

Slang Lexicography and The problem of defining Slang ©

By: (Farris) Jorgen Amari
Email: Nangslang@gmail.com

Oxford 2010

The Fifth
International
Conference on
Historical
Lexicography and
Lexicology

"By such innovations are languages enriched, when the words are adopted by the multitude, and naturalized by custom."

Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616)

It is widely acknowledged that slang is considered an alternative register of English which negates all that is polite, pious and noble, that it is bawdy, crass, cruel, racist and sexist and yet brims with humor, color and vibrancy. The existence of this type of lexis is possibly as old as language itself, for slang appears to be part of the everyday interaction within a community with distinct and identifiable groups or subgroups.

Nevertheless, within the practice of dictionary making, slang still poses quite a challenge. Slang terms often tend to confound the category labels used by lexicographers. For example, in his article (*American Lexicology, 1942-1973. 146*) James B. McMillan identifies the fundamental problem of slang lexicology as a problem of definition, and I quote: "Until slang can be objectively identified and segregated (so that dictionaries will not vary widely in labeling particular lexemes and idioms) or until more precise subcategories replace the catchall label SLANG, little can be done to analyze linguistically this kind of lexis, or to study its historical change, or to account for it in sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic contexts"

It must be pointed out however, that lexicographers are not solely responsible for the lack of an adequate definition of slang. After all, slang terms are largely ephemeral, elusive, and simply characteristic of marginalized groups and subgroups. Consequently, the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic contexts in which slang is embedded cannot be readily identified or captured by any system of distinct categories.

In my view, one of the major stumbling blocks is the assumption among many linguists that thanks to their elusive nature which is characteristic of subcultures, being mostly oral and short-lived, slang terms are considered peripheral to language. To these linguists and scholars, slang is nothing more than a quirk, a linguistic deviancy substituted for what is regarded as 'standard' and therefore can not be neatly classified by a system of discrete labels.

Quite often, slang emanates from conflicts in fundamental socio-psychological values. When an individual applies language in a new and novel way to express opposition, ridicule, or contempt, often tinged with sharp wit and humor, he or she may be an unconscious creator of a slang item. If the speaker happens to belong to a group then the expression will gain currency based upon the unanimity of attitude within the group.

The American poet Walt Whitman once wrote in the *North American Review*, in 1885:

Slang ... an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably ... the wholesome fermentation or eructation of those processes eternally active in language, by which froth and specks are thrown up, mostly to pass away, though occasionally to settle and permanently crystallize.

Thus, slang terms such as *Plonk* or *Plonker* (A general term of abuse), *Mule-mouth* (An African-American term for a police informer), *Jerk* (A general term of abuse)—express the attitudes, not necessarily always pejorative, of one social group or class towards the values of another. Slang items sometimes derive from within the group, self-deprecating, satirizing or mocking its own attitudes, values and behavior; e.g., *Brothel sprout* (A jaded and overworked prostitute), *Bean counter* (An accountant, anyone dealing with finances). Slang is created largely by social forces rather than by an individual; consequently, it is difficult to determine the origin of slang terms.

Perhaps it is important to note that psychologically, the majority of slang goes back to the point in human culture and history when animism was practiced as a widespread form of religion. It was believed that all objects consisted of two aspects or dimensions: one was external and objective and could be perceived through the senses; the other imperceptible nevertheless identical with what we now refer to as the “real”. Thus, our survival as a species depended upon the manipulation of all “real” aspects of life such as hunting and gathering food, habitation, protection, reproduction, and so on and so forth. Humans survived through control or influence upon the imperceptible phase of reality, or the animus. This influence was brought to bear through various aspects of what is known as sympathetic magic (or, imitative magic), one of the most powerful and enduring being the use of language. It was believed that words had great potency and magic, because they evoked the objects to which they all referred. In other words, the world is simply a rush of jumbled perceptions and language, including slang, is an effective tool to arrange and re-arrange all that visual abundance.

The use of metaphor, particularly amongst Western languages, owes its power and influence to echoes of this imitative magic. Slang shares certain characteristics of metaphor in order to evoke images and symbols which may appear too close to “reality.” For example, to refer to the neck as a *squeeze* evokes the image of hanging by the rope or to refer to a woman as a *Broad* brings to mind the image of a woman with large hips (*broad in the beam*).

The power to shock is another important attribute of slang. This is often achieved by the superimposition of images and symbols which are incongruous with images, or even values of others, usually members of the dominant culture. It is this juxtaposition of incongruous images that renders slang counter-cultural or anti-social, yet most popular. It must be pointed out however that every slang item has its own reasons for popularity and currency.

In addition, when socio-psychological conditions alter, a slang term may change in meaning and in its currency, entering into what is generally called the mainstream or standard language, or may even continue its existence as slang within certain sectors of society. Some slang items gradually become less ‘pungent’ and more respectable, as it were, when they lose their verve and intensity. Words such as *Funk*, *Shag*, and *Spunk* once considered too racy and risqué are now used quite openly in movies and T.V shows. Some slang remains slang for centuries, like *Booze* for alcoholic drink which has been around since the seventeenth century. Naturally, slang has a high turnover rate, and its excessive use tends to dull the vibrancy and liveliness of some of its expressions.

Some slang terms are revived for a second or a third time, the way that fashions are. For instance, *Bint* from Arabic بنت, meaning girl or daughter, was first noted by the English orientalist and explorer Francis Richard Burton (1821-1890). The term was then adopted by British soldiers during the occupation of Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century to mean ‘girlfriend’ or ‘casual

sex' as in 'to go *binting*'. It was then revived at the beginning of the twentieth century. The term was used in the London area synonymously with 'bird' in its slang usage from at least the 1950s. The term is now generally used as a derogatory slang word in the U.K referring to a woman or a girl. The rate of turnover in slang words has undoubtedly been accelerated by the influence of the mass media, particularly the Internet.

The most effective and enduring slang terms often function on a more complex socio-linguistic level of communication which generally reveals something about the target, the user of the term, and also the social background and framework against which the term is employed. Slang tends to leak through various strata of culture, particularly subcultures, thus invading what is considered the dominant culture. Some slang words remain latent for long periods of time before they finally gain currency in the mainstream culture. Others perish before fully seeing the light of day. Still others make an impact by vividly expressing an idea. Slang is fun and fashionable and in many ways shares similar attributes.

Some subcultures however seem to contribute more to the growth and proliferation of slang than others. For example, in recent years, Rap and Hip Hop have contributed a great deal to the vast pool of slang, whereas the Mafia with its relatively long history of criminal activity in America has contributed very little. This of course is due to the Mafia's structural tightness and the shroud of secrecy surrounding its activities. Nevertheless, as subcultures begin to dissolve and disintegrate, contacts with the so-called prevailing culture increase, subsequently leading to both fusion and diffusion. For example, thieves, pickpockets, pimps and prostitutes had tight-knit structures communicating in highly secret argot; however, their words are now used freely by people with no or very little knowledge or experience of such activities.

Pig's grunt or People's poetry

Slang is employed for a variety of purposes, but primarily it is used to convey a certain emotional or psychological attitude; although, the same term may also express diametrically opposed positions when used by different groups of people. It is generally agreed that quite a number of slang terms are mainly used to express contempt, though they may create ambivalence when used in affection or close familiarity; e.g. *ho*, *bastard*, or the infamous *N-word*. Slang can shock when used directly; however, some terms soften the impact of a sensitive issue. Slang can also be a means to form or promote identification with a certain class or social subgroup. It must be added that some slang words are essential because there are no words in the standard language expressing exactly the same meaning: words such as *Geek*, *Nerd*, and *Soap opera* have no standard equivalents in the English language.

Since most slang is used on the oral level, the choice of terms naturally follows a multitude of unconscious thought patterns. Most creators of slang items are probably not fully aware when creating these terms; although, it has been claimed that slang is the result of a conscious effort on the part of ingenious individuals to make the language more pungent, playful and picturesque. Nevertheless, these purveyors of slang do not seem overly bothered by the outcome of their inventiveness and that what might befall the language as a result of their non-conformity.

Slang derives much of its force from its ability to mock or undermine what is considered 'standard'. It is a language consciously employed to invent and re-invent, to freshen and vitalize. Therefore, it is difficult to pin down exactly what slang means, which only serves to emphasize its elusive nature. Furthermore, the use of slang forms part of what is called style-shifting and code-switching, which means, the blending of and shifting between different codes of language, dialects or languages.

