

Zimbabwean prison argot: A sociolinguistic/etymological analysis of inmates' discourse at Whawha Prison in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The prison is a unique discourse community, often characterised by the use of a peculiar commonly shared communicative code. In a country such as Zimbabwe in which inmates generally come from different and diverse ethnolinguistic and sociolinguistic backgrounds, the need for a common communicative code amongst inmates cannot be overstated. Communication amongst inmates is often through 'cant', 'argot' or slang and these are usually prison specific since they are formulated within. The formulation of prison 'cant' is also often times necessitated by inmates' need to create and own an alternative 'safe' interactive linguistic space that 'evades' prison authorities due to the 'cat and mouse' nature of prison life. Prison is thus here envisioned as a cultural and linguistic space and the linguistic codes used within prison walls can be considered as sociolects or language varieties – more precisely to be conceived of as slang/tsotsitaal. Prison life, thus, has its own value systems and norms which are strengthened through such a linguistic code. Once one gets in prison, he or she adapts to a new culture and language which is spoken by other fellow inmates. Herein, we examine sociolinguistically the etymology of the vocabulary of the discourse of inmates at Whawha Medium Offenders Prison in Gweru, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The prison as a discourse community

Prison represents a very unique discourse community due to the diversity of the ethnolinguistic and sociolinguistic backgrounds that inmates come from. As such, this research analyses the prison community as a discourse community with a unique linguistic behaviour. We thus

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examine here, the etymology of prison specific patterns of language use at Whawha prison complex in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. Halliday (1978) argues that “the language through which a group thinks and communicates serves to organize the experiences of its members, to formulate their world and social reality” (p. 4). Einat and Wall (2006) further suggest that the language that a community speaks serves a socio-cultural index of that community. In linguistics, the study of prison language falls under sociolinguistics and it is termed ‘Prison Argot’ or ‘Prison Cant’. Studies on the language used in prison have been carried out in several western countries especially the United State of America, which has a vastly documented research on prison lingo (Ciechanowska, 2016; Kaminski, 2003; Moshe & Einat, 2019; Tepperman, 2017).

The prison in general is characterised by a group of people who have a set of rules and practices that are common. There are two distinct groups in all prisons, the correctional officers and the inmates. Inmates use a certain kind of language that is called Argot. Cardozo-Freeman (1984) connotes that guards have their own jargon and on occasion their own “cant” which however is not documented. Prison inmates are a discourse community that is held together by various rules, uniforms and ways of speaking. Correctional officers can also be considered as a discourse community. Thus the prison consists of several discourse communities. Moshe and Einat (2019) suggest that the language of sub-groups, subcultures and speech communities may include idiosyncratic expressions that do not exist in formal language of the larger society or borrowed words that are assigned new meaning’ The same can be argued about the prison community. The language used in prison consists of idiosyncratic expressions and terms borrowed from other ‘languages’ and made to have a different meaning. It is this combination of new terms and the borrowed terms that formulate what is known as ‘argot’.

Prison argot or lingo is not formal language but rather a form of slang used by prisoners. The prisoners thus form a unique discourse community and have a set of common communicative goals and purposes to fulfil hence the need to create this slang. Mulvey (2013) defines prison lingo as ‘primarily a spoken language; it can be written down but is not intended to be used for writing and so it has its special features’. Mulvey further expresses that ‘cant’ is perhaps one of the oldest forms of prison lingo. Slang is said to be where ‘cant’ emerged from, however ‘cant’ is mostly linked with criminals. According to Einat and Einat (2000), ‘cant’ is “the restricted speech of the low often criminal classes of society”. The Cambridge Advanced Dictionary defines ‘cant’ as special words by a particular group of people such as thieves, lawyers, or priests, often in order to keep things a secret. For a long time ‘cant’ has been mostly used by thieves and its more or less street talk; hence, it results in the birth of prison lingo.

According to Bronson (2006), ‘argot’ originally referred simply to the language of a brotherhood. Prison argot involves slang, ‘cant’ and jargon which are not new trends. Prison lingo can develop due to two distinct effects. Einat and Einat (2000) contend that recent prison scholarship points to the use of the ‘endogenous’ and ‘import’ models in the creation of prison argot. In the ‘endogenous’ model, imprisonment produces a prevalent language circle amongst the prisoners and, to a lesser extent, the workers. Prison subculture and argot are as a result of various pains of imprisonment and deficit inmates suffer in custody. This means the endogenous model argues that the prison socialises inmates into prison life due to the way they are ill-treated.

