

THE USE OF SLANG LANGUAGES

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Abstract: *People use slang in day to day communication irrespective of their age. Both adolescents and adults use them at some points in time or another, which is not pervasive in a given language lexicon rather it is ever-evolving. Using the published sources and reviews of the literature, this research aims to investigate the ways in which slang terms are used as a means of self-expression between and amongst generation. It further looks at how slang language is created by youth. The findings indicate that young generations are more tolerant of slang use compared to older generation in their everyday speech. The findings further suggested that the way terms are used figure into the concept of stance and the manner in which the words and phrases contain slang are utilized and expressed meaning during everyday discourse.*

Key Words: *Slang, communication, language, self-expression, lexico.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

"Yo, dude, wa s'up?," "wicked," "sweet," and "brutal" are all just a few examples of American slangs. These words are used by both adolescents and adults at some points in time or another, represent a mode of language that is not only pervasive in the American English lexicon, but is ever-evolving. One reason for this constant evolution is slang's use as a referent to specific people, places, actions, or activities; its use indicates a level of judgment, being negative or positive, about those referents (Eble, 2004).

However, though slang has common referents and modes of use, its evolution is user-dependent and is affected by different factors. One such factor is generational differentiation. Slang use varies based upon which generation is currently using a term and how long a specific term has been in use; as such, we can expect the meaning of certain words to change over time as the users mature and enter new phases of life. Another factor is that of stance, or a particular speaker's feelings, attitudes, affect, emotional involvement and value judgments (Barbieri, 2008). Stance is typically associated with both youth and group membership, and it is the final factor we will be discussing. Slang's use as an indicator of group membership has evolved historically and serves to form a sense of solidarity among members of specific subcultures.

For the purposes of this paper, we have chosen to look at how slang is used and its creation functions as a generational marker in American society, all while serving to depict both stance and group membership. We begin by offering a definition of slang, followed by a discussion of generational differentiation, stance and group membership involving the use of slang.

1.1 Defining Slang

In order to understand how slang is utilized, it is necessary to first establish a working definition of slang. Eble (2004) described slang as a "deliberate alternative vocabulary that sends social signals" (376) and evolves from current words in the language. These words are typically either shortened or their meaning is altered in some way so that the word becomes privatized or specific to the group who uses the word/words. Cooper (2001) further stated that the more acceptable a word is then the less likely it is to be perceived as slang amongst the general population.

Researchers also agree that an inherent difficulty lies in trying to pinpoint an exact definition of slang (Cooper, 2001; Eble, 2004; Moore, 2004); however, they do agree that it shares specific characteristics. Past research indicates that slang is ephemeral (Eble, 2004; Labov, 1992; Moore, 2004) due to the way it enters the lexicon and falls out of use fairly quickly, is a spoken language generally used in informal situations (Eble, 2004; Labov, 1992), it serves as an indicator of group membership (Cooper, 2001; Eble, 2004; Kiesling, 2004; Labov, 1992; Moore, 2004), its use further indicates an "attitude" of derision or indifference towards authority or established societal norms (Eble, 2004; Kiesling, 2004; Labov, 1992; Moore, 2004), and, finally, that it is not geographically restricted (Eble, 2004). However, though slang terms in general share these characteristics, other research indicates a narrower field of slang termed 'basic slang.'

Basic slang, while it shares some common features with regular slang, has marked differences in its usage patterns and longevity. Unlike common slang's ephemerality, basic slang is more enduring and has a tendency to last

