

# ASPECTS OF THE PHONOLOGICAL AND LEXICAL FEATURES OF SELECTED NIGERIAN HIP-HOP MUSIC

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## **Abstract:**

*This study examines some phonological and morphological features of the Nigerian Hip-Hop lyrics. It discusses the contributions towards the characterization and the spread of Nigerian English. It accounts for the reasons behind the artists' linguistic choices. Finally, it elucidates the influence these choices may have on the youth who are the major fans of the Hip-Hop genre of music. For the purpose of this study, five Nigerian hip-hop artists were examined. This study employs qualitative method for the purpose of data collection and analysis with insights drawn from Musilanguage Model (ML) (Brown, 2001). The results of the study reveals that Nigerian hip-hop music has contributed immensely to the peculiarity of the Nigerian English language variety, phonologically and morphologically. Nevertheless, this is a form of language creativity but which has implication for language acquisition of Nigerian English as a Second Language (ESL) learners.*

## **Keywords:**

Nigerian Hip Hop, Nigerian English, Language, Communication, Musilanguage, Phonological and Morphological features.

## **1.INTRODUCTION**

Music as a means of communication has become a worldwide phenomenon. Language as an instrument of communication is a set of codes used by a community based on understanding and conventional approval for the purpose of communication; interpersonal relationship, expression of thoughts, propagation and enhancement of cultural values and traditions, entertainment, correction of vices, teaching of morals etc.

In any bi/multilingual community, language contact (Weinreich, 1968) is inevitable. The phenomenon occurs when speakers of two or more languages interact leading to one language

influencing the other. The study of language contact is referred to as Contact Linguistics. Language contact engenders other linguistic phenomena such as borrowing, creole, pidgin, codeswitching, mixed language, hybridization etc. which may be linguistic or socio-psychological. Linguistic contact has to do with the features emerging from language contact such as phonological, morphological and syntactic. Socio-psychological contacts are sex, number, age, status (social or educational), length of contact, degree of contact as well as what motivated the contact among others.

Language is rooted in phonology which is the patterning of sounds into expressions. Language proficiency and creativity boils down to a user's level of phonological awareness; a pivotal for reading and writing skills, closely related to pitch awareness and musical expertise (Dege and Shwarzer, 2011). On the other hand, morphology known to be formation of words cannot be overlooked in music composition. Construction of words using root words and affixes may result in linguistic deviance or creativity.

Music as 'an impressive art and an incontestable conduit for cultural dispersal' (Adedeji , 2017:75) is such an instrument that has contributed positively to the growth of the society in the years past. Various genres of music exist globally. Among them are Blues, Alternatives, Anime, Classical, Comedy, Country Dance, Disney, Electronics, Easy Listening, Enka, French Pop, German Pop, Fitness and Work out, Indie Pop, industrial, Inspirational, J-Pop, Jazz, K- Pop, Karaoke, Kayokyoku, Latin, New Age, Opera, Pop, R&B Soul, Reggae, Rock, Hip-Hop/Rap, Soundtrack, Tex-Mex, Sin Iger/ Song writer, World Music/Beats and of course Hip Hop music [Online].

Hip Hop music is a variety of music globally imbibed by the youth. 'Hip' refers to someone trendy while 'Hop' means a short jump by moving on one leg or a social event in which people dance. The term was first used by the rapper, Keith Cowboy and the Furious Five to mock a friend who was a new recruit in the US Army, by singing 'hip/hop/hip/hop' (Ajaero, Umezina & Nwamara, (2019). Nigerian youth are not exempted from the craze for hip hop music. These days, accessibility to music is so easy that it can be heard anytime and anywhere with the help of technological revolution. The youth are so engrossed in music nowadays that even while walking on the road you see them shaking their heads listening to music from their mobile phones using head phones or ear piece.