The import model gives a different point of view. The import model, argues that the bullying of certain social groups gives birth to specific ‘criminal world’ cants and jargons. This model challenges the endogenous model argument in that it underestimates the importance of customs that inmates bring in prison from the outside. According to Irwin (1985), patterns of inmate language and behaviour form a more general criminal code that is imported into prison. Goodstein and Wright (1989) also argue that inmate subcultures, norms, and roles are

extensions of belief systems and norms to which prisoners had subscribed prior to entering prison and the inmate subculture mirrors prisoners perception social and personal characteristics.

One way of understanding a community is by learning the language used in that community. The same applies in a prison communities. Cardozo-Freeman (1984) contends that "since language carries within it the values, beliefs, attitudes and ideas of a group, anyone speaking the language participates in the 'world-stance' represented by the language". In order for one to understand the prison culture, one must understand the language they use and what it means to the people who use it. For Einat and Wall (2006), one can get to know an inmate by knowing how he or she thinks, interprets him or herself, his or her group and his world in his particular societal and cultural context. Bondesson (1989) argues that inmates live, think and function within the framework defined by the argot. The argument goes on to suggest that the vocabulary supplies alternative names for objects, psychological state of minds, personnel roles, situations and activities in prison life.

Argot brings interconnection in the lives of the prisoners. Encinas (2001) argues that the proficient use of argot is 'one of the most important symbols of group membership among prison inmates'. The use of argot among prisoners is for protection and secrecy even under the presence of intense surveillance. Cardozo-Freeman (1984) argues that it helps inmates to strengthen unity and counteract threats from without. Just as members of corporations use their own language to define their status and rights through coded communication, argot allows prisoners to meet the same ends. For Einat (2002) and Sykes and Messinger (1960), the inmate's code includes informal duties, prohibitions, norms and structure of power that socialize prisoners into their new environment and determine their actual behaviour and status. The use argot reinforces the shared identity of the prison society. According to Encinas (2001), prison argot often varies very much due to the geographic location and related demographics; in their glossaries the southern states contain many Spanish terms (*placa* for 'guard' is one example), while those from the North include many from African American slang.

Whawha Prison as a Discourse Community

Whawha prison complex is located about 20km outside the city of Gweru, in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. The prison complex contains two different prisons in the same complex which are: the medium offenders (which is meant for the older inmates, that is those above the age of eighteen) and young offenders (which houses young inmates, that is those below the age eighteen). These two prisons are separated and inmates from the medium offenders prison barely mix with inmates from the young offenders prison. This means that there are two major discourse communities at Whawha prison complex which are the medium offenders' community and young offenders' community. Within these communities there are sub-communities which are created due to different reasons.

As explained above, Whawha prison complex is located in the Midlands region of Zimbabwe. The Midlands region is mainly bilingual with the common languages being Shona and Ndebele. As a result, Whawha Prison Complex is a place with two dominant linguistic groups, the Shona speaking and Ndebele speaking groups. Referring to the import model discussed above, there are two discourse communities in the prison that develop due to the outside cultural norms and values which the inmates bring into prison with them - one made up of the Shona inmates and the Ndebele inmates. These two linguistic groups formulate their two different communities within the same place. In other words, there are two sub-cultures at Whawha prison complex, which for this research we shall refer to as the Shona discourse community and the Ndebele discourse community.

It is quite common that when two ethnolinguistic groups or tribes share the same environment the people of the same background usually stick together. This kind of attraction to one's tribe is also evident at Whawha Prison Complex. The moment one identifies himself as a Shona or

Ndebele, they are absorbed into that linguistic group. At Whawha, like in most prisons, there are gangs. Due to these different gangs, the creation of sub-communities is strong as the gangs do not get along, and so the creation of argot amongst the groups is necessary in order to maintain secrecy. While gangs are largely created on tribal lines, some of the gangs are created based on similar inmates' behaviour patterns and line of duty. This is often irrespective of one's tribal or ethnolinguistic background. Inmates carry out their duties in different places at different times, and once one is assigned to work at a certain area he will be carrying out his duties at that place for quite some time.

