

THE NATURE OF SLANG: Spoken, creative and transient

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Abstract

The gradual change in the attitude of linguistic sciences towards slang at the end of the 19th century meant that even the most reluctant of linguists had to admit that its study cannot be avoided or neglected. A great variety of literature about slang has appeared since. The two basic problems that invariably arise whether slang is discussed in a highly specialised scientific work or in an impressionistic essay: its definition and its description. The present paper addresses the topic of certain constant characteristics, such as orality, creativity and ephemerality.

Keywords: slang, linguistics, speech, language, vocabulary

From whichever specialised field or point of view professional or amateur linguists approach the topic of slang, they all agree on one point: it is just as difficult to define the term as it is to clearly demarcate its vocabulary or characterise and describe it. The complexity of slang itself as a linguistic phenomenon is the obvious reason and explanation for the countless possible definitions.

In order to avoid the haziness or blurring of terms, it would be a good idea to distinguish more clearly than usual between the lexicological description of slang as a word-board of terms and expressions (i.e. vocabulary) and the sociolinguistic approach according to which slang is a certain lexical behaviour, a peculiar variant of language usage, a particular way of speaking. This variant of language usage is in fact a communicational code dependent on the given situation and defined by the attitude of the speaker – or rather, its use is the expression of the speaker’s attitude. Self-defence, defiance, opposition and mutiny can all be included in the emotional charge of slang usage, in which case we can also speak about it as anti-language depending on how sharply it may turn against the standards and norms it invariably finds ridiculously restrictive.

Despite the seemingly unsurmountable difficulties of providing a comprehensive yet succinct definition or description of it, slang does have a few fundamental characteristics that will occur in the most varied attempts at capturing its essence.

Slang is first and foremost a phenomenon typical of informal spoken language and thus inseparable from and dependent on the speech situation in which it occurs. Most prominent among its features are creativity, novelty and freshness but at the same time ephemerality and inconstancy. This inherent paradox makes slang similar to fashion.

Slang as a phenomenon of spoken language

Slang is a particular way of speaking, a variant of language usage, a situation-dependent communication code which is defined first of all by the attitude of the speaker – or rather, the use of which is the expression of an attitude. In this definition the term “speech”

figures prominently since the use of slang is mainly characteristic of verbal communication and is inextricably connected to the given speech situation.

Looking back on the history of slang research we can see how the gradual change in the attitude of linguistic science towards slang has also brought significant changes in the way it is studied today. Even after the original complete disregard and neglect it took slang a long time to remove (at least partially) the stigma of “vulgar”, “lowly”, “bad” language; for a prolonged period it was considered a peripheral manifestation of language, a sort of linguistic deviancy or, at best, an interesting curiosity, a quaint digression from the norms. However, slang was not the only component of language to suffer this kind of treatment: Connie Eble enumerates supra-segmental prosodic features, a wide range of vernacular uses, dialects of low prestige, colloquial expressions, taboo vocabulary and other ordinary realizations of living language as parts that “are poorly incorporated into the general literary form and, therefore, easy to set aside” and excluded from the mainstream of linguistic study.

In the second half of the twentieth century transformational-generative grammar made its appearance in linguistics, but instead of more attention being devoted to slang and its ‘companions’ due to this supposed paradigm shift, quite the opposite happened: “the ideal speaker-hearer construct and the primacy of competence over performance merely reinforced the practice of equating language with its standard written form.”

The high prestige written variant of language continued to be regarded as model or norm and provided the basis for analysing language. This is hardly surprising considering the fact that traditional western linguistics had concentrated almost exclusively on its study for more than two thousand years.

This partiality is understandable since written language is easiest to gather, record, store, examine, systematise and analyse with various methods and procedures: up until the recent past, more exactly, until the invention of the phonograph at the end of the nineteenth century, this could not be done with any of the spoken variants.

Linguist H. A. Gleason explained this one-sidedness almost forty years ago: “We have taken as normative what is really the anomalous kind of language – legal contracts, examples out of logic texts, and modern descendants from the old classical examples in grammar books. To this core we have added so much of ordinary language as is not distinct from it – or rather, so much of ordinary language as we have not yet noticed to be distinct from it. The malapropisms, poetic figures, popular language play, and ordinary double-talk we hear all around us may after all be the really typifying human language, extreme cases only of the ordinary sort of language.”

By the end of the twentieth century the rules of language usage had become more relaxed both in written texts and in the various modern forms of the media. However, the statement still holds true: the vocabulary of everyday usage is that part of spoken literary language that is least frequently recorded in writing. Slang, colloquial or conversational language, jargon and other informal variants are similar in their being connected to the speech situation. On the other hand, none of these can exist in a stylistically “pure” form or as an isolated system: they can only be used effectively in combination with other ‘layers’ or ‘levels’, like the standard or even the literary language.

