

Sociological Aspects of Slang

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Abstract

The article explores the sociological implications of slang as a form of communication that reflects cultural shifts, social dynamics and group identity. It delves into the ways in which slang fosters inclusivity, constructs boundaries and establishes a sense of belonging within various social communities. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the role of slang in reflecting social attitudes, power dynamics and in-group dynamics. It underscores the importance of examining slang as a lens through which to understand and analyze social interactions, identity formation and the complexities of cultural expression within diverse societal contexts.

Keywords: musicality, informality, group-restriction, secrecy, reduplicatives, debasement, aggressiveness, humour, privacy.

Slang is associated with many sociological properties, which derive from both its varied nature and its multifunctionality. The properties are reported here below and arranged in descending order of frequency: that is, the first property (group-restriction) is the most frequent among slang definitions, whereas the thirty-first (spontaneity) is reported only in one study of all those that we have explored.

Given the miscellaneous nature of such properties, and their often contradictory nature (cf. debasement and prestige), slang is not claimed to exhibit all of them simultaneously. However, it should exhibit at least some of the following:

- **Group-restriction:** in its specific sense, slang is frequently described as an in-group vocabulary that identifies people of a common age and experience, and facilitates their group solidarity. London teenagers, for example, may be identified by their use of such slang words as *man*, *mate* and *wicked* (COLT), while drug addicts use such words as *coke*, *joint*, and *smack* to create cohesiveness within their group.
- **Informality:** slang (esp. general slang) is commonly viewed as a colloquial level of speech that signals the speaker's desire to soften the seriousness or formality of the dominant tone, and to assume instead a more familiar or conversational tone.

Instances of slang informality are the noun *bread* (orig. U.S.), used in familiar contexts to mean 'money', and the verb phrases *go big* (orig. U.S.) and *go it*, which are the informal counterparts of 'be a big success, have a large sale' and 'go along at great speed'.

- **Time-restriction:** slang is temporary since it changes over time. It is typical of some generation but falls into disuse very quickly, with the taking over of the next generation and the change of trends and tastes. Thus, some slang words may have a very similar meaning, but a different temporal collocation, as shown by the near-synonymic exclamations for 'excellent': *wizard*, *groovy*, *magic*, *fab* (^ *fabulous*), *brill* (^ *brilliant*), *sick* [13, 98].

- Ephemerality: slang is an ephemeral, short-lived, everchanging vocabulary. Novel words and special meanings crop up at very brief intervals, but generally remain in current use for a short time, and then pass away as quickly as they have been created. Thus, while some words, such as *chap*, *chum* and *grub* “have been slang for a long time”, other words (called “vogue words” in the literature), such as *massive*, *paranoid* and *reckon*, “have become fashionable for a short period of time”. And still other words, such as *bus*, *phone* and *pub* are no longer felt as slang, but rather as colloquial language.
- Debasing: like many other non-standard varieties, slang is considered debased, subordinate speech, characteristically dominated by reversed prestige, lack of dignity and anti-social features. At least, slang is viewed so by the conformists, who condemn many common slang words (e.g. *bloke*, *dude*, *guy*) because they lower the level of discourse to degraded language.
- Freshness: slang is often described as a fresh vital vocabulary that keeps language alive and growing. The vigour and liveliness that lie behind slang make it a language for fashionable people, and for those who want to avoid the monotony of ordinary language. Thus, fashionable young people use such slang adverbs as *for yonks* (‘a long time’), *in a mo* (^ *in a moment*) and *indeedee* (^ *indeed*) to be fresh and to escape the dullness of neutral style [1, 440].
- Playfulness: slang is usually playful, since it manipulates words and their meanings. The jocular use of slang is illustrated, for example, by the catch-word *Abyssinia*, which plays on the pronunciation of the parting salutation *I’ll be seeing you!*, by the term *Eyetalian*, which distorts standard *Italian* (cf. offens. *Eyetic*), and by *nana* (^ *banana*) and *cake*, used jocularly for ‘a foolish or silly person’.
- Subject-restriction: sometimes slang is described as the special, even specialized, vocabulary of some profession, occupation or activity in society. This makes slang peculiar to a set of people who are identified by their specific terminology or by the specialized terms they use with ingroup members. In particular, specific slang words such as *crack* (‘a potent, crystalline form of cocaine’), *junkie* (‘a drug addict’) and *joint* (‘a marijuana cigarette’) are related to the topic of drugs, and *creep* (‘a stealthy robber’), *dog* (‘an informer; a traitor’), and *the Family* (‘the thieving fraternity’) are connected with the crime topic.
- Humour: slang is usually hilarious and as Yust states, “an element of humour is almost always present in slang, usually as humorous exaggeration”. Sometimes the humour of slang is evident (as in antiphrases that are generally accompanied by an ironic intonation), but more frequently it is implied (as in punning or intrinsic ambiguity). The humour of slang is clearly illustrated by the expressions *to dance one’s ass/tits off*, *to work one’s brains off/out* and *to work one’s guts out*, which are exaggerations of the effects produced by excessive dancing, studying or working [6, 78].
- Hybridism: slang is sometimes viewed as a hybrid language variety because some foreign words may occur in its vocabulary. Foreign lexical material can be borrowed either as direct loans, as in *ciao* (‘hello; good-bye’) from Italian, and *loco* (orig. U.S. ‘mad, insane’) from Spanish, or as loan adaptations, as in *capeesh* (chiefly U.S. ‘do you understand?’), which is adapted from Italian *capisce*. In any case, the effect of borrowing is always that of a mixture of languages and cultures.
- Localism: there are many regional differences in slang. British, American and Australian slang, although they share a common language (English), are viewed as different varieties of it (cf. Brit. slang *bloke* ‘man, fellow’ and U.S. slang *guy*), and within each variety, other sub-varieties can be identified. For instance, American slang is often differentiated between Southern and Northern, and within British slang, Cockney is used in the London area. So, while some slang items can be found in all regions of Britain (e.g. *knackered* ‘exhausted, worn out’), others, such as *whistle*, are restricted to Cockney [14, 118].