In the end, whether slang is "the grunt of human hog..." according to the American satirist Ambrose Bierce (*The Devil's Dictionary*.1911), or "a poor man's poetry," as suggested by John Moore in the book, "You English Words" (1961), Lexicographers are faced with the difficult task of selecting and implementing a suitable set of "boundaries" since these so-called "boundaries" are permeable and therefore few people will agree upon any given definition of slang.

The slang lexicographer, Eric Partridge (1894-1979), in his book, *Slang: Today and Yesterday*, 1933, has provided a list of 15 reasons why people use slang:

1. *in sheer high spirits, by the young in heart as well as by the young in years; 'just for the fun of the thing'; in playfulness or waggishness.*
2. *as an exercise either in wit and ingenuity or in humor. (The motive behind this is usually self-display or snobbishness, emulation or responsiveness, delight in virtuosity).*
3. *To be 'different', to be novel.*
4. *To be picturesque (either positively or - as in the wish to avoid insipidity - negatively).*
5. *To be unmistakably arresting, even startling.*
6. *to escape from clichés, or to be brief and concise. (Actuated by impatience with existing terms.)*
7. *To enrich the language. (This deliberateness is rare save among the well-educated, Cockneys forming the most notable exception; it is literary rather than spontaneous.)*
8. *to lend an air of solidity, concreteness, to the abstract; of earthiness to the idealistic; of immediacy and appositeness to the remote. (In the cultured the effort is usually premeditated, while in the uncultured it is almost always unconscious when it is not rather subconscious.)*
- 9a. *to lessen the sting of, or on the other hand to give additional point to, a refusal, a rejection, a recantation;*
- 9b. *to reduce, perhaps also to disperse, the solemnity, the pomposity, the excessive seriousness of a conversation (or of a piece of writing);*
- 9c. *to soften the tragedy, to lighten or to 'prettify' the inevitability of death or madness, or to mask the ugliness or the pity of profound turpitude (e.g. treachery, ingratitude); and/or thus to enable the speaker or his auditor or both to endure, to 'carry on'.*
10. *To speak or write down to an inferior, or to amuse a superior public; or merely to be on a colloquial level with either one's audience or one's subject matter.*
11. *for ease of social intercourse. (Not to be confused or merged with the preceding.)*
12. *To induce either friendliness or intimacy of a deep or a durable kind. (Same remark.)*
13. *To show that one belongs to a certain school, trade, or profession, artistic or intellectual set, or social class; in brief, to be 'in the swim' or to establish contact.*

14. Hence, to show or prove that someone is not 'in the swim'.

15. To be secret - not understood by those around one. (Children, students, lovers,

members of political secret societies, and criminals in or out of prison, innocent persons in prison, are the chief exponents.)

Still, in my view, within the practice of dictionary making, particularly in the Anglophone world, the definition of slang continues to prove problematic. The description of the form and function of slang has been left largely to lexicographers. In addition, most linguists have not given adequate thought and attention to slang. Many take interest or pleasure in slang as a curious and lively part of language; however, they do not take slang seriously enough as a significant component of ordinary language use or as a field of study. Thus, to this end, slang is merely an object which may convey curiosity and novelty, or background information about the social status of the user, but it does not necessarily affect its function in communication. In other words, if it is to be included in general linguistic description at all, slang fits as an extraneous optional part rather than a recurring element.

In addition to slang, other supra-segmental prosodic components and dialects of low prestige have been understudied for quite the same reason. In contrast, the prestigious written form of language is regarded as the norm. Even the so-called paradigm shift in linguistics, which occurred in 1957, particularly with the arrival of transformational grammar, did very little to bring slang and low dialects into the mainstream of language study. In fact, the prescribed speaker-hearer format and the precedence of competence over performance further strengthened the practice of evaluating language based upon its standard written form.

The fact of the matter is, language is by nature a social phenomenon; In particular, the language that people use in the everyday course of their lives is far more complex, variegated and varied than its written counterpart. It is stated and generally understood as such that certain linguistic forms and components are socially motivated. Slang is no exception to such evolution and evaluation. Slang is a social phenomenon that serves the social nature of language. To further underscore this point, in an article published in 1978 (*American Speech* 53.14-16), Jonathan Lighter and Bethany Dumas point out that slang cannot be identified by any appeal to form, meaning, or grammar or as a component of any kind of autonomous linguistic system. Rather, slang must be identified by its social consequences, and by the effects its use has on the relationship between speaker and audience. Lighter and Dumas put forward four criteria for identifying a word or phrase as slang (1978, *American Speech* 53).

