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ЕЗИК, РЕЧ, ГЛАСНА КОМУНІКАЦІЯ

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SLANG AS A LINGUISTIC PHENOMENON

Slang... an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably... The wholesome fermentation or eductation of those processes eternally active in language, by which froth and specks are thrown up, mostly to pass away, though occasionally to settle and permanently crystallize.
Walt Whitman

This article is devoted to the study of the topic «Slang», its origin and different changes during its evolution.

Slang – informal, nonstandard words and phrases, generally shorter lived than the expressions of ordinary colloquial speech, and typically formed by creative, often witty juxtapositions of words or images. Slang can be contrasted with jargon (technical language of occupational or other groups) and with argot or cant (secret vocabulary of underworld groups), but the borderlines separating these categories from slang are greatly blurred, and some writers use the terms *cant*, *argot*, and *jargon* in a general way to include all the foregoing meanings.

Each society can be divided into many groups regarding to interests, tastes, professional affiliation, political and social points of view, etc. The members of the groups may belong to several ones at the same time, so they will be aware of all the peculiarities concerning these groups. Variety of such groups leads to the deviation from some language standards and creation of so-called «micro languages» within these groups. Each of these «micro languages» develops within the boundaries of one particular group. Such languages are not spread far and wide as they are non-universal ones.

The importance of the problem will remain constant as the development of the modern society and all the social and political processes lead to numerous modifications in the field communication demanding the deep studying.

A great number of scientific debates are held, a great number of scientific works have been issued to touch this problem [2; 3; 4; 5; 7; etc.]. Such issues become useful for the linguists, scholars and others who deal with the living informal language and colloquial speech.

Slang is the *object* of the research. Social, historical and linguistic peculiarities of slang are the *subject* of the investigation.

The *actuality* of the course paper is based on the fact that modern linguistics tends to study social, historical and communicative characteristics of language phenomena, different kinds of slang included.

The *aim* of the research is as follows: to find out and to study social, historical and linguistic aspects of slang.

The aim and the subject determine the following *tasks*:

- to give the definition and the essence of slang;
- to find out social and linguistic reasons for slanging;
- to study characteristics of slang and the process of its diffusion.

Slang – 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. 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 [1.25]. 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. (Compare the slang «*hooker*» and the standard «*prostitute*»).

Under the terms of such a definition, «**cant**» comprises the restricted, non-technical words and expressions of any particular group, as an occupational, age, ethnic, hobby, or special-interest group. (*Cool, uptight, do your thing* were youth cant of the late 1960s before they became slang.) «**Jargon**» is defined as the restricted, technical, or shoptalk words and expressions of any particular group, as an occupational, trade, scientific, artistic, criminal, or other group. (*Finals* used by printers and by students, *Fannie May* by money men, *preemie* by obstetricians were jargon before they became slang.) «**Argot**» is merely the combined cant and jargon of thieves, criminals, or any other underworld group. (*Hit* used by armed robbers; *scam* by corporate confidence men).

Slang fills a necessary niche in all languages, occupying a middle ground between the standard and informal words accepted by the general public and the special words and expressions known only to comparatively small social subgroups. 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. Thus, during various times in history, American slang has provided *cowboy*, *blizzard*, *okay*, *racketeer*, *phone*, *gas*, and *movie* for standard or informal speech. It has tried and finally rejected *conbobberation* (disturbance), *krib* (room or apartment), *lucifer* (match), *tomato* (girl), and *fab* (fabulous) from standard or informal speech. It has held other words such as *bones* (dice), used since the 14th century, and *beat it* (go away), used since the 16th century, in a permanent grasp, neither passing them on to standard or informal speech nor rejecting them from popular, long-term use. [9,102]

