

A Morpho-Semantic Analysis of the Language of the Queer Community in Delta State

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2025.v08i11.003>

| Received: 13.10.2025 | Accepted: 05.12.2025 | Published: 15.12.2025

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic practices of the queer community in Delta State, Nigeria, focusing on the morpho-semantic features of its language. Using qualitative methods including interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussions, and WhatsApp chat analysis the research identifies lexical items peculiar to the LGBT community and examines the processes of word formation and semantic variation. Drawing on Laurie Bauer's morphological productivity theory, the study uncovers innovative morphological structures and semantic shifts reflecting identity, secrecy, and solidarity. Findings reveal that queer language in Delta State exhibits high morphological productivity, incorporating affixation, clipping, compounding, and borrowing. Many lexical items have no direct equivalents in Standard English and exhibit meanings accessible only to insiders. The research underscores the intersection of language, identity, and marginalization in sociolinguistic discourse and contributes to the documentation of underexplored Nigerian linguistic varieties.

Keywords: Morphology, Semantics, LGBT, Delta State, Sociolinguistics.

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INTRODUCTION

Language shapes how we claim social identities. In Nigeria where same-sex relations are criminalized and societal stigma is intense queer individuals develop coded forms of speech to communicate safely and build community (Julien 123). This paper examines the queer lexicon in Delta State, focusing on how morphological creativity and semantic nuance converge to express identity, secrecy, and solidarity.

Language is a cultural artifact deeply tied to the lived realities of its users. For marginalized populations such as Nigeria's LGBT community, language serves as both a tool of communication and a mechanism of resistance and identity formation. In an environment where same-sex relations are criminalized and socially stigmatized, the LGBT community has developed a distinct linguistic code that allows them to navigate public and private spaces more safely. In 2014, Nigeria enacted the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, criminalizing not only same-sex marriages but also associations and public expressions of LGBT identity. This legal framework has further pushed LGBT individuals into secrecy, necessitating covert communication mechanisms.

This socio-political repression has contributed to the evolution of a linguistic repertoire used exclusively within LGBT circles. These forms of expression rely on creative manipulation of the English language, Nigerian Pidgin, and local cultural symbols to produce new lexicon that outsiders cannot easily interpret. This research focuses on these morpho-semantic patterns of the LGBT community in Delta State, Nigeria. Specifically, it identifies the word formation strategies used to create coded vocabulary and explores the semantic fields in which these words operate.

The findings contribute to a growing understanding of queer linguistic practices in Africa and emphasize the role of language as both a cultural and survival tool.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Morpho-semantics examines the interplay between form and meaning in lexical structures (Leech 98). Bauer's morphological productivity theory provides a lens for analyzing the creative capacity of word formation in natural language. Productive processes such as affixation, compounding, and clipping enable speakers to coin new terms that encode identity and secrecy. It is analysis bridges morphology (word form) and semantics (meaning). Ferdinand de

Saussure's concept of the signifier and signified laid the groundwork, but it was Laurie Bauer's Morphological Productivity (2001) that provided a systematic account of how speakers generate new forms. Bauer defines productivity as the capacity of a morphological process like adding a suffix or creating a compound to coin an open-ended set of new words (25). He distinguishes between transparent formations (where meaning follows from form, e.g., un-happy) and opaque ones (butterfly), and he ranks affixes by their productivity.

In queer sociolinguistics, Polari (Baker 52), Gayspeak (Hayes 7), and Gayle (Cage 30) illustrate how marginalized groups use morphological innovation to subvert norms. Polari's alliterative female names, Gayspeak's sexual compounds, and Gayle's versatile nominalizations all reflect Bauer's principles in action. Yet these studies focus on Western contexts. In Nigeria, despite dozens of languages and intense repression, queer communities have crafted their own lexicon by blending English borrowings, local morphemes, and semantic play. Our framework combines Bauer's morphology with insights from sociolinguistics how

language serves identity, resistance, and community building.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Data were collected through purposive and snowball sampling methods, involving LGBT individuals in Delta State. Instruments included semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and content from WhatsApp conversations. The data collection process emphasized ethical considerations, particularly regarding anonymity and voluntary participation.