from generation to generation. Another feature of basic slang is its wide use within a specific generational cohort, rather than the mainstream population, as it has a special appeal to the core values of the group ((Barbieri, 2008; Moore, 2004). Because basic slang begins with a specific youth culture that adopts the term as a means of “deviant or rebellious” response (Moore, 2004, p. 63) it becomes a core term for that generational group as it matures and its use remains steady. The consistent use of both common and basic slang in American English makes it a common mode of communication in the American English lexicon and an accepted mode of expression (Moore, 2004). Moreover, research indicates that slang serves to indicate a demarcation between generations (Barbieri, 2008; Cooper, 2001; Eble, 2004; Kiesling, 2004; Labov, 1992; Moore, 2004), the stance of the speakers (Barbieri, 2008; Kiesling, 2004; Moore, 2004), and group affiliation (Cooper, 2001; Eble, 2004; Kiesling, 2004; Labov, 1992; Moore, 2004). It is slang’s pervasive use in English that makes it worth studying, and teaching, in the academic setting.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Generational differentiation is one of the main markers of slang use. Slang, though it is typically associated with the younger cohort, is used across generations. Barbieri (2008), Cooper (2001), Eble (2004), Kiesling (2004), Labov (1992), and Moore (2004) all agree that while slang use is mainly found in the lexicon of adolescent and youth culture as an outward act of rebellion against adults and mainstream society, older generations also use slang as part of their everyday discourse. Eble (2004) believes that adults adopt slang as a way to “project a youthful image” (p. 382), but they themselves are not the purveyors of slang, rather the younger generation are the one’s responsible for slang use in American culture. Barbieri’s (2008) findings support this idea that youth are the main arbiters of slang use, as she found that older generations tend to rely more on stance markers than they do the use of slang. Cooper’s study (2001) found that younger generations are more tolerant of slang use, an indicator that older generations do not use it as commonly in their everyday speech patterns.

However, an ever-revolving cycle of slang words is found throughout history. Older generations, who once comprised the younger, were the creators of particular words that began to die out as the generation began to age; as such, the value of a slang term lies in its most recent version, and not that of the term’s older use (Eble, 2004). The ushering in of the new, younger generation brings with it a new youth culture, and consequently introduces a unique set of lexemes. Ironically, with each new generation of youth, the underlying message of slang use is borne out of an attempt to distinguish themselves from the older generation, their parents in particular. What both the older and the younger generation tends not to consciously realize is that even the older generation, as youth, had their own methods of rebellion against their elders and slang was the typical lexical vehicle of this outward rebellion. Examples of this can be found in Moore’s (2004) study of the terms “swell” and “cool”, Eble’s (2004) discussion of the term “hot” (p. 379), and Kiesling’s (2004) study on the use of “dude.”

Kiesling (2004) found that older generations typically stereotype “young people nowadays” to be not only “inarticulate” (p. 281), but slackers as well. However, their critique does not recognize the fact that they themselves were once the young people in question. For instance, the term “swell” used as slang, was first noted in the late 1700’s, and referred to stylish young men (Moore, 2004). This trend continued into the twentieth century, with “swell” still being used as reference to men who dressed well and carried themselves in a manner not associated with the working class. The term, however, began to evolve and was eventually identified as one that referenced those who lived on the “edge of respectable society” (64). As a result, several well-known 19th and 20th century authors, such as Byron and Mark Twain, employed swell as an adjective referring to not only something stylish and elegant, but as someone who lived on the fringe of acceptable society.

“Swell” and its continued use as a well-known slang term progressed even further into the 20th century with the advent of World War I. Historically, the youth in this era began to rebel against the Victorian cultures of their parents. Their ideals ran counter to the ideas of earnestness and restraint that dominated the older generation’s sensibilities and instead, promoted modernity and a shift in core values, namely those values dealing with overt sexuality. With this shift, swell became “the most widely used slang term of approval through the 1920s, and the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s” (Moore, 2004, p. 65). Resultantly, “swell” signalled a drastic shift in the modern youth’s attitude towards the older generation’s positionality on propriety, modesty, and proper behaviour.

After the long span of swell in popular usage, the new generation of 1950s arose, and with it the term cool (Moore, 2004). The development of this new term came about in part by the “tendency for adolescents to see their elders as lacking in authenticity and sincerity” (Moore, 2004, p. 74). This time period encapsulates the rebellion of youth through various mediums of film and print. Moore offers two prominent examples from this time period: J.D. Salinger’s (1951) novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and the James Dean film *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). These representations exemplified the idea of youthful rebellion as they are “sympathetic depictions of adolescents who feel alienated from adults” (Moore, 2004, p. 74).

