

Slang in Its Cultural Environment



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There has always been interest in substandard strata of the English vocabulary. In the twentieth century this interest intensively grew. Substandard words and formations began to gain more and more attention, they appeared in dictionaries, linguistic journals and even in daily papers. But in spite of all these facts there are some difficulties to draw a precise line between substandard and standard vocabulary, because as we know language is apt to change and the same word that was substandard some twenty years ago may be considered standard nowadays. Slang is one of the forms of substandard English.

If we are to understand slang intelligently we must examine it within the general framework of productivity and linguistic innovation, qualities of human language that, unlike our notion of slang itself, are truly universal.

The productive property of language may be explained as follows. The linguistic resources of any functioning society are more than versatile - they are potentially infinite. All people can speak eloquently in their native tongues about any subject or interest. Even the Latin language, usually regarded as extinct, clings to a tenuous existence in the form of Modern Latin, which is maintained as the official vehicle of papal encyclicals within the Roman Catholic Church, its vocabulary regularly is artificially updated to cover such post-Classical developments as motorcycle and wonder drugs - and indication of Latin's continued viability, if not its practicality, as vehicle of contemporary thought.

All human languages are linguistic systems; and each of these independent systems of contrastive sound, structure and meaning provides an inexhaustible framework for the expressions of thought as well as for the creation and adoption of new words and meanings. But the framework itself is useless without the existence of people to bend it to their needs, both as individuals and as sharers in a common culture. The productivity of each language system relies entirely upon its living speakers. The element added by speakers of a language is the active participation of living thinking minds in a preexisting but entirely abstract system. Living minds alone possess the power to transform language from a lifeless set of instructions into something much more profound: a dynamic entity or process continually evolving in unpredictable ways.

Any adult, who tries to learn a second language, discovers that linguistic systems vary greatly. Yet no language that we know of or can guess about is "primitive" in the sense of having a tiny, infertile vocabulary, or a structure that is somehow an obstacle to sophisticated thought. Quite the contrary: all languages are in principle infinitely flexible

and adequate to the changing need of their speakers and their societies. When the Apache language, for example, required a new vocabulary to name automobile parts, it did not simply borrow terms from English: it quickly developed an automotive vocabulary from native elements, which is exactly what English had done.

The speech of various small nomadic and agrarian cultures scattered across the world five thousand years ago developed incrementally into the international tongues of the present day. Their slow metamorphosis into systems perfectly suited to discuss notions of artificial intelligence, political philosophy, or the mass marketing of frozen orange juice, occurred not because of any special virtues in the ancestor languages of English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and the rest, but because all natural languages since before recorded history, have had the fundamental ability to change and expand along with the societies that use them.

Thus, all living languages innovate in response to new developments and expand their vocabularies to encompass new ideas. But slang is not a simple synonym for lexical innovation, even at the level of nonstandard speech. Slang is lexical innovation within a particular cultural context.

The “counter culture” helped disseminate many drug terms that might otherwise have remained part of a special vocabulary. Among the immigrant-ethnic bestowals, the influx from Yiddish continues strong in spite of the sociological shifting of Jewish population. The old Dutch and German sources have dried up. The Italian carries on in modest proportion. The Hispanic has been surprisingly uninfluential, although heavier contribution is surely predictable. All these are far outstripped by increased borrowing from black America, and this from the urban ghetto rather than the old Southern heartland. Close analysis would probably show that, what with the prominence of black people in the armed force, in music, in the entertainment world and in street and ghetto life, the black influence on American slang has been more pervasive in recent time than that of any other ethnic group in history. This can be conjectured without any implication that black Americans constitute a homogeneous culture. The culture of US occupies the culture through pervasive and unifying communication media. They give us the slang of brass of the execs of middle management, of dwellers in bureaucracies of yuppies, and of the talk shows and the “people” sort of columns and magazines. New emphasis in the fortunes of American slang point to one of its important distinctions, “primary” and “secondary” slang. Primary slang is the pristine speech of subculture members, so very natural to its speakers that it seems they might be mute without it. Of course they would not be since the slang is by definition always an alternative idiom, to be chosen rather than required. Much of teenage talk and the speech of urban street gang would be examples of primary slang. Secondary slang is chosen not much to fix, one in a group as to express one’s attitudes and resourcefulness by pretending, momentarily to be a member of a street gang, or a criminal, or a gambler, or a drug user or a professional football player, and so forth, and hence to express one’s contempt, superiority and cleverness by borrowing someone else’s verbal dress. Secondary slang is a matter of stylistic choice, rather than true identification. Slang may mean that in the future secondary or acquired slang will be our major variety. That is, the old disreputable

groups will become more a matter of individual wit and self-advertisement, with its sources no more apparent than those of inappropriate joke.

