

## SLANG IN LITERATURE? FREDDY MACHA'S SHORT STORY "CHECK BOB"

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The definition of **slang** in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* is as follows: "Words and phrases in common colloquial use, but generally considered in some or all of their senses to be outside of standard [English]; words and phrases either entirely peculiar to or used in special senses by some class or profession"

We shall investigate the use of Swahili slang in Freddy Macha's tiny collection of short stories *Twen'zetu Ulaya* (DSM 1984), and especially in his short story *Check-bob*. This is arguably the only epistolary short story in modern Swahili literature; in fact, epistolary novels are uncommon in anglophone Africa as a whole. In this narrative two former lovers shower abuses on each other and their four letters — two by each character — unfold the story of a selfish young woman who shamelessly exploited her boyfriend and the manner in which he paid her back with her own coin. It is interesting to note how the same events are presented from two different perspectives and hence evaluated differently.

Macha's lively idiosyncratic language reflects the Tanzanian urban slang of the eighties which, for a foreigner, is hardly comprehensible.

Thus *Check-bob* indicates a young modern townsman; it comes from the American exclamation *Check out Bob! Sista-du* is the female counterpart of Check-bob; her name originated from the greeting "*Hey, sister, how's the doing?*", heard in Hollywood films

In slang words play a decisive role as markers. Slang might be said to arise out of a given group's need to form a style in its own, to mark solidarity within the group. If suitable markers for such an in-group style do not already exist, they have to be created. The means are the same as in word formation. Old words can be used in new meanings and new contexts and collocations

Thus *kudundika* ("to walk with a swagger") originally means "to jump up and down like a ball"; *kudaka* ("to catch with a sudden, quick movement" and hence also "to pounce on someone, appropriate greedily") here refers to a lover:

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- [1] Nahusudika mtoto miye ( ) Mwembamba, maji ya kunde, natembea kwa kudundika na matao ya mtoto wa kileo anayejua kudaka na kurusha (p 1)

*Vidudu* are “nice modern clothes”:

- [2] Yote n’liyokutendea kukutafutia kazi, kukutafutia nyumba, kukununulia vidudu chungu nzima bado unaniita lofa mtu n’liyokutendea yote hayo, mbwa wewe? (p.3)

*Kusota* (“to move along on the buttocks”) has acquired the meaning “to bustle about without any result”:

- [3] Wanaume ni sisi bwana, tunaosota, na kupigania maisha bila msaada wa mtu. (p.3)

Sote wawili tulikuwa tukisota hapa bongo-kantri-jua-kali tukiambiana lazima twende Ulaya siku moja (p.2)

*Bongo-kantri-jua-kali* stands for “Tanzania-country-njaa-kali” The nickname for Tanzania comes from *bongo* “brain”. [Some other nicknames of countries are: *Kwa Mama* Great Britain, *Unyamwezini* USA (black Americans are tall and stout like the Wanyamwezi), *Buruda* Italy (from *buruda*<sup>2</sup> - friar, brother), *Ubatani* Turkey (*bata* - turkey), *Majuu* Europe ]

*Kumaliza* (“to finish off”) here means “learn to know all things of this world, especially bad things”:

- [4] Lakini wewe mwenyewe Check-bob u’shamaliza Feza unayo. (p.2)

*Kusimama dede* has acquired the meaning “to be dumbfounded” (lit “to stand uncertainly, as a child just beginning to walk”); *chuma* (lit. “iron”) indicates “girlfriend or other treasured ‘property’”:

- [5] Miye n’nacho chuma changu, mtoto wa Kijapani, mwenyewe ukimwona utasimama dede. (p.4)

*Kuopoa* (lit. “to take out, rescue”) means “to steal”, or “to get a lover easily”; *nepi* (“nappy” or “diaper”) indicates a cheque, hence *nepi ya kuopoa* is “a stolen cheque”.

- [6] Wee kaa na ulofa (“poverty, ‘poor mouth’”) wako tu, ukijilambalamba na vijisenti vyako vya kuuza sidiria, ‘spotshuuz’ za bandarini na nepi za kuopoa toka kwa watalii. (p.6)

New words arise through affixation, change of morphological category or from onomatopes: *Ung’eng’e/ King’eng’e* “English”.

- [7] *Ung’eng’e nabonga*. (p.4) “I do speak English.”