Inmates are formally classified into stages depending on the crime they committed and on the number of years they have stayed in prison and these stages range from A to D classes. Due to this classification, other social groups are created. This is so because inmates spent most of the time with the inmates who are in the same class as they are. Each of the classes A to D can be envisioned as a sub-community of the whole prison since it is constituted of inmates who share different codes of conduct from others. When it comes to carrying out duties inmates are chosen in respect of these classes and inmates from different classes do not mix. The only exception is when too many inmates in one class are working at a certain place and time, and a few inmates from another class are chosen to help the officers monitor the other inmates who will be at work.

Due to these factors of classification, line of duty and tribal identification issues, groups with common languages or linguistic codes are created. Argot develops so that privacy can be maintained since inmates are almost always monitored by the officers. Maurer (1981) and Cardozo-Freeman (1984) argue that secrecy of communication protects inmates' privacy even under intense surveillance. In other words, one of the major reasons for the use of argot is to perhaps find ways of easing duties and the inmates occasionally give each other signs so that they work in unity. Bondesson (1989) argues that inmates function in the framework of 'argot'. In spite of the different circumstances resulting in the proliferation of many linguistic sub-communities being created in prison, all the inmates share one common language. All the inmates have a common enemy who is the correctional officer. The officer is the one who is not, under any circumstances, supposed to understand the argot used by the inmates as it might land them in trouble. All the inmates at Whawha Medium Offenders keep a common code of conduct that the officers find it difficult to infiltrate the world of prisoners. This common code of conduct is important to all the inmates. To Einat and Einat (2000) the code is directly linked to the process of socialization and adaption to prison life. Cardozo-Freeman (1984) connotes that the secrecy of communication among inmates who share a common linguistic code strengthens unity.

Despite the existence of several other smaller linguistic sub-communities, this research has established that there is one major common 'argot' at the Whawha prison complex which, for the sake of this research, we will term 'the official argot'. The research thus will not focus on all the different discourse sub-communities at Whawha prison complex but this common language used by all the inmates. The research will also focus mainly at the Medium Offenders' section of the prison complex, as it is the part which houses a larger population of inmates who have stayed in prison for a longer time.

The etymology of Whawha Prison Argot – A brief historical description

As far as this research has established, most of the terms that make up the official argot used by inmates at Whawha prison complex overlap to street talk, Shona, Ndebele and English terms. This means there is a high level of codeswitching and lexical borrowing in the construction of this argot. Whawha prison official argot borrows words from the outside larger society language and give new meanings to the terms, which is quite common when slang is created. Terms are given new pragmatic and contextual meaning that are different from their natural and ordinary meanings to such an extent that when the language users communicate, it will definitely not make sense to a third party who is not part of the discourse community as

the terms would mean something else. However, the important factor here is that when the terms are used, they produce meaning to the users. "Acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language natural communications in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding" (Krashen, 1988).

The issue of lexical borrowing supports the import model of argot creation. Some of the borrowed lexical items are from English. Some terms on the other hand are created by the inmates themselves; there are quite a number of these and they help to make up the 'argot'. Such terms are new to anyone who has not been a prisoner at Whawha prison complex. These terms however, also overlap into the slang used by those outside the prison. This situation occurs when an inmate goes out of prison and would still communicate in the way he had been used to. This creation of new terms from within the prison supports the endogenous model of argot creation. New terms at Whawha are created to aid all the inmates and these are formulated in either Ndebele, Shona and to a lesser extent English. Ndebele and Shona are the two dominant languages and most of the new terms are coined from within the Ndebele and Shona languages.

The 'official' argot at Whawha prison complex comprises of Shona, Ndebele and English terms. It is a mixture of these three languages with Shona and Ndebele being the most dominant in the creation of new terms. Some of the terms are also coined by joining words together. Most of the studies on discourse communities have mostly been focusing on academic, computer and political communities. This research thus seeks to take a different course by analysing the prison community as a discourse community. The studies on prison language also termed argot have been carried out in most American states and Australia as well as Asia, and barely in Africa. Prison language has mostly been documented rather than studied but still not in most African countries, and Zimbabwe is one of the countries lacking documented studies of prison lingo, something which this research aims to achieve.

Coinage also plays an important part in the generation of the vocabulary of argot. Oftentimes inmates are forced to be creative and 'invent' completely new words. Eble (1996) argues that slang exploits existing forms and their meanings in several ways. During the interviews, the inmates argued that some of the words had no other meanings outside the prison walls. In fact, these were words that were specifically 'invented' within the prison and whose meanings were confined to the prison.