30 lexical items were extracted for analysis. These were categorized according to their word-formation types coinage, clipping, compounding, borrowing, and acronyms. The analysis employed Laurie Bauer's morphological productivity framework, with additional attention paid to the socio-cultural meanings embedded in each term.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Percentage
Female	58%
Male	29%
Gender Non-Conforming	13%

Female dominance reflects greater openness among lesbians and bisexual women compared to their male counterparts, who fear social exposure and legal sanctions.

Lexical Features of Queer Language

The analysis revealed 60 lexical items with unique meanings within the LGBT community. These terms function as markers of in-group identity and as a protective mechanism against societal hostility.

Table 2: Examples of Queer Lexical Items

Lexical Item	Meaning (Queer Context)	Word Formation Process
Rainbow	Queer identity symbol	Metaphorical extension
Top	Dominant sexual partner	Borrowing + Semantic Shift
Bottom	Receptive sexual partner	Borrowing + Semantic Shift
T-girl	Transgender woman	Clipping + Compounding
Pansexual	Attraction beyond gender	Prefixation

Word Formation Processes

- Affixation: Words like transphobic, cisgender demonstrate prefixation.
- Clipping: Trans from transgender.
- Compounding: Drag queen, lip-sync battle.

- Borrowing: Adoption of global queer terms (gaydar, closet).
- Coinage: Newly created items like rainbowism to indicate queer pride.

This aligns with Bauer's notion that productive morphological patterns fulfill naming needs in emerging cultural contexts (Bauer 25)

Lexical Item	Word Formation Type	Meaning
Kito	Coinage	Police entrapment of gay men
Shina	Coinage	Flamboyant homosexual man
Rainbownize	Derivation + Coinage	To recruit into LGBT
NYSC	Acronym	New Young Sexual Contact
BV	Clipping + Initialism	Boyfriend or partner

Mechanic	Metaphor + Borrowing	Man paid for sex
Maga	Borrowing (Pidgin)	Sexual client or sugar daddy
Coded	Borrowing + Semantic Shift	Closeted LGBT person
Mama Rainbow	Compounding + Cultural Reference	Respected elder LGBT
Aunty	Borrowing + Semantic Shift	Effeminate man

Category	Term	Meaning	Formation Process
Identity Markers	Rainbow	Queer identity symbol	Metaphorical extension
Identity Markers	Luvz	Queer peer kinship term	Clipping + spelling shift
Sexual Roles	Top	Dominant partner	Borrowing + semantic shift

Sexual Roles	Bottom	Receptive partner	Borrowing + semantic shift
Sexual Roles	Versa	Versatile role	Clipping + suffixation
Physical	Bae-face	Attractive partner	Blending
Physical	Femme	Femininepresenting	Borrowing
Physical	Masc	Masculinepresenting	Clipping
Social Slang	Closet	Hidden identity	Metaphorical extension
Social Slang	Outing	Revealing identity	Nominal derivation
Social Slang	Tea	Gossip/information	Metaphorical extension
Reclaimed Terms	Queen	Empowered gay man	Semantic reclamation
Reclaimed Terms	Kiki	Queer party	Borrowing
Acronyms	LGBTQ+	Community umbrella	Acronym
Acronyms	GSRM	Gender, sexual, relational minorities	Acronym
Coinages	Rainbowism	Queer pride movement	Suffixation
Coinages	Panthro	Pansexual person	Blending
Pidgin Borrowings	Omo-gay	Person perceived gay	Compounding
Pidgin Borrowings	Sharp-sharp	Attractive	Pidgin reduplication
Other	Safehouse	Support space	Compound
Other	Code-switch	Change speech style	Compound
Other	Ally-tect	Straight ally	Blending
Other	Xtra	Overly dramatic	Clipping
Other	Sissify	To feminize	Derivation
Other	Enby	Non-binary person	Clipping + borrowing
Other	Fluidity	Gender variation	Derivation
Other	Pronoun-drop	Omitting gender pronouns	Compound
Other	Rainbow-flagged	Publicly queer	Compounding
Other	Queer-coded	Hidden queer signals	Compounding

