

SLANG. PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

L. Taran

(Sumy State University)

Research supervisor – instructor V. Dorda

The social and psychological complexities captured in slang vocabulary make the term difficult to define, leading some scholars to question whether the term is even usable for linguistics. Dumas and Lighter reject the classical formula for definition and instead propose four identifying criteria for 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 special 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 status 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.

None of the four criteria is formal, for slang is not distinct in form. And only number 3 may be said to be loosely based on meaning. But all four concern the social relationships of the participants and the "ultimate identifying characteristic" is the consciousness of shared knowledge between speaker and hearer, 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 operational definition are necessary or sufficient, in the final analysis Dumas and Lighter are right. Slang cannot be defined independent of its functions and use.

Despite the difficulty of defining the term, slang does have some consistent characteristics. Foremost, slang is ephemeral. A constant supply of new words require the rapid change characteristic of slang. Most slang items enjoy only a brief time of popularity, bursting into existence and falling out of use at a much more rapid rate than items of the general vocabulary. Sometimes a new slang form either replaces an earlier one or provides another synonym for a notion already named in slang, like *ramped*, *ranked*, *ted* (from *wasted*), and *toe* (from *torn*) for 'drunk'; *bagel* and *hang* for 'do nothing in particular'; *bumping* and *hegging* for 'exhilarating';

squirrel kisser and *tree nymph* for 'someone concerned with the environment'; or *red-shirted* and *latered tor* 'jilted'. Sometimes new slang extends to new areas of meaning or to areas of meaning of recent interest to the group inventing the slang, like *Tom* (from *totally obedient moron*) for 'computer'; *dangling modifier* for a single, long, flashy earring'; *the five-year program* (or even *the six-year program*) for 'the time it takes to complete an undergraduate degree'; or *twinkie* (yellow on the outside, white on the inside) for 'an Asian who identifies with Caucasians or has a white girlfriend or boyfriend'.

The vocabulary of college students can illustrate the ephemeral and innovative character of slang. One way to measure the ephemerality of student slang is to compare slang vocabulary at the same institution at different time.

There is a lot of examples of slang concerning drugs, e.g.: *A-bomb* is a word, meaning smoking marijuana and heroin in 1 cigarette. *Blow a stick* as well as *get on* means smoking marijuana. *Ganja* –is a term for marijuana, originating from India. Slang is not geographically restricted vocabulary. In Hawaii people call marijuana *paca lolo*. In Canada they call it *wacky tabacky*. In Miami it's simply *the stuff*. In Taxes it's *crack*, *weed*. In Pennsylvania it's *weed*, *pot*, *green grass*.

In some places the slang words for the marijuana are really confusing for the foreigner. E.g. *Blanket* is a marijuana cigarette. *Butter* is marijuana. So, we should be aware of not to be confused by these false friends of interpreter.

Sometimes slang gets completely ridiculous and unexplained. *Strawberry milk* is also a name for marijuana.

Some slang words even come from the names of the movies. *Assassin of Youth* is a name for the marijuana, which comes from the 1930's film that was intended to warn people of the dangers of marijuana, but like reefer madness it instead became stoner movie classic.

Slang must be distinguished from other subsets of the lexicon such as regionalisms or dialect words, jargon, profanity and obscenity, colloquialism, and cant or argot – although slang shares some characteristics with each of these and can overlap them.

Syntax, or sentence structure, is not important in defining slang. Slang expressions are not composed in word order sequences idiosyncratic to slang, and individual slang words and phrases

typically fit into an appropriate grammatical slot in an established pattern.

If grammars and dictionaries are to explain language accurately, they must find ways to describe slang. Thus, the definition of slang used by both linguists and lexicographers must incorporate the social, contextual, and rhetorical dimensions inherent in this type of vocabulary.

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