Sociolinguistics and the study of prison discourse

This study examines the etymology and nascence of Zimbabwean prison argot from a sociolinguistics perspective. Schmitt (2013) argues that the most obvious definition of 'sociolinguistics' is that it is the study of language in society. Schmitt goes on to argue that there is a social and contextual dimension to every naturally occurring use of language.

There is a social and contextual dimension to every naturally occurring use of language, and it is always these social factors that determine the choice and form of what is written or said or understood (Schmitt, 2013, p. 5).

Eble (2005) opines that sociolinguistics is the study of how language serves and is shaped by the social nature of human beings and that sociolinguistics analyses the many and diverse ways in which language and society entwine. Wardhaugh (2010) argues that sociolinguistics is 'the relationship between language and society... the various functions of language in society'. In sociolinguistics, the focus is on the impact of society on language. The theory of sociolinguistics has other theories that emerge from its concepts. Sociolinguistic theory studies how language varieties differ among groups that are separated by certain social aspects such as status, ethnicity, gender, and or age.

Sociolinguistics examines the relationship between language and society, with language as the starting point. Sociolinguistics also examines dialect. Sociolinguistics is a fieldwork-based discipline (Schmitt, 2013). Heller (1984) argues that there are two branches of sociolinguistics which are 'interactionist' and 'variationist'.

Interactionist' sociolinguistics is principally interested in what language use can tell us about social processes and therefore a central concern is the social meaning of language use. 'Variationist' sociolinguistics is interested in accounting for linguistic variation and change, at least partly as a product of social distribution of language varieties (Heller, 1984, p. 48).

According to Baker (2010), 'interactional sociolinguistics combines anthropology, ethnography, linguistics, pragmatics and conversation analysis to examine how speakers interpret meaning in social interaction'. This is the kind of approach that was used in this research.

Another hypothesis of sociolinguistics is that language is variable and changing. Baker (2010) propounds that '...there are two other important concepts relevant to sociolinguistics - variation and change'. The argument behind these elements is that language is not homogeneous. Variation can be diachronic or synchronic. Baker (2010) argues that 'synchronic variation can also refer to differences between varieties of the same language...diachronic variation, however, refers to variation overtime'. The study relates mostly with synchronic variation. In this view, the study adopts the argument raised by Schmitt (2013), which postulates that:

Sociolinguistics is a fieldwork-based discipline. Researchers collect examples of language usage in their naturally occurring environments and study them in relation to the findings of other sociolinguistics' research work. In this sense, it is truly an example of applied linguistics: there is no introspection, nor impressionistic evaluation involved (Schmitt, 2013).

Data collection methods

In order to get this data and in observation of proper ethical considerations, the researchers used the following methods:

- Interviews (informal discussions and conversations): These were conducted with ex-convicts from Whawha Medium Offenders and recorded on a tape recorder as well as notepad. The researchers managed to get in touch with six ex-inmates at Whawha Medium Offenders who consented to being interviewed. Informed consent forms were also signed by the prisoners. One-on-one interviews with some of the former inmates were conducted in this study. During the interviews (which were tape recorded), the researchers used unstructured questions. However, the respondents were free to communicate and not necessarily guided by the structure of the questions. Group discussion was also used to gather information. The researchers resorted to collecting information from the former inmates because it was easier to collect more information from these subjects as they did not speak under any correctional officers' surveillance and the researchers could easily look up for the subjects at any time of the day. Studies that have been carried out in other countries on prison lingo have shown that the inmates do not give more information if the prison officers are around as they fear exposing their 'secret' language which will in turn expose their secrets (Ciechanowska, 2016; Kaminski, 2003; Moshe & Einat, 2019; Tepperman, 2017). Therefore, a different approach was used in acquiring information so as to access the full participation of the subjects. Interviewing the inmates at Whawha Medium Complex would definitely require a correctional officer to monitor the process and so the subjects would be restricted in terms of the information they would provide.

- Personal observation (listening to the inmates communicating whilst they were on duty outside the prison premises): One of the researchers resided at Whawha Prison Complex for a period of nearly two years. During this period, the researcher managed to observe and listen to inmates communicate. He was also able to interact with inmates informally and thus able to ask for clarification to some of the expressions they used which he did not understand. Ethical clearance from the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Services was also obtained to allow for the observation of prisoners.

