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Nicknaming soccer players:
The case of Nigerian supporters of English Premier League clubsides

Abstract. Soccer is widely popular in Nigeria, especially the English Premier League (EPL). Players in the league are given nicknames by fans in the country, which reflect Yoruba cultural world view and discourse practices, and reveal the (Yoruba) linguistic and geographical base of the fans. These nicknames can be said to occupy the slangy register of casual, entertainment speech. This article attempts a sociolinguistic study of these names and the naming practices involved in their formation. Data were collected through participant-observation and oral interview over a three-month period, during the second half of the 2008-2009 English league season from four viewing centres in two Nigerian cities. Fans agree on the names of fourteen players, drawn from the four most successful EPL club sides – Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, and Manchester United. The names encountered conform to such word-formation processes as borrowing, analogy, and semantic transfer, and such contextual considerations as performance, role, age, and physical appearance. Most of the names (ten) are adulatory, while names ascribing new meanings to old concepts are the most common.

Keywords: slang, name, English Premier League, fans, sports discourse, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Among Nigerian soccer (or football) fans there exists implicit, unacknowledged agreement about alternative names, or nicknames, for star players in the English Premier League, even though they have different club affinities. This study investigates those names, their sociolinguitic situation, and the discourse practices that produce them.

Slang has been described as informal or non-standard vocabulary, originating from and helping to identify subcultures within a society (Varanakov, 2002). As such any study of slang presupposes the existence of a subculture whose members are a part of a larger culture or society. Slang and soccer are forms of entertainment, the one, phonological, the other, physiological. The entertainment value of EPL soccer players is overtly and covertly displayed in the names they are called by their Nigerian fans.

Only a few studies have been done on the linguistics of naming and/or nicknaming in Nigeria. While Adejumo and Odebunmi (1999) have examined Nigerians' nicknaming of Nigerian currency notes, Ajileye and Ajileye (2003) have investigated the stylistic values of Yoruba nicknames. Odebode (2005) studies names and nicknames in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, and Odebunmi (2008) examines naming patterns and functions in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. However, no attempt has been made to investigate naming in sports discourse from a Nigerian perspective. This study is a modest attempt to fill the gap.

Motivated then by the desire to intersect slang, naming practices, and soccer support, and focusing on Nigerian fans, this study will a) identify the nicknames given to EPL players, b) trace the etymologies of the names, and c) contextualise the names within the Yoruba football worldview.

2. Naming in Sports Discourse

Elsewhere, academic studies in naming patterns in sports discourse have not been nil. In Bruce's (2004) study of televised-sports commentators' naming practices in England, he posits that commentators covertly and unknowingly speak the ideology of the dominant culture. He finds that players tend to be called by first names and nicknames because of their celebrity status and viewer familiarity and because of their "unusual names", i.e., "names that were 'other' or 'exotic' in relation to the dominant culture" (Bruce, 2004:871). Kennedy and Zamuner (2006) investigate the structure and usage of the nicknames of professional hockey and baseball players and identify two general types of nicknames, descriptive, phrasal expressions or "Homeric nicknames" and a referential term of address shortened from a formal name or "hypocoristic nicknames".

Mean (2001) highlights the salience of gender in the discursive practices of male referees of men's and women's football matches. She discovers, *inter alia*, that the referees use a lot more varied and frequent terms of address to call men than women, and claims that this probably stem from the failure of men to accept women as co-sharers of the football space, thereby precluding solidarity. Calderon (2008) focuses on the use of the names of soccer players to teach onomastics (especially "name theory"). Duda (2008) investigates how Polish sports commentators deploy slangy expressions for spectators' membership categorization, by demarcating *kibic* 'true sports fans' from *pseudokibic* 'hooligans'. Luhrs (2008) delves into the use by football supporters of *blason populaire* '"ethnic" chants' to maintain and contest intergroup identities and rivalries in England and analyses how rival sets of football fans employ local and regional stereotypes for the ultimate purpose of projecting in-group superiority and out-group inferiority. While taking these works as points of departure, this study seeks to analyse Nigerians' use of slang expressions to

nickname EPL players, with the intention of identifying strategies employed in the naming patterns.

