CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES OF SLANG. LEXICOGRAPHY AND USERS

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Abstract

A gradual change in the attitude of linguistic science 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 continues the discussion of the controversial issues of slang: the difficulties it poses to lexicography and the question of who its users are.

Keywords: language, lexicology, linguistic, slang, speech

Slang and lexicology

Slang (or cant) was long regarded as a negligible peripheral phenomenon and whenever it had to be dealt with the approach was not of a linguistic nature and did not concern the linguistic phenomenon, but was meant to facilitate the identification and exposure of rogues and thieves, criminal underworld groups and gangs by their characteristic use of language. Consequently, the first 'collections' of slang words were lists usually compiled in courtrooms during criminal trials.

As linguists did not consider the 'lowly' slang worthy of their learned attention, the task went to the lexicographers of the time, and they were the first to attempt giving a description. Considering its roots and the significance of the term at its origin, it is unsurprising that in these early days slang was branded as illegitimate – a stamp which it could not completely shed even to this day.

If we attentively consider the definitions in different dictionaries in a chronological order, we can trace the gradual change in the attitude towards slang. From definitions similar to the one in Noah Webster's dictionary of 1828 (1): "low vulgar unmeaning language", which clearly shows his barely concealed disgust, his appalled, rigid condemnation and disapproving rejection; through exaggeratedly simplistic, neutral and general formulations like "unpolished language" in Francis A. March's 1903 dictionary (2), we eventually arrive at those descriptions of today which try to also include the positive traits of slang, like the one from dictionary.reference.com: "very informal usage in vocabulary and idiom that is characteristically more metaphorical, playful, elliptical, vivid, and ephemeral than ordinary language".

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Yet, however far slang has come from its original meaning, however much respect and appreciation, even distinguishing attention it has been getting lately, many problems connected to it have not been satisfactorily solved to this day.

First and foremost, the difficulty which poses the most obvious problem not only for linguists but also for lexicographers dealing with slang, is the matter of its definition, as discussed in the previous part of the present paper (*Controversial Issues of Slang. Etymology and Definition*).

Admittedly, linguists and other practitioners of lexicology can not be blamed for the continuing absence of a suitable, practical, unambiguous, clear, concise, comprising (but possibly short) definition of slang: it is not for lack of trying. There has been no shortage of attempts, but it is exactly the complex nature of the phenomenon of slang which makes it so elusive. On the other hand, the fact that views as to what should and should not be included under the term 'slang' are constantly changing doesn't further the matter much.

This many-layered question has been most succinctly summed up and explained by Connie C. Eble: "… slang words and expressions are in large part short-lived, slippery in meaning, characteristic of marginalized groups, oral, and highly conditioned by social situation. These are all characteristics that militate against the frequent and consistent occurrence of slang in the files on which dictionaries are customarily based. Moreover, the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic contexts in which slang is embedded cannot readily be captured by any system of discrete labels." (3)

The confusion in the multitude of slang definitions, the unclarified nature of several of the theoretical approaches has unavoidably left its mark on the practice of lexicographers too. Although the new term occurred in the English lexicography as early as the beginning of the 19th century (and spread from there) to denote words which for some reason did not qualify as belonging to the literary or standard variant of language, it has kept muddling up the labels and stylistic indicators used for categorisation in the different (not only slang) dictionaries.

In the processed vocabulary material slang is usually mixed with all kinds of other labels, beginning from elements of the informal, colloquial style through the categories of dialect and jargon to vulgar, obscene or euphemistic.

These problems are due to the fact that language and, within it, slang are systems of a dynamic nature. The constant change is the result of the incessant circulation of words within the language: they tend to stream from one usage level to the other or from one language variant to the next. The different jargons and dialects, as well as the everyday language are pre-eminent among the sources of slang (besides new coinages, borrowings and calques). At the same time slang words can themselves become part of the above mentioned. In most cases the transition takes the word towards 'neutral' colloquial, perhaps through the intermediate category of momentarily fashionable 'buzz-word'.

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There are several slang words that proved appealing enough in general use for such a long time that they made it into the standard language. Some have been invariably efficient in their role as slang for centuries and are still going strong, others simply fade into oblivion after a brief period of sparkling glory, and again others suddenly spring to life again for some reason after having lain dormant for a while. Many slang words are felt to be dated or hackneyed very shortly after their appearance, especially if the new 'pretender' is already there too, waiting to supplant its predecessor. The basic paradox of slang is that it has to continually strive for renewal, freshness, wittiness while at the same time, due to the speed with which they spread and become popular overnight, the greater part of its words and phrases wear away into clichés faster than items of any other part of the vocabulary.

Even if slang is a constant in its quality of linguistic phenomenon (some researchers would even go as far as considering it a language universal), its vocabulary is constantly changing. The relative speed of this change depends on changes in the circle of its users, which in turn is influenced by the dimensions of the circle.

In addition to all this, the status of slang can differ in different languages or even in different variants of the same language, which further complicates matters when it comes to categorisation in stylistic terms. Sometimes the same word can be slang in one variant, neutral everyday term in another and regional dialect word in the third (examples for this can easily be found among the different variants of English).

As an additional confounding aggravation to both researchers and lexicographers of slang, a given word can become slang in a certain situation, context, or atmosphere – even if only occasionally and temporarily, because of its "stylistic aura". Body language, intonation, pitch of voice and even pauses may have an important role in indicating that a word or expression should (then and there) be interpreted as slang. These facets of slang are impossible to be conveyed by dictionaries.