Kiesling (2004) and Eble (2004) also agree that slang within the youth culture has developed as a means of rebellion against the older generation’s definition of acceptable behaviour. Their discussion leads back to the idea that

the evolution of cool as an acceptable slang term derived from the casual attitude of jazz musicians and other people in the time period from the 1940's to the 1960's who were viewed as arbiters of an aura that expressed "easy competence...[and]...stylishness" (Moore, 2004, 71-72). As the years progressed, new slang terms evolved as a means of generational identification, one of them being the term "dude."

Following the trend of a new slang corpus emerging almost systematically, dude arose as slang terminology between male youth around the 1980's (Kiesling, 2004). Interestingly, dude, like swell, historically referred to "a sharp dresser" (p. 283), and became a form of address for certain clothes-conscious groups of men. As dude-usage progressed through the 20th century, it, like its historical predecessors swell and cool, became an everyday "exclamation of delight and/or affection" (p. 284). Its use, as evidenced by its historical referent to young men, has remained true to this original group.

The predominantly young male use of dude is an aspect of the cool solidarity stance of young male culture. Dude allows men to share close companionship and emotional intimacy while maintaining the homosocial accord, "that is, the small zone of "safe" solidarity between camaraderie and intimacy" (Kiesling, 2004, p. 291). Dude denotes a stance that not only refers to young men, but one that is "attractive to adolescents" (p. 300) as well. As dude and swell both emerged from a lengthy history of usage, it is evident that the meaning of said terms has evolved and changed over time. Swell, which at one point in time was considered to be "the slang word" [emphasis mine], which was the "most widely used term of approval...through the 1920's until the 1950's" (Moore, 2004, p. 65), until it shifted to cool in the 1960's is much like "dude" in its current terms of use. During its time, "swell came to be reinterpreted as extraordinarily uncool... 'corny, square'" (p. 77) and evolved into a different term, unlike "dude," a term that has remained in vogue from its use in the 80's to the present time. As seen through this example, the cool factor of a slang term easily comes and goes according to each generational shift, where "what was cool in 1982 is not necessarily cool in 2002 but may become cool again in 2005" (Kiesling, 2004, p. 300). As of 2004 and the publication of Kiesling's article, dude was prevalently used in American society, specifically since it was a term that "indexes a stance of cool solidarity for everyone...also having second orders of indexicality relating it to young people, young men, and young counterculture men" (p. 300). This use determines its longevity as an acceptable slang term in a wide range of groups, even those that may not be typical users of the term, such as African-Americans.

Eble (2004) addresses the fact that African-American youth and the rise of the hip-hop musical genre has had a major impact on slang and its use in the American lexicon, an idea that is supported by both Kiesling's (2004) examination of the term "dude" and Moore's (2004) discussion about "cool" and "swell." Labov (1992) also supports the idea that African-American youth are arbiters of use, as they, in her surveys, showed up as frequent users of slang.

As a result, it is important to look at the ways in which slang terms are used as a means of self-expression between and amongst generations. How terms are used figure into the concept of stance and the manner in which the words and phrases that comprise slang are utilized, and express meaning, during everyday discourse.

2.1 Stance

Though Kiesling (2004) and Moore (2004) were the first to discuss stance in regards to its use in relationship to slang, Barbieri (2008) was the first to provide a full definition based upon her research. She defined stance as how a speaker expresses subjective meaning through affect, emotion, attitude, level of interpersonal involvement, and value judgments. Like Kiesling, who associated stance with an air of distance and casualness between cohorts, and Moore who never directly mentioned the term stance, but referenced the affects and emotions that embody slang by associating it with a sense of "detachment, knowingness, and emotional control" (p. 78), Barbieri found, in her discussion on variation in language use based upon age, that stance was more commonly used among younger speakers than it was among older adults.