Slang words cannot be distinguished from other words by sound or meaning. Indeed, all slang words were once cant, jargon, argot, dialect, nonstandard, or taboo. For example, the American slang *to neck* (to kiss and caress) was originally student cant; *flattop* (an aircraft carrier) was originally navy jargon; and *pineapple* (a bomb or hand grenade) was originally criminal argot. Such words did not, of course, change their sound or meaning when they became slang. Many slang words, such as *blizzard*, *mob*, *movie*, *phone*, *gas*, and others, have become informal or standard and, of course, did not change in sound or meaning when they did so. In fact, most slang words are homonyms of standard words, spelled and pronounced just like their standard counterparts, as for example (American slang), *cabbage* (money), *cool* (relaxed), and *pot* (marijuana). Of course, the words *cabbage*, *cool*, and *pot* sound alike in their ordinary standard use and in their slang use. Each word sounds just as appealing or unappealing, dull or colourful in its standard as in its slang use. Also, the meanings of *cabbage* and *money*, *cool* and *relaxed*, *pot* and *marijuana* are the same, so it cannot be said that the connotations of slang words are any more colourful or racy than the meanings of standard words.

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. All segments of society use some slang, including the most educated, cultivated speakers and writers. In fact, this is part of the definition of slang. For example, George Washington used *redcoat* (British soldier); Winston Churchill used *booze* (liquor); and Lyndon B. Johnson used *cool it* (calm down, shut up). [6; 11]

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.

Slang is not the language of the underworld, nor does most of it necessarily come from the underworld. The main sources of slang change from period to period. Thus, in

one period of American slang, frontiersmen, cowboys, hunters, and trappers may have been the main source; during some parts of the 1920s and '30s the speech of baseball players and criminals may have been the main source; at other times, the vocabulary of jazz musicians, soldiers, or college students may have been the main source.

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 or in the dialect of the southern United States. Words that are taboo in one era (e.g., *stomach*, *thigh*) can become accepted, standard words in a later era. 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. 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 ambience. 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.

Social and linguistic reasons for slanging

Slang tends to originate in subcultures within a society. Occupational groups (for example, loggers, police, medical professionals, and computer specialists) are prominent originators of both jargon and slang; other groups creating slang include the armed forces, teenagers, racial minorities, ghetto residents, labor unions, citizens-band radiobroadcasters, sports groups, drug addicts, criminals, and even religious denominations (Episcopalians, for example, produced *spike*, a High Church Anglican). Slang expressions often embody attitudes and values of group members. They may thus contribute to a sense of group identity and may convey to the listener information about the speaker's background. Before an apt expression becomes slang, however, it must be widely adopted by members of the subculture. At this point slang and jargon overlap greatly. If the subculture has enough contact with the mainstream culture, its figures of speech become slang expressions known to the whole society. For example, *cat* (a sport), *cool* (aloof, stylish), *Mr. Charley* (a white man), *The Man* (the law), and *Uncle Tom* (a meek black) all originated in the predominantly black Harlem district of New York City and have traveled far since their inception. Slang is thus generally not tied to any geographic region within a country.

A slang expression may suddenly become widely used and as quickly date (*23-skiddoo*). It may become accepted as standard speech, either in its original slang meaning (*bus*, from *omnibus*) or with an altered, possibly tamed meaning (*jazz*, which originally had sexual connotations). Some expressions have persisted for centuries as

slang (*booze* for alcoholic beverage). In the 20th century, mass media and rapid travel have speeded up both the circulation and the demise of slang terms. Television and novels have turned criminal cant into slang (*five grand* for \$5000). Changing social circumstances may stimulate the spread of slang. Drug-related expressions (such as *pot* and *marijuana*) were virtually a secret jargon in the 1940s; in the 1960s they were adopted by rebellious youth; and in the 1970s and '80s they were widely known. Slang emanates from conflicts in values, sometimes superficial, often fundamental. When an individual applies language in a new way to express hostility, ridicule, or contempt, often with sharp wit, he may be creating slang, but the new expression will perish unless it is picked up by others. If the speaker is a member of a group that finds that his creation projects the emotional reaction of its members toward an idea, person, or social institution, the expression will gain currency according to the unanimity of attitude within the group. A new slang term is usually widely used in a subculture before it appears in the dominant culture. Thus slang, e.g., «*sucker*,» «*honkey*,» «*shave-tail*,» «*jerk*»- expresses the attitudes, not always derogatory, of one group or class toward the values of another [8.91]. Slang sometimes stems from within the group, satirizing or burlesquing its own values, behaviour, and attitudes; e.g., «*shotgun wedding*,» «*cake eater*,» «*greasy spoon*.» Slang, then, is produced largely by social forces rather than by an individual speaker or writer who, single-handed (like Horace Walpole, who coined «serendipity» more than 200 years ago), creates and establishes a word in the language. This is one reason why it is difficult to determine the origin of slang terms. Civilized society tends to divide into a dominant culture and various subcultures that flourish within the dominant framework. The subcultures show specialized linguistic phenomena, varying widely in form and contents, that depend on the nature of the groups and their relation to each other and to the dominant culture. The shock value of slang stems largely from the verbal transfer of the values of a subculture to diametrically opposed values in the dominant culture. Names such as *fuzz*, *pig*, *fink*, *bull*, and *dick* for policemen were not created by officers of the law. (The humorous «*dickless tracy*,» however, meaning a policewoman, was coined by male policemen.)

