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## THE CONCEPT OF SLANG AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

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**Annotation:** Language is dynamic, and at any given time hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of words and expressions are in the process of changing from one level to another, of becoming more acceptable or less acceptable, of becoming more popular or less popular. This article discusses the concept of slang and its characteristics.

**Key words:** slang, language, word, concept, vocabulary, jargon, expressions, dialects, speech.

Every adult speaker has a concept of slang-knowing at the least that some words and expressions transgress generally accepted norms of formality or appropriateness and in some way do not fit the measure of what "good" language is. Despite such recognition by almost all speakers, scholars with formal training in linguistic analysis have almost ignored slang--though they acknowledge having the same intuitions about this type of vocabulary as do all speakers. In truth, most linguists have given no more thought to slang than have people who claim no expertise in language. In the English-speaking world in particular, the description of the form and function of slang has been left largely to lexicographers rather than to others who study language for a living.

Webster's "Third New International Dictionary" gives the following definition of the term slang:

1. Language peculiar to a particular group as:
  - a) the special and often secret vocabulary used by a class (as thieves, beggars) and usually felt to be vulgar or inferior: argot;
  - b) the jargon used by or associated with a particular trade, profession, or field of activity.
2. A non-standard vocabulary composed of words and senses characterized primarily by connotations of extreme informality and usually a currency not limited to a particular region and composed typically of coinages or arbitrarily changed words, clipped or shortened forms, extravagant, forced or facetious figures of speech, or verbal novelties usually experiencing quick popularity and relatively rapid decline into disuse.

The "New Oxford English Dictionary" defines slang as follows:

- a) the special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character; language of a low and vulgar type;
- b) the cant or jargon of a certain class or period;
- c) 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."



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As it is seen from these quotations slang is represented both as a special vocabulary and as a special language. This causes confusion. If this is a certain lexical layer, than why should it be given the rank of language or a dialect of even a patois, and then it should be characterized not only by its peculiar use of words but also by phonetic, morphological and syntactical peculiarities.

In general all linguists agree that slang is nonstandard vocabulary composed of words or senses characterized primarily by connotations of extreme informality and usually by a currency not limited to a particular region. It is composed typically of coinages or arbitrarily changed words, clipped or shortened forms, extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech, or verbal novelties. They are identified and distinguished by contrasting them to standard literary vocabulary. They are expressive, mostly ironical words serving to create fresh names for some things that are frequent topics of discourse.

Slang consists of the words and expressions that have escaped from the cant, jargon and argot (and to a lesser extent from dialectal, nonstandard, and taboo speech) of specific subgroups of society so that they are known and used by an appreciable percentage of the general population, even though the words and expressions often retain some associations with the subgroups that originally used and popularized them. Thus, slang is a middle ground for words and expressions that have become too popular to be any longer considered as part of the more restricted categories, but that are not yet (and may never become) acceptable or popular enough to be considered informal or standard. Slang fills a necessary niche in all languages. It can serve as a bridge or a barrier, either helping both old and new words that have been used as "insiders' " terms by a specific group of people to enter the language of the general public or, on the other hand, preventing them from doing so. Thus, for many words, slang is a testing ground that finally proves them to be generally useful, appealing, and acceptable enough to become standard or informal. For many other words, slang is a testing ground that shows them to be too restricted in use, not as appealing as standard synonyms, or unnecessary, frivolous, faddish, or unacceptable for standard or informal speech. For still a third group of words and expressions, slang becomes not a final testing ground that either accepts or rejects them for general use but becomes a vast limbo, a permanent holding ground, an area of speech that a word never leaves.

Slang words cannot be distinguished from other words by sound or meaning. In fact, most slang words are homonyms of standard words, spelled and pronounced just like their standard counterparts, as for example slang words for money such as beans, brass, dibs, dough, chinc, oof, wards; the slang synonyms for word head are attic, brain-pan, hat peg, nut, upper storey; drunk- boozy, cock-eyed, high, soaked, tight, and pot (marijuana). Of course, these words are alike in their ordinary standard use and in their slang use. Each word sounds just as appealing or unappealing, dull or colorful in its standard as in its slang use. Also, the meanings of beans and money, head and attic, pot and marijuana are the same, so it cannot be said that the connotations of slang words are any more colorful or racy than the meanings of standard words.



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All languages, countries, and periods of history have slang. This is true because they all have had words with varying degrees of social acceptance and popularity.

The same linguistic processes are used to create and popularize slang as are used to create and popularize all other words. That is, all words are created and popularized in the same general ways; they are labeled slang only according to their current social acceptance, long after creation and popularization.

To fully understand slang, one must remember that a word's use, popularity, and acceptability can change. Words can change in social level, moving in any direction. Thus, some standard words of William Shakespeare's day are found only in certain modern-day British dialects. Words that are taboo in one era (e.g., stomach, thigh) can become accepted, standard words in a later era. Many prove either useful enough to become accepted as standard or informal words or too faddish for standard use. Blizzard and okay have become standard, while conbobberation ("disturbance") and tomato ("girl") have been discarded. Some words and expressions have a lasting place in slang; for instance, beat it ("go away"), first used in the 16th century, has neither become Standard English nor vanished.

Slang is very informal use of words and phrases for more colorful or peculiar style of expression that is shared by the people in the same social subgroup, for example, computer slang, sports slang, military slang, musicians' slang, students' slang, underworld slang, etc. Slang is not used by the majority of native speakers and many people consider it vulgar, though quite a few slang phrases have already come into standard usage. Slang contains many obscene and offensive words and phrases. It also has many expressions that are acceptable in informal communication. Slang is highly idiomatic. It is flippant, irreverent, indecorous; it may be indecent or obscene. Its colorful metaphors are generally directed at respectability, and it is this succinct, sometimes witty, frequently impertinent social criticism that gives slang its characteristic flavor. Slang, then, includes not just words but words used in a special way in a certain social context.

The origin of the word slang itself is obscure; it first appeared in print around 1800, applied to the speech of disreputable and criminal classes in London.

Language is the property of a community of speakers. People rarely speak, or write, with only themselves as the audience. It should not be surprising then that some components and forms of language are socially motivated. Slang is one kind of vocabulary that serves the social nature of language. In an important article in 1978 Bethany Dumas and Jonathan Lighter make the crucial point that slang must be identified by its social consequences, by the effects its use has on the relationship between speaker and audience.

Dumas and Lighter posit four criteria for identifying a word or phrase as slang.

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.



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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". In other words, Dumas and Lighter's formulation requires that the type of lexis called slang be recognized for its power to effect union between speaker and hearer. Whether or not the particulars of their definition are necessary or sufficient, Dumas and Lighter are right. Slang cannot be defined independent of its functions and use.

Despite the difficulties of defining the term, slang does have some consistent characteristics. Slang is lexical rather than phonological or syntactic, though, in English at least, body language and intonation are often important in signaling that a word or phrase is to be interpreted as slang. Nor is there a peculiarly slang syntax. Slang expressions do not follow idiosyncratic word order, and slang words and phrases typically fit into an appropriate grammatical slot in an established syntactic pattern. Furthermore, the productive morphological processes responsible for slang are the same ones responsible for the general vocabulary, i.e., for English, compounding, affixation, shortening, and functional shift.

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