Global English Slang

Methodologies and Perspectives

Edited by
Julie Coleman

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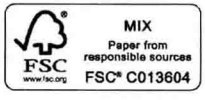

GLOBAL ENGLISH SLANG

Global English Slang brings together twenty key international experts and provides a timely and essential overview of English slang around the world today.

The book illustrates the application of a range of different methodologies to the study of slang and demonstrates the interconnection between the different sub-fields of linguistics.

A key argument throughout is that slang is a function played by specific words or phrases rather than a characteristic inherent in the words themselves – what is slang in one context is not slang in another. The volume also challenges received wisdom on the nature of slang: that it is short-lived and that slang is restricted to verbal language.

With an introduction by editor Julie Coleman, the topics covered range from inner-city New York slang and hip-hop slang to UK student slang and slang in Scotland. Authors also explore slang in Jamaica, Australia, New Zealand, India and Hong Kong and the influence of English slang on Norwegian, Italian and Japanese. A final section looks at slang and new media including online slang usage, and the possibilities offered by the internet to document verbal and gestural slang.

Global English Slang is an essential reference for advanced undergraduates, post-graduates and researchers working in the areas of lexicology, slang and World Englishes.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS NOT IN GENERAL USE

adj.	adjective
adv.	adverb
ACOD	*The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, first edition (Turner 1987), second edition (Ramson et al. 1992), third edition (Moore 1997)
AND	*The Australian National Dictionary* (Ramson 1988)
c.	*circa* 'about'
DJE	*The Dictionary of Jamaican English* (Cassidy and Le Page 1967, 1980)
DOSC	*The Dictionary of Street Communications* (O'Connor 2005, 2006, 2008)
DOST	*The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (Craigie et al. 1931–2002)
et al.	et alia 'and others'
f.	feminine
interj.	interjection
JC	Jamaican Creole
JND	*The Jamaican National Dictionary* (Farquharson, forthcoming)
m.	masculine
MLE	Multicultural London English
MSP	Member of the Scottish Parliament
n.	noun
n.p.	no publication details (other than those given)
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson and Weiner 2008–)
phr.	phrase
prep.	preposition
SND	*The Scottish National Dictionary* (Grant et al. 1931–76)
SNDS	the first Supplement to *The Scottish National Dictionary* (Grant et al. 1931–76)

SNDS2	the second Supplement to *The Scottish National Dictionary* (Macleod et al. 2005)
SSE	Scottish Standard English
s.v.	*sub verbo* 'under the word'
UNO	'Språkkontakt och Ungdomsspråk i Norden' research project
v.	verb

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Understanding slang in a global context

Julie Coleman

The workshop

Most of the contributors to this volume attended, either in person or virtually, a workshop on contemporary slang at the University of Leicester in September 2012. We presented draft versions of the chapters included here, and have provided each other with feedback verbally at the time and in writing since. Several sessions were put aside for discussion of more general issues, and these formed the basis of this chapter and of the other introductory sections.[1]

Defining *slang*

Traditional definitions of *slang*, such as those written for the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter OED: Simpson and Weiner 2008–) and currently unchanged in the online edition (as of 2 May 2013), suggest a hierarchy of users, status and value, with Standard English and its users at the top of a pyramid, and slang, along with other non-standard forms, at the bottom. As will become evident in the course of this volume, Standard English is not a well-defined concept in itself: its meaning varies according to geographical location and social context. Slang, of course, is even harder to define.

Although defining *slang* by what it is not is dangerously reductive, it might be useful to emphasize that in this volume we are not using *slang* to include the technical usage of particular professions or interest groups (jargon), usage that is geographically restricted on a sub-national level (dialect), usage that is geographically restricted on a national level (national Englishes), informal usage that enjoys a temporary high profile in the media (buzz words), informal usage that is widely distributed socially and geographically (colloquial language), informal language used within families (family language), informal language characteristic of particular social classes (sociolects or

social dialects) or informal language used by a single individual (idiolect). We are also not using *slang* with any negative connotations.