Using key word analysis (a method which looks for words that occur most frequently in a specific text) of 400,000 words collected from the American Conversation corpus, Barbieri (2008) examined how speakers between the ages of 15 to 25 and 35 to 60 used speech. In pursuing her purpose, uncovering speech patterns between the two age groups, she revealed major differences between youth stance and adult stance. Barbieri discovered youth stance was most often expressed using "...inserts (uhm, ah, uh), polite speech-act formulae (please, sorry), first and second person reference (I, me, you), attitudinal or personal effect adjectives (stupid, sucks, good, awesome), intensifiers (totally, too, really), discourse markers (like, know, right), and slang (dude, cool)" (pp. 67-78). Adults, on the other hand, relied more on modals (may, will, could), making their stance less obvious and not as readily expressed through linguistic features. She asserted that the adult use of stance is essentially one-dimensional; whereas, youth stance is more "flexible" and "multi-functional" in its use (p. 78).

Her findings support the earlier research of Kiesling (2004) and Moore (2004) both of whom described stance as a multi-functional part of youth discourse. Kiesling, in his discussion on the slang term "dude" asserted that stance plays multiple roles in the term's meaning. Drawing his data from multiple sources—surveys, ethnographic/interactive observations, media, personal experience—Kiesling found stance provided the user with an air of solidarity that appeared both "effortless", "nonchalant" (p. 282), and representative of a "nonconformist" (p. 299) attitude. Stance, in

this regard, creates a sense of distance between the two parties engaged in the discourse, while still allowing them to maintain a sense of subtle camaraderie and an attitude of disdain regarding conventional authority. Moore (2004) asserted similar ideas about stance; however, he refers to it as an attitude that possesses the core features of “emotional control, detachment, knowingness, and deviance from the mainstream” (p. 79). The idea of stance and its demarcation between younger and older generations signifies the importance that slang plays in determining who the primary users are of this language facet. All studies, except Barbieri (2008) support the idea that slang is also associated with group membership.

2.2 Group Membership

One of the most salient features of slang is the concept of group identification. Its use in this context provides members with a way to either identify with others who share common interests or exclude those who do not understand the subcultural interactions that occur as a result of slang use. This use of language is considered both fashionable and inclusive for anyone who wants to be seen in a light of group belonging. For instance, a young man who plays football in high school may want to be a Jock, regardless of any other skills or group affinity he may be able to fit into; therefore, it is dependent upon him to adopt the appropriate terminology, or slang, which that group uses to identify itself to other members. Conversely, slang can force people into groups even if they would rather not be seen that way; for example, a cheerleader who gets great grades and earns scholarships and is called an airhead or rah-rah, may not identify with either of those terms since she would also like to be recognized for her academic accomplishments. Unfortunately, the cheerleader’s social situation dictates that she responds in an accommodating manner and accept the slang terms her group cohorts place upon her if she wants to be included within that specific social group.

The cheerleader is a great example of how traditional research has classified slang as a linguistic identifier of groups within society. According to Eble (2004), Labov (1992) and Moore (2004) slang is a derivative language variation created by youth to help them establish a sense of self-identification (Eble, 2004; Moore, 61; Labov, 1992), while simultaneously establishing both affinity or solidarity with a group and relationship interactivity between members of that group (Kiesling, 298; Labov, 345; Moore, 82; Barbieri, 78; Eble, 375). Labov (1992) found, through the administration of a questionnaire given to 261 college students, that group membership can be identified by different social categories such as race, gender, region and how far a student is in their education. These categories often determine who uses certain slang terms and whether or not the groups using the terms are characterized as deviant or exemplary according to their social class structure.

Groups can take on the low class status (Moore, 2004) of subversive deviant when they exercise irreverent, flippant and defiant slang tokens in everyday discourse. Because “slang is vocabulary with attitude” [emphasis author’s own] (Eble, 2004, p. 382) it is often used as an identifier of marginalized groups (Eble, 2004; Labov, 1992; Moore, 2004). These groups are similar in that they exhibit a “degree of commitment to deviant, rebellious, or antiauthoritarian values” (Moore, 2004, p. 69) and a desire to set themselves apart from other groups and the older generation.

