

The Origin of Slang

Sobirjonova Mukhlisa Sobirjonovna

Teacher, Denau Entrepreneurship and Pedagogy Institute

Abstract

Slang was the main reason for the development of prescriptive language in an attempt to slow down the rate of change in both spoken and written language. Latin and French were the only two languages that maintained the use of prescriptive language in the 14th century. It was not until the early 15th century that scholars began pushing for a Standard English language.

Keywords: bus from omnibus, taxi, piano, phone, and pub mob, dandy; booze for alcoholic beverage; gat, crone, iron, chrome; canary, grass, snout, stoolie; hammered, hamstered, langered, mulled.

Introduction. During the Middle Ages, certain writers such as Chaucer, William Caxton, and William of Malmesbury represented the regional differences in pronunciations and dialects. The different dialects and the different pronunciations represented the first meaning for the term "slang."

However, our present-day meaning for slang did not begin forming until the 16th or 17th century. The English Criminal Cant developed in the 16th century. The English Criminal Cant was a new kind of speech used by criminals and cheats, meaning it developed mostly in saloons and gambling houses. The English Criminal Cant was at first believed to be foreign, meaning scholars thought that it had either originated in Romania or had a relationship to French. The English Criminal Cant was slow developing. In fact, out of the four million people who spoke English, only about ten thousand spoke the English Criminal Cant. By the end of the 16th century this new style of speaking was considered to be a language "without reason or order". During the 18th century schoolmasters taught pupils to believe that the English Criminal Cant (which by this time had developed into slang) was not the correct usage of English and slang was considered to be taboo¹.

Because most people are individuals who desire uniqueness, it stands to reason that slang has been in existence for as long as language has been in existence.

Literature review and methodology. A slang expression may suddenly become widely used and as quickly die (23-skiddoo). It may become accepted as standard speech, either in its original slang meaning (bus from omnibus, taxi, piano, phone, and pub mob, dandy) or with an altered, possibly tamed meaning (jazz, which originally had sexual connotations). Some expressions have persisted for centuries as slang (booze for alcoholic beverage). In the 20th century, mass media and rapid travel have speeded up both the circulation and the demise of slang terms. Television and novels have turned criminal cant into slang (five grand for 5000). Changing social circumstances may stimulate the spread of slang. Drug-related expressions (such as pot and marijuana) were virtually a secret jargon in the 1940s; in the 1960s they were adopted by rebellious youth; and in the 1970s and '80s they were widely known. But this must be done by those whose mother tongue is English.

¹ www.ask.com/questions-about/British-slang/

They and only they, being native speakers of the English language, are its masters and lawgivers. It is for them to place slang in its proper category by specifying its characteristic features.

Many words formerly labeled as slang have now become legitimate units of the Standard English. Thus, the word "kid" (=child), which was considered low slang in the 19th century, is now a legitimate colloquial unit of the English literary language.

It sounds unbelievable but not so long ago the words: of course, to take care, to get up, lunch were considered to be slang. "Lunch" entered the language after World War I is not used in some books that prefer "dinner" to "lunch".

Slang users tend to invent many more synonyms or near-synonyms than might be thought strictly necessary: for example, criminals may have a dozen different nicknames (gat, crone, iron, chrome) for their guns, or for informers (canary, grass, snout, stoolie); drinkers can choose from hundreds of competing descriptions of a state of intoxication (hammered, hamstered, languered, mullered)²

Discussion. It is convenient to group slang words according to their place in the vocabulary system and more precisely in the semantic system of the vocabulary. If they denote a new and necessary notion they may prove an enrichment of the vocabulary and be accepted into Standard English. If on the other hand they make just another addition to a cluster of synonyms and have nothing but novelty to back them, they die out very quickly, constituting the most changeable part of the vocabulary.

Another type of classification suggests subdivision according to the sphere of usage, into general slang and special slang.³ General slang includes words that are not specific for any social or professional group, whereas special slang is peculiar for some such group: teenager slang, university slang, public school slang, Air Force slang, football slang, sea slang and so on.

General slang is language that speakers deliberately use to break with the standard language and to change the level of discourse in the direction of formality. It signals the speakers' intention to refuse conventions⁴ and their need to be fresh and startling in their expression, to ease social exchanges and induce friendliness, to reduce excessive seriousness and avoid clichés, in brief, to enrich the language. General slang words have a wide circulation as they are neither group – nor subject – restricted.⁵

You'll hear Brits refer to their currency as quid, much in the same way American dollars are "bucks" and Canadian money is called "loonies."

If someone asks to borrow a fag off you, give them a cigarette.

Result. In Britain, a kiss is called a snog. If someone is knackered, that means they are exhausted. If someone is referred to as "a minger", that means that they're unattractive. If someone tells you to "Bugger off!" well, it is suggested that you go away.

Instead of "Hi, how are you?" go with the quick and easy British "Alright?" No answer is expected.

² www.slanginsider.com

³ Арнольд И.В. Лексикология современного английского языка.: учебник для ин-тов и фак. иностр. языка.- 3-е издание, перераб и доп.- М.: Высшая школа, 1986.-250с

⁴ Crystal D., The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language.-Cambridge University: Press. 1996-712p.

⁵ Mattiello Elisa. The Pervasiveness of Slang in Standard and Non- Standard English.- Mots Palabras Words-6/2005.- 41p.

Emphasize greatness. These include "barry," "ace" and "kewl." The latter kind of sounds like "cool" but you'll know the difference in your heart.

Insult others. Calling someone an "arseface" or a "pilchard" will be even more the merrier if they have no clue you are insulting them to their face.

Throw in the emphatic "bloody" a lot. Bloody this, bloody that and bloody everything. The British are also known to put it in the middle of words for even more emphasis, such as "absobloodilylutely."

Describe drunks. Slang is always full of euphemisms for "drunk" in any language. The British versions include "airlocked" and "bevved up," as in "full of beverage."

Special slang is language that speakers use to show their belonging to a group and establish solidarity or intimacy with the other group members.⁶ It is often used by speakers to create their own identity, including aspects such as social status and geographical belonging, or even age, education, occupation, lifestyle, and special interests. It is largely used by people of a common age and experience to strengthen the bonds within their own peer group, keeping the older generation at a distance.⁷ It is also used by people sharing the same occupation to increase efficiency in communication; or by those sharing the same living conditions to hide secret information from people in authority. It is finally used by people sharing an attitude or a life style to reinforce their group cohesiveness, keeping insiders together and outsiders out.

Conclusion. Special slang tends to originate in subcultures within a society. Occupational groups (for example, loggers, police, medical professionals, and computer specialists) are prominent originators of both jargon and slang; other groups creating slang include the armed forces, teenagers, racial minorities, citizens-band radiobroadcasters, sports groups, drug addicts, criminals, and even religious denominations. Slang expressions often embody attitudes and values of group members. They may thus contribute to a sense of group identity and may convey to the listener information about the speaker's background.

While some slang words and phrases are used throughout all of Britain (e.g. knackered, meaning "exhausted"), others are restricted to smaller regions.

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⁶ www. lexs scripta.com/desktop/dictionaries/

⁷ Eble, C. Slang and Sociability. London and Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.