CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES OF SLANG

Etymology and definition

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Abstract

A gradual change in the attitude of linguistic sciences towards slang at the end of the 19th century has resulted in a considerable growth in the number of studies on this component of language, an abundance and variety in specialized literature that brought a great diversity of opinions. The present paper discusses two of the controversial problems of slang: the etymology of the word and the possibility of a satisfactory definition.

Keywords: slang, jargon, etimology, definition, terminology

From the end of the 19th century there has been a gradual change in the attitude of linguistic science towards slang, and researches in this field have grown both in number and in scope. As a result, considerable knowledge has been accumulated which has not only dispelled the cloud of prejudice and altered the hitherto 'underprivileged' and 'discriminated' position of slang, but has also shed light upon its character, its workings, and its vital role in the life of any language.

The best evidence to prove the popularity of the subject is the abundance and variety of specialised literature on slang. Inevitably, such profusion has also led to a great diversity of views and opinions: on certain points these can still differ significantly.

1. The etymology of "slang"

The word itself is from slang: this is how the disreputable and criminal classes used to refer to their peculiar vocabulary and language in 18th century London (possibly from even earlier), and it originally meant 'vulgar language'. The term was first recorded in the 1750s and was at that time used as a synonym fairly interchangeable with the terms *cant*, *flash* or *argot*, all referring to 'the language of rogues and thieves' or 'special vocabulary of tramps or thieves'.

The opinions regarding its etymology are divided: some sources state that it is unknown, uncertain, or at the very least debatable, and leave it at that. Others venture the idea that it might be of Gypsy origin, but this is rather unlikely, just like the speculation

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according to which it could be an argotic perversion of the French word *langue*, language. (1) Another conjecture is that *slang* has been formed by shortening from genitive phrases like *beggars' language* or *rogues' language*, in which the genitive suffix of the first noun attaches to the initial syllable of *language* and then the final syllable is lost. (2)

However, the most widely spread – and also the most probable – assumption is based on the resemblance in sound and figurative meaning to the noun and verb *sling* and the occurrence of apparently the same root in Scandinavian expressions referring to language. These suggest that the term *slang* is a development of a common Germanic root from which the current English *sling* is derived. In Scandinavian languages words and expressions like the Norwegian *sleng* 'a slinging, an invention, device', *slengja* 'to sling, to cast', *slengenamn* 'nickname', *slenjeord* 'an insulting word, a new word that has no just reason for being', *slengja kjeften* 'to abuse with words', lit. 'to sling the jaw' are related to the O.N. and Icelandic *slyngva*, A.S. *slingan* and the German *schlingen* 'to sling'. There is also a rather obvious relation to such expressions in English like *sling words* 'chatter incessantly', *sling off at somebody* 'jeer, make fun of somebody', or the regrettably lost *slangwhanger* 'noisy or abusive talker or writer'.

When discussing the history of the word *slang* we must state the fact that its existence was for a long time ignored by scholars and lexicographers as a term denoting a peripheral phenomena in language, something that was not worthy of their learned consideration. It was nowhere recorded in the Middle English period, it was not yet in 'official' usage in the Stuart period according to the *Glossary of Tudor and Stuart Words* (3), and it was neither used nor entered as a headword by Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755. Even after the unwilling acknowledgment of its existence, slang was long frowned upon by linguists with unequivocal disapproval as some linguistic deviance or aberration, a "tumour" on language that should be cut out in order to preserve the health and beauty of the latter.

Slang was described as "low vulgar unmeaning language" in the 1828 edition of the Webster Dictionary and this definition reoccurred with slight variations in other dictionaries for several decades. The end of the century brought a few attempts at more nuanced interpretations both in dictionaries and essays published on slang, but the general attitude of those who studied language for a living remained disapproving and condemnatory, similar to what J.B. Greenough and G.L. Kittredge expressed in 1902: slang was still considered "a kind of vagabond language, always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech, but continually straying or forcing its way into the most respectable company" (4).

This stigma and the accompanying prejudices haunted slang to the end of the 19th century, when the first slightly more indulgent definitions and description began to appear. These mentioned for the first time its figurative and ephemeral quality, as well as its humour.