3. Nature and Characteristics of Slang

Attempts have been made to define slang from varied perspectives, but fundamental problems have been found (McMillan, 1978). According to Varanakov (2002:3) slang comprises "informal, nonstandard words and phrases, generally shorter lived than the expressions of ordinary colloquial speech, and typically formed by creative, often witty juxtapositions of words or images". This definition highlights informality, linguistic creativity, and short life-span as essential to slang. From another perspective, Matthews (1997) as quoted in Ademola-Adeoye (2004:340) sees slang as "a collection of vocabulary specific to a particular generation of speakers, as well as in ordinary usage, specific to a group of professions (e.g. army slang)". Here the emphasis is not only on slang's distinctive vocabulary but also on its creators. From a third perspective, slang is "an ever-changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish and reinforce group identity or cohesiveness within a group or within a trend or fashion in society at large" (Eble, 1996:11). This definition indicates as characteristic of slang, ephemerality, informality (already incorporated in the two previous definitions) and social functionality. For our purposes, an aggregation of the three definitions above provides a fair representation of the concept.

Slang begins as a novel use of language, initiated by an individual speaker, operating within a group. When accepted by other members of the group, it becomes additional, special vocabulary, and conventional slang, or else it dies. As such, slang originates from groups or subcultures. Researchers have shown how subcultures like university undergraduates (Ademola-Adeoye, 2004; Longe, 2003; Yusuf, 1994), city youths (Mutunda, 2007) and American teens (Burke, 2000) create and develop slang to foster group identity and cohesion. Slang first gains currency in a social

group before it becomes more widely used. Slang is thus socially motivated, processed, and functional (Eble, 1996; Mutunda, 2007).

Accordingly, a number of characteristics have been identified with slang. According to Varanakov (2002:7-8) the most prominent are incongruity ("the superimposition of images that are incongruous with images (or values) of others, usually members of the dominant culture") and novelty (introduction of new concepts, providing new expressions – fresh,satirical, shocking – for established concepts, often very respectable ones). For Eble (2009), ephemerality, novelty and group identification are the most salient qualities of slang. He sees slang as linguistically equivalent to "fashion", so that the individual speaker who uses slang strives to be, at once, unique and identified with a group. Slang, linguistically, distinguishes "insiders" from "outsiders" and is thus moved away from an inferior poison to a certain middle ground or borderline of legitimate speech, less restricted in use, yet not socially endorsed as standard (Partridge, 1950; Varanakov, 2002).

There are two main attitudes to slang. Some highlight slang as inferior or corrupted language. This view is represented by Mawadza's (2000:93) definition of slang as "unconventional, substandard, colloquial and unwholesome language that is associated with the lower class of the society". This definition classifies slang as language use in an illegitimate form, traceable to an "inferior" group of people. Yet others see slang positively, as "being created by ingenious individuals to freshen language, to vitalize it, to make language more pungent and picturesque, to increase the store of terse and striking words or to provide a vocabulary for new shades of meaning" (Varanakov, 2002:9). Slang is here seen as enriching language with insightful variation. It is to this second view, which positions slang among the sources of language renewal and replenishment, that this study subscribes.

Linguistically, slangy expressions are formed in the same ways as other words or expressions in any language. In this respect, Varanakov (2002:7) lists the most common processes of slang formation as employment of metaphor, simile, folk etymology, distortion of sounds in words, generalization, specialization, clipping, the use of acronyms, elevation and degeneration, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, borrowings from foreign languages, and the play of euphemism against taboo. As will be shown presently, employment of metaphor, distortion of sounds, and borrowings from foreign languages, to which will be added object description are the most prominent strategies used by Nigerian fans to name EPL players.

Longe's (2005:35) identification of three main features of slang, in a way, summarises the most salient characteristics of slang: "language which is specific to a group operating in specific situations … specialized or technical language intended to disguise its meaning … a non-standard variety of language". As such, slang is a situation-specific group work, manifested in "secretly" coded and substandard language.