Identity markers rely on metaphorical imagery (e.g., 'Rainbow') and playful spelling ('Luvz'). Sexual role terms 'Top', 'Bottom', 'Versa' are borrowed from global queer English but localized in meaning. Physical descriptors employ clipping and borrowing (e.g., 'Masc', 'Femme'). Social slang illustrates semantic innovation, with terms like 'Tea' undergoing metaphorical extension. Reclaimed terms such as 'Queen' exemplify semantic amelioration, transforming former slurs into affirmations of pride. Pidgin borrowings underscore local adaptation, while novel coinages demonstrate morphological creativity through compounding and suffixation.

Digital Discourse and Morpho-Semantic Patterns in Queer WhatsApp Chats

The chats below from the queer WhatsApp group “Rainbow flag” reveal vibrant, coded, and identity-affirming language. These digital interactions blend English, Nigerian Pidgin, slang, and queer linguistic creativity. Morphologically, they employ clipping, compounding, nominalization, and borrowing, while semantically, they rely on metaphor, euphemism, and community-specific meanings.



Term/Phrase	Morphological Process	Semantic Function	Explanation
bottom stud	Compounding	Refers to a masculine queer person who is sexually submissive	Combines two role markers “bottom” (sexual position) and “stud” (masc lesbian)
baby butch	Compounding + Diminutive	Young or soft masculine-presenting individual	“Butch” = masculine queer woman; “baby” implies younger/less dominant
very totoise	Semantic shift/metaphor	Extremely attractive / sexy	“Tortoise” humorously flipped in meaning through queer slang
cupcake	Metaphorical euphemism	Refers to someone’s buttocks	Use of sweet food metaphor to feminize/sexualize body
drama queen	Idiomatic + reclamation	Overly expressive person (often queer)	Historically derogatory, reclaimed in queer speech as humorous
purr / purrrr	Slang from drag/queer culture	Affirmation or sass	Originally from Black queer American slang (like “yas!”)
Gist time 📰	Nominalization + emoji use	Cue to share gossip/story	“Gist” (Nigerian Pidgin for news) + wine emoji as dramatization
outing	Derivation from verb “out”	Public revelation of queer status	Standard queer terminology adopted locally
Abeg no drama	Nigerian Pidgin + English	Plea to avoid conflict	“Abeg” = “please” in Pidgin; code-switching illustrates informality
If you see am	Nigerian Pidgin	“You should see her/him” (emphatic expression)	Emphasis marker in Pidgin; shows linguistic hybridity

Interpretation

These lexical items:

- Reinforce group identity through shared slang.
- Encode meaning using safe, stylized expressions.
- Are morphologically inventive blending local forms with global queer lexicons.
- Use humor, flirtation, and euphemism to manage desire, danger, and drama.

This kind of language aligns with Bauer’s theory of morphological productivity: queer speakers use productive processes like compounding, clipping, and blending to innovate expressive terms. The semantic creativity reflects resistance, solidarity, and pleasure, key aspects of queer linguistic subcultures globally.

DISCUSSION

Findings affirm that Delta State’s queer lexicon reflects both global and local linguistic ecologies. Like Polari and Gayle, it privileges secrecy, playfulness, and identity assertion.

However, unlike its Western counterparts, it interweaves Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous elements, producing a hybrid register. This hybridity aligns with Bauer’s thesis on productivity: highly motivated communities exploit open morphological processes (e.g., suffixation in ‘Rainbowism’) to meet emergent naming needs (Bauer 113). Semantic strategies including metaphor, euphemism, and reclamation enable speakers to navigate stigma while reinforcing in-group solidarity.

CONCLUSION

The queer lexicon of Delta State constitutes a dynamic semiotic resource, enabling identity negotiation and resistance in a context of hostility. Through

morphological innovation and semantic creativity, speakers’ fashion linguistic practices that foster solidarity and secrecy. Beyond its descriptive value, this study contributes to African sociolinguistics and gender studies by documenting an under-explored variety of Nigerian English. Future research should examine phonology, pragmatics, and cross-regional variation, as well as digital discourse patterns.

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