

Language and Creativity: Slang

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Slang is a notoriously slippery linguistic category, often of more interest to lexicographers than linguists. Indeed, prominent sociolinguist William Labov once proposed relegating all work on the topic to “an outer, extra-linguistic darkness” (see Dumas and Lighter 1978, 7). In a classic sociolinguistic study of American college slang, Connie Eble (1996) defines slang as a colloquial vocabulary that creates solidarity within a social group or affiliates speakers with a trend in society. Slang is readily contrasted – by linguists and the general public alike – with the technical or scientific vocabulary associated with jargon and with what is considered “standard language.” It is thus viewed as neither high prestige nor “normal” speech. Definitions of slang also commonly include the social goals of marking informality, conveying creativity or playfulness, and displaying irreverence or even the rejection of formal conventions. However, emphasis on interactional dynamics such as “reducing the formality of an utterance” naturalizes standard language and the linguistic expectations of standard language speakers (including linguists). For example, some youth speak slang as part of their normal everyday speech, and it is in fact unexpected and only to lend an air of formality that slang is avoided.

Recent research in the field of linguistic anthropology allows for a reexamination of common assumptions about what slang is and what it does, demonstrating that despite its linguistic “slipperiness,” the study of slang is central to a broader investigation of language in context. In what follows, I unpack the following themes: (i) Slang is more than just a collection of novel and fleeting synonyms for words that already exist, and it often extends into grammatical and pragmatic alterations made to what is considered “standard language.” (ii) Slang is used by speakers to accomplish a wide range of social and linguistic goals (such as displaying irreverence or informality), but it is more often the social evaluation of its speakers, rather than these social goals, that is critical to defining a term as slang. (iii) Slang constitutes a linguistic register (Agha 2015) due to its association with a particular persona, or type of person, which varies within different social, cultural, and political contexts. (iv) Slang frequently conveys novelty, but it actually draws on well-established word formation and grammatical patterns. (v) Slang is often strongly connected to the media and dispersed through different forms of popular culture and music.

Stance, style, and stigma

We can begin to reconfigure our definition by noting that any linguistic term identified as slang signals to listeners (and embeds speakers in) the negotiation of stance, style, and

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stigma. By this I mean to highlight the fact that, as with all metalinguistic categories, neither a speaker nor a listener retains complete control over “the meaning” of slang – its semantic definition, its pragmatic function, or the sociopolitical work that it accomplishes. As I will discuss further, a speaker may intend to align with friends or with a trend in society, but a listener or overhearer may tap into more negative associations that frequently surround slang speaking. Slang thus serves as an elegant illustration of Bakhtin’s point that language is multilayered, shot through with different intentions and interpretations, and a site of social struggle. A focus on stance, style, and stigma allows us to see how slang – like language itself – is inherently a social phenomenon.

Linguistic stance displays a speaker’s orientation toward or away from a topic, situation, idea, way of knowing, conversational participant, or the interaction itself. Stance can be conveyed by the use of evaluative terms (both positive, as in “It’s lit,” and negative, “He’s so garbage”), an area that frequently sees heavy slang activity (Eble 1996). Slang words may also congregate around socially taboo activities, such as sex, drinking, and other illicit semantic domains, leading some to regard these terms as evidence of either a lack of linguistic precision or a wasted effort to create alternative vocabulary for terms that already exist. But as James Slotta notes, “the distinctive semantic space carved out by a set of slang expressions [constitutes] different ways of saying different things” (2016, 122). Appreciating the semantic distinctiveness of slang terms – and the lack of equivalence they share with terms in the standard language – is critical to recognizing different stances and “distinctive ways of characterizing the world” (Slotta 2016, 125). Dismissing slang as “alternative vocabulary” that is unnecessary to everyday speech perpetuates standard language ideologies that predetermine who speaks appropriately and who retains meaning-making rights within a society. Another way that slang accomplishes important stance work is by encoding into the lexicon a particular point of view. For example, a term such as “the man” can be used to reference the police (and other people in a position of power), but it injects a new perspective into the lexicon, in this case as African Americans stake a claim to rename their oppressors (Smitherman 2000). Stance is further negotiated when black speakers employ the term to indicate in-group solidarity (and sometimes playfulness) while white listeners may choose to hear only disrespect toward authority. This is slang as a site of linguistic and social identification *and* struggle.