Occupational groups are legion, and while in most respects they identify with the dominant culture, there is just enough social and linguistic hostility to maintain group solidarity. Terms such as *scab*, *strike-breaker*, *company-man*, and *goon* were highly charged words in the era in which labour began to organize in the United States; they are not used lightly even today, though they have been taken into the standard language.

In addition to occupational and professional groups, there are many other types of subcultures that supply slang. These include sexual deviants, narcotic addicts, ghetto groups, institutional populations, political organizations, the armed forces, Gypsies, and sports groups of many varieties. Some of the most fruitful sources of slang are the subcultures of professional criminals who have migrated to the New

World since the 16th century. Old-time thieves still humorously refer to themselves as FFV-First Families of Virginia.

In criminal subcultures, pressure applied by the dominant culture intensifies the internal forces already at work, and the argot forming there emphasizes the values, attitudes, and techniques of the subculture. Criminal groups seem to evolve about this specialized argot, and both the subculture and its slang expressions proliferate in response to internal and external pressures. Most subcultures tend to draw words and phrases from the contiguous language (rather than creating many new words) and to give these established terms new and special meanings; some borrowings from foreign languages, including the American Indian tongues, are traditional. The more learned occupations or professions like medicine, law, psychology, sociology, engineering, and electronics tend to create true neologisms, often based on Greek or Latin roots, but these are not major sources for slang, though nurses and medical students adapt some medical terminology to their slang, and air force personnel and some other branches of the armed services borrow freely from engineering and electronics. The processes by which words become slang are the same as those by which other words in the language change their form or meaning or both. Some of these are the employment of metaphor, simile, folk etymology, distortion of sounds in words, generalization, specialization, clipping, the use of acronyms, elevation and degeneration, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, borrowings from foreign languages, and the play of euphemism against taboo. The English word «*trip*» is an example of a term that has undergone both specialization and generalization. It first became specialized to mean a psychedelic experience resulting from the drug LSD. Subsequently, it generalized again to mean any experience on any drug, and beyond that to any type of «kicks» from anything. Clipping is exemplified by the use of «*grass*» from «*laughing grass*,» a term for marijuana. «*Funky*,» once a very low term for body odour, has undergone elevation among jazz buffs to signify «*the best*»; «*fanny*,» on the other hand, once simply a girl's name, is currently a degenerated term that refers to the buttocks (in England, it has further degenerated into a taboo word for the female genitalia). There is also some actual coinage of slang terms.

Characteristics of slang

Psychologically, most good slang harks back to the stage in human culture when animism was a worldwide 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.

Civilized cultures and their languages retain many remnants of animism, largely on the unconscious level. In Western languages, the metaphor owes its power to echoes of sympathetic magic, and slang utilizes certain attributes of the metaphor to evoke images too close for comfort to «reality.» For example, to refer to a woman as a «broad» is automatically to increase her girth in an area in which she may fancy herself as being thin. Her reaction may, thus, be one of anger and resentment, if she happens to live in a society in which slim hips are considered essential to feminine beauty. Slang, then, owes much of its power to shock to the superimposition of images that are incongruous with images (or values) of others, usually members of the dominant culture. 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*» were quite stylish phrases in the U.S. 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 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 (Dekker)[4,41]. 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 luster of even the most colourful and descriptive words and phrases. The rate of turnover in slang words is undoubtedly encouraged by the mass media, and a term must be increasingly effective to survive.

