

Language Investigation: 'Slang' and word-formation processes

Background

This language investigation focuses on the slang that you use in everyday speech and in online, informal writing. You are encouraged to discuss words in your vocabulary that would not be considered 'standard': words and phrases that you use online or talking with your peers.

Slang

Slang is loosely defined as words, phrases, and uses of words from an informal register, compared to a formal one. Think about the language that you and your friends use online, on social media, or in private messages, but wouldn't write in an essay. Slang usually forms as a deviation from standard language, although many terms end up becoming a part of people's standard vocabulary over time.

Slang is also constantly changing and new words are developing. When they were your age, your parents and grandparents used slang which is entirely different to the slang you use today, and probably sounds very outdated.

Slang is very important in constructing identity and signalling membership of different social groups. By using the slang that is different from your parents and the same as your friends, you are signalling your identity as a member of your age group, or your friendship group. Slang can also be used to identify yourself as a member of certain subcultures, and lots of the slang used on the internet implies a shared knowledge of popular culture. Ultimately, slang needs to be understood by both the speakers and listeners in the conversation. If someone doesn't use the same word that you're using, it's likely that they aren't a member of the group which that term comes from.

The existence of the internet has also changed the way we speak: we now have real time, informal, written conversations all the time, using social media and instant messaging. The limits of typing, as well as character limits in texts and tweets have all had an impact on how we write in informal conversation. This in turn will have had an impact on the slang that we use today, as well as also being a way of sharing slang terms.

Word formation processes

In 1969, Richard Seymour wrote about the aspects of word formation and change in college slang. He describes eight different processes. Although much of the slang he writes about is not used any more, it is worth examining whether the word-formation processes he discusses are still relevant to the slang you use.

Derivation:

Adding a suffix to a word to derive a new meaning. Example suffixes are: -ness, -y, -o. An example of this would be the word 'selfie', which is made up of the noun 'self' and the suffix '-ie'.

Clippings:

Removing the beginning or the end of a word and using the shortened form. An example of this is 'bot' instead of 'robot', or even 'photo' instead of 'photograph'.

Blends:

Combining existing words to form a new word. An example of this is 'blog' which is formed from 'web log' or vlog ('video blog').

Acronyms:

A word or name formed from the initial parts of a longer word or phrase. An example of this is NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) or 'lol' ('laugh out loud').

Conversions:

Changing the grammatical class of a noun, so using a noun as a verb, or a verb as an adjective. An example of this would be 'friend'. Normally it is a noun, but it has become widely popular as a verb, meaning to add someone to your contacts on social media such as Facebook.

Rhyme formations:

Making a phrase out of words that rhyme with one another. An example of this would be 'God squad', referring to the members of a religious organization, usually Christian.

Alliteration:

Making a phrase out of words which begin with the same letter or sound. An example of this would be 'Debbie Downer' – a person who is consistently negative.

Semantic change:

When a word or phrase acquires a new meaning. For example, 'salty' can now mean to be bitter or annoyed about something, or 'shade' now also means a subtle insult.

Step 1: Word Lists

For each of these word formation processes, try to think of an example (or more if you can!) from your own vocabulary. If you're really stuck, try looking online for lists of slang from the past few years. You may be surprised by how recent some of the words you regularly use are.

Choose one or two of these words or phrases for each process and do the following:

1. State which word-formation process it follows. Break down the different components, if relevant.
2. Provide a definition: what does this word mean?
3. Use it in a sentence.
4. If you know where this word is originally from, comment on this, e.g. is it from internet/text speak? African American English? If possible, comment on its origins and how/when it became popular.
5. Does this word appear in a dictionary? If so, see if you can find out when it was added.

After you have done this for one or two examples, feel free to list any more that you can think of. These can be used later in your commentary.

Example

Word: lol

Process: Acronym, stands for “laugh out loud”

Definition: Used to indicate that something was funny.

Example: “I can’t believe he said that lol”

Origins: ‘lol’ is from SMS or internet language. It dates back to the late 1980s, when the internet was first becoming popular, and people wanted to express emotions via online messaging. It became more popular along with the internet and SMS messaging.

‘lol’ was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in March 2011.

Step 2: Commentary

Now provide a commentary on the words you have chosen, and the word formation processes involved. You may want to think about the following.

- 1) *Was it particularly difficult to come up with examples for any of these processes? If so, comment on why you think this might be. Has the way we speak informally changed?*
- 2) *On the other hand, did you find yourself coming up with lots and lots of examples for any of the processes in particular? If so, which ones? Why might some processes be more common than others?*
- 3) *Do any of the slang words you use not fit into these processes? If so, describe what you think is involved in creating this word.*
- 4) *Was it difficult to track down the origins of any particular words? Some words have been around a lot longer than we think, and sometimes can become popular without acknowledging its origins. Think about why this might be. Are the words are still closely linked to their original users and cultures?*
- 5) *Do you think the internet has changed slang? Think about whether the words that you have written about would still be popular or even exist without social media and the internet. What is it about the internet that has allowed these words to become popular?*

- 6) *Has the meaning of this word, or the way it is used changed over time?* Is the way you understand and use this word is different from in the past, or how it is defined in a dictionary? (if there is a dictionary definition for your word) Words change their meaning over time, and sometimes it takes a while for new meanings to be added to the dictionary. Sometimes these changes can be very nuanced and may not necessarily require an entirely new definition. If you find any differences, discuss them. Why do you think the word has changed?

Tips

When talking about words, either italicise them, or use commas, e.g. *lol* or 'lol'. This indicates that you are talking about the word itself, not just using it in a sentence. It doesn't matter which you use but be consistent.

The Oxford English Dictionary, Collins English Dictionary, and Merriam-Webster are good dictionaries to start with. Urban Dictionary can be helpful, but be careful: all of the entries are user-submitted and anyone can contribute, meaning that it is unreliable, and some definitions may be offensive. Ask your school or local library whether they have a subscription to the OED, as this is a really useful resource.

The OED has regular blog posts explaining when words are added to the dictionary.

If you are using information online for origins, make sure to list all the sources you have used in a reference list at the end.

Links and helpful resources

Merriam-Webster Online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

Oxford English Dictionary: <https://www.oed.com/>

Updates to the OED: <https://public.oed.com/updates/>

References

Richard K. Seymour; Collegiate Slang: Aspects of Word Formation and Semantic Change. *Publication of the American Dialect Society* 1 April 1969; 51 (1): 13–22