysis

Analysis of Sex

Analysis of inscriptions or graffiti by male students on the toilet walls of the selected halls of residence addresses power struggle and the 'benefits' of sex to the male folk. This, to a large extent, challenge the master code whose signature terms on sexuality include self-denial and marital sex. Excerpts 1-4 are appropriate for our purposes here.

Excerpt 1

Without the vagina there is no life, it is what I depend on for survival

In a social milieu in which educational and health discourses on sexuality emphasize abstinence and the dangers of irresponsible sexual activity, the writings above can be regarded rebellious. From the inscription, there is an obvious celebration of sex as an indispensable component of one's life. The dialogic significance of the statement 'the vagina (sex) equals life' which can be said to correspond with clichés such as 'water is life' or 'education is life' makes for a more thought-provoking appraisal. 'Education is life', for example is being emphasized in schools including higher institutions, and it's a member of a master code which in turn relegates sex to the boundaries. Inscriptions suggesting and equating 'sex with life' on toilet walls, therefore belong to a revolutionary code which appropriates discourses on sex from the centre and render them complex. It can be argued that the statement 'without the vagina there is no life,

it is what I depend on for survival' calls for the inclusion of sex in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, because it is placed and considered among other life's basic needs.

Excerpt 2 contains inscriptions that reveal the significance of sex to male graffiti writers:

Excerpt 2

- (a) **Fuck them girls**
- (b) **Jaidoski was born to fuck them girls**
- (c) **'Japojapo' Sperm supplier**

Excerpt 2a clearly suggests a longing to engage in heterosexual sex. Nevertheless, there is another probable interpretation: that the graffitist is generally 'fed up' with girls and might be hinting at a substitute form of sexuality. However, when interpreted in the background of excerpt 2b then a desire to have sex with women is revealed. Male graffiti writers appear to regard women as objects that can be slept with for sexual gratification. When such inscriptions appear recurrently on toilet walls and doors, they become naturalised. 'In excerpt 2c, 'sperm supplier' suggests an identity constructed around the notion of sex alone. Such inscriptions disclose male chauvinistic behaviour. To these graffiti male writers, the penis is the man and vice versa, revealing deep male patriarchal attitudes.

Excerpt 3

- This is for you Bisi**
- You are nothing. I will fuck you beyond your understanding.**

The inscription is drenched in ambiguity in the sense that Bisi can be a girl or a boy who behaves contrary to expectations. On the one hand, the personage in question may be a girl who is acting in 'deviant' ways. What is obvious is that the graffitist reads Bisi's behavior as a challenge to his manliness. The entity in question may also be an unmanly male who apparently 'deserves' or 'warrants' being fucked by a 'real man.' Nevertheless, the sexual identity of the person in question is not the focus here. The focus is rather on the suggested line of

action considered apt in dealing with the person in question, not considering their gender.

Sometimes, inscriptions in the toilets at halls of residence of male students reveal an active creation of sexual fantasies which involve female lecturers. Excerpt 4 show the extent to which this is done.

Excerpt 4

**Dr Stella I have had sex u.
Suck my dick Angelina
Mrs Iwabi was moaning when I fucked her.**

If one looks beyond the perspective of masculinities and its associated relations of power, the inscriptions may just be adolescent fantasies energetically constructed by horny adolescent students, trying to get to terms with excess of hormones in their systems. Nonetheless, when excerpt 4 is considered in the perspective of masculinities and its associated relations of power, the act of imagining oneself engaging in sexual relations with a female lecturer represents an undermining of authority and the confirmation of manhood. Masculinity socialisation most often involves mocking boys for coming second best to girls. More often than not, male children are chided for signs of weakness against their female counterparts. Sentiments like the above mirror the common gender order in most patriarchal societies where gendered roles exist, and present grave problems for most men to find themselves in spaces that are dominated by the womenfolk.

In higher institutions, there are male students who do not want to accept the dominance of the female. Graffiti dealing with sexual fantasies can be seen as a way of rationalizing uncharacteristic power relations. Excerpts 4b and 4c couch these fantasies along pornographic 'lines' where the plan is to completely control and humiliate. When a woman sucks a dick, it is more often than not done in a kneeling position. In this position, the woman appears to be bowing to the man and showing reverence to the male symbol (the phallus). The inscription about moaning in 4c is deployed to show that, despite the boys' likely lesser age, they can sexually control

or/and satisfy the female teacher/lecturer. The inscriptions in excerpt 4, thus, is indicative of the men's answer for getting to grips with a social milieu which subjects them under individuals who are considered as inferior to them. The female lecturers in question are regarded as sexual objects and thus, inferior to the male students.

Graffiti dealing with sexual fantasies and desires, emblazoned on toilet walls by male students of the University of Ibadan in their halls of residence, reveal profound erotic fantasies by male students seek to entirely control and humiliate the female lecturers.

Homosexuality

Nigeria is a country that has unambiguously banned the practice of homosexuality. However, the secrecy of graffiti writing permits individuals to explore this marginalized sexuality. Investigation of the writings in male toilets at the University of Ibadan showed a certain level of resemblance with other researches that have been carried out on homosexual graffiti. Trahan (2011) disclose how heterosexual and homophobic graffiti vie for discursive spaces on the toilet walls.