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However, the real turnabout in the attitude towards slang only occurred around the middle of the 20th century, and this eventually brought the "recognition of its merits".

The gradual change in this attitude and, consequently, in the prestige of slang came slowly and was mainly due to the fact that linguists began to take a less prejudiced and biased stand in the matter. Following their lead, other branches of science joined the research work and started to view slang with the interest and attention it deserves. The social sciences, psychology and stylistics were the most important among these, but also anthropology and ethology (the study of animal behaviour as it occurs in a natural environment), and several interdisciplinary sciences that intersect with linguistics at some point. Without their valuable contribution certain relevant issues involving slang would never have been detected, studied, analysed and clarified.

2. The problem of a precise and exhaustive definition

It has been said that slang is a phenomenon that anyone can recognize but no one can define. This succinct characterisation attributed to the French lexicographer Paul Ch. J. Robert might indeed reflect its complexity, but is not necessarily true. We only have to take a look at the countless attempts made (not exclusively by linguists) to point out the most important features of slang, or the reams of paper filled with the results of surveys, questionnaires and other means of investigating the usage of slang to realise that in fact anybody can define it, only in different ways. Which aspect of this complex and multilayered component of language one may consider most significant largely depends on one's viewpoint, which in turn is defined by the perspective of the particular branch or subfield of linguistics (or interdisciplinary study) from which one may approach it. However elusive, unpredictable, whimsical and protean slang might prove whenever people try to define it, its study cannot be avoided or neglected, because it is an existing, active, functioning reality very much alive.

The complexity of slang itself is the obvious reason and explanation for the many possible definitions. To bring all these together in one comprehensive and concise answer to the question "What is slang?" would be a hopeless undertaking. However, it might prove useful to start by examining what slang is not.

Several definitions have described slang from a purely lexicological point of view as a stock of words and expressions, a distinct set or strata of lexis, a group of words used in a particular social context. It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that slang (basically pertaining to spoken language) is simply a certain 'vocabulary'. This misconception was fairly long-lived, and not only among linguists: slang was identified with the words collected in special glossaries or labelled as such in dictionaries. Although slang does indeed have a

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specific vocabulary, defining this would be even more difficult: we might say that slang is constant, its vocabulary is constantly changing and impossible to 'demarcate' clearly.

Slang is not poetry. Common traits are not difficult to notice: both poetry and slang are the result of conscious choice, a deliberate endeavour to "say it differently". There are means by which conventional language can be turned into a text with aesthetic value. In search of alternative ways of expression, both poetry and slang make the most of those possibilities offered by the linguistic system which are not usually employed in everyday usage. Most frequent among these are the replacement of a common word by another (possibly a loan-word) with similar reference, the creation of highly expressive synonyms for conventional words and expressions based on periphrasis, metonymy or metaphor (hyper-synonymity is a prevalent characteristic of slang), exaggeration and understatement, etc. It is important though to emphasise that we can only speak about the possibility of aesthetic value, since all these similarities are only in the techniques and devices, the 'artifices' shared by poetic language and slang – not between slang and the specific communication system of poetry or the 'language' and 'code' of particular poetic creations. Thus, although slang might occasionally come close to being poetic, it is not poetry.

Slang is not 'a language' in the same sense as English, French, Chinese or even Esperanto are languages. As Bethany Dumas and Jonathan Lighter pointed out in an important article in 1978 (5), slang cannot be identified by any appeal to form, meaning, or grammar or as a component of any kind of autonomous linguistic system. It is not possible to speak exclusively in slang, there is no slang-grammar, no specific slang word-formation procedures, slang has no particular phonetics, morphology or syntax of its own. (On the other hand, it does have a rather peculiar semantics in which its most conspicuous linguistic traits are rooted.)

In numerous studies approaching slang from a sociolinguistic point of view it has been analysed and also defined as a social dialect or sociolect. The inherent difficulty in this case is how to separate and tell apart slang from its 'relatives' in this category: cant, argot, jargon and technical terminology on the one hand, (regional) dialects on the other.