As well, Varanakov (2002) sees slang as serving a number of purposes, including naming an object or action, offering an emotional outlet or patronising reference, and providing euphemisms. The names given these footballers and the practices that produce them satisfy several of the above criteria of slang. This study focuses on naming objects, i.e., footballers, yet I shall show that in case of the names originated for these EPL players in Nigerians, naming the object converges with offering an emotional outlet

4. Contextualising EPL "Viewership" in Nigeria

Watching EPL matches has caught the fancy of most Nigerian youths (especially males) ever since the proliferation and increasing affordability of Satellite Television or Pay TV broadcast in Nigeria. On days when games are to be played (usually weekends and sometimes Wednesdays) these fans

make their ways to viewing centres (halls, mostly make-shift, where matches from foreign football leagues are shown live at affordable rates) in their neighbourhoods to support their favourite teams or watch the games of rival teams.

An average Nigerian football fan supports a particular clubside (or club) and feels duty-bound to watch his/her favourite team play, week in week out. As a matter of fact, the fans have put in place "associations of supporters", especially for the traditionally-successful EPL teams – Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester United – known as the "Big Four". Thus, Nigerian EPL fans constitute an amalgam of four major sub-cultures, which are linguistically demarcated by specific slogans:

Arsenal: Gunners for life

Chelsea: The Blues/ Blues for life

Liverpool: Never walk alone

Manchester United: AIG for life

Thus when supporters of the same club meet for the first time on match days the chanting of their club's slogan will serve as the introductory greeting.

Supporters hold meetings to discuss matters concerning their team and communicate decisions arrived at to their clubs via e-mail. Fans also support their clubs spiritually and physically by organizing prayer sessions and street carnivals before matches they consider important or dicey. Fans usually identify with their teams by dress signification, wearing the teams' jerseys, hand-bands, head-bands, and mufflers to viewing centres. Supporters "speak" their club identity through the deployment of personal pronouns. When an Arsenal fan, for example, talks about the team and decisions taken by the team's board, they use personal pronouns to suggest that they are part of the action or decision-making. This is evidenced below in the

deployment of first-person singular and plural pronouns in selected quotations from the utterances of a joyous Arsenal fan after his team had just defeated Chelsea:

> I have beaten Chelsea despite all their money. I will use the money
>
> they use to buy one player to buy five and still beat them
>
> When the transfer window opens, we will go and look for small boys with big talent
>
> and we will still continue to win. Who is wise?

Tellingly, the success or failure of the team is passionately received by the fans. For example, Manchester United fans bought a cow, painted it red (the club's favourite colour) and killed and feasted on it on the day they emerged as EPL champions in 2008. And two Chelsea fans claimed that they could neither sleep nor eat when they lost the European Champions League trophy to their EPL rivals, Manchester United in May, 2008.

5. Data

The data for this study were collected over a period of three months, specifically between March and May, 2008 (that is, the last part of the second half of the 2007-2008 season of the EPL) from four viewing centers, two each in Ibadan and Oyo (two cities, the one a state capital, the other a smaller city, both in South-Western Nigeria). This period was chosen because of the high expectancy and passion it often aroused in EPL football fans. The method employed was a blend of participant observation and oral interview.

In all, twenty games were viewed, sixteen games in which the Big Four played against other teams, and four in which they played against each other. This variation authenticated the consistency in the nicknaming of the players whose performance was outstanding enough to earn them these names. In addition, ten fans were interviewed, two who passionately supported each of the Big Four, and two who supported clubs other than the Big Four. At the viewing centres, the

researcher surreptitiously tape recorded fans' utterances during matches. The tapes were later played and the nicknames of the players were gathered. These were cross-checked against the names given by the ten fans interviewed.

The fans were mostly youths and students (of secondary schools and tertiary institutions) with ages ranging in age between fifteen and thirty, and containing ninety-five percent males. On the whole the fans displayed a rich knowledge of the identities of the players, including the clubs they played in the past, for and such-like antecedents.

6. Analysis

Here, we shall investigate the linguistic forms of the names, their meanings, and the social and contextual sources of the names. In all, fourteen players "qualify" for the study. Although I gathered the names of more than fourteen players, those selected are the most generally agreed upon by the fans. In the data, only one of the names belongs to a player playing outside the Big Four. Table1 presents the real names and clubs of the players as well as their nicknames, both in their original Nigerian forms and as glossed. Some of the players are called by two names, which I have labeled (a) and (b).

