

SLANG AS SOCIAL VARIETY OF SPEECH

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A lot of new means of communication have appeared in our life lately. We can't imagine our life without computers and notebooks, mobile phones and smartphones and also without the programs that make possible communication with each other using these technical devices. It is quite logical that the language itself has changed because of the changes in the way of expressing information.

Planning a trip to the United States, you should take into account that American English is quite different from the English language you have learnt at your school, college or university. You will ask „Why?“. The answer is very simple: spoken language is different from the official standard English. As a rule the Americans speak using slang that we are not practically acquainted with.

Slang is the use of informal words and expressions that are not considered standard in the speaker's language or dialect, but are considered more acceptable when used socially. Slang is often to be found in areas of the lexicon that refer to things considered taboo. It is often used to identify with one's peers and, although it may be common among young people, it is used by people of all ages and social groups.

The origin of the word slang is uncertain. It has a connection with Thieves' cant, and the earliest attested use (1756) refers to the vocabulary of „low or disreputable“ people. Beyond that, however, its origin is unclear. A Scandinavian origin has been proposed (compare, for example, Norwegian slengenamn, which means „nickname“), but is discounted by the Oxford English Dictionary based on „date and early associations“^[1].

Slang, as a rule, is not used in formal speech. Often the literary language or a dialect do not let us express our views briefly and emotionally. The charm of slang lies in a bit rough vocabulary that makes our speech more expressive. This is particularly essential for the youngsters. The youth speech displays an unstable cultural and linguistic state of society, balancing on the brink of the language and slang.

Few linguists have endeavored to clearly define what constitutes slang. Attempting to remedy this, Bethany K. Dumas and Jonathan Lighter argue that an expression should be considered „true slang“ if it meets at least two of the following criteria^[2, p.141]:

- It lowers, if temporarily, „the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing“; in other words, it is likely to be considered in those contexts a „glaring misuse of register“.
- Its use implies that the user is familiar with whatever is referred to, or with a group of people who are familiar with it and use the term.
- „It is a taboo term in ordinary discourse with people of a higher social status or greater responsibility“.
- It replaces „a well-known conventional synonym“. This is done primarily to avoid the discomfort caused by the conventional item or by further elaboration.

Michael Adams remarks that „[slang] is liminal language... it is often impossible to tell, even in context, which interests and motives it serves... Slang is on the edge^[3]. Slang dictionaries, collecting thousands of slang entries, offer a broad, empirical window into the motivating forces behind slang^[4]“.

Slang is different from [jargon](#), which is the technical vocabulary of a particular profession, and which meets only the second of the criteria given above. Jargon, like many examples of slang, may be used to exclude non-group members from the conversation, but in general has the function of allowing its users to talk precisely about the technical issues in a given field.

Slang can be regional (that is, used only in a particular territory), but slang terms are often particular instead to a certain [subculture](#), such as [music](#) or [video gaming](#). Nevertheless, slang expressions can spread outside their original areas to become commonly used, like „cool“ and „jive“. While some words eventually lose their status as slang (the word „mob“, for example, began as a shortening of Latin *mobile vulgus*^[1]), others continue to be considered as such by most speakers. When slang spreads beyond the group or subculture that originally uses it, its original users often replace it with other, less-recognized terms to maintain group identity.

One use of slang is to circumvent social [taboos](#), as mainstream language tends to shy away from evoking certain realities. For this reason, slang vocabularies are particularly rich in certain domains, such as [violence](#), [crime](#), [drugs](#) and [sex](#). Alternatively, slang can grow out of mere familiarity with the things described.

Even within a single language community, slang, and the extent to which it is used, tends to vary widely across social, ethnic, economic, and geographic strata. Slang may fall into disuse over time; sometimes, however, it grows more and more common until it becomes the dominant way of saying something, at which time it usually comes to be regarded as mainstream, acceptable language (e.g. the Spanish word *caballo*), although in the case of taboo words there may be no expression that is considered mainstream or acceptable. Numerous slang terms pass into informal mainstream speech, and sometimes into formal speech, though this may involve a change in meaning or usage.

Slang very often involves the creation of novel meanings for existing words. It is common for such novel meanings to diverge significantly from the standard meaning. Thus, „cool“ and „hot“ can both mean „very good“, „impressive“, or „good-looking“.

Some [linguists](#) make a distinction between slangisms (slang words) and [colloquialisms](#). According to Ghil'ad Zuckermann, „slang refers to informal (and often transient) lexical items used by a specific social group, for instance teenagers, soldiers, prisoners and thieves. Slang is not the same as colloquial (speech), which is informal, relaxed speech used on occasion by any speaker; this might include contractions such as „you're“, as well as colloquialisms. A colloquialism is a lexical item used in informal speech; whilst the broadest sense of the term „[colloquialism](#)“ might include slangism, its narrow sense does not. Slangisms are often used in colloquial speech but not all colloquialisms are slangisms. One method of distinguishing between a slangism and a colloquialism is to ask whether most native speakers know the word (and use it); if they do, it is a colloquialism. However, the problem is that this is not a discrete, quantized system but a continuum. Although the majority of slangisms are ephemeral and often supplanted by new ones, some gain non-slang colloquial status (e.g. English silly – cf. German *selig* ‘blessed’, Middle High Ger-

man sælde 'bliss, luck' and Zelda, a Jewish female first name) and even formal status (e.g. English mob)
[5].

Having heard slang for the first time one can say that it is a „wrong“ speech full of mistakes. But it is not true. There are no grammatical, syntactical and phonetic rules of slang. It often contradicts all laws and rules of the English language.

In spoken language (also, in the texts of various songs and even in literary works) we often meet such words as: wanna (want to), gonna (going to), gotta (got to) etc. They are particularly typical for American variant of the English spoken language.

Such generally known words as OK, guy (friend, partner), etc. may also be referred to a class of slangisms.

In American slang the verb „to get“ is often used in various meanings: „to kill“, „to understand“, „to do“.

Here are some more frequently used shortenings in spoken language, rarely mentioned in the textbooks: em ('em) – them; gimme – give me; lemme – let me; whassup – what is up or more common what's up; kinda = kind of; d'jever (jever) – did you ever; ama – I'm; yep, ye – yes; cause – because; dis – this; em – them; dunno – don't know; u – you.

It should be mentioned that slang constitutes one third of spoken English vocabulary. Slangisms appear in the language, spread widely, exist for some time and then disappear, ceding the room to new ones together with new trends and ideas.

References

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