*Kenge* is a large lizard, but *kukenga* signifies “to play tricks on someone”, hence *kenge* here means “a crook”

- [8] Huna adabu kweli wewe. ( ) Kenge wee (p.5)

<sup>2</sup> Bruder (in German)

Loans can be brought in from other regional or social dialects, from neighbouring languages, and from other languages familiar to the group. Thus *kubonga* "speak, blab" has the meaning "to speak" in some other Bantu languages (see *-ongea* in Kiswahili)

*Kugida* ("to drink") comes from Kaguru; *Tumgidie bwege* ("Let's milk a goose/a dumb-head") is the title of a booklet by John Rutayisingwa (1985)

Many Swahili slang words are borrowed from English. See in this short story: *saizi* (size), *chizi* (cheese: "mad, crook"), *disiko*, *wikiendi*, *spotshuuz* (sport-shoes), *tukaspendi* (let's go to spend), *bloo* "to be astonished with wonder, admiration, etc."

[9] Miye na vidato vyangu vinne lakini watoto wa Chuo Kikuu wananibloo. (p 4)

*Lofa* (loafer) is a derogatory term for an idler and hence a pauper (whereas *kabwela* also designates a poor man, but without scorn)

[10] Yote n'liyokutendea kukutafutia kazi, kukutafutia nyumba, kukununulia vidudu chungu nzima bado unaniita lofa mtu n'liyokutendea yote hayo, mbwa wewe? (p.3)

In favourable situations, where the in-group is large and has a strong need for demonstrations of solidarity, the slang may spread very rapidly. For instance *bwege* "imbecile, simpleton" has become widespread in colloquial language

[11] Wazee, wazazi, na watu wananiona bwege kujidai kuwa mtu kama wewe ni 'saizi' yangu. (p.2)

But if a style-marker of slang is so successful that it passes into the language of other groups, or into general use, it loses its original function. Its originators may therefore have to adopt new slang terms. So there are new synonyms for "stupid", like *mbuzi wa maisha*, *mruka manyoka* etc. There are also more and more new terms, say, for "black market" instead of *ulanguzi* which is now a normal colloquial word.

Virtually every slang expression is a metaphor. Thus "a dangerous person" may be designated as *moto wa kuotea mbali*, *ngoma nzito* or *maji marefu*. *Chai ya rangi* means "miserable, needy, broke":

[12] Unafikiri angekuwa mtu mwingine angepata kazi ya ubaharia? Watu wangapi wanakuwa mabaharia lakini mambo zao zinakuwa wasiwasi chai ya rangi? (p 4)

*Embe dodo* is a large kind of mango, but *dodo* (5/6) designates a young woman's firm breast, thus *Embe dodo* is an easily understandable nickname of a young woman

[13] Rafiki zangu Hawa Embe Dodo na John Check-bob walikuwa wakipendana sana. (p 1)

*Baharia (wa) nchi kavu* is someone who follows the sailors' life-style without being a sailor himself, that is, someone who puts on a high-and-mighty manner without reason.

*Golikipa* (goal-keeper) suggests a person who leaves important decisions to others; hence *mke golikipa* is a submissive wife who stays at home most of the time.

[14] *Au unataka niwe mke golikipa?* (p.5)

Amusing metaphors are linked with money: *soketi* “a hundred-shilling note” — it may give you light (or life) like a socket; *pajero* “500 shs” — unobtainable for a poor fellow like the Japanese car of that name.

[15] Ali mradi kila wikiendi hukosi soketi zako kumi, kumi na tano na ukija na tekisi nyumbani Magomeni Kondo na kuniambia Sista du twen'zetu tukaspendi. (p.2)

In all forms of slang there are strong concentrations of synonyms around certain characteristic themes: theft, cheating, drunkenness and such like. Thus *propoza* (proposal), *misheni* (mission), *ma(a)gamu*, *magendo* and *ulanguzi* mean “black market, illegal traffic or smuggling”, and *kulangua* is “to sell on the black market”.