Aspects of Whawha Prison argot: Examples and Discussion

This section presents examples of the lexical and syntactic structure of the Whawha Prison argot. Data is presented in tabular form (Table 1) constituted of examples of lexemes and phrases as well as a discussion of their etymology. In presenting the data, we take into cognisance the need to present the literal translations of the words (in case were these are possible). Some of the words used in Whawha Prison do not have immediate translations and etymologies as they are creations from coinage. In other words, they are completely new words created specifically in the prisons. In instances where sense and etymology cannot be immediately determined, it is indicated.

Table 1

Examples of the lexical and syntactic structure of the Whawha Prison argot

Words	Basic/Literal Meaning/Reference	Etymology/Sense
B		
Base	Mattress	Prisons are overcrowded and basic sleeping apparatus like beds are absent. Space is also fought over because of overcrowding. A very lucky few will get the very few mattresses available. They thus consider them and the space they occupy on the floor their abode: their 'base'. In Shona slang and tsotsitaal, home is often referred to as 'base'. This could probably be the origin of the term.
Bomb	'Explosive'. Something prisoner would have hidden from prison officers.	Prisoners have a tendency of importing illegal and banned things into the prison walls. These banned commodities are thus used as a form of currency. If found by prison officials, they could land the prisoner in trouble. The reasoning/analogy is that if whatever is hidden is discovered, it could land the prisoner in trouble - explode. It is like a bomb waiting to explode.

Boma	Prison	The etymology of the word is not immediately established. The word is however not exclusive to prison as outside prison and in Shona slang, where the word is also used to refer to the police. Two possibilities however come to mind. It could be borrowed from Chichewa (a Malawian language spoken by many migrant labourers in Zimbabwe during colonial times) in which it means 'government' or 'authority'. In this case, it could be in reference to the authority that prison has to restrict and govern prisoners' behavior and movement. It could also be borrowed from KiSwahili where it means 'enclosure' or 'fortified outpost'. This would be in direct reference to the 'security' of the prison walls.
Bongirifaya	Peeping	The term is derived from the Shona noun 'Bonga' meaning a 'wild cat' or in some dialects just 'cat'. Cats are thought to have good vision and a sly behaviour of being able to secretly look at things. Their eyes are also metaphorically imagined to be able to pierce through the soul – see through the soul. The term in prison is used in instances when prisoners peep into places they are not supposed to, like cats.
C		
Cash	'Money'. Bathing Soap (Geisha in particular)	Because money is not allowed in prison, prisoners often illegally trade in other necessary commodities such as cigarettes, soap: some form of barter trade. So soap, as a commodity

		that can be traded with is considered 'money'.
Chitima	'Train'. A group of prisoners who are working. Usually the term is used to refer to inmates who are watering the garden in line form.	The allusion here is made of the physical train which will be made up of the horse (head/engine) pulling a lot of passenger or goods carrying vehicles (wagons). Trains are thus often long and hence the long line of working prisoners is analogized as a train.
Chikepe	'Boat/Ship'. To escape from prison	This is use to refer to an escape. It is used because ships/boats glide smoothly on the sea. The prisoner is thus like a ship, gliding smoothly and unnoticed to escape. The allusion here is that a ship in the large sea or ocean is lonely. An escapee is within society but is still lonely (alone in a 'sea of people') because they are afraid of being caught. They are at large.
Chikopokopo	'Helicopter'. Tractor	The term is probably used in reference to the noise that the tractor makes in an ordinarily quiet environment that prison is. Inferences could also be made of the pace at which it ploughs – faster than humans and in a short space of time. This could be allusions of the helicopter in war, which would shoot and wipe enemies faster that foot soldiers.
Chibhonda	A person of no fixed aboard.	The etymology of the word cannot be immediately determined. The term however is not exclusive to prison and therefore is not coined within the prisons. In fact, it is also part of Shona slang and tsotsitaal and is used as a reference to people of no fixed aboard,