### **1.1 Hip Hop Music in Nigeria**

Hip-Hop as a variety of music has become a global phenomenon. Its entry into the Nigerian music industry is not without its influence on the linguistic repertoire of the concerned musician and their fans. In the same vein, there are peculiar ways the local language has influenced the Hip-Hop. It is a variety of music which entered the music industry in the 1970s, consisting of these creative outlets: MCing which focuses on emceeing, breakbeats and house parties pioneered by KoolHerc, a Jamaican. DJing (Deejaying) is a variety which evolved through the use of phonograph turntable and DJ mixer. Breaking, otherwise referred to as B-boying or B-girling or Break dancing, was earlier a display of technical battling skills. Graffiti Art though contested by some musicians as being an element of Hip-Hop was a form of expression used in the late 60s by political activists and a means of marking territory. It is a sort of visual expression of rap music

the same way breaking is perceived as a physical expression. Beat-box is using the mouth to create rhythm which provides a background beat for MC to rap over. (Wikipedia, 2015; Milliman, 2021).

Before 1990, the Nigerian youth could not categorically identify with a variety of music which could be tagged as theirs. The existing music then was embraced by both the youth and the elderly unlike Hip Hop which is basically music of the youth and even frowned at by most adults. Youths who were into music profession then were forced to be apprentice to the existing musicians. There were little or no opportunities to showcase their potentials. The existing types of music limited their input into the music world. Youths exposure to the world of music opened them to new varieties of music among which Hip Hop is one. The music that existed before the 90s could not satisfy, the youths' thirst for self-identity in the area of music. Apart from that the quest for them to blend with the trend of music across the globe necessitated a new dimension to music. The hunger for creativity and especially milieu to “find their own voice, tell their own stories and hopefully effect a change in the country’s socio-political climate” proliferated the Hip Hop music. (Adedeji, 2017: 77). As put by Babalola (2014:244 )"the development of artistic and cultural traditions in a given community follows a unidirectional pattern in which indigenous values are gradually eroded in favour of the cultural imperatives of an invading urbanization". Hip-Hop as a variety of music has become a global phenomenon. Its entry into the Nigerian music industry is not without its influence on the linguistic repertoire of the concerned musician and their fans. In the same vein, there are peculiar ways the local language has influenced the Hip-Hop. It is a variety of music which entered the music industry in the 1970s, consisting of these creative outlets: MCing which focuses on emceeing, breakbeats and house parties pioneered by KoolHerc, a Jamaican. DJing (Deejaying) is a variety which evolved through the use of phonograph turntable and DJ mixer. Breaking, otherwise referred to as B-boying or B-girling or Break dancing, was earlier a display of technical battling skills. Graffiti Art though contested by some musicians as being an element of Hip-Hop was a form of expression used in the late 60s by political activists and a means of marking territory. It is a sort of visual expression of rap music the same way breaking is perceived as a physical expression. Beat-box is using the mouth to create rhythm which provides a background beat for MC to rap over. (Wikipedia, 2015; Milliman, 2021).

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traditions in a given community follows a unidirectional pattern in which indigenous values are gradually eroded in favour of the cultural imperatives of an invading urbanization".

Hip Hop in Nigeria is traceable to Ron Ronnie Ekundayo's first record of Rap song, titled 'The Way I feel'. Between late 80's and early 90's, it was referred to as Gbedu or Naija (Agbo, 2009:36). However, Hip Hop in Nigeria cannot be said to be a new phenomenon in Nigeria, (Liadi, 2012) since the mid 80's (Omojola, 2006) which is over two decades ago, Hip Hop has been overwhelmingly adopted by the Nigerian youth. This was set in pace by artists such as Felix Liberty, Danny Wilson, Evi Edna Ogoli, Dizzy K. Falola and Chris Okotie (now Pastor Chris Okoti) (Omojola, 2006; Onyeji 2002 quoted in Liadi, 2012:11).