Research indicates that, historically, groups who use slang can be broken down into certain categories (Eble, 2004; Kiesling, 2004; Labov, 1992; Moore, 2004). Eble, Labov, and Moore all identify early slang user categories that include musicians (specifically jazz and hip-hop), individuals living on the fringe of society (i.e. druggies, prison inmates, carnival workers, gang members, thieves, and nightclub performers), people who feel they lack personal freedom or power (military personnel, African-Americans, teenagers), and others who disagree with the basic ideals of society (hipsters, beatniks, punks). These groups, in response to the constraints they feel are placed upon themselves identify one another through the use of slang. Slang, in this context, helps them to create a secret code, if you will, and exclude others (most specifically the older generation and those in power) who are not in the know. Eble claimed that one of the requirements of group membership is the ability to stay current on the slang being used by other members, to not do so will cause someone to become excluded from the group or find themselves in an uncomfortable situation.

One way in which youth are able to maintain their sense of belongingness is by adopting a stance of effortless disregard for social propriety and solidarity with their age cohorts. Kiesling’s (2004) study on the term “dude” showed that young men typically use it as a means of solidarity. By referring to each other in this way they are suggesting a certain camaraderie that makes them members of a group. The term has traditionally been associated with druggies, surfers, and slackers. However, there is evidence it has become an acceptable term for other subcultural groups as is evidenced in its widespread use amongst other members of society.

The use of dude among young men as a common term shows that “the group identifying functions of slang are indisputable” (Eble, 2004, p. 381). Data further shows more purposeful word choice in adolescent use of slang to differentiate themselves from adults (Labov, p. 340). As an example of this differentiation, Kiesling cites the example of Spicoli and Mr. Hand in the 1982 film, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. In the film, Spicoli (the stoned surfer) and Mr. Hand (the uptight teacher) are constantly at odds with one another. Part of the conflict emerges from Spicoli’s seemingly clueless attitude towards Mr. Hand’s demands regarding the surfer’s reprehensible, anti-establishment behaviour. However, Spicoli’s attitude projects one of laidback coolness, not outright rebellion. His youthful cohorts

understand him and do not see his behaviour as subversive, but as amusing. In this respect, individual slang words, as exemplified by “dude,” can both imply group membership and confirm solidarity with other members of that group.

Eble’s (2004) research, a study among undergraduate students that resulted in the identification of sixteen groups bearing slang identifiers, showed that slang can be adopted as a social performance to take on the image or images that the slang term invokes. This is also evidenced in Moore’s study on slang and generational shifts, where he notes slang functions to “highlight value differences between young and old” (2004, p. 82) and specifically identifies several groups such as members of the beatnik culture, Jazz musicians, Cool Kids, and Hipsters. All of these groups project a certain image not only through their outward appearance, but through their use of insider group slang. Cooper’s (2001) study on the acceptability of slang use among different social groups also identified Jazz musicians as arbiters of slang terms who are readily identifiable by their use of language. His assertion that “the use of slang is a sign of membership within that group” (p. 71) agrees with that of Eble (2004), Kiesling (2004), Labov (1992), and Moore (2004), all of whom believe slang use is an indicator of group belonging.

2.3 Reflection

Slang is the verbal expression of exuberant social emancipation and a way for people to assert their self-identity. When someone chooses to associate themselves with a particular group, they adopt the language, behaviours and fashion associated with other members of that group. As a result, they have made a choice to be known as a *jock*, *punk*, *rapper*, *queer*, or *bitch*. As a result, others can generally identify what names or categories with which to place those individuals. Sometimes group identification is automatic, as in age variation. Someone can be considered an outsider from a youthful perspective if they have aged beyond the focus of the music, fashion or culture that is common to a younger person. For example, if a 40-year old man likes hip-hop, he may be accepted by some members of the group, but rejected by most as a joke or someone desperate to retain his youth. When older men date younger women, even if the age difference is 20 years, it is not frowned upon in American society as evidenced by a lack of true slang terms for a man such as this. However, if an older woman dates a younger man, she is called a *cougar* and is the subject of humour and judgment, as evidenced by the use of slang applied to her persona and behaviour. This example exhibits that for women, the greater the difference in age between her and her male counterpart, the harsher the criticism.

Also, American youth use slang more frequently than older adults. In fact, as the younger group ages, their use of slang decreases unless they are current members of a subculture that utilizes slang as a membership marker. Besides age, education serves as marker of slang use, as an increase in educational level results in the decrease of slang usage.