At the beginning of its career, *slang* used to be a synonym for other terms denoting special languages or specialised idiomatic vocabularies peculiar to certain classes or groups of people, especially those of underworld groups. *Argot* is a term of French origin applied to the vocabulary or speech of thieves, tramps and vagabonds; it is also called *flash* in English. *Cant* developed after 1680 to mean the characteristic language used by rogues and vagabonds (especially the secret language of gipsies, thieves, tramps, or beggars), then was applied contemptuously by any sect or school to the phraseology of its rival. Both were originally devised for private communication and identification and were used as a secret language to

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prevent outsiders from understanding the conversation. This intention of concealing the meaning from outsiders make them examples of cryptolects, characteristic secret or private languages used only by members of a group.

Slang should not be identified with either: secrecy is not the main purpose of slang and it is not the specialised language of criminals, although its vocabulary can draw on the language use of different marginalised groups and subcultures.

Jargon is mostly used today as a collective term to refer to the specialised or technical language and vocabulary of a trade, profession, activity, or group. This terminology that relates to a specific activity usually develops as a kind of shorthand and can be very useful as long as its purpose is indeed to quickly express ideas that are frequently discussed between members of the group, to exchange complex information efficiently. Jargon can, however, become unnecessarily complicated and unintelligible to outsiders, especially when it is used excessively and gratuitously with the sole purpose of impressing the uninitiated who will understandably regard it with distrust and resentment.

Slang often incorporates elements of the jargons of special-interest groups and is similar to jargon when used as 'in-group code' to imply familiarity with a certain group or even membership, but it is not restricted to any profession or occupation.

The above categories need to be distinguished from slang if we are to think in terms of a 'vertical' stratification of language, which usually occurs in theoretical models that resemble a layer-cake. If we picture such a model, slang can not be localised in or limited to any of the levels or strata, its use is too wide-spread and general – for this reason it can not really be termed a sociolect.

Slang comprises a great variety of vocabulary, and the different dialects and regionalisms are definitely present among the various sources it feeds on. Moreover, there might be marked differences between the slang of certain regions, but even if we consider this kind of 'horizontal' distribution of language, it is impossible to connect or limit slang exclusively to any definite territory, so it can not be called a dialect either.

Approaching slang from a stylistic point of view, slang has also been defined as style of speech, usage level, or register. By style we usually mean the whole of ways, methods and means of expression when their particular combination into a text is the result of choice and is motivated by some kind of functional appropriateness – not by a certain attitude, which is the motivation of slang.

If we try to describe slang as style or as one of the possible usage levels or registers, we invariably come up against the problem of separating it from the others: informal,

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colloquial, familiar, non-conventional, substandard, etc. on the one hand or clichés, vogue words, colloquialisms, obscenity, etc. on the other. Most linguists involved in the study of slang agree on one fact: these terms are relative. Moreover, the (in)formality of a given situation may suffer alterations, implying a shift in language usage, and – even more significantly – the status of words can change in time.

It is hardly surprising that slang items often pose such a problem to lexicographers. James B. McMillan identifies this as the fundamental problem of definition: "Until slang can be objectively identified and segregated (so that dictionaries will not vary widely in labelling particular lexemes and idioms) or until more precise subcategories replace the catchall label *slang*, little can be done to analyse linguistically this kind of lexis, or to study its historical change, or to account for it in sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic contexts." (6)

There have been attempt to describe slang as speech genre, in its Bakhtinian sense. According to his theory, we always speak in certain speech genres: there are either strict and rigid or more flexible but always typical structural forms at the depth of our utterances. All the same, this speech genre is closer to the notion of text genres and can not really be applied to slang.

Slang is in fact a certain lexical behaviour, a peculiar variant of language usage, a particular way of speaking. This variant of language usage is 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. The use of slang is not an end in itself: since it generally develops in smaller communities, groups or subcultures, it is meant in the first place to indicate identity within the given group. From a sociolinguistic point of has a double function: to reinforce cohesion within the group and at the same time to delimitate it from other groups, most importantly, from the dominant culture. Here there might be more than simple separation: 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.

NOTES:

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2. Connie C. Eble: *Slang*. In: *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992, 940-943.
3. Walter W. Skeat, Anthony L. Mayhew: *Glossary of Tudor and Stuart Words*, 1914
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5. Dumas, Bethany K., Jonathan Lighter: *Is Slang a Word for Linguists?* In: American Speech,

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