		especially homeless people living in the street or sometime scruffy looking people. In prison, the term is used to refer to prisoners that were living on the street when they committed the offences that brought them to prison.
Chibhengebhenge	'Noise' (Literal Translation). Useless person	The term is derived from a Shona idiom that refers to noise. The reference here would be that of a noisy and yet useless person that disturbs others – and whose 'noise' (speech and conversations) is not helpful or productive. These people are regarded as empty vessels.
D		
Dambarefu	'Long Play'. Serving life or sentence of not less than ten years	Derived from 'Long Play Record'. This was a vinyl musical recording before the advent of CDs and other modern technology. Vinyl records were in two categories: Singles (which were small and contained one song on each side) and Long Plays (LPs) which were bigger in shape and had several songs on either side and could play for a long time hence 'long play'. So the allusion was made to those serving long sentences who are thus considered to be in prison to stay for long: 'play for long'.
Dzokufa	'The dead ones' (Literal Translation). Beans	A major part of the Zimbabwean prison diet is dried beans. The prison system in Zimbabwe favours beans because they can be grown by the prisoners and can also be kept for long times. Beans is considered by the prisoners as 'the dead ones' because they are obviously not fresh. The

		other dimension is that prisoners are simply saying beans is permanent: literally meaning 'till we die, we will be eating beans'.
G		
Gavhunga	Green vegetables such as rape and cabbage (which have been cut using a hoe)	The term is coined in the prison to refer to the roughly cut vegetables. Because they are cut using a hoe and not a knife, the vegetables are rough and do not look nice/appetizing. Prisoners have often signified that prison food is not well made, especially that it is prepared by fellow prisoner. Some have contended that vegetables are often cut using a hoe instead of a knife. Apparently this is a safety issue as prison officers try to avoid knives disappearing into cells where inmates can hurt or kill each other. It is apparently easier to monitor the movement of big apparatus/tools such as hoes rather than the small knives.
Gumbakumba	'Collect/Grab all' (<i>Literal translation</i>). UD Nissan truck used to transport prisoners. The windows are very tiny and have a thick mesh wire. It is like a moving prison	This is a Shona idiom that refers to a person who or animal which is not selective and collects anything and everything. The allusion drawn here is of how these cars that transport prisoners from prison to court and vice versa, carrying all kinds of criminals indiscriminately and carries them in huge numbers too.
Gozhla	Groceries	This results from a nativisation of the English word 'grocery' in Shona slang and tsotsitaal. The term is also used to refer to large quantities of things in Shona slang and tsotsitaal.

Ginyabvu	'To force' (<i>Literal translation</i>). An inmate charged with rape	The term in Shona slang and tsotsitaal means 'to force things'. Robbery for example is also referred to in Shona tsotsitaal as 'kuginyabvura' (to forcefully take). The analogy here is made because the nature of the crime – rape – is forced.
Getsi getsi pascreen	'Power or light on the screen' (<i>Literal translation</i>). Opening statement when someone is telling a story or movie	This is used when one is beginning to tell a story or narrating a movie. The idea is that of notifying the audience that he is now 'switching on the TV (screen)' that is beginning to tell an entertaining story. One cannot watch or listen to the television when it is still off. It needs to be switched on. Movement and access to entertainment in prison is minimal to null. Prisoners thus derive entertainment from telling each other stories and retelling movies that they have watched before.
J		
Jega mudhuri	'To carry the wall' (<i>Literal Translation</i>). Leaning on the wall when the officers are counting prisoners in the cells	Prison officer perform physical daily counts of all inmates. In order to get the correct count and avoid double counts or miscounts, prisoners are ordered to stand straight against the wall. This enables prison officers to be able to see each and every one of them. The process of standing straight against a wall is jocularly likened to supporting the wall from falling, or carrying it.
K		
Kaza	Mercedes Benz truck used to transport prisoners. The windows very small in size with a thick mash wire	This is a nativisation of the English word 'car' in Shona slang and tsotsitaal.

Kule	'Grandfather/Uncle'. Male Prison Officer	This is simply a term of respect used by prisoner to address female officers. In fact, the prison officers also know this term of address.
Kudhonza tambo	'To pull a string' (<i>Literal Translation</i>). Pretending to be sick or demonstrating	Here reference is made to time wasting activities. This is when inmates feign illness in order to avoid completing a task, or a demonstrating or on a go slow. The allusion is drawn from the idea of a person trying to pull a ball of wool. The string is long and will not easily end. The process is thus nihilistic and time wasting – literally.
Kucheka	'To cut' (<i>Literal Translation</i>). Sexual intercourse	How such a word which signifies a pain giving act is used to describe sex is mysterious. I would imagine that since in this case, the alleged sex could be homosexual it could be painful. Or the term could just be used to throw off officers from understanding the real meaning. It thus could be some form of semantic expansion. In fact, within Shona slang and tsotsitaal this word and other words signifying pain giving acts are used to refer to sexual intercourse, even heterosexual sex. Examples of such words are 'kutsemura' (to split into two or half), 'kukwira' (to ride), 'kuzvambura' (to beat thoroughly) etc. (See Sabao, 2013).
M		
Makadhibhokisi	'Cardboard box' (<i>Literal translation</i>). An inmate who leaks information to the prison officers	The reference here is drawn from the image of leaking. The act of confiding in someone is metaphorically analogized as safekeeping in a cardboard box. When a person confided in leaks the information, it is also metaphorically imagined as