Until relatively recently there have been few types of written text where slang could make its unhindered appearance: plays (examples can be found as far back as the classical

Greek comedies), novels and short-stories. Here slang – as the secondary representation of verbal communication – can occur in dialogues where the author seeks to complete the portrayal of the characters through their way of speaking, where the realistic and lifelike depiction of the individual is more important than the elaborately polished phrasing.

Slang lives and thrives in and through dialogue and conversation. The problem of slang dictionaries and glossaries continues to be the fact that the words, phrases and expressions that are included in them are taken out of context and severed from the speech situation – it is the only way they can be listed –, and one of the selection criteria is whether they are verifiable from some written source. As modern slang studies have repeatedly pointed out, what we get this way is nothing more than the vocabulary of slang, laid out on paper: just ‘dead letter’ in itself.

Further complications arise when we consider the fact that in a certain situation a word can become slang, even if only temporarily, because of the stylistic ‘halo’ projected onto it from the context. Body language, intonation, pitch or even pauses can have an important role in signalling that (then and there) a word or expression should be interpreted as slang. These and similar components of spoken language are beyond the scope of the best dictionaries.

The use of everyday spoken language, including slang, is generally characteristic of informal situations; just as formal use of language can be expected in official or formal social contexts. More slang can be heard during a friendly conversation than around the table at a formal dinner party, in a coach’s pep talk addressed to his team than in a eulogy speech.

However, there is no automatic, clean-cut, constant, never-changing correspondence between the degree of formality in a situation and the “probability of slang occurrence”. Generally speaking, several types of rapports have become less formal in modern society: parent-child, teacher-student or boss-employee relationships have shifted towards the intimate, unceremonious or casual, but not everywhere and not to the same extent. On the other hand, language usage can gradually and subtly alter together and parallel with the relationship itself, or this can happen without any change in the situation (‘metaphorical shift’). The formality of a speech situation can thus change in time and space, from country to country, from culture to culture or even according to the variations in the mood of the participants.

Slang has something significant in common with several other elements of the vocabulary (such as provincialisms, vogue words, jargon, vulgarisms, etc.) and with other sub-standard or unconventional variants: it is not the denotative but the social and interpersonal function of the language they serve in the first place.

Although traditionally linguists and their books or introductory courses on linguistics would have us believe that language is primarily a means or instrument for conveying thought and objective information, more recently this view has sparked off considerable debate. It is a fact each of us has confronted at some time or other: language is not particularly suitable for this specific role linguists used to assign to it (and was very likely never intended to perform it). Language often proves rather inadequate and awkward in expressing space relations, describing feelings and emotions and is only moderately appropriate for transmitting simple information. It is, however, remarkably serviceable and effective when we want to build and maintain social relationships or influence others.

Creativity and ephemerality

When listing the characteristics of slang, creativity and innovation feature prominently in most definitions – together with ephemerality and transience. This is where the basic paradox of slang lies: on the one hand, there is the endeavour to renew language and be different in your speech, on the other hand, the faster and more widely the new slang creations spread, the more quickly they will wear out. Most slang expressions only enjoy a brief popularity: they capture public attention with the suddenness of fireworks or a shooting star and they are just as soon gone, no matter how well-known they might have become momentarily.

Historical events, changes in social conditions, different trends can also influence the development of current slang. As a rule, changes in the vocabulary of specialised slangs, for example, only affect the relatively small circle of its users. “But when through a profession or a trade, a commotion is brought about in society as a whole, when the public is aroused and becomes acquainted with the affairs of that profession, then the conditions become favorable to a transition of the slang of a class to the slang of society. This has happened in this country when the public attention was drawn, for instance, to contemporary wars, polar expeditions, the conflict of labour, the insurance scandals, municipal corruption, and the graft of big business”, states Frank K. Sechrist in his study on the psychology of slang. “Whenever in history an interest grew up in any sport, as in hunting and hawking, a vocabulary grew up and had its influence on the general language to the same degree that the popularity of the sport became general. It is the same with the synonymy of any of the languages ...; the synonymy follows the liveliest interests.”

“The unconventional language of any period reflects the social and material environment of the time”, he eventually concludes – and does so at the start of the previous century, when slang research as we know it was only just beginning.

During and after the wars of the twentieth century countless elements of military slang entered the language. It is clearly noticeable to the attentive observer that whenever significant advancement occurs in the most various scientific fields (be it the exploration of space, medicine or computer science), when industries, professions, sports or even hobbies gain in popularity, the number of slang words borrowed from their respective specialised vocabulary will skyrocket and some of them may live on in everyday usage long after their ‘source of origin’ ceased to arouse public interest.