Slang is best understood as a linguistic and social formation (a speech register) that relies not on a particular linguistic repertoire but instead foregrounds “relationships between social groups” (Agha 2015, 307). It is here that what I am calling style, or the well-discussed aspects of how slang performs identity work, must be reconciled with “stigma” or the language ideologies that relate groups of speakers to each other and place them within social hierarchies. As Eble (1996) and Bucholtz (2011) find in their studies of American teenagers (in college and high school, respectively), slang is often used as in-group language, meant to promote social solidarity, to stake out and link speakers to salient youth subcultures, and to serve as an insider “code” among friends. But as a “deviant register” (Agha 2015, 306), slang is simultaneously valued by some (and given what has been called “covert prestige”) and dismissed or disdained by others. The stigma of deviance comes not from the linguistic terms themselves, but rather from the low prestige, outsider, and/or marginalized status of its speakers. For example, in

the late twentieth century, slang was to be avoided due to its associations with dirt and disease – and other social failings of the “have nots” of society (Dumas and Lighter 1978, 5-6). Today, American slang’s associations with youthfulness, black culture, and masculinity signal a cool, tough, and “with it” persona to speakers, but also associate its use with a lack of professionalism or intelligence and may even suggest a hint of danger to others. These associations create the push/pull dynamic that attracts its speakers and repels and angers its detractors: “To use slang is to *deny allegiance* to the existing order, either jokingly or in earnest, by refusing even the words which represent convention and signal status; and those who are paid to preserve the status quo are prompted to repress slang as they are prompted to repress any other symbol of potential revolution” (Sledd 1965, 699, cited in Dumas and Lighter 1978, 12).

This tension surrounds slang speaking across the globe. In Indonesia, where university students and other middle-class youth use *bahasa gaul* (an informal “language of sociability”) to sound fashionable, trendy, and cosmopolitan and create a sense of belonging, the speech register can come across as “too familiar” and even rude to standard language speakers. *Gaul* is thus simultaneously understood to be “infusing Indonesian with a liveliness, emotional expressivity, and cosmopolitan cachet,” expressing youthful aspirations for social and economic mobility, at the same time that it is said to be “ruining good and proper Indonesian” (Smith-Hefner 2007, 185). The personae evoked by slang speaking differs in Brazil, where *gíria* (slang) is associated with youth but also with blackness, poverty, residence in socially marginalized shantytowns, and criminality. In this context, I have found that slang speaking takes on dangerous connotations that its speakers cannot control. While black male youth use slang as an in-group language that connects them to their communities, the deviance associated with this speech register ideologically links speakers’ supposed linguistic deficiencies – a “lack of rationality, order, and intellect” – to a lack of legal and personal discipline, successfully working to criminalize and dehumanize them (Roth-Gordon 2017, 86). As one Rio de Janeiro resident explained to me, “Slang is pretty frightening. It’s not that everyone who speaks slang is a *bandido* [criminal], but a *bandido* definitely speaks slang” (2017, 102). Thus, the social negotiation of stigma must remain central to our understanding of what speakers are playing with (and risking) when they take up linguistic stances, take on linguistic styles, and choose to engage in the linguistic creativity and performative fun of slang speaking.

Slang formation

Novelty is a critical part of the attraction – and fear – surrounding slang. While not all new words are considered slang, slang typically conveys a sense of newness. Examining the linguistic strategies that speakers draw upon in slang formation, however, one finds that entirely novel linguistic constructions are far less common than words that play with established sound patterns, reconfigure word forms, and break grammatical rules or discourse conventions. Slang creation relies heavily on already familiar language patterns to maximize the feeling of novelty while minimizing the cognitive burden of managing new linguistic information. For example, slang terms can be made by

