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THE PROBLEM OF STYLISTIC CLASSIFICATION OF COLLOQUIAL VOCABULARY

Summary: A discussion of the ways the English vocabulary can be classified from a stylistic point of view.

Key words: colloquial vocabulary, slang, jargon, classification.

The first thing that strikes the scholar is the fact that no other European language has singled out a special layer of vocabulary and named it slang, though all of them distinguish such groups of words as jargon, cant and the like. Why was it necessary to invent a special term for something that has not been clearly defined as jargon or can't have? Is this phenomenon specifically English? Has slang any special features which no other group within the non-literary vocabulary can lay claim to? The distinctions between slang and other groups of unconventional English, though perhaps subtle and sometimes difficult to grasp, should nevertheless be subjected to a more detailed linguistic specification.

Psychologically, most good slang harks back to the stage in human culture when animism was a world-wide religion. At that time, it was believed that all objects had two aspects, one external and objective that could be perceived by the senses, the other imperceptible (except to gifted individuals) but identical with what we today would call the "real" object. Human survival depended upon the manipulation of all "real" aspects of life-hunting, reproduction, warfare, weapons, design of habitations, nature of clothing or decoration, etc.- through control or influence upon the animus, or imperceptible phase of reality. This influence was exerted through many aspects of sympathetic magic, one of the most potent being

the use of language. Words, therefore, had great power, because they evoked the things to which they referred.

Slang is most popular when its imagery develops incongruity bordering on social satire. Every slang word, however, has its own history and reasons for popularity. When conditions change, the term may change in meaning, be adopted into the standard language, or continue to be used as slang within certain enclaves of the population. Nothing is flatter than dead slang. In 1910, for instance, "Oh you kid" and "23-skiddoo"¹ were quite stylish phrases in the US but they have gone with the hobble skirt. Children, however, unaware of anachronisms, often revive old slang under a barrage of older movies rerun on television.

Some slang becomes respectable when it loses its edge: "spunk", "fizzle", "spent", "hit the spot", "jazz", "funky" and "p.o.d.", once thought to be too indecent for feminine ears, are now family words. Other slang survives for centuries, like "bones" for dice (Chaucer), "beat it" for run away (Shakespeare), "duds" for clothes, and "booze" for liquor (Lekker). These words must have been uttered as slang long before appearing in print, and they have remained slang ever since. Normally, slang has both a high birth and death rate in the dominant culture, and excessive use tends to dull the lustre of even the most colourful and descriptive words and phrases.

In some cases slang may provide a needed name for an object or action (walkie-talkie, a portable two-way radio; tailgating, driving too close behind another vehicle), or it may offer an emotional outlet (buzz off! go away!) or a satirical or patronizing reference (smokey, state highway trooper). It may provide euphemisms (john, head, can, and in Britain, loo, all for toilet, itself originally a euphemism), and it may allow its user to create a shock effect by using a pungent slang expression in an unexpected context. Slang has provided myriad synonyms for parts of the body (bean, head; schnozzle, nose;), for money (moola, bread, scratch), for food (grab, slop, garbage) and for drunkenness (soused, stewed, plastered).

It has been claimed that slang is created by ingenious individuals to freshen the language, to vitalize it, to make the language more pungent and picturesque, to increase the store of terse and striking words, or to provide a vocabulary for new shades of meaning. Most of the originators and purveyors of slang, however, are probably not conscious of these noble purposes and do not seem overly concerned about what happens to their language.

With the rise of naturalistic writing demanding realism, slang began to creep into English literature even though the schools waged warfare against it, the pulpit thundered against it, and many woman who aspired to gentility and refinement banished it from the home. It flourished underground, however, in such male sanctuaries as lodges, poolrooms, barbershops, and saloons.

By 1925 a whole new generation of U.S. and European naturalistic writers was in revolt against the Victorian restraints that had caused even Mark Twain to complain, and today any writer may use slang freely, especially in fiction and drama. It has become an indispensable tool in the hands of master satirists, humorists, and journalists. Slang is now socially acceptable, not just because it is slang but because, when used with skill and discrimination, it adds a new and exciting dimension to language. At the same time, it is being seriously studied by linguists and other social scientists as a revealing index to the culture that produces and uses it.

Slang expressions are created by the same processes that affect ordinary speech. Expressions may take form as metaphors, similes and other figures of speech (dead as a doornail). Words may acquire new meanings (cool, cat). A narrow meaning may become generalized (fink, originally a strikebreaker, later a betrayer or disappointer) or vice-versa (heap. a run-down car). Words may be clipped, or abbreviated (mike, microphone), and acronyms may gain currency (VIP, awol, snafu). A foreign suffix may be added (the Yiddish and Russian-nik in beatnik) and foreign words adopted (baloney, from Bologna). A change in meaning may make a vulgar word acceptable (jazz) or an acceptable word vulgar (raspberry,

a sound imitating flatus; from raspberry tart in the rhyming slang of Australia and Cockney London). Sometimes words are newly coined (oomph, energy or impact).

Slang is one of the vehicles through which languages change and become renewed, and its vigor and color enrich daily speech. Although it has gained respectability in the 20th century, in the past it was often loudly condemned as vulgar. Nevertheless, Shakespeare brought into acceptable usage such slang terms as hubbub, to bump, and to dwindle, and 20th century writers have used slang brilliantly to convey character and ambiance. Slang appears at all times and in all languages. A person's head was Kapala (dish) in Sanskrit, testa (pot) in Latin; testa later became the standard Latin word for head. Among Western languages, English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Yiddish, Romanian and Romany (Gypsy) are particularly rich in slang.