A close look at the linguistic forms of the names reveals that they have been formed via a number of word-forming processes, the most obvious being borrowing. A greater majority of the names are loanwords from Yoruba. These are descriptive tags, referring to action (10), physical appearance (12) and (1), age (5b) and (13), role and age (2), and ability (7) and (8). In (5a), we encounter a process of compounding, as *head* and *master* are fused. The appellation *van der safe* for van der Sar (i.e. (9)) is achieved through affixation. The *safe* can be seen as a derived morph with changed morphosyntactic class, from noun to adjective, of the root word *Sar*.

Table 1: Players' Names and Clubs

No.	Real Name	Clubside	Slangy Nickname	English Gloss
1.	Rio Ferdinand	Manchester United	(a) Amugbo (b) Fagbo	Hemp Smoker Hemp Addict
2.	Cesc Fabregas	Arsenal	Olori Awon Odo	Leader of the Youths
3.	Ivan Campo	Bolton	Minus One	
4.	Didier Drogba	Chelsea	Aderogba	Crown forms a fence
5.	John Terry	Chelsea	(a) Headmaster (b) Egbon	 Elder
6.	Steven Gerrard	Liverpool	(a) General (b) Class Captain	
7.	Peter Cech	Chelsea	Omo Iya Aje	Child of a witch
8.	Christiano Ronaldo	Manchester United	(a) Omojomolo (b) Omo la toro boolu la bi	A child is superior to another We prayed for a child but got football
9.	Edwin van der Sar	Manchester United	van der safe	
10.	Patrice Evra	Manchester United	Oloko	Car owner
11.	Michael Carrick	Manchester United	Distributor	
12.	Peter Crouch	Liverpool	Omoga	The child is tall
13.	Ryan Giggs	Manchester United	Arugbo Ojo	Ancient of days
14.	Theo Walcott	Arsenal	Fine boy	

Items (4) (6a) are phonological approximations of Drogba and Gerrard. While *general* is

obvious (i.e., an English word), the etymology of *Aderogba* is less so. Yoruba disallows consonant

clustering, so /e/ (the Yoruba version of the English diphthong /ei/) has to be inserted between the

/d/ and /r/ of Drogba. Item (13) is a Yoruba calque formed through a process of analogy. It is

glossed as "Ancient of Days", one of the Christian tags for God/Supreme Being and thus allusive

to Christianity. It is also a coinage, which gives an otherwise religious-referring expression a

sports identity.

The tags (11), (3), and (6b) are coinages which ascribe new meanings to known words. The

term *distributor* traditionally belongs to the field of commerce, while *minus one* should be in

Mathematics and *class captain* is best suited for educational discourse. However, fans have

experimented with and given new, social meanings to these tags, in the tradition of slang formation.

Finally, (14) is simply descriptive of Theo Walcott's outstanding good looks.

In all, three names of Yoruba origin stand out for an elaborate treatment – (8a and 8b) and (12).

(8a) and (8b) are both sentences which become utterances through compounding, as evidenced in

the atomistic analysis below:

(8a)   Omojomolo
         Omo ju omo lo
         Child superior child to
         A child is superior to another

(8b)   Omolatoro boolulabi
         Omo la toro boolu la bi
         Child we begged for ball we born
         We prayed for a child we got (foot) ball

The linguistic processing of the names (8a) and (8b) is characterised by the facility in Nigerian

conversation for quick, creative phrase generation and pronunciation. Similarly, (12) is a

noun-phrasal name which depicts the compounding of an adjective and a noun, with the adjective

following the noun as Yoruba word order dictates:

(12)   Omoga
         Omo ga
         Child tall
         Child is tall

The names (8) and (12) "mirror exactly the stream-of-utterance situations … one does not pause

after each word in speech" (Oduyoye, 2001:3).

In Table 2, I contextualise the nicknames according to their origins as well as their value

assignments. The source considerations of the players' names are given, based on four major and

one minor parameters – performance, role, age, physical appearance – with phonological

approximation being the minority case.