		the cardboard box leaking out the things that we safe keep. It is also imagined that cardboard boxes cannot be used to store water, they will be always leak – like a snitch would too.
Mwana	'Child' (<i>Literal translation</i>). Gay (male partner who takes the female role)	The allusion to the 'female' man in a homosexual act as a child is probably drawn from their dependence on the 'male' in the sexual act. It is often rumoured that some weak prisoners offer themselves for sex to more powerful prisoners for protection. As such, they become dependent on the 'man' in the relationship just like a child is to a caregiver.
Matabawo	Tablets/Medication	A basic Shona tsotsitaal word play and nativisation of the word 'tablets'.
Mutsara	'Line' (<i>Literal translation</i>). Meat	Meat is a scarce commodity in most Zimbabwean prison. It just gives access to trading for favours in prison. It is thus considered a 'line' to opportunities.
Musoro wechitima	'Head of the train' (<i>Literal translation</i>). Gang leader	Gangs are a reality of prison. Prisoners often find themselves in gangs for a variety of reasons such as protection from violence and abuse by members of other gangs as well as to find comfort in these forms of 'families'. Groups of prisoners are often referred to as trains. The head of a gang is thus the train head (the horse) that pulls everyone else in the gang (the wagons).
Munyoro	'Soft one'. (<i>Literal translation</i>). New inmate	Habitual criminals and jailbirds are often referred to as 'hardened' criminals. New offenders are thus considered soft. They are

			untainted and not hardened by prison. Because they are new to prison and prison life, they are considered 'soft'.
Muchini	'Machine'. Needle		Needles are a rare commodity in prison. Clothes as well are few and new ones are not often availed to prisoner. When prison garb tears off, prisoners need to mend them, and a needle is considered a 'machine'.
Mbuya	'Grandmother/Aunt'. Prison Officer	Female	This is simply a term of respect used by prisoner to address female officers. In fact, the prison officers also know this term of address.
Mavhiri mudenga	'Wheels in the air' (<i>Literal translation</i>). Punishment from prison officers (beating underneath the feet in particular)		Reference is made to an overturned car which will be having its wheels in 'the air'. Because prisoners are legally protected from abuse and torture, it is rumoured and argued by many prisoners that the prison officers often beat them under the feet. While we cannot establish the medical accuracy of it, the claim is that there is little or no swelling that shows under the feet and therefore prisoner officer torture them this way.
Mari	'Money'. Anything used for barter trade		Because money is not allowed in prison, prisoners often illegally trade in other necessary commodities such as cigarettes, soap. Toothpaste, toothbrushes, etc.: some form of barter trade. So any commodity that can be traded is considered 'money'.
N			
Ngayaya	Marijuana		The root of the name is difficult to locate. We however believe it's a word

		coined within the prison wall to refer to the illegal drug.
Nzondora	'Chicken feet'. Homosexual	Chicken feet are quite a delicacy amongst most Zimbabwean communities. We suspect the reference signifies someone that a fellow prisoner is 'enjoying' sexually.
Noczim	Cooking oil	NOCZIM is an acronym for National Oil Company of Zimbabwe. It is here used as an analogy because petrol and cooking oil are literary referred to using the name noun in Shona – 'mafuta' (oil). Cooking oil is 'mafuta ekubikisa' (oil to cook with) and petrol is 'mafuta emota' (oil for the car).
Ndege	'Aeroplane' a) Maniac (b) Mentally challenged person	Reference to a mentally challenged person or a manic is made reference as an aeroplane. The allusion is made of an aeroplane because, since it does not travel on a definable road, it is thought of as being directionless so to speak. Mentally challenged people are thus imagined as being directionless as their mental processes are not coordinated and linear – just like a plane.
O		
OK (Supermarket)	Rubbish pit	Reference is made because oftentimes, prisoners get to pick up leftover food thrown away by prison officers, which they often consider better than the prison food itself.
P		
Panze	'Outside'. Outside the prison parameters	The prison and its confinement is referred to as 'the inside'. The concept of 'the outside' is reference to the freedom that the world