In addition to its use in scholarship, *slang* is an everyday term that does encompass jargon, dialect, national Englishes, buzz words, colloquial language, family language, sociolects and idiolects. It is also frequently used with negative connotations. Describing *slang* as 'language of a highly colloquial type', as the OED's third definition does, implies that the difference between slang and colloquial language is a matter of degree rather than quality: that colloquial language is informal and slang is very informal, or that colloquial language is vulgar and slang is very vulgar. Any two-dimensional description of slang (as a pyramid or scale) necessarily simplifies the complexities of its use in social settings.

Slang is employed in conjunction with standard and other non-standard forms of the language: within a family setting, for example, we might hear examples of slang as well as standard, colloquial and family language; in a professional setting, we might hear professional and general slang used alongside jargon and the standard language. For example, a doctor might refer to *ashcash* 'the fee paid for signing a death certificate', which is professional slang; *bladdered* 'drunk', which is general slang; and *nephrology* 'the branch of medicine that deals with the kidneys', which is technical language or jargon. These terms will be deployed within sentences and clauses that conform to standard or colloquial grammar and syntax, such as 'Fancy getting bladdered on my nephrology ashcash?' Moreover, although a term might be slang in one person's usage, it can simultaneously be dialect or a media buzz word in other people's. For example, young people might use *chav* 'a working-class urban youth' as slang, but older people are more likely to have picked it up from the media, and these two groups of users will understand it with different connotations that might eventually lead to the development of separate senses. For example, I still picture a chav in Burberry check, but young people's prototypical chav is likely to have kept up with fashion trends.

One of the difficulties of talking about *slang* is that it is often used to encompass all types of non-standard language. In response to this instability of meaning, Dumas and Lighter (1978) famously asked whether *slang* was a word that linguists should be using at all. They concluded that it was and produced a set of criteria for determining whether or not a given term is slang, but the definition of *slang* remains unstable to the point that a dozen slang experts happily spent three days circling around this very issue during the workshop from which this book arose. This section is a summary of our discussion, which approached slang from a variety of disciplinary and geographical perspectives, and inevitably identified some differences of opinion that we were not able to resolve. This, we concluded, is intrinsic to the nature of slang: the meaning of *slang* and the meaning of individual examples of slang are entirely dependent on context. For this reason, the definitions provided for terms cited more than once in this volume will vary from chapter to chapter to reflect the way they are used in different contexts and parts of the world.

In his seminal paper on anti-languages, Halliday (1976) characterized an anti-language as one in which social values are foregrounded and which richly

re-lexicalizes the areas of most concern to the anti-society it is associated with. By providing an alternative hierarchy and value-structure, Halliday argues, the anti-language re-socializes its users. He writes that:

> There is continuity between language and anti-language, just as there is between society and anti-society. But there is also tension between them, reflecting the fact that they are variants of one and the same underlying semiotic. They may express different social structures; but they are part and parcel of the same social system.
>
> *(Halliday 1976: 576)*

Although this provides a useful way to look at the functions of language in social settings, Halliday's discussion ranges across Elizabethan cant, literary language, Spike Milligan's verbal dexterity and African-American English. *Anti-language* is thus broader than *slang* and does not really help us to pin down its meaning.

Slang is informal and non-standard, that much is uncontentious. Slang can be used in formal contexts to lower or challenge that formality. Although this will sometimes have a disruptive effect, it need not. For example, at a formal press conference, a former chancellor of North Carolina University, who had been receiving treatment for cancer, responded to a query about his health by saying:

> Thank you for asking. I'm doing well, but let me tell you ladies and gentlemen, chemotherapy sucks.
>
> *(reported from memory, by Connie Eble)*

In this instance, slang was not used disruptively, but instead strategically to take the edge off a profoundly personal and serious subject that would not normally be discussed in such a public setting. This use of slang lightened the mood without lowering the tone.

Slang can also be used in informal settings, and in these situations the tone may already be fairly low. Whatever the setting, slang can be antagonistic or irreverent, but it can also create an implied agreement between the speaker and listener that may or may not include any other people who are present. Slang not only spreads through social networks, but also sustains them by creating and expressing bonds between people.