- Colour: slang has a tendency to be colourful, or, as Andersson and Trudgill suggest, “to make your speech vivid, colourful and interesting”. Yust made reference to the “onomatopoeic colour” of some slang words of the period: e.g., *biff* (‘a blow, whack’), *flabbergast* (‘bombast’) and *flummox* (‘a failure’).
- Impertinence: slang may be defined as audacious, and be accused of disrespect and impertinence. For instance, it disregards respect for other people with its numerous impolite appellations. Many derogatory terms are coined or used in slang to name outsiders: e.g., the term *dago* (a corruption of Sp. *Diego* ‘James’) is used by American people for Spaniards, Portuguese, Italians or any foreigner, *Chinkie/-ey/-y* and *Paki* are used by British people to indicate Chinese, Pakistani or South Asian people, whereas *Pommie/-y* (^ *pomegranate*) is used in Australia and New Zealand for immigrants from Britain, esp. from England.
- Secrecy: slang may also be cryptic and exclusive when it is used by certain subgroups to hide their conversations from people in authority. Criminals, for example, use the slang verbs *nick* and *pinch* to mean ‘steal (a thing)’, and they employ the polysemous noun *stuff* (‘money, cash’, ‘stolen goods’, ‘forbidden goods smuggled into a gaol’) to speak secretly about clandestine drug traffic and other forms of illegal behaviour [7, 30].
- Musicality: another typical tendency of slang speech is to play with sounds. In particular, rhyme is the favourite sound effect of slang, as amply illustrated by the phenomenon best known as Cockney rhyming slang (e.g. *pork-pie* ‘a lie’). Yet reduplicatives (e.g. *hotsy-totsy* ‘comfortable, satisfactory’) and alliteration (e.g. *dinky-die* Austral. and N.Z. ‘honest, genuine’, *kidvid* U.S. ‘a video made for children’) also play a role in slang musicality.
- Privacy: slang is occasionally private, obscure or nearly incomprehensible to outsiders. It generally creates a sense of intimacy among in-group members, but at the same time it may create a sense of exclusion or even rejection among those people who are not part of the group. College students, for instance, show their closeness when they talk about the other sex: e.g., young men use *fox* and *knockout* to refer to ‘attractive girls’, and young women use *babe* and *magnet* for ‘attractive boys’. But most of these college slang words would be impenetrable to outsiders, esp. parents, teachers and adults in general [17, 4].
- Aggressiveness: slang is aggressive and forceful, and at times malicious or even cruel. Sornig cites the aggressive and parodistic undertone of slang, and Allen its “vicious and hostile verbal aggression”. In fact, slang is often used by speakers as a means of provocation or otherwise to express hostility and dislike. Verbal aggression is illustrated, for example, by the numerous slang terms referring to ‘an idiot, fool, crazy, or stupid person’ (*airhead*, *bone-head*, *cluck*, *drongo*, *dumb- dumb*, *flat-head*, *goof*, *knuckle-head*, *muggins*, *ning-nong*, *slob*, *turkey*, etc.)

Conclusion. Our examination has shed light on the sociological underpinnings of slang, positioning it as a vibrant form of communication that not only reflects but also shapes cultural nuances, social stratification, and group identity. Slang serves as an expressive tool, fostering inclusivity, constructing social boundaries, and amplifying the sense of belonging within diverse social communities. It emphasizes that the analysis and understanding of slang’s sociological properties offer profound insights into social dynamics, identity construction and the ever-evolving intricacies of linguistic and cultural expression within various societal settings.

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