“clipping,” abbreviating, or truncating a more standard lexical form. Terms like “toats” (for totally) and “rents” (parents) may be difficult for the untrained ear to decipher but are easy for speakers to form and remember. Over time, some of these slangy abbreviations may come to be accepted as equivalent to their unabbreviated and original forms. Terms like “exam” for examination and “math” for mathematics sound unremarkable today, but they originate from school slang that has been absorbed into the standard language. Slang terms do not always prioritize efficiency and speed, however, and prefixes and suffixes can be added or changed without affecting word length or the number of syllables (as when “amazing” becomes “amazeballs”) or when words or terms are compounded to make them longer than the original (“awesome” becomes “awesome sauce”). Slang terms draw on word formation processes found in standard languages (Eble 1996), including reduplication (“cray-cray” for crazy) and blending (“bromance” = bro (a clipping of brother) + romance or “sext” = sex + text). Catchy phrases, often popularized through mass media (such as “That’s what she said”), are also readily associated with slang speaking and help counter the misconception that slang is all about abbreviations, lack of linguistic/cultural knowledge, or linguistic laziness. Indeed, adding tag lines such as this requires cultural insight, cognitive skill, and a certain amount of linguistic confidence or bravado to know that one is getting the timing right and not misusing a term or phrase. Skilled slang speaking can be related to the quick wittedness associated with good punning and other forms of language play, as these daring linguistic acts involve the risk of being called out and accused of failure: “Do you even know what that means?”

Meticulous and intentional rule-breaking is a very popular feature (and social goal) of slang speaking that contributes to a sense of novelty. This kind of playful linguistic tinkering can be found on many different levels, from phonological changes (“yes” to “yaaassss,” “thing” to “thang,” both drawing on African American English) to semantic inversion (when “bad” becomes “good” along with terms like “sick” and “ill,” slang terms that have also “crossed over” from AAE). Speakers often create slang by employing old words in new contexts, thus changing their semantic domains: “Hot” and “chill” (terms that have been around for decades but would still readily be associated with slang today) are expanded beyond their referential meanings related to temperature to talk about physical appearance, relaxation, and/or sex (as in the updated expression “Netflix and chill”). What is creative and skillful language play to some may sound ungrammatical and demonstrate disfluency to others, particularly as slang speakers dig into grammar for their source of inspiration. Here we commonly find words that are used in new grammatical contexts, often by expanding the grammatical roles (or parts of speech) they can fill. Verbs can become adjectives (“She’s woke”) and adjectives can become adverbs (“He is mad good” – note also the semantic inversion here), as easily as verbs can become nouns (“kicks” for shoes). Often, these modifications are subtle, but they pack a linguistic punch. One current way to offer a positive evaluation of something or someone is to call them “fire,” as in “Those shoes are fire.” Note that this includes only a small change from the older slang version of describing something or someone positively as “on fire,” and yet the grammatical shift lends salience and novelty to the utterance. Middle-school youth with whom I converse frequently claim that they are

“triggered,” as in “I was so triggered,” or “She triggered me.” These linguistic modifications turn “triggered” into a possible adjective or alter the allowable semantic domain to include people as the possible subject and object of this verb. Within the boundaries of the more commonly accepted standard language, the verb “to trigger” only allows for a discussion of inanimate objects, events, and actions (as in “The paper the professor assigned triggered a backlash among her students”). Despite the social imperative to “go big,” slang speaking seems to prefer small linguistic tweaks that lend the feeling of dramatic change.

While slang – like all language – is patterned and rule-governed, the unauthorized nature of these changes to grammatical constructions successfully ruffles the feathers of grammarians, language prescriptivists, and other self-nominated guardians of linguistic standards. A new “because” construction, for example, omits larger chunks of language and relies on the shared linguistic and cultural knowledge of listeners: “I’m going that way, because ... hotness” stands in for the longer, “I’m following those guys, because they are very attractive.” Here an entire clause is reduced because the information can be gleaned from the speech context, maximizing grammatical difference and emphasizing inside knowledge. Another linguistic trick of the trade involves sheer repetition, which offers added “strangeness” through frequency. For example, the much-maligned English pragmatic marker “like” can be the only feature an older person might hear in a long narrative filled with reported speech: “I was like ... And he was like ‘no way.’ And then everyone was like ...” But the repetitive term fulfills just one linguistic function in this example, as a quotative marker introducing speech (equivalent to the Standard English “said”). When these shifts become more established, linguists describe them as examples of grammaticalization (often to the disdain of grammarians).

