

## Raak wys to the rejuvenating power of slang

**Author: Carlos Amato**

My two-year-old son calls his sandals his “scandals”. So does his five-year-old brother. And so do his parents, come to think of it. At first, we all copied the toddler’s usage because we found it funny. But the next thing we knew, “where are your scandals?” became a perfectly serious question. Words like these are part of our family’s ever-expanding dictionary of nonsense. I won’t bore you with more examples; every young family has its own toddler-dominated lingo.

The urge to invent and use slang -- to personalise and localise a language, in other words – seems to be hard-wired into the human brain. There is a universal impulse to play with words, and to use that process of play as a way to bond with others.

Teenagers have always been the slang maestros. This is because they love being part of an in-group, which slang helps to demarcate, and also because they generally have enough leisure time and spare synaptic voltage to polish a patois. When me and my tjomies were in Grade 10 in leafy Kenilworth, Cape Town, our quest for mastery of Cape Flats street slang far outranked our quest for mastery of maths. This had appalling long-term consequences for our bank balances. Thirty years later, I can still understand the words “stiek uit that side!”, but I can’t understand the words “exchange-traded fund”.)

“Youth are the movers and shakers of language,” says Ellen Hurst, a scholar of urban youth language at University of Cape Town, and author of a new book, *Tsotsitaal in South Africa*. “They’re the ones experimenting, using new terms from pop culture, joking around. There is an exclusionary and competitive element to youth languages,” she says, with urban kids always ready to dream up rude epithets to describe their rural counterparts. “But it’s also about affiliation and bonding, about supporting and affirming each other through banter and play. You extend a metaphor and support each other in language.”

Hurst grew up in Britain, where the meaning of speech codes can literally change a person’s life. Her hometown is Newark, Nottinghamshire, where the distinctive youth slang is heavily influenced by the Romani (Gypsy) language spoken by settled-down Travellers. (Some raucous examples of Newark patois: a “chavvie dagger” means a penis, a “mutter” means a poo, and “warm” means promiscuous.)

When two cultures collide in the way they have done in Newark, potent youth languages tend to pop up – and South African tsotsitaal is the ultimate example of that chemistry. While some of its best tsotsitaal words have stuck around for decades because they are unimprovably good (my personal favourite is to “blom” (blossom), meaning to relax.)

But Hurst says tsotsitaal is more a style of creating language than a static, enduring language itself; in its Soweto iteration, for example, it is an ever-changing hodge-podge of Zulu, Sotho, Afrikaans and English. In other South African cities, the ingredients are mixed differently.

The language soup is far from unique to South Africa – it’s common up north. Hurst and fellow researchers across Africa have recently been comparing tsotsitaal with other multilingual youth subcultures like Kenya’s Sheng, Cameroon’s Camfranglais and Ivory Coast’s Nouchi.

The good news is that the rise of internet culture – which from certain angles can seem totalising and homogenous – is not killing off these wild languages. If anything, Hurst says, social media applications like Tiktok, Twitter and Instagram are boosting the process of slang innovation – providing powerful open stages for new words to explode into the broader public consciousness. As a result, some nifty youth terms have even reached the ears of this bougie white grootman (old timer).

Because as of this year, I am making an effort to absorb and use some of the finest mzansi slang, in order to replace the extinct Capetonian schoolyard lingo of the early 1990s which is still living rent-free in my head. This project is not just for my

amusement: it might fend off senility. I recently discovered that learning new slang can be as beneficial as learning a foreign language – it builds and sustains both memory and attention span.

I still miss the musty catchphrases of my misspent youth, like “Swak move!” and “Blind, ek se!”. But oksalayo, I must just dala what I must.

So without further ado, here is a small selection of the very finest new (or newish) slang terms of this land. I found these definitions on the excellent website [Mzansitaal.co.za](http://Mzansitaal.co.za), which is doing a great job of crowdsourcing a national slang lexicon.

### **OKSALAYO**

(Interjection) But the fact of the matter is; in any case; but still ...

### **MSUNERY**

(Noun) Nonsense; output of the anus (msunu) Remove

### **ERENG ... MO NGWANENG**

Direct translation from seSotho: What does (X) say to a child?

Meaning varies with the context, but the phrase generally emphasises the impact or effect of something.

Examples:

“I don’t feel like working today ... ereng laziness mo ngwaneng!”

“They don’t want to see me succeed. Erenge jealousy mo ngwaneng!”

### **ZWAP**

(Pronoun) Everything or all of them.

Person 1: Did you finish everything?

Person 2: Zwap!

### **TSWA DAAR**

(Interjection) Let’s not go there / let’s not talk about it.

Guy 1: I heard you and Rouge broke up.

Guy 2: No man, tswa daar!

### **KSAZOBALIT**

Direct translation: :it’s about to get lit”. Things are about to get fun and awesome.

MA 2000

(Noun) The generation born around the year 2000.

“Ma 2000 don’t know what a floppy disc is.”

### **DALA WHAT YOU MUST**

(Phrase) Do what you must.