We eventually have to reconcile ourselves, however reluctantly, to the fact that there is no linguistic litmus paper that could unequivocally and infallibly evidence whether a word or expression is slang or not. On the other hand, slang is much too lively a concept to be lightly classified alongside everyday speech or to be nonchalantly placed on a certain rung of the social ladder of language use. Nevertheless, lexicography has a very practical need for the term "slang" if it wishes to fulfil its purpose and provide the user of the dictionary with directions as to the sphere of applicability of such an entry word: it is situated below the standard or everyday informal levels of language (it should not be used in formal or official situations, since it usually is considered to transgress generally accepted norms of formality or appropriateness), but stands above geographical or social dialects, as well as the specified vocabularies of different subcultures (it is spoken and understood in a wider circle than these restricted variants of language).

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Users of slang

According to V. de Klerk, there are "two long-standing strong cultural stereotypes regarding slang users. The first is that slang is the primary domain of adolescents, all of whom inevitably use it. The second is that slang (especially words that are more taboo) is largely the domain of males, while females avoid it as unladylike, because of its strong connotations of masculinity and toughness." (4) However, observation and research done in the last decades raises question marks in connection with both above statements and makes it clear that they need to be carefully reconsidered.

Slang is much too often identified by linguist and non-linguist alike as the language of youth or that of college students, although more cautious formulations include that slang is 'usually' and 'mostly' to be found in the speech of young people. This much is true, but the circle of users is not by far as restricted as that.

Peculiar slang usually develops not only in schools or universities, but also in other 'confined' institutions, such as military bases or prisons; within occupational or interest groups, even in the private sphere of families. Typical users of slang – on the other extreme of the wide range, as it were – are the different peripheral subcultures and even counter-cultures, branded as 'deviant', e.g. homosexuals, drug users or criminals.

Slang flourishes therefore in those tight-knit communities where the atmosphere among peers is relaxed enough for language use to be freed from the constraints of politeness and formality. It also strives where group-membership and group-solidarity has great significance. In these situations the main purpose of slang is to signal that the user is part of a certain subculture and is on the same 'wave-length' with it. Slang words function as a sort of 'badge' and their role is similar to that of the latest popular form or style in clothing, hairdo, tattoos and even entertainment: since they are the linguistic equivalents of fashion, they have to be new and attractive for the group to accept them.

As this kind of communities, coalitions and groups usually (though not exclusively) are formed among the young, especially teenagers, it is only natural that slang should remain primarily the 'domain' of youth. The obvious explanation for this lies in the fact that 'belonging' is particularly important at this age, and the amount of time one spends with peers in school, sports, free time and leisure activities is the largest. Slang functions as a linguistic code, reinforcing membership and showing the existence of collective knowledge, common interest and shared attitude. The use of slang can also show rebellion and resistance against authority, it can be an act of defiance: there are always lots of slang terms in schools for those who have 'power' over teenagers.

Words from any type of specialised slang can find their way into youth slang or into general slang (as the term suggests, this is so widespread that it cannot be localised either vertically or horizontally, or even according to age-groups) as the walls of subcultures are crumbling and the boundaries of ethnicity, class and life-style are weakening. The multiplying means of modern mass-communication have also contributed

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to the acceleration of this process, for they can enable the instant spreading of new slang whether it occurs in a popular show, the news, a film or the lyrics of a song.

The frequency of slang usage has also significantly changed as regards the distribution between gender groups. Up to the sixties and seventies of the 20th century slang was mostly used by men rather than by women (at least in public). This was due to the fact that it came largely from a man's world and referred to 'manly' endeavours and interests. Women did not have much chance to develop a slang of their own because they had little direct contact with activities, groups or subcultures which might have facilitated this. On the other hand, women used less slang (even if they were familiar with the meaning) because society put a much greater pressure on them to comply with the rules of convention and decency, to live up to the expectations in good manners – and to observe the proprieties in their choice of words. These differences were clearly bound up with the differences between the position and role of men and women in society.

Alongside the social transformations of the last decades the attitude towards slang and its use has also undergone some changes. The experiences of subcultures based on social class, ethnic group, gender, sexual orientation, age group or life style are blending, as their dividing walls gradually dissolve and they lose their exclusive and isolated character.

Today the use of slang, including taboo and vulgar expressions, does no longer provoke the shock and consternation it used to, not even in speech situations where in the past its appearance would have been unimaginable. The gradual change that has occurred within gender groups in this respect has primarily socio-linguistic cause and explanation. While in bygone days women of ladylike refinement and delicacy avoided the use of slang, today it is applied more and more often by girls and women. The feminist movement can, to some degree, be held accountable for setting the process off: slang being one of the 'male' privileges, a badge not only of manliness but also of power, its 'conquering' was felt to be a significant step in the pursuit of emancipation.

Where adolescents are concerned, he differences in the frequency of slang within gender groups are not consistent. The view that boys use slang more often than girls is justified by the fact that their peer groups are larger and more close-knit, and also because for them competition and the underlying hierarchy are more important. Girl-groups are smaller, more intimate, and their members do not set much store by verbal posing and blustering.

Some surveys have concluded that differences are slowly but surely disappearing, others have found that 'boy-slang' contains more words and expressions referring to sex, 'otherness', hobby and leisure activities, while 'girl-slang' deals mainly with the home and people who are close to them. 'Boy-slang' is still usually held to be coarser, to contain more negative, offensive, taboo and vulgar words. This mirrors the general tendency in society, where this kind of linguistic behaviour is more easily accepted from men than from women – to this day.

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Notes

1. Noah Webster: *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828
2. Francis A. March: *Thesaurus Dictionary of the English Language,* 1903
3. Connie C. Eble: *On Defining Slang,* in *"Slang: Deviation or Norm?"* 1983, 409-16.
4. V. de Klerk: *Slang, Sociology,* in: ELL 2, vol. 11, 407-412.

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