Writings on homosexuality in the University of Ibadan toilet walls can be roughly classified into pro- and anti-homosexuality writings. Pro-homosexuality inscriptions display a certain degree of diversity depending on how the inscription intends to discursively position the reader. The mild inscriptions are aimed at justifying or, at least, rationalising the availability of alternative sexualities.

Some graffiti writings in male toilets operated like a newspaper's confidential segment. To some male writers, the walls are active platforms through which they can seek male partners. In this context, the anonymity allowed by graffiti motivates writers to write nearly anything. Excerpt 5 below provides an example:

Excerpt 5
I need a boy/male to fuck in the ass.

Excerpt 5 reveals two aspects about homosexuality. To start with, homosexuality is

also gendered, in the sense that one of the participants performs 'maleness' while the other performs 'femaleness.' Madero (2012) acknowledges the significance and part played by gender role performance in general homosexual sociability. Homosexuality is a social practice in which gender is vigorously recognized. Excerpt 5 constructs homosexual identities on the grounds of performance in which one of the participants performs the male role of infiltration while the other partner is the receiver. Further, homosexuality, just like heterosexuality, is represented as having the same patriarchal tendencies of objectifying another body; this is evident in the graffiti. Therefore, excerpt 5 reveals the fact that there are gender orders even in sexualities that are practiced amongst imaginary equals. This brings to the fore a central feature of gender; it operates on inequality. While the participants are both males, they perform different roles. One performs the main role while the other performs the subsidiary role, signifying an unequal relationship of power.

More often than not, graffitiists made explicit or implied references to the anus:

Excerpt 6

James dey always fuck Michael yansh.
(**Michael was constantly fucking James in the ass**).

Excerpt 6 all make reference to the anus in one way or the other. Whilst, *yansh* is one of the most common terms used to refer to a person's behind, it is also commonly used to represent the anus. *Yansh* is a Pidgin English word used to refer to the anus.

Excerpt 7

I'm gay

You are a product of leaking condom

In male student graffiti, males launch viciousness and hatred toward homosexual males. The abhorrence is conveyed in the graffiti inscriptions and abuse directed at homosexual males. It is obvious in excerpt 7 that homosexuality is frowned on by majority of male students. It is considered a moral collapse that is damaging to society. The fight to control

homosexuality, morality and decency is used *as* a tool to defend society and its 'decent and normal' members. Through this mechanism and other, Thai society places homosexuals as the outgroup awarding them no status or place in society assigning them to stay at the margin.

Religious tension

Graffiti provide a glowing and often unflattering insight into the hidden side of our society, but they also represent an intriguing, and an important source of information for those studying the behavior of human beings. It seems that graffiti are an accurate indicator of the social attitudes of a community (Abel & Buckley 1977). It seems that graffiti are an accurate indicator of the social and religious attitudes of a community. In addition, the topics are likely to vary according to the liberalism or conservatism of the social group in question.

Excerpt 8

8a. What can I do without Jesus?

R: He is just a prophet and human accept Islam.

Excerpt 9

9a. All Christians should be shot.

R: Fuck all you Muslims.

At the University of Ibadan, scribbles and inscriptions on the wall reflect Christians – Muslims conflicts. An example of a religious line can be found in graffiti 8 and 9. The struggle for supremacy between the two religions is all but evident in graffiti 8. Two graffitiists are involved here. The first graffitiist who is obviously a Christian asked a question "what can I do without Jesus?" The second graffitiist who is likely a Muslim, judging from his response to graffiti 8 challenges the Christian graffitiist on what he interprets to be a struggle for supremacy between adherents of Christianity and Islam. This is a testament to what the Nigerian society looks like. Christians and Muslims are in an eternal battle for which religion is greater. Further, graffiti 9 helps to confirm the tension between adherents of the two religions. The graffitiist in excerpt 9a calls

for the killing of Christians while another graffitist replies by all Muslims.

By means of graffiti individuals or groups reveal their hostilities, unburden their grievances, express fantasies and frustrations or declare a socially unacceptable point of view on subjects ranging from philosophy to politics, humour, religion, race relations, drugs, sports and sex. Even though graffiti are anonymous ways of communication without the possibility of being interrupted or rejected, they are expressed in a way that is easily understood; in the spoken language of the period. Little wonder then, they are of interest to the linguist.

6. Conclusion

The research was a sociolinguistic investigation of graffiti writing among male students, in two halls of residence at the University of Ibadan. Graffiti is an alternative practical discourse that functions as an opening for pent up emotions and, politically, to resist conditions of domination. Inscriptions in male toilets revealed a propensity to construct sex as a calling for men who consider themselves unable of existing without sex. This could be a reaction against the abstinence messages which dominate educational, health and religious discourses, advocating putting education ahead of romantic relationships and sexual activities. In the graffiti, sex is represented as a device for dominance and a regulative weapon for unruly individuals who need to be put in their right position. The domination role of sex as is evident in the graffiti was not only restricted to females. Through graffiti, alternative sexualities such homosexuality is constructed and negotiated. Inscriptions questioning or debating the assumed superiority of Islam and Christianity highlight the constructed nature of the notion of religious tension that is prevalent in Nigeria.

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