[16] Ingawa mshahara wako mdogo lakini wewe mwenyewe kwa magendo na magamu! Ukipata propoza ya kuuza viatu vipya toka bandarini sawa. Ukipata misheni ya kuuza matairi ya magari ambayo ni haba, twende! (p.2)

Isingekuwa naogopa kufungwa kwa ulanguzi miye gari ningeshanunua zamani. (p.4)

Pesa yako ya kulangua mwenzio n'likuwa naichekea tu (p.6)

“Illegal” is indicated by *-a kuruka*:

[17] Watapata wapi fedha ya “kuruka” kila siku ili wawalishe wake zao wanaolia lia ovyo. (p.5)

“To cheat someone” is *kutia ndani* or *kufunga kamba* and “to cheat oneself” *kujipindua*, whereas “a cheat, fraud” is *ndonga* or *kamba*. “To ruin someone” is *kupakaza*, “to ruin oneself” *kujitomba*.

[18] *Aliyenipakazia afungwa miaka 30.* (“Motomoto” 16-31/12/1992, p.11)

There are several picturesque expressions linked with the police, escaping and such like. “Policeman” *mzee*, *mmwela*, *njagu*; “plain cloth policeman, askari kanzu” *mzee wa suti*; “to escape” *kuingia mitini*; “to escape from the police” *kulala mbele* “To enter a country without permission, illegally” is *kubinjua* and *mbinjuaji* is the person who introduces people illegally into the country. If the things come to a bad end, perhaps because of a traitor (*mnaa* or *kinaa*), who has informed the police (*kuchoma*, *kutonya*), the poor African will be seized (*kung'ang'ania*) and *kupigwa bomba* “sent by the plane back from where he has come”

“A drug addict” is *kijugu* and “to use drugs” is *kunyonya nchi*. For “drug” there are several words, like *bwimbwi*, *unga*, *mzigo*. Notice that *unga* in colloquial speech means “interests” or “job” and *kumwaga unga* is “to lose one's job” or “to make worse one's situation, to get oneself into a scrape”:

[19] Hapana aliyekuwa radhi kumwaga unga wake kwa kuthubutu kutoa huduma yoyote - iwe kubwa au ndogo - kwa Lumbesi. (Mapalala 1992:111)

Money, wealth and poverty are very important themes. Thus *bao* indicates “value”, *kupanchi* “to be successful in one’s life” and *kucharara* means “to run out of money, get ruined”:

[20] Siku hizi umeanza kucharara Huna bao tena mtoto wa kiume (p 2)

Many words are affected by *delicacy taboo*. It is a general human tendency to avoid direct references to unpleasant things. Many euphemisms are correlated with illness and death. Another group of words affected by this form of taboo are names of physical or mental deficiencies. Yet another class of words that is often avoided because of delicacy, or ironic delicacy, is names of criminal actions such as cheating, theft or murder. “Theft” has given rise to many euphemisms in different languages (cf. Ullmann 1962:328-329). For instance *kuopoa* “to steal” literally means “to take out, rescue”.

Macha uses throughout his story **colloquial speech** characterized by interjections (*eh*), questions and orders:

[21] *Ukome tena usin'zoe*. (p 5) “Stop being familiar with me.”

*Wee ulie tu*. (p 2) “Give up all hope / Lie down and die”

exclamations:

[22] *Vijana wenzetu si wivu huo!* (p 2) something like: “And other young people [our friends], how they envied us!”

foregrounded word order:

[23] *Vitabu vya kila aina nasoma. Pombe za kila aina nakunywa* (p 4)

and other devices of spoken language, like *sijui* in

[24] *Unajidai sijui hutaki kuwa golikipa sijui nini* (p 7)

where *sijui* signals Check-bob’s ironical or scornful distancing from Sista-du’s claim that she does not want to be a submissive wife.

The ironic tone of the short story is heightened by hyperboles and abuses:

[25] *Shetani kweli kakuzaa mwembamba kama uzi wa katani* (p 4)

The new lover is put disparagingly in class 5:

[26] *Leo unathubutu kuniambia eti umempata bwana mwenye gari Jitu lenyewe kwanza lile wala mapenzi halijui* (p 2)

The letters are full of picturesque invective. The first vituperations come from the young woman:

[27] Ukweli najidanganya mwenyewe kuwa na lofa wewe, check-bob, mvuta bangi, baharia nchi kavu, usiejua ustaarabu wala kutumia Hela yako kwanza ya njaa! (p.2)

Her lover does not hesitate to shoot back:

