
Storia della Lingua Inglese

Lecture 1

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What is Slang? – Some Definitions

- In older times *slang* was seen as emerging from and sustaining an undisguised baseness of mind, leading to the coarsening of both language and civilisation
 - “A language of waste, riots and wild companions” (Dr. Johnson 1755)
 - “The grunt of the human hog (Pignoramus intolerabilis) with an audible memory” (Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary* 1911)
 - “Slang is a genuine and influential branch of speech. It is one of the feeders of the so-called standard language, which adopts and adapts the words it happens to want [...]” (Tylor 1874)
- Subjective definitions belonging to different periods.

What is Slang? – Some Definitions (2)

- ***Specific Sense***
- An ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend of fashion in society at large (Eble 1996: 11).

What is Slang? – Some Definitions (3)

- **General Sense**
- Language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1933)

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What is Slang? – Some Definitions (4)

- **Global Sense**
- A language in statu nascendi, a language (or at least a lexicon) in the making. Slang is essentially an experimental language (Sorning 1981:20)

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Slang: Towards an Operative Definition

- 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 and irreverence**, especially for established attitudes and values within the prevailing culture

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Linguistic Conditions for the Rise of Slang in the Anglo-Saxon World

- *Slang* can only be defined in relation to a **Standard vocabulary**. Its *raison d'être* lies in the rejection of authority (parental, social, political and even linguistic)
- Lack of an Academy aimed at 'purifying' the language (see *Accademia della Crusca* in Italy), and of a consciousness of a standard until 1500
- The conventions of Standard English usage gradually altered to encourage greater concision and to accommodate more features of spoken language

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Slang: Basic Elements

- Slang vs. Standard Language
- Slang vs. Informal Language, Cant, Argot and Jargon
- Psychological Function
- Social Function

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Some key concepts

- **Standard**: the kind of vocabulary and usage taught in schools and used in serious writing, although it is by no means the only proper way to express a particular idea.
- **Nonstandard**: words and phrases notably absent from edited Standard English prose. Ex: *Ain't; y'all*

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Some key concepts (2)

- **Substandard:** usages stigmatized by schoolteachers as hallmark of ignorance and illiteracy. Ex: *hisn* (in place of *his*); present simple in ***they be fighting***; illogical constructions, such as ***between you and I***, or ***me and her went*** [..]
- **Colloquialism:** It takes in features of standard and nonstandard speech. Informal character, easygoing naturalness. Ex. ***Mad as a hornet*** → shift in focus from codified to uncoded and from formality to informality

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Dialect, Cant, Jargon

- **Dialect** refers to cohesive, chiefly regional and socioeconomic varieties of a language. Former dialectal words have made themselves at home at various levels of usage: *fun, skirt, spook*
- **Cant:** a private language of the underworld, the earliest form of nonstandard language to be known and condemned by critics. It consisted mainly of made-up or altered words, often of Celtic or unknown origin. Antilanguage or cryptolect
- **Jargon:** sociolect. Technical terms peculiar to specific occupations and professions. It is standard language that is unfamiliar beyond the limits of specific fields (linguists; philosophers; aviators)

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Differences from Slang

- Slang is nonstandard and typically informal, but all that is informal is not necessarily to be considered slang. (vs. Standard, Nonstandard, Colloquial)
- Slang makes use of existing words to derive new meanings and connotations
- Slang differs from Jargon for its purpose. Technical language develops among specialists for the purpose of cooperation. Slang develops among associates for purpose of expressiveness and companionability

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Differences from Slang (2)

- It differs from formal and colloquial uses on the basis of **style, context, function** and **emotive association**
- **Style:** its hallmark is undignified or indecorous tone. Informal language simply aims at conveying a natural tone to discourse. Slang is divergent, substituting the words which lie at the core of the language and re-orienting them
- It is found in **contexts**, where SE is not cultivated, i.e. work environment, naval and military bases, high schools, campuses, prisons, taverns etc.

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Differences from Slang (3)

- **Psychological Function:** concealing secrets
 - **Social Function:** it serves to test, establish and reinforce nonconformist attitudinal bonds between peers
- It promotes social isolation and detachment from outsiders
- It promotes social cohesion among in-group members

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The Development of the Word *Slang*

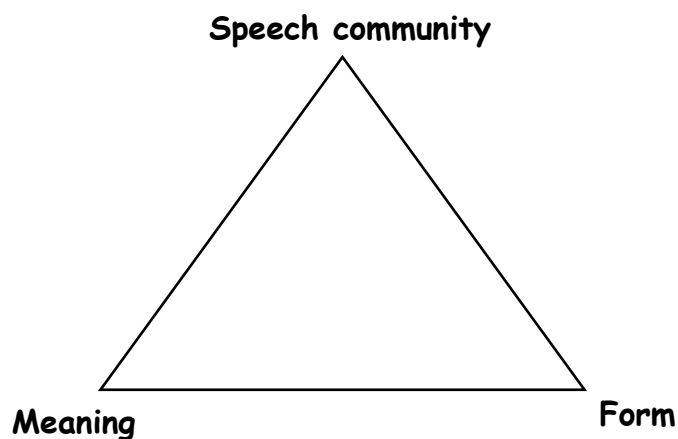
- The origin is obscure. Etymological hypotheses suggest a connection with Dutch *slang*, 'snake, serpent', but it is mere conjecture.
- By association to the serpent of Genesis, ideas of cheating and deception.
- 1756 *slang patter*: obscure, exclusionary and socially restricted jargon of a mostly itinerant class
 - 1785 (Captain Grose) 'cant language'
 - Extended sense 'empty or deceptive language, rubbish'
 - 18th cent. 'abusive and vituperative language, offensive talk'
 - 1830s 'extravagant talk'
 - 1920s 'nonstandard idioms, catch phrases, cliches of commerce'