Hip hop is a lucrative genre of music. Most of the hip hop artists are today millionaires. They ride in the most expensive cars and possess the most expensive material things. Many Nigerian youths admire these artists as models because of the height they have attained. Most of them are not just famous locally but internationally, promoting cultural values and aesthetics; satirizing economic, political and even religious vices of the society they evolved from. In spite of these positive roles their negative impact on the youth cannot be over-emphasized. There are various ways some of the Hip Hop artists have promoted cybercrime, e.g. Olu Maintains Yahoosee; excessive drinking, e.g. Shayo by Biggiano; irrational behaviour, e.g. Faze's Kolomental; indiscriminate sex, e.g. Konga, More by Dare; inordinate ambition for 'get rich quick' through various ways they flaunt their wealth (whether hired or possessed) e.g. P Square's 'Bank Alert', Davido (Omo Baba Olowo) E Ma Da Mi Duro; immoral dressings etc.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Some writers have delved into various aspects of Hip Hop music both locally and internationally. Some studies examine code switching and code mixing as features of HipHop genre of music. Pennycook (2003) for instance, in what he called English mixing, in his analysis of the lyrics of the Japanese Hip Hop group 'Rip Slyme's sees it as a form of semiotic reconstruction to express new identity. This assertion is corroborated by Omoniyi (2006) who also observes code-switching as a common feature of Nigerian Hip Hop. According to him, it is a musical invention aimed at resisting the influx of American Hip Hop culture in Nigeria and at the same time asserting their national identity. Some of these artists in order to promote their cultural heritages sing in their local languages and even use their traditional attires.

Babalola and Taiwo, (2009) in an examination of five (5) Nigerian Hip Hop artists also assert that code-switching is an identity marker which reflects the culture, origin, growth, spread and the popularity of the Hip Hop music. While they want to blend with their counterparts across the globe, they still try to maintain their local languages via codeswitching to avoid local languages attrition. In a further study, Omoniyi, (2006) focuses on Nigerian Hip Hop features such as Nigerian hip hop English phonology, Code-switching, Cross-referencing, etc. Olatunji (2007) in his own study ascribes code-switching in HipHop music to the heterogeneity of Pidgin English, and this might not be unconnected with multi-lingual nature of the Nigerian society where pidgin is seen as a unification language which is accessible to all and sundry.

Liadi, (2012) in a study of multilingualism and Hip hop consumption in Nigeria, observes the factors responsible for the recent abrupt thriving in the prevalent consumption of HipHop music in Nigeria. He establishes that multilingualism is a primary factor that culminated in the sudden proliferation of HipHop. What others refer to as code-switching or mixing is what he refers to as 'multilingual lyrics' (Liadi, 2012:13); English mixing or hybridization in K-Pop music (Lee, 2004:429) or music and crossing which is a dramatic shift between two varieties of languages (Rampton (1995).

Music is a product of language; and language choice and use is rooted in language contact which has manifested itself in concepts such as diglossia, bilingualism, codeswitching, language maintenance and language shift, (Kayambazinthu, 2000). Among identified factors leading to codeswitching are desire to showcase mastery of several languages; trying to maintain status or identify with a prestigious group in the society; inadequate knowledge of a certain language that necessitates the use of another language to facilitate communication in certain subject or to exclude certain people present from an aspect of conversation (Trudgill, 1974; Parkin, 1974 and Scotton, 1976) or to either converge or diverge (Giles et al., 2007). Nigerian youth's musicians' choice of language might not be unconnected with one or all the factors mentioned above.

A closely related research to this study is Lee, (2009) which investigates occurrence of phonological variation in Korean Hip Hop English lyrics and the extent to which their English incorporates features associated with African American vernacular English (AAVE). His work focuses on three segmental features, which are /ay/ monothongization, /t, d/ deletion and /r/ reduction.