1. *Its presence will markedly lower, at least for the moment, the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing.*

2. *Its use implies the user's familiarity either with the referent or with that less statusful or less responsible class of people who have such special familiarity and use the term.*

3. *It is a tabooed term in ordinary discourse with persons of higher social rank or greater responsibility.*

4. *It is used in place of the well-known conventional synonym, especially in order (a) to protect the user from the discomfort caused by the conventional item or (b) to protect the user from the discomfort or annoyance of further elaboration.*

They conclude that "when something fits at least two of the criteria, a linguistically sensitive audience will react to it in a certain way. This reaction, which cannot be measured, is the ultimate identifying characteristic of true slang" (16).

Thus, slang cannot be defined independent of its functions and use. According to Connie Eble (Slang and Sociability 1996.12–24), despite the difficulties of defining the term, slang does have some consistent characteristics. Slang is lexical rather than phonological or syntactic. Slang terms do not follow idiosyncratic word order; rather, they fit into an appropriate grammatical slot in an established syntactic pattern. Furthermore, slang follows the same productive morphological processes as the ones responsible for the general lexis, such as compounding, affixation, shortening, and functional shift. It must be added that body language and intonation are often important in indicating that a certain word or phrase is to be interpreted as slang.

Later on, in a somewhat fine-tuned definition (*Historical Dictionary of American Slang* 1994-?), Jonathan Lighter defines slang as:

“Slang denotes an informal, nonstandard, nontechnical vocabulary composed chiefly of novel-sounding synonyms (and near synonyms) for standard words and phrases; it is often associated with youthful, raffish, or undignified persons and groups; and it conveys often striking connotations of impertinence or irreverence, especially for established attitudes and values within the prevailing culture.”

However, slang remains a word for linguistics as long as it is taken and understood in merely sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic terms. Slang is not simply an anomaly or an aberration created by some crude or deviant characters; rather, it is an important part of a dynamic sociolinguistic structure which, I believe, also wields characteristics usually exclusive to poetics. Many definitions of slang ignore this aspect by overstressing its lexical character. Slang is used to identify an attitude, employing qualities which are adaptable to human social and aesthetic needs and desires.

Also, another oft-cited characteristic of slang is its group-identifying function. It is well-documented that social groups and subgroups are fertile breeding grounds for an idiosyncratic type of lexis such as slang and jargon in order to reinforce the group solidarity and identity. Marginalized groups operating on the periphery of society seem particularly adept at creating slang. For example, **Leet** (**Leetspeak** or “**1337**”) was originally popular only among certain Internet subcultures, or, *netheads*, such as so-called computer hackers and online video gamers. **Leet**, also known as **eleet**, is an alternative alphabet for English. The leet alphabet is a form of symbolic writing. However, during the 1990s, and into the early 21st century, *Leet* became increasingly more commonplace on the Internet, and now it has spread well beyond Internet-based communication and into spoken language. Nevertheless, association with a group is not essential to the creation and development of slang. With the possibilities of rapid and widespread communication; particularly via the Internet, the group-identifying characteristics of slang for the public may be on the wane in favor of identification with a certain attitude, code, or style rather than with a distinct, easily delineated class or group.

It is also worth mentioning here that slang is not a unique or isolated type of lexis. Being an integral part of a continuum of words and expressions, it serves the social and interpersonal functions of language more than its ideational function. Thus, in many ways, slang is similar to--and sometimes difficult to distinguish from--other types of vocabulary, such as jargon, neologisms, colloquialisms and regionalisms or low dialects. It is also obvious that due to various social and psychological influences, many currents of the human spirit seem to emerge and converge in slang.