The idea that slang is equally manifested in all languages and cultures is often taken for granted by linguists. Such an assumption rests upon shaky foundation, indeed, like the innocent belief that all societies share a common sense of humour, the cliché that slang is as old as language, and that every language has its slang, stems largely from a naïve uniformitarian view of world cultures. It rests too upon a failure to distinguish slang from other forms of wordplay and linguistic innovation. Anthropologists, for example, have written articles reporting on “slang” in languages as different from English - and from each other - as Hanuoo and Zuni, but the vocabularies and syntactical devices they identify, function rather differently from the kinds of words and phrases that bear the slang label in English dictionaries. Figurative expressions that might sound like slang to us in literal translation are not necessarily perceived as such in the languages that employ them. Slang, therefore, conveys social and cultural associations that would be entirely foreign to nonliterate societies lacking both a standardized written language and a system of formal education to inculcate it.

Thus, the evidence from linguistic anthropology, incomplete as it is, strongly suggests that slang exists in literate, complex, heterogeneous cultures recognizing a standard usage whose primacy is upheld by a strong pedagogical tradition. Slang abounds in English, French, Spanish, Russian, and other modern Indo-European languages. The vocabulary of Roman comedy and satirical verse, much of which does not appear in serious Roman writing, suggests that slang existed in Popular Latin as well. In contrast, nonliterate societies appear not to judge varieties of language as either good or bad: what they do judge is the effectiveness of the individual speaker, particularly in a given context. The correlation between slang and extended societies whose structure resembles our own comes from the interplay of several far from universal factors:

1. a written language that turns words into visual symbols, which can then be scrutinized as discrete entities;
2. public consciousness of normative standard written usage and consequent tendency to weigh language as “good” or “bad”, “reputable” or “disreputable”;
3. the existence of vocabularies widely associated with disesteemed social groups, subcultures, or countercultures;
4. sufficient interaction among mainstream speakers and these numerous subcultures to give prominence to a sizable vocabulary of antiestablishment or stylistically unorthodox expressions;
5. opportunity for that vocabulary to circulate more or less freely;
6. very importantly, enough resistance to change in standard usage to keep most such innovations from gaining formal acceptance very quickly;
7. crucially, a widespread habit among “respectable” speakers of emulating the “unrespectable”, either by adopting the irreverent locutions of their own, in a rhetorical climate felt to discourage this very habit.

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Ժարգոնը մշակութային համատեքստում

Անգլերեն լեզվի ոչ ստանդարտ բառապաշարը միշտ էլ եղել է հետաքրքրության առարկա: 20-րդ դարում այս հետաքրքրությունը էլ ավելի աճեց: Ոչ ստանդարտ բառեր և բառակապակցություններ սկսեցին հայտնվել բառարաններում, լեզվաբանական ամսագրերում և նույնիսկ ամենօրյա թերթերում: Սակայն դժվար է սահմանազատել ստանդարտ և ոչ ստանդարտ բառապաշարը, քանի որ, ինչպես գիտենք, լեզուն անընդհատ փոփոխվում է, և նույն բառը, որը ոչ ստանդարտ էր համարվում, ասենք, 20 տարի առաջ, կարող է համարվել ստանդարտ այսօր: Ժարգոնը ոչ ստանդարտ անգլերենի ձևերից է: Այն լեքսիկական նորույթ է որոշակի մշակութային համատեքստում: Ժարգոնը հավասարապես գոյություն ունի բոլոր լեզուներում և մշակույթներում: Ժարգոնով հարուստ են հնդեվրոպական շատ լեզուներ: