

Teaching Unit 30: Slang

Background

This teaching unit offers a definition and an overview of slang in everyday speech. Students are encouraged to distinguish between slang, accent, and dialect. They are encouraged to think about how slang words are formed, why they are formed, and how even though slang changes all the time, the way we form those words and phrases and our reasons for doing so remain fairly constant. This teaching unit has a parallel language investigation where students can take their ideas further in an independent project.

What is slang?

Eble (1996: 11) defines slang “as an ever-changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large.” This definition highlights a number of key features:

- Slang involves words and phrases (not accents or grammar)
- The words are part of informal or colloquial speech (not formal language)
- Their main function is to signal in-group belonging, a social identity, or a trend
- For this reason, slang tends to turn over and change rapidly

Slang is thus limited to words and phrases that we might use casually in conversation and online, in social media or private messages, but wouldn't write in an essay. It can sometimes be an active 'anti-language', creating an explicit contrast to standard language and sometimes made to be intentionally unintelligible to outsiders. But many terms end up becoming a part of people's standard vocabulary over time.

Because it marks in-group membership, slang is constantly changing. If out-group individuals start to use an attractive and trendy new slang word, the group that originally created it may struggle to use it to mark their group identity, and so may create a new in-group term. One example of this cycle is the adoption of terms from African-American slang into mainstream English usage for over a century. This has taken place due to the popularity and trendiness of African-American music and culture in the United States and globally. From blues and jazz a hundred years ago, English acquired slang terms like *man*, *cool*, *hip*, *right on*, *get down*, *do your thing*, *gig*, and dozens more. This cycle of uptake—sometimes considered appropriation—continued through the early years of rap and hip-hop to the present day: *chill out*, *hang out*, *high five*, *player*, *hood*, *you go girl*, *bling*, *threads*, and countless more.

In the UK, in addition to hundreds of slang words that have developed individually and entered wider circulation, there have been some substantial subcultures of slang over the centuries. A few examples include: Elizabethan cant or thieves' argot; Cockney rhyming slang (https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:Cockney_rhyming_slang); other sources of slang in Cockney, including back slang (*rof* for *four*) and words of Indian origin via the British Empire (*shoofty*, *doolally*, *Blighty*, *have a dekko*); nineteenth century Romani and

Angloromani slang (e.g. *chav*, *shiv*); Polari, associated with gay subculture, theatre and entertainment in the 19th and early 20th century; and slang terms currently used in grime music and other popular culture (*fam*, *endz*, *bruv*, *blood*, *ting*).

Tony Thorne, one of Britain's leading experts in slang language, documents the British slang in his *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* (Thorne 2014) as well as online, including recent slang relating to the Covid-19 crisis: <https://language-and-innovation.com/> Jonathon Green is another leading lexicographer who has written numerous books on historical and contemporary British slang.

Slang is often central to young people's construction of identity. By using the slang that is different from their parents and the same as their friends, younger people can signal their youth, personal style, attitudes, friendships, and subcultures. It is of course not true that older people have no slang. People often use slang less as they age, but when older people were young, they very likely used slang which is entirely different to the slang used today, and perhaps now sounds outdated or quaint.

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 informal written conversation, and a wide-ranging impact on global circulation of slang today.

What is not slang?

It is important to recognise that accents and dialects—e.g. Cockney, Multicultural London English, or Liverpool English—are not slang. Accents and dialect grammars are as systematic as what we consider to be Standard English. It is easy to see this if you try to pretend to speak in an accent or a dialect that is not native or familiar to you: you will make mistakes because you have not learned the complexities of that language fully. Standard English is only considered 'more correct' because the speakers of that variety historically gained more political and social status than others.

Unlike accents and dialects, slang is more easily picked up, as it is limited to words. (However, it can be socially risky to pick up slang that you are not seen as 'entitled' to use!) To refer to accents and dialects as slang reduces their status to a mere fad or a few words that can be switched on and off. It is therefore very important to distinguish the use of slang vocabulary from a person's accent and dialect.

Word formation processes

A long time ago, in 1969, Richard Seymour described a number of word formation processes involved in the slang of his time. Although much of the slang he writes about is not used any more, it is interesting to reflect on whether the word-formation processes he discusses can still be seen in the slang we use today.

Derivation

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

Clipping

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').

Conversion

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 formation

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.

Analogy and metaphor

When a phrase creates a comical, exaggerated, or striking comparison to the intended meaning, without any structural change. For example, 'a dog's breakfast' refers to a mess.

Points for discussion

1. Here are some examples of common slang words, some quite old: *newb/newbie*, *wicked*, *tenner*, *cuppa*, *journo*, *OK*, *argy-bargy*, *barking mad*, *veg*, *minger*, *PNG*, *PLU*. Can you identify the word formation processes from the list above that created them?

2. Think of some more recent examples of slang (e.g. millennial, online, or pop cultural slang). Do any of them involve the same word-formation processes that Seymour documented half a century ago?
 3. Are some word formation processes more common than others? Why might that be?
 4. Can you think of slang words that don't fit into any of these processes?
 5. Think of a few examples where you can see that the meaning of a slang word has changed. Why do you think it changed?
 6. Have a chat with your parents, grandparents, or other older acquaintances about slang that was popular when they were young. Is it still in use? Did it perform some of the same social functions as contemporary slang? Did it use similar word formation processes?
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Linguistics Research Digest entries

- Oh gurl, you sassy!
<https://linguistics-research-digest.blogspot.com/2019/10/oh-gurl-you-sassy.html>
- Just your Donald!
<https://linguistics-research-digest.blogspot.com/2012/04/just-your-donald.html>

Other Teaching Units

- Many of the Spoken London English Teaching Units features slang being used in casual conversation.

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

Eble, Connie. 1996. *Slang and Sociability: In-Group Language among College Students*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press.

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

Thorne, Tony. 2014. *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* (4th edition). London: Bloomsbury.