

The Characteristics and Functions of Slang in English Language

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Abstract

In the course of the development of English language, people have different attitudes towards slang. Slang is in a dynamic process of constant development. People often use slang out of their instinctive desire for fresh expressions, and slang continues to evolve in their use. Slang has various forms and rich characteristics. Slang not only adds many new words and expressions to the English language, but also has unique functions. Understanding the semantics and style of slang is of profound significance to improving the comprehensive language knowledge of English learners and to understanding the cultural information and lifestyle of English-speaking countries.

Keywords

English slang; non-standard language; slang words.

1. Introduction

English slang is an important part of the English language, with the characteristics of simplicity, vividness and authenticity. Slang belongs to the non-standard language, which is a “middle ground” between the subcultural language and the mainstream cultural language (standard language), and it also distinguishes itself from other non-standard languages, such as cant, jargon, dialect, etc. Slang is mainly derived from, but not entirely equivalent to, cant, dialects, and jargon, most of which are temporary and localized, and not easily understood by people outside the industry or group. Slang is the part of these non-standard terms that has been popularized and accepted by the general public. Slang has historically been viewed in two ways, positively and negatively. Some see it as a blasphemy against the purity of the language, while others see it as a breath of life for the English language.

Slang has a varied life span, with most slang often remaining popular for a while and then disappearing without a trace, while only a few have stood the test of time. Only a few have stood the test of time, and the vivid ones have been absorbed into mainstream culture and have made their way into standard English. Slang is a language of great charm and infectiousness, with the characteristics of wit, humour, vivid image and concise speech. In communication, it is brighter and more personalized than standard English. It constantly feeds fresh blood into standard English and becomes one of the main sources of standard English. Slang also has unique functions and roles in the English language. Slang has a certain function of identification. As a non-standard language, slang can also prevent the invasion of the alien subject. Slang is rich in emotion, helps communication within a group, and reflects social culture. The English language is incomplete if slang is not regarded as an important linguistic feature and an important source of the English language. To deepen the understanding of slang is of profound significance to the understanding of English language and the culture of English-speaking countries. Through the analysis of its characteristics and functions, this paper aims to provide a understanding of English slang, shedding light on its role as a living, breathing linguistic phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining Slang

The From the linguistic perspective, slang is regarded as the use of ordinary words in extraordinary senses or of extraordinary words in ordinary senses [1]. Jespersen pioneers this position, stating that slang “finds amusement in the creation and propagation of new words and in attaching new meanings to old words”[2].

Within the linguistic approach, slang is different from the standard language in both its morphology and its semantics. In morphology, it is characterized by clear insubordination as regards the standard word-formation rules, and in semantics, it not only renames everyday objects, but also enriches, qualifies and complexifies them. Hence, Sornig’s definition of slang: Slang is, as it were, a language in statu nascendi, a language (or at least a lexicon) in the making. Slang is essentially an experimental language[3].

In dictionaries, there is no clear definition of slang because this concept has different meanings in different periods of time. Originally, the term was used to refer to the language of criminals, thieves and vagabonds. The OED states that it is “the special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character” in the mid-eighteenth century. Webster & McKechnie (eds) specify that in the beginning it referred to “the specialized vocabulary and idioms of criminals, tramps, etc. the purpose of which was to disguise from outsiders the meaning of what was said”[4].

After the mid-eighteenth century, the term slang gradually expanded to include the language of other subgroups, not necessarily of low culture, but linked by their profession, such as lawyers, scientists, historians, essayists and poets (OED), or by a common way of life [4].

In the early 19th century, slang acquired a broader meaning for colloquial or informal words that, outside of traditional or standard usage, belonged more to familiar conversation than to written language [4]. Slang today includes both specific and general meanings. It usually consists of new words and novel or extended meanings, and develops from the pursuit for fresh, vibrant, colorful, spicy, or humorous expressions.