		outside the prison walls represents.
Police	A snitch. An inmate who leaks information to the prison officers	This is because a snitch will be working or cooperating with the police to sell out other inmates. Because of that he is considered one of them, hence the tag 'police'.
R		
Razor	A small place to sleep on	Culminating from the smallness of sleeping spaces in prison because of overpopulation. Reference is made to the razor as an analogy because of its thinness.
S		
Stodart	Movie watching/story telling	Derived from the famous Stodart Hall in Mbare (Harare), where high density youths during and after colonial times, used to go and watch bioscope (movies). So any form of entertainment would be called such.
Seridha	Cell	Resulting from some tsotsitaal nativisation of the word 'cell' in 'prison cell'.
Shop dambu	'Breaking a shop' (<i>Literal translation</i>). Shoplifting	Resulting from slang word play to refer to breaking into a shop and stealing or basic shop lifting – 'breaking the shop'.
T		
Thornhill	'Thornhill Airbase' a) Maniac (b) Mentally challenged person	Thornhill Airbase is the largest military airbase in Zimbabwe. It is where most military planes land and are kept. In as much as reference is made of the base, the intent is to refer to the planes themselves. Reference to a mentally challenged person or a manic is made as an aeroplane. The allusion is made of an aeroplane

		because, since it does not travel on a definable road, it is thought of as being directionless in a manner of speaking. Mentally challenged people are thus imagined as being directionless as their mental processes are not straight forward, coordinated and linear – like an aeroplane.
TV (Television)	Window	Because prison is restrictive in terms of access to the outside world, windows offer prisoner a chance to peep into the outside world, hence reference to them as 'televisions'.
TM (Supermarket)	Rubbish pit	Reference is made because oftentimes, prisoner get to pick up leftover food thrown away by prison officers, which they often consider better than the prison food itself.
W		
Whiters	Fresh or sour cow milk.	A name derived from the colour of milk – white.
Z		
Zvibhezhi	Hospital, clinic, or dispensary	Derived from the Ndebele word for clinic/hospital – isibedhela.
Zviwanikwa	'Discoverables' (Literal translation). Illegal things, e.g. cigarettes	Used in Shona slang and tsotsitaal to refer to important and valuable commodities that are sometimes rare or difficult to find. Illegal gold panner also call their find using the same name. Within the prison system sometime basic commodities such as cigarettes, toothpaste, toothbrushes and tissue are considered 'gold'.

Conclusions

Argot is a language common to criminals but it is distinct from prison to prison. The researcher came across of quite a number of words and phrases that are peculiar to Whawha Medium Offenders. Some of the words are borrowed from other languages and societies but they mean something totally different. Looking at the research from the empirical study, results showed that the inmates use both speech and written modes of communication. Speech is used more often though and this is so because it is less risky to communicate through speech. It is easier

for the inmates to provide information and feedback as they use a secretive language. Results showed that the inmates are able to communicate anywhere and anytime especially under surveillance. During the research, the researcher discovered that prison slang has been studied and documented vastly in Western Countries and hardly in Zimbabwe and several African countries. For further research, there is need for further lexicographical and sociolinguistic studies on Zimbabwean prison lingo.

From the results on the data analysis, the research shows that all the inmates at Whawha Medium Offenders use argot to communicate which is a language peculiar to them only. This is so due to the fact that they are all identified in a similar way and the issue of age or gender does not affect them. Prisoners use language to achieve certain goals. The results also showed that the inmates have a number of reasons for using argot which are: to be secretive, for group identity and solidarity, as a means of survival and for cultural coherence. Several scholars argue that the main purpose for using slang is to be secretive. Maurer (1981) propounds that "secrecy of communication protects inmates' privacy even under intense surveillance". The inmates need to be secretive and language is one of their major tools to attain this goal.

Results also indicated that argot is used as a means of identification and solidarity among the inmates. One of the purposes for using argot is for survival in prison; the argot makes life in prison easier. The research also indicated that argot is also used as a tool which brings together different cultures and creates one common culture. Einat and Einat (2000, p. 309) propounds that "the norms and values of the inmate code form the core of an inmate subculture". The reasons given from the findings of this research are the set of public goals that the inmates at Whawha Medium Offenders share.

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