However, none of the studies really delve into the area of cluster realization, Vowel lengthening and morphological features (as considered in this study). This study is therefore an expansion of the previous studies on HipHop music as a global phenomenon with a view to identifying some contributions the selected phonological and morphological features may be to the spread of Nigerian English and of course to determine the implications this might have on the English language proficiency of the youth who are the major fans of the HipHop genre of music. The study also stands to account for the reasons behind the artists' choice of the linguistic features under discussion.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The underlining theory for this research is Music Language Model (ML) proposed by Brown (2001). It expresses a point of convergence between language and music. The theory dwells on the ability to use sound elements as a building block for complex combinatorial structures. It states that human beings like birds have the ability to create permutations out of the available basic set of smaller units. That is variations are generated using a few available set of symbols. This is what (Marler 2000) refers to as "phonocoding" or "phonological syntax".

Brown establishes analogy between language and music by relating phoneme to pitches and morphemes to motifs. The central idea of ML is a continuous process that exists between two poles i.e. referential versus emotive meaning. The phonological level is the acoustic level governed by a type of phonological syntax in which discreet acoustic units (phonemes, pitch) are combined to form functional units (morpheme, motifs) that feed into meaningful level of each system.

It is pertinent to add at this juncture that phonology is essential to music. Music is an example of bare phonology (Fitch, 2010). The duo has shared features which evolved first and their domain specific feature evolved later as part of a branching process; meaning they are separate but have homologous functions. However, these entities re-unite in songs with words (Brown, 2017:1). This informs our examination of both phonological and morphological features of the selected Hip Hop music.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

This study employed qualitative data collection. Interviews conducted with students between the ages of 16 and 26 form our qualitative data. This intended to elicit information from them on their favourite hip hop artists with a view to determining the kind of influence these artists might have on the language use of their fans. The respondents were not pre-informed of the motif for the interview. This was deliberate in order to get true information from them. The interviewer was one of their class mates to allow a free flow of information. The interview was recorded using audio recorder with a 44 kHz 16 bit. The speech recorded was transferred into the laptop VLC Media Player for audibility of the sounds. A respondent was taken per time.

Also, purposively selected five hip hop songs of five different artists were considered. They are 1. Frank Dawnzy – Ngene –*Konnect*; 2. Idahams- *Anything for You* (Omojuwonlo); 3. Tiwa Savage – *Wanted*; 4. Olamide- *Lagos Boys* and 5. Humble Smith – Osinachi (Remix) ft Davido. Their lyrics were collected and by listening to the songs and comparing them to the lyrics. Our methods of analysis were both perceptual and descriptive in nature. The phonological features examined were (i) cluster realizations such as deletion, epenthesis, substitution and vowel lengthening, as well as morphological features, such as affixes, auxiliary verbs etc. All variants were detected based on personal human perception with the aid of a head phone to enhance audibility. The different realizations were coded into a Microsoft Excel spread sheet with their general information like the name of the album, the number of words in the lyric, the RP (Received Pronunciation) realization, the realization by the artist etc.

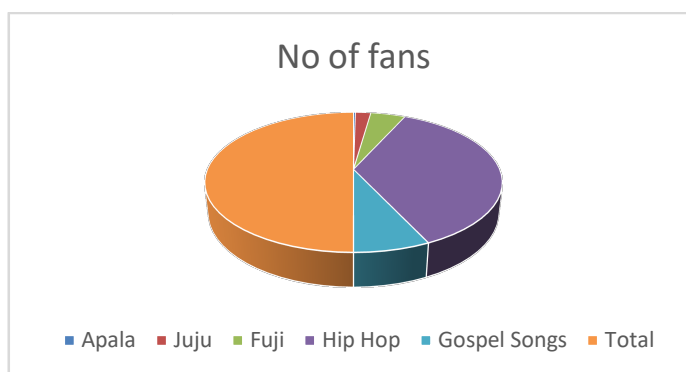
## 5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