Within the sociological approach, slang is thought to have two opposite purposes of keeping insiders together and outsiders out. On the one hand, Eble stresses the social and interpersonal aspects of slang and its function “to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large”[5]. Accordingly, sharing the same slang vocabulary aids both to gain acceptance in a group and to preserve group solidarity. More generally, slang is a sociocultural practice used by speakers for social purposes such as being at the same language level with others, promoting social interaction, and enhancing friendship or intimacy. On the other hand, slang is considered to serve antisocial purposes such as marking social differences, opposing authority figures, and concealing secret information or misconduct from them[6]. In particular, slang is viewed as an in-group vocabulary, cultivated by certain subclasses in society such as criminals or drug addicts to keep their conversations private, or used by subgroups as adolescents or college students to distance themselves from older generations.

Slang differs from standard language for its lack of formality. Anderson and Trudgill, even remark that the most important aspect of slang is that it is language use below the level of stylistically neutral language usage [7]. Another difference of slang from standard language lies in its effectiveness. Although some slang words are mere informal synonyms of their standard equivalents, others add some new meanings to them. For example, the word bimbo is employed to address a young attractive empty-headed woman. There is no standard English word that can convey the same concept. Most importantly, slang differs from standard language in some of the rules of word-formation that are typical of slang but are not actually present in standard

English. For example, the final combing forms like -head (e.g. “ginhead” (drunkard), “grasshead” (marijuana smoker)). section headings are in boldface capital and lowercase letters. Second level headings are typed as part of the succeeding paragraph (like the subsection heading of this paragraph).

2.2. Slang and Other Non-standard Language Forms

The classification of slang is a challenging task because the conceptual and terminological overlap makes it difficult to distinguish slang from other similar varieties of language such as cant, jargon, dialects). As a non-standard language variety, slang diverges from jargon, cant, dialect, vernacular and accent.

2.2.1. Slang and Jargon

Jargon is a widely used term referring to the specialized vocabulary and phraseology of a set of people sharing a trade or profession [6]. Some slang words may overlap with jargon words. For example, musicians use slang terms to refer to different music styles such as funk, grunge, hardcore, jazz and so on, doctors employ slang words to describe the diseases or physical conditions of their patients.

Slang differs from jargon in that it lacks prestige and pretentiousness. In fact, slang is more familiar and natural than professional jargon in science, medicine, academia, law, bureaucracy, business, etc. Slang may be used among specific groups, such as musicians, doctors, soldiers, or sailors, but it is not entirely about status or reputation.

2.2.2. Slang and Cant

Cant is the specialized and usually secret language of thieves, professional beggars, and other groups operating on the fringes of society [6]. Many slang words come from the language of the underworld and are used for the purposes of secrecy and conspiracy. For example, criminals use slang words such as bill and fuzz to present the police in their criminal activities. However, slang cannot be reduced to the private language of the criminals. Slang is also used by other groups, such as teenagers. Teenagers use slang to gain acceptance of the group or to keep the group together.

2.2.3. Slang and Dialect

Though slang is often regional, it is not geographically restricted like dialect. Some slang words have different meanings in two regions. For example, the slang word bomb refers to a success in British English, while in American English, it means a failure. Unlike dialect, slang is not necessarily associated with one region or social class. Some slang words are of more general use.

2.2.4. Slang and Colloquial Language

Slang does not correspond to colloquial language, although, like familiar speech, it departs from neutral and formal styles [7]. Slang is informal language used between people who belong to the same social group or, more broadly, between friends, intimates, or family members, but it serves a different purpose than mere familiarity. For example, nana is an abbreviation of banana in colloquial English, but as a slang word, it refers to a silly person. Slang has the characteristics of secrecy, privacy or vulgarity that colloquial language does not have, and can produce humor, rudeness, offensiveness and other effects, which are not achieved by similar familiar expressions. not number your paper:

3. The Features of Slang

3.1. The Linguistic Characteristics of Slang

Freshness and novelty are distinctive features of slang. People always like to innovate when they think or speak, which is one of the main reasons for the emergence and popularity of slang.