Table 2: Players' Nicknames, their Sources and Values

No.	Nickname	Source/Origin	Value Assignment
1.	Amugbo/Fagbo	Physical appearance/medical past	Negative (neutral)
2.	Olori awon odo	Age + performance	Positive
3.	Minus One	Performance / contribution to teamwork	Negative
4.	Aderogba	Phonological approximation	Neutral (positive)
5.	Headmaster/Egbon	Performance + role	Positive
6.	General/Class Captain	Performance + role	Positive
7.	Omo Iya Aje	Performance	Positive (negative)
8.	Omojomolo/ Omo la toro boolu la bi	Performance + ability	Positive
9.	Van der safe	Performance	Positive
10.	Oloko	Performance	Positive
11.	Distributor	Performance + role	Positive
12.	Omoga	Physical appearance	Positive
13.	Arugbo ojo	Age	Positive
14.	Fine boy	Physical appearance	Positive

We can see that nine of the players are named for their performance and roles, while the other five are named for other reasons. According to the fans, the player's ability to consistently *deliver* (a paraphrase for good on-the-pitch performance) is the major consideration for naming. In the words of a Bolton fan,

> You have to be good, good consistently, to deserve a name. Nobody will give a name
>
> to a player who plays well today and is terrible tomorrow. A player is not expected to
>
> be regularly bad, anyway, but if we find such players … like Campo, then they can be
>
> named as well … Campo destroys what other players do most times. Even when he
>
> scores it is by mistake. He's only living on past glory.

Three of the names are given based on their bearers' performance alone – (9), (10), (7) – and are all positively valued. The *safe* in *van der safe* is an adjectival coinage which underlines van der

Sar's goalkeeping prowess. (10) refers to the defender's electrifying pace, which sees the player being in attacking and defensive positions, almost at once, here represented, metonymically, with the speed of a car. The situation with (7) needs a little explanation. Within the Yoruba world view, *aje* 'witch' or *iya aje* 'old witch' can be interpreted either negatively or positively, depending on the context of use. When a woman who is deemed to have "strange" powers uses such powers to evil purposes, makes someone else sad, and is called *witch*, the negative interpretation is meant. However, when a woman who performs a pleasing or virtuous act, in an extraordinary manner is tagged *witch*, the word's positive implication is intended. Naturally, the child of such a woman would not be an attractive personality. According to a Chelsea fan, however, Cech's nickname is sourced from his consistently amazing performances in goal, and is thus positively conceptualized:

> Cech is wonderful. Whenever he is in goal we feel safe. Even if they score against us you will see it was not his fault. *Omo iya aje* is not negative … it is a commendation. His performances are often close to being supernatural.

The nicknames of the three players named for a combination of their performances and roles – (5), (6), (11) – are positively valued. A Chelsea fan's comments on the source of (5a) reveal its connotative interpretation:

> Terry is *headmaster* because he is a master header and because he is the captain. When we defend he uses his head to nod away dangerous ball. When we attack he comes to head in goals, especially from corner kicks … and he leads the team well as a captain. He is our *headmaster*.

Thus, *headmaster* is an index of semantic-scope extension whereby the meaning of the term is extended beyond 'the head of an elementary school' to being 'a master user of the head' and leader of the team. The situation with (5b) is similar. Terry is so-called not just because of his being one

of the oldest players in the Chelsea team (at age 29) but also because of his maturity on and off the field. Among the Yoruba, elders are respected not just because of their age, but because of the roles they play in specific socio-cultural situations.

Although Carrick (11) is not a captain, he is judged by the fans to do well in his midfield role for Manchester United to deserve the name *distributor*. A slightly similar situation is found in the origin of (6a) and (6b), which, connotes a combination of the player's status as the team captain of Liverpool *class captain* with being its chief mobiliser, *general*. Number (8a) and (8b) connect the bearer's performance and ability in a positively-valued manner: (8b) can be traced to the Yoruba religious belief that children come as answers to prayers from God, while (8b) arises from the belief that sometimes children may not come naturally, except by entreaty to God. And such Divine gifts, it is believed, usually come with unique abilities. It is in this context that a Manchester United fan rationalises (8):

> Ronaldo is simply fantastic. He can do anything with the ball. He scores with his head, his legs, from free kicks, from individual effort … from anywhere on the field. He is football. That's why his name is so long. He is too much for a short name. Even those who don't like him respect his skills.