Whether it is considered casual or calculated speech, crude or playful, derogatory or self-deprecating, slang lacks clear-cut and proper demarcation marks. In fact, socio-psychological

complexities render the task of classifying slang difficult. For instance, the jargon that speakers use either at work or in any other activity can resemble slang in its curtness or disrespectfulness; however, whether language is slang or jargon has little to do with the nature or quality of the term; rather, it is to do with whatever social purposes it serves. Slang is distinct from jargon and the distinction lies in the fact that it is the language of a group or subculture with shared interests, values and attitudes but not necessarily a shared purpose. In my view, slang is a language of being and unity, not of vocation or avocation. Some jargon terms may resemble slang; nevertheless, the social circumstances which lead to the creation and use of jargon are different from those which encourage the use of slang.

In jargon, there is something beyond identifying oneself in social circumstance. It is more about facility and efficiency of speech than about linguistic defiance or class-identification. It must be added that jargon is not merely the language of work; it is also the language of hobbies, entertainment, sports, and so on. Though they are usually distinct, still slang and jargon are sometimes so closely connected that the borderline between the two becomes quite blurred. For example, 'Flaming', also known as 'bashing' which means: 'to post an email message intended to insult and provoke' (*New Hacker's Dictionary.1996*) was originally a computer jargon term used at MIT in the late 1980s. However, the term is now used as a slang term in chatrooms and other types of fora on the Internet.

Slang is usually characterized as "low" although many so-called standard dictionaries avoid defining slang as such. For example, according to the Concise Oxford dictionary (11th edition.2006), Slang is:

"Informal language that is more common in speech than in writing and is typically restricted to a particular context or group."

Webster's online dictionary defines slang as:

"an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech."

It must also be pointed out that most slang used, particularly by youth, isn't necessarily low speech, nor is it criminal or an attempt to conceal criminal activity. In fact, slang is a social or psychological fault line that distinguishes one group or class from another; for example, Internet slang is used by teenagers to keep their parents or other adults in the dark. The so-called teen chat lingo is an ingenious tool employed by young people in chatrooms to hide the meaning of their exchanges from their 'rents' (parents). For instance, *Crat*, meaning, 'can't remember a thing' is a chatroom acronym; although, major slang dictionaries still seem reluctant or hesitant to recognize or consider texting slang worthy of inclusion into the fold. This is perhaps because this type of vocabulary is mostly nothing more than shortened variations of common words. However, abbreviations and truncated forms are a frequent part of slang, e.g. *Bod, Crim, Perv*. There is no denying the fact that so-called Tech-lingo has been advancing rapidly through the educational pipeline for the last few years, and this appears to threaten the white picket fences of 'standard' English. In fact, according to a 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, two-thirds of middle- and high-school students accidentally used instant-messaging-style words in their work, while a quarter admitted using emoticons in their assignments.

The early slang dictionaries dealt almost exclusively with the slang and cant of lowlifes and criminals. Although, slang flourishes in the areas of narcotics, sex, drinking, and other crime, it does not exclusively feed and fatten on a steady diet of sins and vices. Today, we live in a "liberal society", and slang is used as a "liberal" language to deny conformity and allegiance to the mainstream society and the existing order of things. It is a refusal to accept what is considered norm, a 'cocking a snook' at the preservation of linguistic conventions. It is an attitude, a revolution against the status quo and those who try to repress it as an aberration or a linguistic anomaly. Slang is highly rich, colorful, divergent, and yet stylistically rebellious and different. Although slang's hallmark, according to J.F. Lighter (*Dumas, B.K., and Lighter, J. (1978)*), is, "Its undignified or indecorous tone", our current socio-linguistic attitudes seem to have rendered the lines between acceptable and antisocial hard to distinguish. In addition, our longstanding fascination with the quirky and colorful side of English without implying any criminal or unsavory attitude or behavior does guarantee a continuing tradition and perhaps near obsession regarding such lexis. Many assume that slang originates in people's need and desire to hide, confuse or obfuscate. Nevertheless, our desire for privacy which can often mean that we do not trust others and therefore are reluctant to divulge our private thoughts has led us to implement a variety of methods such as body language, speaking in a low tone of voice or using slang, to name but a few. Of course, cant or argot was chiefly employed to camouflage criminal activity. The list of terms that make it into slang dictionaries are a mixture of cant, jargon, informal, and slang; it demonstrates how easily terms can cross over from one category into another or even overlap and perhaps even occupy more than one category. For example, cant was used to hide criminal activity by thieves and beggars, yet it is also considered criminal jargon, e.g. the word *Drum*, meaning 'home, house' (*U.K underworld slang since 19th C*)