[28] Siku zote n'takuita Sista-du chawa wee! (...) Yote n'liyoku-tendea kukutafutia kazi, kukutafutia nyumba, kukununulia vidudu chungu nzima bado unaniita lofa mtu n'liyekutendea yote hayo, mbwa wewe? (...) Ningekuacha na kijitumbo ndiyo ungeniheshimu, paka wee kasoro mkia. (p.3)

Shenzi wewe, unanisemea mambo ya magari (p.4) Wee kafilie mbali, malaya tu, dogi mbwa koko aliyekosa mnofu wenye supu sasa anataka nyama ya kukonda. Ukinikosa miye utampata nani tena kama miye? Wee tamaa ya kutakataka vitu itakuponza Kwaheri Na sina haja ya majibu. Kafilie mbali, nuksi tu. (p.4)

Sista-du reinforces her arguments:

[29] Kenge wee. (...) Mwongo mkubwa wee! (p.5) Mjinga wewe. (...) Nyeie wanaume mabwege sana (...) Lofa wewe Una roho maskini wewe. (...) Pumbavu wee. (p.5-6) Kwa heri kaka bwege, lofa chizi (...) Shenzi wee lofa kwisha kazi Mungu akulaani uwe chizi Mvuta bangi wahed...! (p.6)

And Check-Bob concludes:

[30] N'shakuaga mwanamke kibiongo wee (...) Miye chizi mvuta bangi, lakini sikufikii wee malaya mkubwa Wee kijana na miye kijana lakini utazeeka uniache hivi hivi, na utaniona hivi hivi, kima wee (...) Mwongo wee (7)

Notice how many animals are there in Check-bob's repertory of offences, whereas Sista-du's abuses are mostly variations on the theme of poverty and stupidity

In this short story there are also many sayings and proverbs

**Sayings:** *Unikome kama ulivyokoma titi la mama yako* "Stop being with me like you stopped (suckling) your mother's breast" *Unajipalia makaa* "You are getting yourself into troubles/danger" (Lit "You are heaping live coals on yourself")

[31] Barua zako nzuri maana unajipalia makaa mwenyewe (p.2)

*Huna bao tena* "You are worth nothing anymore" *Zitakutokea puani* "You will spit it out!" ("You will repent" Lit "They will sort you through the nasal passages")

**Proverbs:** *Debe tupu hupiga kelele* "Empty vessels make more noise", a variation of the proverb *Debe tupu haliachi kuvuma* "An empty tin never fails to make noise." *Usitupe mbachao kwa msala upitao* "Do not throw out your old mat for a [better] praying-mat which passes: Do not desert your old friend for a new one who may not be permanent" (Johnson 1939:265) *Mavi ya jana hayanuki* "Old droppings do not stink." — *Usitupe jongoo na mti*

wake. "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater" (Lit "Don't throw away a millipede with its stick").<sup>3</sup>

Most proverbs are heaped at the end of the last letter of all, by Check-bob' This mock moralizing recalls the usual ending of traditional Swahili narratives where the moral lesson must be clearly expressed.

According to Enkvist (1973:64-5) **slang** is a relative term, not an absolute: the distinction between concepts such as 'slang', 'professional language', and 'sociolect' depends on our classification of groups of people (in-group, profession, social class) rather than on linguistic criteria. If a certain subvariety of language which was originally used by members of a restricted in-group when communicating within itself spreads to a whole social class, it stops being slang and becomes a sociolect.

This brings me to my final point: Can we label Macha's language in the short story we have analysed, as 'slang' at all? Since his two characters are not professional thieves, belonging to the criminal underworld, but rather members of a certain (albeit dishonest) class of Tanzanian society, they use a widespread subvariety of Kiswahili, hence a sociolect. In fact, if it were not so, the author himself could not know this language if he were not a crook himself.<sup>4</sup>

## References

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<sup>3</sup> Scheven gives another meaning for the affirmative version of this proverb: "He who throws away a millipede, throws away the stick [it is on] as well. I.e. A person who wants to quit a bad habit must get rid of all the means and circumstances which may bring back that bad habit." (Scheven 1981:104)

<sup>4</sup> It, however, can be considered 'slang' in the first sense of the Oxford dictionary: "Words and phrases in common colloquial use, but generally considered in some or all of their senses to be outside of standard language"