For example, when people criticize someone harshly, the word criticize is too bland, so the word bad mou is employed to make it different. The phrase "give him the air" is used to refer to dismiss someone. Teenagers, and young people in general, tend to be up-to-date and innovative in their speech. Teenagers make efforts to invent new words and to modify the form or meaning of existing ones. The young are indeed creative and continually in search of novel expressions which show that they are fashionable. Slang has been loved by many people because of its freshness and uniqueness, but it is also this characteristic that determines the instability of slang. Some slang words have died out over time, and some of them continue to maintain their status or rise to formal status such as baby-sister, fire, jet etc.

Slang is popular not only because it is novel and unconventional, but also because it is vivid, humorous and colorful. For example, "Bureaucracy and procrastination" is called "think-thank". The phenomenon of highly qualified people leaving their own country or region to seek better opportunities and treatment in other countries or regions is called the "brain drain". The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is slang for "no action,talk only", which is a clever satire on the organization. These witty slang words can be found in newspapers, TV programs and novels. The audience unknowingly memorize and spread the slang words in their daily life. These lively and humorous sentences add much pleasure to our life.

Brevity is an obvious characteristic of slang. Slang words such as lifer, oncer, weeper, 3D strikes people as concise and clear. For example, to express the same meaning as lifer, the standard language uses a phrase: "life sentence or a man serving a life sentence." When the existing vocabulary (standard or colloquial) cannot express a thing, concept, phenomenon, etc., succinctly, a lot of slang comes into being. And then into the standard vocabulary or colloquial vocabulary.

Another linguistic feature of slang is that it is rhythmic. Rhyming plays a large part in the formation of slang. Most of English slang is the result of simplifying one or several words through various word-formation methods, and some of them are the result of matching some words through innovation, so that two morphemes with similar structure and rhyme overlap, forming a word rich in music, in line with rhythm, short and easy to remember. Such as alliteration words "ding-dong" (spirited, strong), "tip top" (very outstanding). There are more rhyming words, such as "wavy-navy" (British navy), "chit-chat" (cordial and leisurely conversation), and "wily-nilly" (casual). "lead-head" (outstanding person). These slang words are catchy, easy to understand and remember, and greatly enrich and strengthen the expression of slang.

Variation is one of the main characteristics of English slang. Slang is constantly changing at any given time in history. People are often surprised to find that words they use naturally are questioned or condemned by writers a generation or so ago. The expression "what on earth" seems to be an idiom to us and would certainly not be objected to in anyone's speech today. But De Quincey decried the term as slang and expressed shock to hear government officials use it. Even the word joke, which we take for granted today, was once slang. Whether some words are considered slang depends on the time period in which they are used. Because slang is fleeting, the lifetime of slang expressions can be short, and also because some slang words may quickly become accepted in standard speech. Slang has been described as "a peculiar kind of vagabond language, always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech, but continually straying or forcing its way into the most respectable company." [8] The word slang was not lexicalized in Johnson' Dictionary and first occurred a few years later. Webster in 1828 defines it as "low, vulgar, unmeaning language." Many scholars protested against the use of new slang and professed to fear that the English language would be utterly corrupted by it. Then in 1911, the definition in the Oxford Dictionary presented a different attitude. Slang is explained as "Language of a high colloquial type, below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words, or of current words employed in some special sense." The attitude towards

slang became more objective and scientific[9]. Slang is used out of the desire for novelty, but the novelty wears off quickly, so slang must also be constantly renewed. It should be noted that not all elements in slang are aesthetic, but as time passes, the haze and dirt settle or are carried away in the boundless speech ocean and the life-giving freedom stays as a clean current in the language system. Language diversity alongside language ecology may contribute to the growth and development of the language system.