Slang is thought to primarily involve changes made to the lexicon, but as speakers venture into the terrain of address terms, intensifiers, and pragmatic markers, they become invested in what we might call “pragmatic play.” All of these are terms that are not grammatically necessary to an utterance, but they add both linguistic and social meanings useful for stance work. The linguistic subfield of pragmatics involves the study of language in context, exploring how speech and text are organized and how they convey much more than just literal meaning. For example, I have found that Brazilian Portuguese youth who are described as “heavy” slang speakers fill their narratives with profanities and address terms, often using these to help their listeners parse the back-and-forth nature of animated stories (Roth-Gordon 2007). Used most often in a specific order (profanity and then address term), this pattern pragmatically offers emphasis to an utterance, making storytelling more vivid and engaging. Another pragmatic and useful effect of this speech pattern is to frame or bracket off reported speech for listeners, as in the example: “*Eu falei, ‘Caralho, agora já era, mano’*” (“I said, ‘Shit, now it’s all over, bro’”). The formulaic use of these markers allow speakers to seemingly “fill” their conversations with slang, offering helpful pragmatic cues to insiders but leading outsiders to hear their speech as “nothing but slang.” Thus, the discursive convention of frequency can sometimes add more salience than any semantic novelty or lexical innovation associated with slang.

Slang use also relies heavily on borrowings from other language varieties to increase novelty and strangeness. This includes both “foreign” languages and stigmatized or “non-standard” dialects. African American English has, for decades, remained one of the most desirable sources for new slang terms in standard American English. One productive grammatical pattern adds the definite article “da” in front of a noun (taken from the stereotypical pronunciation associated with AAE and found in certain established slang phrases, such as “da bomb”). This produces expressions like “you da” (a clipped form of “you da man”) and “what da?” (short for “what the fuck?”). A similar pattern drawn from “Mock Spanish” (see Hill 2008) adds “el” to produce new noun phrases: *el cheapo*, *el sicko*, *el homo*. Note that these particular slang patterns often uphold racial ideologies about the inferiority of African Americans and Spanish speakers, and they reveal the power that white Standard English speakers have to sound “cool” and “down-to-earth” through the appropriation of racialized slang terms. Paying careful attention to the racial context, we can also watch slang terms as they are picked up by white speakers, semantically “bleached” to lose their strong (and negative) racial associations, and then used by a wider range of speakers to index whiteness (see Bucholtz 2011). Scott Kiesling (2004) describes how the term “dude” has moved from an address term used among Mexican Americans and African Americans, to index participation in white surfer or “druggie” subcultures, to its current use as a pragmatic marker, most often in the language of frat boys and other young white men. In some cases, as with the address term “man,” the political perspective of the term (previously used by African Americans to counter the insult of being called “boy” by the police) is also bleached, and the full history of the term is no longer widely known among speakers. This loss of awareness of the etymology of a term also reveals much about the larger sociopolitical context of language use.

Popular culture, mass media, and linguistic appropriation

Another commonly cited attribute of slang terms is their propensity to rapidly circulate. Linguistically, this is better described as an example of speakers’ abilities to create inter-textual chains and social connections through the linguistic processes of decontextualization and recontextualization. As words and phrases are picked up from one linguistic context and productively inserted into unrelated contexts, slang gives the impression of spreading more quickly than “regular” words. But this rapid dissemination of speech is not restricted to, or predictive of, the categorization of a word as slang. The term “to go viral” *went* viral when it was taken from medical contexts and inserted into the realm of social media, but this phrase would not commonly be viewed as slang, perhaps because it is not associated with a stigmatized social group or persona. While words do not have to circulate far for their speakers to identify them as their own in-group language, slang is often associated with mass media. In a classic article on the influence of radio in Zimbabwe, Debra Spitulnik (1997) suggests that words and expressions circulated through mass media serve the important social function of creating common linguistic reference points that connect members of what are best described as “imagined communities.”