**Table 1: Findings from the Interview**

Type of Music	No of fans	%
A p a l a	1	0 . 5 %
J u j u	8	4 %
F u j i	1 8	9 %
H i p H o p	1 4 5	7 2 . 5 %
Gospel Songs	2 8	1 4 %
T o t a l	2 0 0	1 0 0 %

Table 1 shows the result of the interview which elicited information on the fans music preference. Out of 200 youth fans interviewed 145 forming 72.5% prefer Hip Hop to any other type of music. 14% prefer gospel songs while 9% loves fuji. Just 4% prefer Juju while 1 out of 200 forming 0.5% prefer Apala. It is deducible from the data that majority of Nigerian youth love and listen to Hip Hop music.

**Fig. 1: A 3-D Pie Chart Showing Fans Preference**



### Selected Lines Showing Phonological Features

1. Hay!! Ehen!! Eleyeyi!! Confam!!!
- 2 Connect!! O ya connecti!

3. My babee connect!
4. Chocolatee, okwa...
5. E strongi passi nokia.

**Table 2: Analysis of Phonological Features**

	W o r d	Realization	I t e m	R P	N P	Position	No o f Occurrence	Album
1	Confirm	Confam	Vowel	kən'fɜ:m	kən'fa:m	C o d a	1	1 - 5
2	Connect	Conneti	Consonant/ Vowel	kə'nekt	kə'neti	C o d a	1 1	1 - 5
3	B a b y	B a b e	Vowel	'beɪ.bi	Bæbei	F i n a l	1	1 - 5
4	Chocolate	Chocolate	Vowel	'tʃok.əl.ət'	'tʃokəʊleiti	F i n a l	1	1 - 5
5	Strong	Srongi	Consonant /vowel	strɒŋ,	s r ɒ ŋ i	O n s e t	1	2 - 5
6	P a s s	P a s s i	Vowel	pɑ:s	P a s i	C o d a	1	2 - 5

In word **1** the long central vowel /ɜ:/ is substituted with the long semi-back vowel /ɑ:/.

In word **2**, there is vowel /i/ epenthesis.

In word **3**, the diphthong /ei/ is substituted with the monophthong using the short front vowel /æ/ in the first syllable while there is diphthongization of the monophthong /i/ in the second syllable.

In word **4**, the schwa in the second syllable is diphthongized as /ei/ with /i/ epenthesis in the last syllable.

Word **5** reveals cluster reduction and a case of vowel epenthesis. The cluster [str] is reduced to [sr] and there is a case of vowel epenthesis in the final position thereby making a one syllable word two syllables.

Finally, word **6** reveals vowel reduction of long /ɑ:/ as /æ/ and a case of vowel epenthesis in the final position.

### Morphological Features

Morphology as an integral part of scientific study of language deals with word formation as well as their relationships with other words in the same language. It analyzes the structure of words and parts of words, such as: stems, root words and affixes (prefixes and suffixes). It goes beyond that to examine parts of speech stress and intonation as well as the influence context can have on words pronunciation and meaning.

As part of this study, we observed deletion in morphological construction in the selected 5 hip hop lyrics with a view to unveiling the causes of hip hop fans' erroneous use of language.



Table 3: Morphological Features

Word	Conventional	Item deleted/substituted	R P	Generated Pronunciation	Album
They	T h e y ' r e	A r e	deia:r,	d e i	3 - 5
Slow	S l o w l y	- l y	sləʊli	s l ə ʊ	3 - 5
You	Y o u ' l l	W i l l	J u l	j u :	4 - 5
Way	A w a y	A	ə'weɪ	w e ɪ	4 - 5
Bout	A b o u t	A	ə'baʊt	b a ʊ t	5 - 5
We	W e ' r e	A r e	wia:r	W i	3 - 5
Fell	F a l l	E	fɔ:l	F e l	3 - 5

To explain the table above, we will follow these Morphological rules:

1. To make the future tense of a word, use the particle *will*
2. For past tense add *d* or *ed*.
3. In some words change the word or part of the word e.g. *go/went, see/saw, pay/paid* etc. to indicate past tense.
4. To indicate progressive or continuous tense, use the auxiliary *is /are* or *was/were* depending on the tense.
5. Add Affixe(s) to root word to change word class for concord.

The above table shows deletion of part of words as against the morphological rule. For instance:

- i) 'cos **they** looking for me' (Line 2 of Tiwa Savage, 2013- *Wanted*)
- ii) **We** killing all the show lo sneh (Olamide, 2015- *Lagos Boys*, stanza 3 line 5)
- iii) and I promise **you** be alright (Idahams, 2016- *Anything for You* (Omojuwonlo) Stanza 2, line 3)
- iv). Killing him **slow** while I'm shake shaking it (Tiwa Savage, 2013 -*Wanted*, line 46)
- v) But I didn't mean you should **fell** (Tiwa Savage, 2013- *Wanted*, line 5)

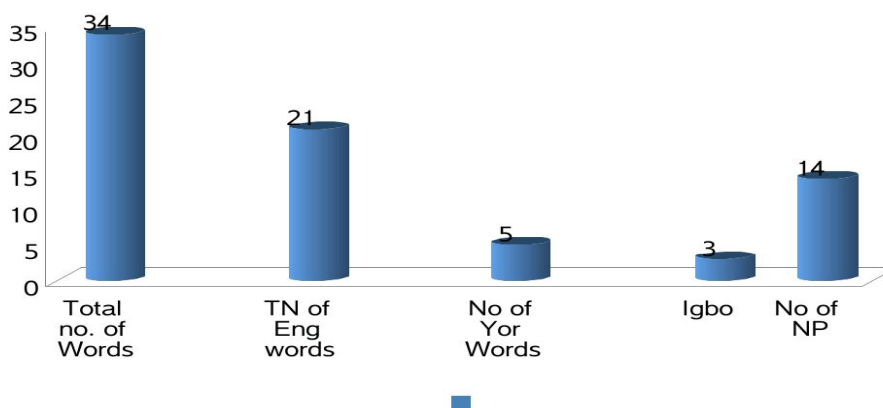
In the above sentences, the auxiliary verb '*are*' is omitted in (ii) and (iv). The contracted forms '*they're*', '*you're*', and '*we're*' are treated as single words thereby violating morphological rule number 4. Sentence (iii) violates rule 1 by omitting the auxiliary *will*. In sentence (iv), the additive morpheme *-ly* is deleted, violating rule 5. *Slow* is an adjective which is supposed to be changed to *slowly* (adverb) to comply with the rule of concord. The deletion of letter '*a*' in *away* and *about* makes the words incomplete considering the environment in which it occurred.

It is observable at this juncture that the musicians most of the time use the expressions discovered not because they are not good in English or their local languages but the need for harmonize songs with words (Brown, 2017:1) as explained in musilanguage necessitated their code choices in an attempt to relate *morphemes* to *motifs*.

### Codemixing in the Hip Hop Songs

As pointed out by some researchers who worked on codeswitching, in hip hop musics, e.g. Babalola and Taiwo (2009), it is the use of two or more languages in the same speech context in hip hop musics as shown in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: A 3-D Stacked Column of the Code-mix



The 3-D stacked column above shows evidence of code-mixing in the selected Hip Hop with English language dominating the lyrics. The songs are a combination of English, Yoruba and Igbo. Interestingly there are 14 instances of NP (Nigerian Pronunciation) cluster realizations, which forms 41% of the total number of words used in the music. For example: *conneti*, *srongi*, etc. The total number of English words used in the Lyrics is 21, which forms 61.7% of the lyrics. Fourteen (14) which forms 66% of the total English words (including the repeated cases), represents a higher percentage than cases of RP pronunciation. This means the NP is more than the RP (Received Pronunciation).