Many slang words lose their original impetus and succumb either to fashion or conformity as their provocative character gradually weakens when the humorous, mocking, ironical or disparaging component of their meaning fades or when new synonyms crowd them out. This transformation is somewhat similar to the fate of the blue jeans. These trousers were originally designed in the mid-nineteenth century as durable work clothes in the United States, but teenage children of rich American families began to wear them in the sixties in protest against their parents’ luxurious life style. However, the blue jeans, or Levi’s, soon spread worldwide, wearing them as expensive designer clothes became ‘chic’ and lost every last trace of rebelliousness in the process. Today they are a commonplace item in most people’s wardrobe, regardless of age or social status.

Since as a rule the occurrence of a new slang word is connected to the place and the situation, relatively few of them manage to spread nationwide or even further, usually due to extensive media coverage. At the same time such excessive popularity can bring about their 'downfall': the more frequently a slang word is used, the sooner its freshness wears off, and as it steadily loses its original impact, a new word pops up to replace it.

In this vicious circle it is impossible to define a clear cause-result relationship. Because of the relatively short life span of its words productivity is indispensable for slang; the incessant renewal from seemingly inexhaustible supplies counterbalances the high 'mortality rate'. Conversely, the huge amount of 'newborn' slang is a constant threat to the older words. This simultaneous novelty and transience makes slang the equivalent of fashion in language.

Connie Eble discusses the traits that stand at the basis of this comparison in her paper *Lexicon à la Mode*, stating that fashion has lately become an increasingly important factor in the shaping of the lexicon. A closer look at these two phenomena reveals that fashion and slang most definitely have certain characteristics in common: they can be the expression of the individual's quest for identity and status; they can assert individuality by uniqueness and imaginative deviation from the norm – or conformity to a group by imitation; they are wasteful because they discard perfectly functional and serviceable items and acquire new variants just for the sake of their novelty (the latest version has the greatest value and conveys the highest prestige); they can usually be associated with a certain period; they tend to be cyclic: certain items can re-emerge after a while and become popular again; and they get out-of-date extremely fast. Finally, both fashion and language use have become less formal lately, as have most other forms of social interaction: "Informality is the prevailing style."

Another peculiarity that fashion and slang have in common is the fact that they appear sooner and spread faster in the densely populated capitals and big cities than in the smaller towns, villages or sparsely inhabited regions.

The change and renewal of the vocabulary does not happen at the same rate and to the same extent in all types of slang. The conclusions drawn by Kari Nahkola and Marja Saanilahti during their thorough and extensive study of Finnish slang probably hold true, at least in broad terms, for most languages. The quickest to recreate is teenage slang, or school slang. The members of the circle who use it change constantly, since practically everyone passes through it at the appropriate age, but most people stop using it after finishing school. Next is military slang, especially in countries where the armed forces are fairly numerous or military service is compulsory for a certain period of time. In the latter case the use of this slang is again connected to a definite age group, the vocabulary changes more slowly, the circle of users is more restricted but is replaced with the same regularity. Least prone to change are the specialised slangs of different professions and hobbies, where the use of slang is intended primarily to facilitate communication, not to express various shades of meaning or value judgement. The number of users is considerably smaller, it changes slowly and there is no age-limit: one might belong to such a circle for a long time, possibly all through adulthood.

When discussing the creativity and ephemerality of slang, or any other of its basic characteristics for that matter, we should bear in mind that any labelling is relative.

Only a small amount of slang is created by really original 'invention'; creativity manifests itself most often in renewing and refreshing: the novel combination, modification,

alteration, shortening or even distortion of already existing elements. ‘Creators’ of slang might also change the meaning of an ordinary word, borrow from other varieties like cant, dialects, jargon or even from a foreign language.

Several slang words and expressions do indeed fall into oblivion after a brief life or an even briefer sparkling appearance, faster than any other category of the vocabulary. Throughout the ages, such swift extinction must already have been the lot of countless slang words, most of which never even got recorded. There is nonetheless a more important number of words that prove so attractive and long-lasting in general usage that they become part of the accepted neutral style and eventually make the transition to the recognised, legitimate language. From there some of them take the road of hackneyed clichés; others get stuck in the ‘informal’ category. A select few, however, by some surprising and inexplicable vagary of fate, may surpass the ‘neutral’ category and end up in the elevated circles of ‘literary’ or even ‘formal’.

On more than one occasion, long forgotten slang words have unexpectedly resurfaced and experienced a sudden revival. This usually happens due to a new generation of children exposed to the re-runs of some old classic movie or TV series. Not knowing what ‘anachronism’ is, they might treat these words as their own discovery and breathe fresh life into them.

Finally, a considerable part of the slang vocabulary has tenaciously remained slang not only for decades, through more generations, but even for centuries: these words have never become accepted as standard, but neither have they faded away.

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