As a marker of both generational differentiation and group membership, slang provides a lasting contribution to spoken American English. A mostly oral tradition, slang provides people with a means of self-expression that may not necessarily exist for them inside of the mainstream lexicon. True subcultural groups work to distinguish themselves from society-at-large through not only their appearance, but through the ways in which they communicate with one another. Slang is this mode of communication. Therefore, it is important for us as scholars and teachers to have a solid understanding of slang and the role it plays in the lives of its users.

3. CONCLUSION:

Out of the six research articles we reviewed in an attempt to discern basic findings regarding college slang and its use among youth and different subcultural groups, we concluded that the subtopics of stance and group membership covered in our paper were conclusive in their overall findings. Generational differentiation, however, is still an area that, according to each author, is either lightly touched upon, or inconclusive and in need of further research. According to Barbieri, “There has been little, if any, research that has had age differences in language use as its primary focus, in contrast with other social variables such as sex and socio-economic class, age has not typically been of interest in and of itself” (as found in Cheshire 1987:766, quoted by Barbieri, 2008, p. 58). She elaborates that “Research focusing on particular age groups has focused almost exclusively on adolescence” (cf. Eckert 1997; contra Andersen 2001; quoted by Barbieri, p. 59).

Therefore, we were able to determine that the commonality of opinions between the six authors of slang were that slang emerges as a new lexicon and belongs to the youth of the specific time period being studied. Hence, while learning from these articles that youth create their own slang per generation, as a means of rebellion against their parents and others in authority, as well as the values and expectations set upon them by said people, we still know little about how this differs from lang that was produced by the older generation in their own periods of youthful rebellion. Therefore, if this lexicon exists as the progression from youth to the older generation occurs, it would be interesting to examine how other slang terms have evolved and/or been discarded as a way to separate one generation from another. Barbieri (2008) sums up this idea by stating that, “we know little about how speakers from different age groups might differ in their linguistic choices, particularly at the lexico-grammatical level” (p. 59).

As a group of non-traditional students evaluating this generational shift in slang, we propose an area of future research that would entail a study concurrent with our lives and the use of slang in the present time. Being that we are

all members of, essentially, the same generation, we feel that performing research comparing and contrasting slang usage of our youth to the youth of today would result in findings exemplifying the shift in lexicon that is found with each generational shift.

Future research, however, is not the only way in which we might use slang as an academic tool. Practical applications in the classroom are also suitable. As English teachers to non-native speakers, it is vital that the language we bring into our classrooms is both pertinent and authentic. Most importantly, our lexicon should be understandable to our students. In striving for authenticity, we cannot employ scripted language, as that is not how everyday, conversational English occurs in real-life situations. We need to expose them to real world language contact. Since our students will be faced with many linguistic challenges as they navigate the English speaking community, it is essential we provide them with examples and practice in the classroom that will prepare them for this discursive encounters. Given this, slang is a necessary teaching tool, as its use is so pervasive within American English. However, in teaching slang, we must be sensitive and overtly aware of how we incorporate slang into the learning environment as usage outside of context may only serve to confuse our students rather than teach them anything valuable.

4. Pedagogical Implementation:

This teaching concept holds true throughout all areas of English language learning, but for our current focus on slang usage we are mainly concerned with if, when, and how should slang be taught in the L2 classroom. As one of our group members is a non-native English speaker and has experienced difficulties when encountering slang in the classroom as well as in normal every day's life, our group consensus to this dilemma follows closely to the aforementioned authentic teaching approach. Slang is a vibrant part of our everyday culture; ignoring its existence within the classroom hinders understanding for our students. The use of slang in the classroom is a delicate situation that must be dealt with carefully. Authentic use of slang would entail the teacher using it in their vernacular, but it is integral that we provide an explanation as to its meaning and spelling, otherwise there is no value in presenting it in the classroom. Therefore, we, as teachers, must be acutely aware of our language and present it in an authentic manner, yet follow this authentic use of slang with an inclusion of an explanation to guide students' learning.

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