### 6. CONCLUSION

Hip hop is a genre of music that has become a global phenomenon. It is an art that employs language as a means of communication; be it verbal or non-verbal. English as a global language has experienced a lot of modifications which has culminated in what is referred to as the World Englishes. Nigeria is not an exemption of the societies where English is spoken as a variety of World Englishes, (Pan, 2005) most especially in the area of pronunciation. Hip hop artists in an attempt to belong to the global world artistically and socially employ some colloquial expressions which reflect their identity as part of the global world, for instance, the use of *wanna*, *gonna* etc. and of course as members of their immediate society, hence, Nigerian Pronunciation (NP) as

observed in the data. This study has revealed that most of these realizations were carried out mainly for rhythm in the notion of Musilanguage. Since Hip Hop is synonymous to Rapping in a way, the artists want their music to follow the rhythmic pattern they commence the music with to allow for uniformity and a smooth flow. This leads to Afro-American pronunciation.

Music is artistic in nature and this makes it beautiful and entertaining. The beat most of the time determines the language preference and vice versa. However, the repercussion the artists' use of language has on the Nigerian youth who crave for them cannot be disregarded. From the interview conducted, it is revealed that majority of the Nigerian youth prefer hip hop music to any other genre. The few who fancy gospel music are also falling in love with gospel hip hop. The contemporary technology has made accessibility to the lyrics, audios and videos quite easy. They can play it on their cell phone and even download for a replay.

The media is a contributory factor to youth propinquity to hip hop music. There are channels specially devoted to hip hop even on the DSTV and other satellites. Our interview revealed that some of these youth speak the hip hop language and the worst part of it they transfer these features into their writings.

It is imperative at this juncture to suggest that teachers of the English language at all levels should take cognizance of the language codes in Hip Hop music to know where some of their students' errors emanate with a view to helping them demarcate between conventional use of the English language as a second language (ESL) and special use of the language for musical beats as part of innovations. Both the young and the old are in need of music for recreation depending on individual choices. The choices we make however should not jeopardize other target goals in live endeavours.

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## **Discography**

Frank Dawnzy (2014). *Ngene (Konnnect)*

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## **APPENDIX**

### **1. Frank Dawnzy – Ngene (Konnnect)**

Hay!! Ehen!! Eleyleyi!! Confam!!!

Connect!! O ya connecti! My babee connect!

Oya connect! Oyaconnecti! My people connect!

Oyaconnecti! Oya connect! Everybody

Oya connecti! Oyaconnecti! Lasgidi

Connect! Ehen!

Okwa the song

Chocolatee, okwa...

### **2. Idaham’s Anything for You (Omojuwonlo)**

This your love no be made in China

No be fake na original

E strongi passi nokia

All my body you deyingalinga

O baby you deykalango  
In my head you deykalangolo  
This your beauty they cosokoro  
No be marykay, you no need tiro...

### 3. **Tiwa Savage – *Wanted***

My heart is beating  
'cos they looking for me  
And I can hear them screaming yea ah, yea ah.  
And I admit I was there  
But didn't mean you should fell  
I left him there.  
It was like a gun on my hand  
Killing him slow while I'm shake shaking it  
I didn't wanna do it cos I know...  
And if you ready for it...  
I didn't wanna do it 'cos I know...

### 4. **Humble Smith – Osinachi (Remix) ft Davido**

Verse 1 – Davido My humble father sinachi  
Line 9- they want to take way my favour  
they want to spoil my career  
them no know say I get flavor  
Line 15 -my papa just buy a jet  
and bout to take off everywhere...

**5. Olamide– *Lagos Boy***

Ladies sneh and gentlemen sneh

I'm your host today sneh

They call me baddosneh eyan nlasneh...

Chorus – Skeskeroboske

Roboskeskerobo

Skeskeroboske

Roboskeskerobo...

Stanza 3 line 5 We're killing all the show lo sneh...