Slang consists of non-standard terms and non-standard uses of standard terms. It is considered innovative because it continually enriches the standard language in various ways [10]. First, slang enriches the language with new words. It often forms new terms with onomatopoeia hues, such as verbs “blub”(cry), “boak”(vomit), “wazz”(urinate), which have a strong phonetic identity and expressiveness. Second, slang enriches language with novel meanings. It may establish new additional feelings, much of which come from figurative language. For example, “diamonds” are something wonderful, “poison” is a metaphoric name for alcohol, and “bad” ironically means good. Sometimes standard words are given more casual additional meanings. For example, “chicken” is a curious slang name for “young man”[11].

3.2. The Rhetoric Features of Slang

Slang is a kind of language with great charm and appeal. It is humorous, vivid, concise and comprehensive, and can produce novel and fashionable rhetorical effect when used.

Slang tends to use a variety of figurative devices, especially similes and metaphors, to express things. For example, “be as drunk as a fish”. When a fish drinks through water, it looks like it is drinking water with a big mouthful. Therefore, drink like a fish can symbolically express “drinking too much”. A common slang word related to chicken is “chicken out”, which refers to run away from the crisis. The slang term “couch potato” provides a vivid image of a couch potato eating junk food while watching television on a couch. There is a metaphor in this slang expression, which compares a person to a potato.

In English slang, euphemisms occupy a larger proportion. Euphemism is the replacement of rude, harsh, or explicit speech with something more elegant, melodious, or gentle. It is a good way to express things in life that are embarrassing, unpleasant, annoying or frightening. Slang vocabulary is full of euphemisms for topics such as fertility and death. Slang expressions about fertility include “wear the apron high”, “be in a delicate condition”, “eating for two” etc. For the subject of death, English slang has many different expressions such as “turn up one’s heels”, “kick the bucket” and so on.

Exaggeration is a rhetorical device that deliberately exaggerates or overstates its reality. It is characterized by an exaggerated description of the object of expression that is contrary to common sense so as to achieve a strong rhetorical effect. Exaggeration is also commonly used in English slang, such as “dress to kill” (clothes are very beautiful), “knock someone’s socks off” (someone is very excited) and so on.

Metonymy is also a common rhetorical device which use the name of the thing that is closely related to the person or the thing to substitute the original name of the person or thing that needs to be explained. This technique focuses on the relevance of things and subtly forms a linguistic renaming that forms slang. For example, “from soup to nuts”(from soup before meals to nuts after meals) refers to “from beginning to end”.

Some slang also achieves irony, humor and other effects by saying opposite words. For example, “fat chance” refers to a slight possibility. A fat chance he has of winning the title. (His chances of winning the championship are slim.) Some derogatory words in standard English can be used to describe positive ones in slang. For example, your new shoes are really devil. The word devil here conveys a positive meaning.

4. The Function of Slang

4.1. Identify Expression

English slang contains a certain degree of identification. American scholar Roberts pointed out that people use slang more often to indicate that they are a fully qualified member of a particular group of people. In every place where people live, they will form their own cultural circle, and people within this cultural scope will be influenced by local ideas, and will have local characteristics in many aspects such as behavior and handling. Therefore, when we talk with foreign friends, if we can use a local slang, we can quickly arouse others' emotional identification and narrow the distance with the speaker. The use of slang can also promote economic and trade cooperation faster to a certain extent. The use of simple sentence patterns to express complex meanings will make more of the local language labels, with their own family characteristics. The generation of English slang is based on the existence of some people have the same views and opinions on something, which is the basis of the formation of a common language. The identity of English slang will make more people begin to accept a particular slang expression, which is the consistency of ideas to a certain extent. Guiding more people to form a unified view is, to some extent, the most important social culture of English slang, because the popularity and popularity of slang will narrow the distance between people and make it easier to have a sense of identity, so that the views of certain things can have an impact on more people [12].

Slang expressions are also different among different groups of native speakers within the same country. Sometimes you can guess the identity of the speaker from the content of the slang. People who have been in the army tend to use military slang when they speak. It is a habit left over from years of military life. Students' language also has its own characteristics, showing a kind of youthful vitality, with a clear student logo. For example: apple-polish (flattery), lady-killer (handsome man) and so on. Young people, in particular, like to use slang to gain group recognition and to separate themselves from other groups. In addition, the use of slang can also reflect the speaker's status. In English slang, there are many words with a certain class character, through his words and deeds, we can know what kind of status in the society, and people with different status will show different states when they speak slang. Therefore, it is easy to judge the status of the other party from the words and actions of the speaker. For example, words like "old sport" are rarely seen in the upper classes, and there are so many of them, which is a reflection of the large number of expressions in English slang.

4.2. Preventing Intrusion

The multiplicity of language can be a way of staving off the incursions of an alien subject [13]. Ferguson analyzed the language in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* in his book *Language, Science and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle: The Brutal Tongue*, and stated that the non-standard and multi-mediated English triumphed over the deadly tongue of the vampire. The nation emerges triumphant, not because of its purity of physical might, but because of the mutable and diverse nature of its native languages.

In the 19th century, English was poised to become a new world language, spreading across the globe through colonial expansion. English has never been spoken by so many people abroad, nor read by so many people at home. This spread has given rise both to pride in the vibrancy and resilience of English and to fears that it could degenerate when adopted by rude non-native speakers. However, alongside concerns about the devaluation of English from the outside, a growing number of people are realizing that the language spoken at home is never pure, consistent or standard. The vitality of English comes from its adaptability[13]. When aliens learn English, they usually learn the standard foreign language and do not know much about its slang. In *Dracula*, native speakers represents the diverse ways in which English can be spoken,

heard, and mediated. Their ability to embody and traffic in non-standard forms of English marks their difference from Dracula and provides the key to their eventual victory over him. Locals express their national identity through the use of non-standard languages, while aliens struggle to understand the various variants of their language. Instead of being degenerated, the use of non-standard language creates a linguistic distinction that excludes non-native speakers.

4.3. In-group Communication

The use of slang can help improve communication skills. English slang contains a wealth of emotions. English slang is not a standard form of English, but in many English-speaking countries, slang is widely used and has become a popular language. Slang not only appears in daily life, but also infiltrates literary works and newspapers and magazines. The use of slang in international affairs and some important negotiations can ease the atmosphere and promote the smooth flow of negotiations. These are all examples of the rich emotions of slang. For example, using slang to compliment someone, having a bedroom eyes (attractive eyes), will make the atmosphere more harmonious. A simple, emotional compliment, will have unexpected effects. After the actor has performed, he can be told to have an ear for music. This will make the actor feel that his performance has not been wasted and has been recognized by the people, and he will work harder to perform. Slang is more frequently used in the communication between friends, which is a manifestation of intimacy and can promote the deepening of friendship. English slang is a kind of language with rich emotion, which can carry on the transmission of information, the exchange of ideas and the expression of emotions, and plays an important role in improving people's communicative ability.

Slang promotes communication and creates a good atmosphere. Communication with people is indispensable in life, but due to many factors, many people can not achieve the purpose of communication. As a kind of informal language, slang is open to a certain extent and can be used without worrying too much. In this way, a good communication environment can be created, mutual understanding can be strengthened, and effective communication can be carried out. Similarly, slang expressions can also be used in conversations with strangers. Slang expressions can make others feel friendly in the words, which can break the deadlock and carry out effective communication.

The use of slang can help build harmonious interpersonal relationships. When people from different backgrounds use slang in the same environment, they can deepen their relationship. The use of representative slang to express thoughts and feelings among members of a social group can make them feel that they are in close contact with other members, thus producing a sense of security and a relaxed state of mind, which is conducive to creating a harmonious relationship.