Social Conditions for the Development of Slang in Society

- Slang reflects language plasticity and inherent dynamism
- The widespread awareness of a slangy vocabulary is typical of highly stratified literate societies, with a certain mobility in them, having a strong traditional standard language
- Hospitality to or acceptance of new objects, situations
- Wide numbers of diversified subgroups in society
- Democratic mingling and mixing between these subgroups and the dominant culture

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The Semiotic Triangle



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A Dynamic vs. Static View of Language

- A naïve view of language: “Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly” (Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* 1965: 3)
- A language corresponds to the utterances produced by members of a speech communities
- Speech communities are considered as completely detached from one another

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Problems with the Naïve View

- Multilingual speech communities: a “single” speech community, but not a single language
 - Different languages are used in different social domains
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 - Revision of the concept of speech community:
A group of speakers associated in a particular social domain (Joshua Fishman, “The Sociology of Language” 1972)
- Typical domains: family, friends, school, work, religion

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Variation in the Semiotic Triangle: the Speech Community

- The English language is a **multiplicity of codes**, specialized to varying degrees
- “There is no limit to the ways in which human beings can league themselves together for self-identification, security, gain, amusement, worship or any other purposes that are held in common; consequently there is no limit to the number and varieties of speech communities that are to be found in society” (Bolinger 1975: 333)

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Variation in the Semiotic Triangle: the Speech Community (2)

- All societies are multilingual
- All speakers are members of multiple speech communities at a time

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Variation in the Semiotic Triangle: the Speech Community (3)

- Common Communities:
- Nationality: American, Canadian, Dutch
- Residence: New Zealanders, Californians, Glaswegians
- Language: English Speakers, Japanese speakers, German speakers
- Cohort (age): teenagers, senior citizens, thirty-year olds
- Education: high school graduates, university students
- Occupation: plumbers, ophthalmologists
- Subculture: rock musicians, drug addicts

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Degrees of Inclusiveness of Speech Communities

- Residence >North Americans>
Americans>Westerners>Californians>North
Californians>San Franciscans
- Occupation>middle
class>professionals>physicians>ophthalmologi
sts>ophthalmic surgeon
- Language>English speakers>speakers of
New Zealand English>speakers of Auckland
English Dialect

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Common Ground

- Communities are characterized by *common ground* (H. Clark 1996), that is, mutual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices shared by the members

Basis for Common Ground:

- shared experiences – ***personal common ground***
- shared expertise – ***communal common ground*** (accumulated through interactions with other community members, i.e. transmission of cultural heritage)

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Common Ground

- Mutual knowledge, shared practices, beliefs, scripts, communal lexicons and self-awareness
- A language is a population of forms and meanings in a series of interconnected set of communities, and is pulled between unity and diversity, because
 - Society is inherently multicommunal
 - Society is unified because of core expertise across communities
- Speech communities are not isolated, but speakers interact with members of more inclusive communities

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Language Change

- Every change in the *langue* has its origin in an act of the *parole* (F. de Saussure)
- Variation: a two-step process involving
 - ◆ The production of VARIATION via ***altered replication***
 - ◆ The SELECTION of variants via ***differential replication***

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Language Change (2)

- People create culture through their interaction
- Every time we open our mouth to talk, we replicate grammatical structures in language
- Not every replication of grammatical structures is perfect → variation is generated
- Culture evolves via the selection of which alternative cultural acts to replicate
- Innovation via altered replication is functional, since a grammar consists of a balance between multiple competing forces

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Language Change (3)

- Propagation via selection is social, and is related to the social structure of speech communities, to the desire of the speaker to identify with a particular speech community
- Propagation of a variant begins when new forms are re-analysed as having a social value

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Language Change (4)

- When an alternative is produced, the original form either disappears or shifts in meaning
- Let us think of synonyms: is perfect synonymy possible?
 - *Kingly, royal, monarchical*
 - *Prize, reward*
 - *Job, position, occupation, profession*
 - *Aroma, scent, perfume, fragrance, essence*

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Slang and Language Change

- Not all which at a certain stage in language is slang, can become standard in the future. Indeed only a small portion of the vocabulary of a language

Ex. *Disc-jockey, jazz, juke-box, o.k., hijack*

- Most slang terms are temporary and local. What persists are the extremely useful terms, i.e. those for which a commonly accepted variant does not exist

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Slang and Language Change (2)

- If the word is useful to non-members of the small group as well, it is on its way to becoming slang
- In fewer cases words ready for literary usage became slang: anatomical parts from the Middle English period, i.e. *ass, shit, balls* for which these were the only available words at the time

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Why do people use slang?

- It is more straightforward and communicates something more quickly, easily and personally
- More forceful and expressive than standard usage
- Its brevity (use of shorter words) makes content more forceful
- To show in-group membership → where we belong, our social, mental, biographical background

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Why do people use slang?

- To escape the routine of daily life and the “stale taste” of standard language
- Slang always tends towards degradation rather than moral elevation. We would rather share or accept vices than be excluded from a social group.
- Many people use slang just because it is not standard or polite, to show their rebellion and to express their anti-intellectualism

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