Cesc Fabregas' (2), whose tag is *Olori awon odo* 'leader of the youths', is the only player who fuses age and performance. Fabregas is so named because of both his age (he was born in 1987) and his outstanding performance; fans judge him the best player in a youthful Arsenal side with an average age of twenty three years, one month, the lowest average age among the so- called Big Four (as of July 29, 2008). According to a Manchester United fan, the age-related tag (13) is not intended for equating the player with God but for underlining the player's age, long stay at the club and dependability:

Arugbo Ojo has spent all his life with us. He is thirty-four and I think he has been with

us since 1990 playing very well like a young man. He still plays ninety minutes and

scores goals. Alex [Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United coach] says you only have

to give him a day's rest and he would play like any young player. That's to show you

how dependable he can be".

Only three players derive their names from physical appearance and not from the display of any football traits: Ferdinand, Crouch and Walcott. While the names (1) are considered neutral by fans of Manchester United, who try to capture the bearer's stern, no-nonsense look, the fans of other clubs trace the names to the player's medical past of drug addiction and thus ascribe to them negatively value. (12) is neutral, as it simply highlights Crouch's unusual height of six feet, seven inches, and (14) receives a positive value assignment because the name is only called when Walcott does well on the field of play.

At the denotative level of meaning, (4) also has no football source, being a mere phonological corruption of native Ivory Coast name, Drogba. Connotatively however, the "Yorubaisation" of Drogba indicates the intention of the fans to identify culturally with the player. In the assertions of a Chelsea supporter, fans coined the name to nativise the player:

Drogba is a very good player, one of the best in the world … we call him *Aderogba*

because we find it easier to pronounce and because he is so skillful he should be a

Yoruba man. Who won't want to identify with such talent?

We can observe that most of the names (ten out of fourteen) are either denotatively or connotatively adulatory, while only two (1) and (3) are clearly derogatory. The high incidence of positively-associated names not only indicates not only the appreciation of the players by the fans but also fans' the intention to feel rapport or familiarity (even if artificial or virtual) with them, i.e.,

to identify with them. Furthermore, most of the names studied belong to players of Manchester United (i.e. seven out of fourteen). This is not accidental. Of the Big Four, Manchester United has the highest retention rate of players, with players like Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes having spent more than fifteen years with the club. And since consistency has been identified as a major criterion for naming, we can understand the high number of Manchester United players in the data. So, the longer a player plays for a team, the better the fans know him and the more likely it is that he would be nicknamed.

Fans of particular clubs have the best understanding of the contextual conditions and social matrix which inform the naming of the players of these clubs. This explains why, for example, there is a little difference in the interpretation of *fagbo / amugbo* between the fans of Manchester United and fans of other clubs. This demonstrates Varanakov's remark about slang terms, "pungency may increase when full understanding of the term depends on a little information or knowledge of a term already in use" (2002:8). Of the qualities of slang identified earlier, the ascription of a new meaning to an old term, i.e., semantic extension. is the most common in our data. Such labels as (3), (5), (6b), (9), (10), and (13) have been given novel interpretations by Nigerian EPL fans.

Most of these names have rich social and cultural significance and can thus be classified in Kennedy and Zamuner's (2006) category of Homeric names. Kennedy and Zamuner (2006:390) define a Homeric nickname as a "semantically contentful nickname used in print and broadcast journalism, usually two or more words and/or containing more than one stressed syllable". As such, names as (2), (3), (5b), (6b), (7), (8), (13) and (14) are purely Homeric names. According to Kennedy and Zamuner (2006:390), "the social meaning of nicknaming is closely related to the culture that employs it … nicknaming practices are adapted to their cultural contexts." As

Odebode (2005:211) points out, "names in the African Yoruba worldview are meaningful." It is the Yoruba cultural worldview that generates that semantic content. This naming pattern is a function of the Yoruba cultural setting and its discourse practices.

7. Conclusion

Most of the names discussed are slangy coinages based on the players' capabilities, performance, and roles, on the field of play. The names comprise mostly Yoruba expressions which reflect discourse practices which are motivated by the social and cultural worldview of the geographical base of the data. Although the fans have different club affinities, they hardly differ on the names and interpretations which the players deserve. Nigerian fans of EPL constitute a subculture, or cohesive group or in-group, whose identity is revealed by its naming style; anyone not familiar with the nicknames of EPL players would be seen as an outsider. Sports discourse, especially in Nigerian, is open to more varied linguistic research.

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