One thing is certain: slang is casual and quite metaphorical. The figurative side of slang comes right through many slang words and expressions: e.g. 'Hot' a metaphor meaning 'sexually attractive', or *Coffin-dodger*, a crude metaphor for an elderly person. The desire to enliven speech and the impulse towards increased sense of familiarity and intimacy has certainly led to creating a relationship between metaphor and slang. Slang is a language that is vivid, humorous and witty; a language invented by individuals providing lexis that expands and pushes the boundaries of allusion and metaphor. The users of slang are in many ways similar to poets though not restricted by codes of taste and decorum as well as socio-logical and linguistic considerations. Slang encourages a break with what is regarded as 'standard'; it exalts anti-rational bursts and spurts of expression. It is the feast of stylistic imagination where things are paradoxical and transgressive, where it is "cool" to be bad and "wicked" is good, where the shock factor is dignified and celebrated.

As a poet and a first-time slang lexicographer who has been working on a comprehensive dictionary of slang and informal English for quite a while now, I am convinced that slang, in many ways, represents a parallel path to poetry. Most slang terms depend upon incongruity of imagery, conveyed by the vibrant connotations of a novel term applied to an otherwise established norm or concept. A substantial body of slang reflects a simple need to discover new terms for common and perhaps far less colorful ones. Food, drink, sex, bodily functions and body parts are the examples of this urge for novelty and innovation which cover an extensive part of slang vocabulary.

Like those other types of verbal and visual expressions, slang is just as baffling and elusive as far as the task of definition is concerned. Poetry is usually identified as a composition given intensity by a string of vocal sounds and imagery thus representing a distinct way of classifying a part of our linguistic accomplishment; nevertheless, no poet or scholar can adequately define poetry. By and large, both slang and poetry are influenced by social and psychological factors which make their definition limiting or inadequate.

Final Analysis

Although, most of us believe that we recognize slang when we see or hear it, exactly how slang is defined and which terms should or should not be classified as such continue to be the subject of much debate among lexicographers and linguists alike. This situation somehow calls to mind one of the most famous phrases in the entire history of the American Supreme Court, used by Justice Potter Stewart to define pornography: *"I know it when I see it."* (*Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. 184 (1964), regarding possible obscenity in the French film *Les Amants*)

Perhaps, in order to come to a practical definition of the term, one should re-evaluate one's criteria and approach slang from slightly different points of view. Slang is a stylistic category occupying an extreme end on the spectrum of linguistic convention and formality. It reinforces intimacy and solidarity within a group. To this end, slang performs an important social function which is to include or exclude others.

Of course, there are other characteristics which tend to delineate slang, but these demarcations may often lead to misunderstanding at best, or even prejudice. Slang has often been referred to as "low" or "degraded" speech". As Oliver Wendell Holmes once sneeringly suggested: *"the use of slang is at once a sign and a cause of mental atrophy"* (*Partridge, 1935: 295*). However, slang does share certain characteristics of art, particularly poetry in its manipulation of linguistic codes, conventions and processes, its creative handling of metaphor, allusion, irony, humor, its wit and inventiveness. In essence, slang is a language used in conscious opposition to authority and socio-linguistic conformity, yet it is not necessarily subversive; it may simply convey a shared attitude or experience in order to promote and celebrate a common view which may be based as much upon innocuous fun as upon criminal attitude or behavior. It is a fact that much slang serves as an alternative register, replacing standard terms with more vivid, vigorous and emotive forms.

Also, novelty and ephemerality are often cited as the main qualities associated with slang. This is perhaps because slang is the linguistic counterpart of fashion, offering a means to express both uniqueness and allegiance to a certain group or subculture. Most slang terms enjoy only a short life span, bursting into existence and falling out of use into oblivion or demise at a much faster rate than the general vocabulary; although, there are quite a number of slang terms which have been around for long periods of time, dating back to centuries ago. Repeatedly, in an attempt to establish a defining characteristic for slang, many experts and scholars have used the high turnover rate of slang items as the key element, claiming that slang is whimsical and arbitrary and that its ephemeral qualities render its study implicitly inconsequential. However, a close examination reveals that slang is not necessarily transient and faddish. The verb *Nick* meaning 'to steal', for example, initially began its life as a U.K. underground slang term in the seventeenth century which is still in use.