Although it is not necessarily the case that individual slang terms are substitutions for Standard English synonyms, there are relatively few slang terms that cannot be replaced with a more formal alternative. If this were not the case, slang lexicography would be impossible because we would not be able to define slang terms. However, Standard English often has to resort to paraphrase. For example, there is no Standard English equivalent to *melvin* 'the act of pulling up on the front waistband of (someone's) underwear; the resulting condition', but it is possible to express its meaning to some extent by using Standard English *sexual assault*, *bullying* or *horseplay* or by combining Standard English with a more familiar slang term, *a*

front wedgie. What these terms do not convey are the connotations of *melvin*, which characterize the action as a normal, if unwelcome, part of social interaction between some young males. Crucially, it is the *melvined* person (also referred to as *the melvin*) who loses face rather than the person who *melvins* them.

The decision to use slang in a given context could be seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the language that is otherwise available, but this need not necessarily be deliberate or conscious on the part of the speaker. If I say that I *melvined* someone it may be because the Standard English alternatives do not match my understanding of the action or the interpretation that I wish my listeners to put upon it. On the other hand, it may be because it is the only word I know for this action: if I do not see it as *sexual assault* or *bullying*, those terms would not apply for me.

Slang is often verdictive (Adams, Chapter 15), in the sense that it pronounces a judgement not only on the language, but also on the listener and the referent. For example, one female teenager might refer to another as a *ho*. By doing so she is not only expressing her own view of that individual, but also assuming that her hearers share that view. Like many apparently insulting terms, *ho* can be used in affectionate teasing between friends, so it is the context that determines whether and how far this is a negative judgement. The speaker may instead be passing judgement on the standard language for not providing a neutral term for a sexually active woman. Her use of *ho* might also function as an implicit criticism of people who use it to refer to women in general. The precise shades of meaning attached to *ho* in this context will be determined by the understanding of its users and hearers, which may be shared to some degree or not at all. The *ho* in question might be one of the hearers and her reaction to the label will depend as much on her judgement of the context as on how she feels about the term: if she feels affronted, she may use *ho* back to diffuse the perceived loss of face, and this may feed into the development of *ho* as a term of affectionate abuse within this group.

Slang can thus represent both a challenge to the listener and an assumption of complicity. These functions are not in opposition to one another. Similarly, there is no opposition between the use of slang both to stand out and to fit in. Few rebels are entirely original: rejecting one set of values often involves adopting another set. For example, the teenager who uses *yolo* 'you only live once' to justify the purchase of an expensive pair of shoes is rejecting adult values of caution and frugality, and simultaneously embracing youthful ideals of fashion and hedonistic consumerism.

Because serious slang lexicographers aim to be consistent, they sometimes decide to omit entire groups of words by meaning or use. For example, words used by drug users have been omitted from many general slang dictionaries on the grounds that they are specialized jargon or cant terms used in pursuing illegal activities. Partridge tended to label all terms for drugs as 'drug addicts' language' and considered them to belong to the language of the underworld (Partridge 1950) rather than to slang and unconventional English (Partridge 1937). Although these decisions are clearly sensible in practical terms, they obscure the shading between specialized and general usage in the language of the small number of people who

are addicted to drugs and the much larger group of people who use them occasionally on a casual basis. A usage is not slang or jargon because of who it is used by or what it refers to, but because of how it is used in a particular context.

Slanginess is not a quality of words themselves. The word *awesome*, for example, is used in Standard English with the senses 'full of fear or reverence' and 'inspiring fear or reverence', and also in slang with the meaning 'excellent'. A colloquial usage 'overwhelming, remarkable' occupies the middle ground, and it is not always possible to determine from a written context which label would be relevant. Tone of voice and interpersonal knowledge would be necessary for the listener to be sure what a speaker meant by describing a church or a sporting achievement as *awesome*, and it is entirely possible for misinterpretations to occur and pass unnoticed: youths with low-slung jeans can have religious experiences and Christians can be trendy too. It would be inadequate and inaccurate to say that the word *awesome* is slang or that it is colloquial or Standard English. It can be any one of them and sometimes, punningly, more than one at a time.