The bonding effects of slang may be easy to understand when set within smaller circles where members share in-group language in mostly face-to-face interactions. But it is now equally clear that speakers can identify themselves as members of online communities, using specific words and phrases in order to strategically align themselves with people that they have never met.

Not all of what Spitulnik coins “public words” (or popular culture catch phrases) would be recognized as or include slang, as in the readily identifiable and already mainstream Star Wars’ slogan “May the Force be with you.” Thus neither fast nor far-flung dissemination nor the ability to connect members of in-person and virtual/imagined communities distinguish slang from standard language. Twitter users who want to be identified as part of Black Twitter may be as likely to use slang as they are to use other linguistic features of African American English. But many popular expressions that take up elements of AAE *are* commonly recognized as slang, and they are often employed by speakers to index a persona that is youthful, edgy, and current. In the United States, social media has spurred a new trend in which corporations such as IHOP “speak” in the voice of racialized urban youth, embracing African American slang terms, as well as rap lyrics, to promote their brands through tweets like “Pancakes on fleek” and “the O.G. of O.J.” (a hip-hop reference in which O.G. stands for original gangster). As Jane Hill (2008) and Geneva Smitherman (2000) have both described, language can easily be commodified, turning the words and linguistic styles of disempowered and stigmatized speakers into a kind of property that those in positions of power can co-opt or appropriate for their own personal – or corporate – gain. Note that while edgy terms like “on fleek” appear in online articles entitled “All the Social Media Slang Your Brand Should Know,” they also top the list of “20 Millennial Slang Words to Avoid Using in the Workplace.” The interpretation of “slang” as (in)appropriate, (in)formal, and (im)polite is therefore constantly negotiated, though not all speakers have an equal say in these metalinguistic decisions.

As social media campaigns seek to acquire the largest audience possible, the line between what linguistically counts or does not count as slang again becomes blurred: Do all words from a stigmatized linguistic variety such as African American English or Chicano English sound like slang when voiced by Standard English speakers? At what point do they “cross over” and count as mainstream English? What about inter-textual references to the still stigmatized genre of rap songs? Are these only considered slang when they include non-standard lexical items? Some social media users respond positively to corporations linguistically taking on what we might describe as a hip-hop persona (as in the tweet: “I just want to hug whoever comes up with these tweets! Can we be best friends?” To which one employee responded: “Done. - Tara”). But others mock the ability of corporations to generate or truly stay on top of current slang terms (as in the sarcastic tweet to Denny’s: “FYI the cool new teen word these days is ‘Auschwitz’ so be sure to tweet something like ‘bae pancakes as on fleek as Auschwitz’”). Here we can watch language users debate what it means to achieve sufficient insider status to authentically use and lay claim to terms and phrases associated with slang.

Slang remains difficult to linguistically pin down because it draws on familiar word formation and grammatical patterns to accomplish a wide range of common social goals, from reducing the formality of an utterance or a face-threatening command

(“Dude, stop!”), to indexing youthfulness, newness, and awareness of the latest popular culture slogans (“Bye Felicia!”). A thorough investigation of slang must include attention to larger social contexts in which lexical or discourse features come to be associated with non-standard speech and a particular persona or trend. Attention to real-world instances of language use contextualizes not only which words, phrases, or discourse patterns are considered slang, but also what the consequences and social outcomes are for different users of this marked speech style. Linguistically speaking, slang may feel like a moving target in part because it relies on social contexts that are themselves constantly changing. But slang remains incredibly stable as a linguistic label for speech that is placed in sharp contrast to the “standard language” and to any register that conveys formality and respect. As such, the study of slang offers deep insight into the identities, cultural and linguistic ideologies, and power relations within and between social groups.

SEE ALSO: African American Languages (AAV, AAEV, Ebonics); Competence, Communicative and Linguistic; Correctness, Incorrectness, and Correction; Dundes, Alan; Language and Creativity: Play; Language and Humor; Language and Identity; Language Ideology; Language and Power; Language and Social Class; Maledictive Language: Cursing and Swearing; Maledictive Language: Obscenity and Taboo Words; Peer Language; Standard Language(s); Youth Language

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