H.Wentworth and S.Flexner in their "Dictionary of American slang" write:

"Sometimes slang is used to escape the dull familiarity of standard words, to suggest an escape from the established routine of everyday life. When slang is used, our life seems a little fresher and a little more personal. Also, as at all levels of speech, slang is sometimes used for the pure joy of making sounds, or even for a need to attract attention by making noise. The sheer newness and informality of certain slang words procedure pleasure.

But more important than this expression of a more or less hidden aesthetic motive on the part of the speaker is the slang's reflection of the personality, the outward, clearly visible characteristics of the speaker. By and large, the man who uses slang is a forceful, pleasing, acceptable personality."

This quotation from a well-known scientific study of slang clearly shows that what is labeled slang is either all kinds of nonce-formations- so frequently appearing in lively everyday speech and just as quickly disappearing from the language-, or jocular words and word-combinations that are formed by using the various means of word-building existing in the language and also by distorting the form or sense of existing words. Here are some more examples of words that are considered slang:

to take stock in- to be interested in, attach importance, give credence to;

bread-basket - the stomach;

to do a flit - to quit one's flat or lodgings at night without paying the rent or board;

rot - nonsense;

the cat's pajamas - the correct thing.

So broad is the term "slang" that, according to Eric Partridge, there are many kinds of slang, e.g. Cockney, commercial, society, military, theatrical, parliamentary and others. This leads the author to believe that there is also a standard slang, the slang that is common to all those who, though employing received standard in their writing and speech, also use an informal language which, in fact, is no language but merely a way of speaking, using special words and phrases in some special sense. The most confusing definition of the nature of slang is the following one given by Partridge:

"... personality and one's surroundings (social or occupational) are the two co-efficient, the two chief factors, the determining causes of the nature of slang, as they are of language in general and of style. "

According to this statement one may get the idea that language, style and slang all have the same nature, the same determining causes. Personality and surroundings determine:

- the nature of the slang used by a definite person
- the nature of the language he uses
- the kind of style he writes.

There is a general tendency in England and to some extent in the US to over-estimate the significance of slang by attaching to it more significance than it deserves. Slang is regarded as the quintessence of colloquial speech and therefore stands above all the laws of grammar. Though it is regarded by some purists as a language that stands below standard English, it is highly praised nowadays as "vivid", "more flexible", "more picturesque", "richer in vocabulary" and so on.

The following is an interesting example illustrating the contrast between standard English and non-literary English including slang.

In the story "By Courier" O. Henry opposes neutral and common literary words to special colloquial words and slang for a definite stylistic purpose, to distort a message by translating the literary vocabulary of one speaker into the non-literary vocabulary of another.

"Tell her I am on my way to the station, to leave for San Francisco, where I shall join that Alaska moose hunting expedition. Tell her that, since she has commanded me neither to speak nor to write to her, I take this means of making one last appeal to her sense of justice, for the sake of what has been. Tell her that to condemn and discard one who has not deserved such treatment, without giving him/her reason or a chance to explain is contrary to her nature as I believe it to be."

This message was delivered in the following manner:

"He told me to tell yer he's got his collars and cuffs in dat grip for a scoot clean out to Frisco. Den he's going to shoot snowbirds in de Klondike. He says yer told him to send round no more pink notes nor come hangin over de garden gate, and he takes dis mean (sending the boy to speak for him.-I.G.) of putting yer wise. He says yer referred to him like a has been, and never give him no chance to kick at de decision. He says yer swilled him and never said why."

The contrast between what is standard English and what is crude, broken non-literary or uneducated American English has been achieved by means of setting the common literary vocabulary and also the syntactical design of the original message against jargons, slang and all kinds of distortions of forms, phonetic, morphological, lexical and syntactical.

It is suggestive that there is a tendency in some modern dictionaries to replace the label slang by informal or colloquial. Such practice clearly manifests the dissatisfaction of some lexicographers with the term "slang". This is mainly due to the ambiguity of the term.

On the other hand, some lexicographers, as has already been pointed out, still make use of the term "slang" as a substitute for "jargon", "cant",

"colloquialism", "professionalism", "vulgar", "dialectal". Thus, in his dictionary Prof. Barnhart gives the label slang to such innovations as grab-to cause (a person) to react; make an impression on, which should be classed as newspaper jargon; grass or pot-marijuana, which are positively cant words (the quotation that follows proves is quite unambiguously); groove-something very enjoyable, grunt-US military slang, which in fact is a professionalism; guppy-tummy, British slang,- a common intestinal upset experienced by travelers, which is colloquialism; hang up-a psychological or emotional problem, which is undoubtedly a professionalism which has undergone extension of meaning and now, according to Barnhart also means any problem or difficulty, especially one that causes annoyance or irritation.

The use of the label slang in this way is evidently due to the fact that Barnhart's Dictionary aims not so much at discrimination between different stylistic subtleties of neologisms but mainly at fixation of lexical units which have already won general recognition through constant repetition in newspaper language.

The term "slang" is ambiguous because to use a figurative expression it has become a Jack of all trades and master of none.

Reference:

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2. Gibbon, Dafydd, Roger Moore and Richard Winski, eds. (1997). *Handbook of standards and Resources for Spoken Language Systems*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.