While many slang words introduce new concepts, some of the most effective slang provides new expressions—fresh, satirical, shocking—for established concepts, often very respectable ones. Sound is sometimes used as a basis for this type of slang, as, for example, in various phonetic distortions (e.g., pig Latin terms). It is also used in rhyming slang, which employs a fortunate combination of both sound and imagery. Thus, gloves are «*turtledoves*» (the gloved hands suggesting a pair of billing doves), a girl is a «*twist and twirl*» (the movement suggesting a girl walking), and an insulting imitation of flatus, produced by blowing air between the tip of the protruded tongue and the upper lip, is the «*raspberry*,» cut back from «*raspberry tart*.» Most slang, however, depends upon incongruity of imagery, conveyed by the lively connotations of a novel term applied to an established concept. Slang is not all of equal quality, a considerable body of it reflecting a simple need to find new terms for common ones, such as the hands, feet, head, and other parts of the body. Food, drink, and sex also involve extensive slang vocabulary. Strained or synthetically invented slang lacks verve, as can be seen in the desperate efforts of some sportswriters to avoid mentioning

the word baseball-e.g., a batter does not hit a baseball but rather «*swats the horsehide*,» «*plasters the pill*,» «*hefts the old apple over the fence*,» and so on.

The most effective slang operates on a more sophisticated level and often tells something about the thing named, the person using the term, and the social matrix against which it is used. Pungency may increase when full understanding of the term depends on a little inside information or knowledge of a term already in use, often on the slang side itself. For example, the term Vatican roulette (for the rhythm system of birth control) would have little impact if the expression Russian roulette were not already in wide usage. Slang invades the dominant culture as it seeps out of various subcultures. Some words fall dead or lie dormant in the dominant culture for long periods. Others vividly express an idea already latent in the dominant culture and these are immediately picked up and used. Before the advent of mass media, such terms invaded the dominant culture slowly and were transmitted largely by word of mouth. Thus a term like *snafu*, its shocking power softened with the explanation «*situation normal, all fouled up*,» worked its way gradually from the military in World War II by word of mouth (because the media largely shunned it) into respectable circles. Today, however, a sportscaster, news reporter, or comedian may introduce a lively new word already used by an in-group into millions of homes simultaneously, giving it almost instant currency. For example, the term uptight was first used largely by criminal narcotic addicts to indicate the onset of withdrawal distress when drugs are denied. Later, because of intense journalistic interest in the drug scene, it became widely used in the dominant culture to mean anxiety or tension unrelated to drug use. It kept its form but changed its meaning slightly.

Other terms may change their form or both form and meaning, like «*one for the book*» (anything unusual or unbelievable). Sportswriters in the U.S. borrowed this term around 1920 from the occupational language of then legal bookmakers, who lined up at racetracks in the morning («*the morning line*» is still figuratively used on every sports page) to take bets on the afternoon races. Newly arrived bookmakers went to the end of the line, and any bettor requesting unusually long odds was motioned down the line with the phrase. «*That's one for the end book*» The general public dropped the «*end*» as meaningless, but old-time gamblers still retain it. Slang spreads through many other channels, such as popular songs, which, for the initiate, are often rich in double entendre.

When subcultures are structurally tight, little of their language leaks out. Thus the Mafia, in more than a half-century of powerful criminal activity in America, has contributed little slang. When subcultures weaken, contacts with the dominant culture multiply, diffusion occurs, and their language appears widely as slang. Criminal narcotic addicts, for example, had a tight subculture and a highly secret argot in the 1940s; now their terms are used freely by middle-class teenagers, even those with no real knowledge of drugs.

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. 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.

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ПРОБЛЕМА, СВЯЗАННАЯ С РАСПРОСТРАНЕНИЕМ ЖАРГОНИЗМОВ

Не секрет, что в среде современной отечественной интеллигенции резко снизился уровень речевой культуры. Тем самым поставлено под сомнение её общепризнанное в прошлом право – быть хранительницей чистоты и правильности родного языка. В других социальных слоях общества положение еще хуже. Это своего рода сигнал бедствия, которое еще не разразилось.

increase the store of terse and striking words, or to provide a vocabulary for new shades of meaning. 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.

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