Despite its increasing popularity among the general public, particularly young people, many academic linguists have avoided approaching slang as a field of study. Their reluctance to take Slang seriously is perhaps to do with entrenched linguistic positions, a longstanding conservatism, or simply an aversion to linguistic innovation. Or, perhaps it is to do with the fact that it is the study of standard varieties of English which should be prioritized in academia. Nevertheless, in the United States and Australia the study of slang has been part of the curriculum in many institutions. In these countries, slang continues to be the subject of research projects, debates, and discussions.

Finally, one thing is certain: with the advent of the Internet and other means of mass media and communication, slang has made a quantum leap in terms of its variety and richness in recent years. Therefore, as slang marches on, it continues to trample over hierarchies and linguistic prejudices. Eventually, it may come to be regarded as a linguistic style. However, some words may remain underground and beyond the reach of many speakers. New words will appear, morph, and disappear. Many will spread and continue to enrich the English language. The cross-over may become more acceptable and even faster thanks to the influence and complicity of the Internet and the media. Slang and its shock value may diminish and might even run the risk of becoming 'neutered'; however, its march is ceaseless and its definition is no less elusive than that of poetry. *In the words of the Canadian-American academic S. I. Hayakawa (1906 –1992):*

"Slang is the poetry of everyday life"

Bibliography

Abrams, M.H. and Geoffrey Harpham (2008) *A Glossary of Literary Terms*: Wadsworth Publishing

Ayto, J. (2008) *Stone the Crows. The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bierce, Ambrose (1911) *The Devil's Dictionary*

Cowie, Anthony Paul. (2009) *The Oxford History of English Lexicography*: Oxford University Press

Crystal, David. (2006) *Language and the Internet*: Cambridge University Press

Dalzell, T. (1998) *The Slang of Sin*. Merriam-Webster Inc.

Dalzell, T. and Victor, T. (2005) *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, London: Routledge

Dickenson, Paul (2006) *Slang: The Topical Dictionary Of Americanisms*: Walker & Company

Dumas, B.K., and Lighter, J. (1978) Is Slang a word for linguists? *American Speech* 53: 5-17

Eble, C. (1996) *Slang and Sociability: In-Group Language among College Students*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press

Encyclopedia - Britannica Online. britannica.com

Folsom, W. Davis (2005) *Understanding American Business Jargon*: Greenwood Press

Gleason, H. A., Jr. (1973) "Grammatical Prerequisites," *Lexicography in English*, eds. Raven I. McDavid and Audrey Duckert, 27-33. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 211.

Gibbs, R. *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Green, J. (2005) *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Green, J. (2008) *Chambers Slang Dictionary*: Chambers Harrap

Hoey, Michael. (2005) *Lexical Priming: A New Theory of Words and Language*: Routledge

Jones, Ryan. (2006) *Internet Slang Dictionary*: Ryan Jones and Noslang.com

Keats, Jonathon. (2007) *Control + Alt + Delete. A Dictionary of CyberSlang*: The Lyons Press

Kipfer, Barbara A (2008) *American Slang* (4th edition): Collins Reference

Kittay, Eva Feder (1993) *Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure*: Clarendon Press

Landau, Sidney I. (2001) *The Art and Craft of Lexicography* (2nd Edition): Cambridge University Press

Lighter, Jonathan. E. (1994-?) *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*: Random House Vol. 1 & 2. Oxford University Press

Mattiello, E. (2008) *An Introduction to English Slang: A description of its Morphology, Semantics and Sociology*, Monza: Polimetrica

McMillan, James B. (1978) "American Lexicology 1942-1973," *American Speech* 53: 141-63.

Nash, Walter (1993) *Jargon: Its Uses and Abuses*: Wiley-Blackwell

Partridge, E. (1933) *Slang Today and Yesterday*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Raymond, Eric (1996) *New Hacker's Dictionary*: The MIT Press

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Eleventh Edition) (2006): Oxford University Press

The Oxford English Dictionary Online: Oxford University Press

Webster's Online Dictionary

Whitman, Walt (1885) "Slang in America": *The North American Review*