Some slang, but by no means all (and it is not peculiar to slang), is linguistically playful or creative. Participants in an informal conversation do not tend to disrupt it by asking for definitions of unfamiliar terms. Context usually enables us to interpret the meanings and connotations of individual terms, particularly if we hear them often enough. However, it is possible that slang terms whose phonology is felt to be appropriate to their meaning are more likely to persist in use because they provide an additional clue to the uninitiated listener (see Nyikos 1994: 641–53). It is, unfortunately, difficult to prove that the success of a term like *bling* is connected to its phonology, and even if it were, individuals' interpretations of it would be inherently subjective. While it seems logical that slang terms that are linguistically unusual or pleasing should have a better chance of being adopted and passed on, it is also true that last month's novelty can quickly become this month's cliché: there is a thin line between linguistically striking and plain tiresome.

Novelty is often presented as a defining feature of slang: because of the constant need for renewal, slang terms are sometimes seen as characteristically short-lived. Although it is true that many slang terms are ephemeral, there are also plenty that are not, such as *cool* 'stylish' (cited in the OED since 1918) and *groovy* 'excellent' (since 1937). While not all slang words in use at a particular moment in time are new, they will often seem new to the people who are using them as slang. For example, *epic* 'excellent' is in current slang usage in Britain and the United States (and probably elsewhere too). To some users, the novelty might lie in the unusual application of a word they are familiar with in other contexts. To other users, it might be the word itself that is novel. Clearly, however, novelty is not enough in itself to distinguish slang from other words: many words have been used for the first time or changed in meaning without becoming slang. Similarly, the same slang words tend to be used with great frequency, particularly verdictive intensifiers and adjectives.

Slang often plays a role in defining group identity, which may operate on a very small or very large level: from a small group of friends to an entire nation. Moore

and Bardsley (Chapters 7 and 8) show that the idea of *slang* is particularly problematic in Australia and New Zealand because there has been a historic tendency to identify all non-standard usage as *slang* in contrast with Standard (i.e. British) English. At the same time, these varieties tend to greater informality than British English, so that a word that sounds slangy to a speaker of British English might seem colloquial or unmarked to a native speaker. In these contexts, national identity is performed by using national forms and personal identity is performed by using a variety of standard and non-standard forms. Slang can play both of these functions. For example, Australian rappers Hilltop Hoods are unmistakably both Australian and rappers when they sing:

> I won't judge you tonight,
> Cos I'm paralytic [drunk], I ain't looking to lose a fight,
> So put your hands up if you're not too drunk to stand up,
> If you're bombing up [spraying graffiti on] the toilets put your man [name; tag] up,
> And put your can up spray it in the air mate,
> Check out my man, fuck it's all going pear-shaped [wrong].
>
> *(Hilltop Hoods 2006)*

As Green (Chapter 5) demonstrates, the language of ethnically diverse urban youths in Britain charts a similar path between global, national and local forms. This is a trend repeated in many other chapters in this book but generally overlooked in publications written from a more nationalistic perspective.

Clearly slang is not restricted to the United States, the United Kingdom and the English-speaking Commonwealth countries, which is why this volume samples slang used in English around the world. The original intention was to structure the book around Kachru's concentric-circle model of World Englishes (1985: 11–30), but it has not proved particularly useful for this purpose because it does not recognize the historical and sociolinguistic factors that continue to operate upon (for example) the English of England and the English of Scotland to produce different patterns of status and solidarity. The four diasporas model of Kachru and Nelson (2009) emphasizes historical sequence in categorizing World Englishes, but again assumes that differences between English English and Scottish English are historical rather than dynamic. Schneider's model (2007: 21–70) is more helpful in identifying five stages in the evolution of World Englishes. The chapters in the second section span Schneider's second to fifth stages: exonormative stabilization, nativization, endonormative stabilization and differentiation. Even within this analysis, however, Scottish slang serves as a useful reminder that sociopolitical developments can trump historical sequence by challenging established linguistic norms.

In Scotland and Jamaica, slang operates upon a continuum between Standard English and an unstandardized local form. Scots can fulfil some of the functions of slang in Scottish or Standard English and other terms function as slang in Scots (Scott, Chapter 9). Similar trends are observed in the continuum between Jamaican