4.4. Reflecting Social Culture

English slang reflects social culture. In every country, the construction of economy and culture is very important. While paying attention to economic construction, we should also pay attention to the peace of national development and the construction of cultural quality in the construction process, otherwise it will easily lead to difficulties in national social management. The low quality of the people will lead to an increasing level of dissatisfaction with the country and society. After a long development, English slang has been able to reflect the public's attitude towards national construction. People use slang to express their dissatisfaction with a certain policy or a certain phenomenon and express their emotions. Some English slang has the function of reflecting the real needs of people. People more or less express their dissatisfaction with the reality, creating local slang, reflecting the social culture [14].

Slang is the product of the development of the times. With the rapid development of economy and technology, new things emerge in an endless stream, attracting people's attention. The

emergence of new things must have corresponding language to describe, while it is difficult to define these new things with the standard English. In such an environment, colorful expressions of slang developed the perfect summary of new things to express the characteristics of new things. Language is the main tool for people to communicate, which is reflected in all aspects of life and work. It is the product of social development and has certain sociality. Slang is a special form of English language, and its generation and development cannot be separated from the support of society. Therefore, English slang also has certain social and cultural characteristics. One of the major features of English slang is the variety of expression forms, which meets the language needs of different people. Through the use of slang, different people can express their unique value standards, techniques, attitudes and personal thoughts and feelings. This makes it easier for different groups of people to exchange their thoughts and feelings. With the development of social economy, English slang has gradually penetrated into the mainstream culture, and the subculture groups using slang have developed to a certain extent, and the communication among the members of the group has gradually spread outwards, resulting in the continuous spread of slang among the public, reflecting a variety of social cultures. The expression of English slang in a concise way and image has gradually been recognized by people and gradually developed. English slang, a form of language created by individuals, has gradually penetrated into the mainstream culture, which can be said to be a major progress of English language and culture. With the development of social economy, all kinds of new things are constantly appearing, and the traditional standard language fail to define these new things. In such an environment, slang supplements the gap of standard language with figurative and simple language, and promotes the development of English language.

5. Summary

Language is the main tool of communication and an important means for people to carry out social life. As a special form of English language, slang is different from standard English and is a variant of English. Slang also differs from other non-standard languages such as jargon, cant, dialects, etc., and has different characteristics and functions. Slang has rich linguistic features such as novelty, humor, vividness, simplicity, and rhythm. Slang is highly innovative, creating a lot of new English words or endowing English words new meanings, injecting vitality into the English language. In addition, slang also owns the characteristic of volatility, constantly changing and evolving over a long period of development, some only appeared for a short period of time and then fell out of use, while others were accepted by the public and entered the standard English.

The reason why slang is favored by the people and widely appears in various newspapers and media and daily communication is that slang has its unique function. First of all, a knowledge of slang is often crucial to understanding conversations in the media and in practical situations, and without a knowledge of slang, it is almost impossible to read modern literature and periodicals, listen to the radio, watch television, communicate on the Internet or watch political debates. Slang can also help to identify where people are from and where they belong to a social group or place, strengthening the user's sense of identity with a particular group. Secondly, slang also allows people to interact with others and establish intimate relationships. Third, slang reflects social culture. Slang comes into being with the emergence of new things, which can reflect the daily life of the people and the social culture at that time. In addition, understanding slang knowledge is also of great significance for English learners, which can make their language vivid, colorful and interesting, and make them more close to the expression trend and style of native speakers. Mastering a language is not only about mastering the vocabulary and grammar, but also about mastering the cultural and social world of the people who speak it.

Up to now, a considerable amount of slang has been integrated into the mainstream culture of English-speaking countries with its unique linguistic charm and expression, affecting all aspects of social life. The study of English slang can help to deepen the understanding of English language culture and social structure. Understanding the semantics and style of slang is of profound significance to improving the comprehensive language knowledge of English learners and to understanding the cultural information and lifestyle of English-speaking countries.

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