

A Close Look at the Function of Slang

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We encounter slang on a daily basis, whether it's through spoken word, text messages, social media posts, or the slang-ridden Internet. There is no doubting the prevalence of slang in our everyday conversations and interactions, however what I'm interested in is discovering what role slang plays in our everyday lives. Why do we use slang? What does it achieve? In other words, I want to know the function of slang. Many people view slang in a negative way, and even consider people who use it heavily stupid, uneducated, or lazy. I, however, think there's more to slang than what meets the eye, and in the following, I will attempt to illustrate the significance and function of slang.

Slang is known as “very informal usage in vocabulary and idiom that is characteristically more metaphorical, playful, elliptical, vivid, and ephemeral than ordinary language” (“Slang”). Linguists have struggled to clearly define slang, but what they have come up with so far is that slang is “a linguistic phenomenon ever present and consistently changing” (“Slang”). Linguists Bethany K. Dumas and Jonathan Lighter claim that if words and phrases meet the following criteria then they are considered 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 referent or with that less statusful or less responsible class of people who have such special familiarity and the use of 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” (Dumas & Lighter 14-15). This is the most concise definition of slang I came across, and I believe it covers every possibility of what can be considered slang. It also implies situations where slang is used, which will be helpful in starting to understand the function of slang. Some examples of common slang words and phrases that are used today are “extra” (used when someone is going over the top in a situation), “salty” (used to describe someone that is angry or bothered), or “throw shade” (to insult someone).

Before considering the function of slang, it is necessary to consider the significance of language in general. I think the following aspects of language can be directly translated to slang and used to explain the importance of slang, seeing as slang is an integral part of language, and it is a form of language. Anca Sirbu explains that “language is essentially a means of communication among the members of society” and that “common language is the one of the most important features of a community” (Sirbu 1). Furthermore, she states that language is “a tool that conveys traditions and values related to group identity” (Sirbu 1). Seeing as Sirbu talks about language in relation to society, community, and groups, indicates that language has a *far* greater significance within a group than it does on an individual level. The fact that language is related to group identity is extremely important to consider when it comes to slang, because slang has a strong association with groups. Professor of Linguistics, D.W. Maurer, explains how:



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 (Maurer 1).

It can be concluded that slang only emerges if it is used by a group. Once groups have acquired certain words or phrases, and start using them to communicate with other members of the group, those certain words and phrases will become more known and popular.

Slang is also connected to the identity of a group. As Sirbu says, language is a conveyor of a group's tradition and values, and Mauer explains that if a creator of a slang expression/word "is a member of a group that finds 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" (Mauer 1). The fact that slang will only "gain currency" within a group if it matches their attitude is an indicator that slang can be used to express the identity of a group. An example of this can be found in any new generation. As generations come and go, so do certain phrases and words, but there is a reason that slang associated with one generation, is usually not found in the next. *Daily Arts* writer Sam Rosenberg reminds readers that in the 1950s, "an age swept up in conservative values, young people used "swell" as their very own colloquialism" (Rosenberg). The 1950's followed WWII, and people were doing their best to recuperate. They had hope for the future and were "content, but many others felt ill at ease because of the speed at which the world was changing" (Shmoop). In order to cope and mask their troubles, people "embraced religion and visited psychiatrists in unprecedented numbers" (Shmoop). "Swell" doesn't exactly mean that everything is just perfect and amazing but rather that things are okay. I think the fact that "swell" was commonly used during this era, shows that life wasn't particular the best it could be and there was some troubles, but it also wasn't *as* bad as it was during the war, so things were simply fine. Since people in the 50s were trying desperately to distract themselves with things like therapy, and religion and pretend that everything was okay, it makes sense that people were going around telling each other that everything was just "swell."

With the change of times, came the change of slang words. During the "lively era" of the '80s and the "grunge scene" of the '90s, words like "cool," "groovy," "wicked," and "sweet," became popular (Rosenberg). The new slang words used in the '80s and '90s expressed the newfound identity of the generation. It was a livelier generation, and therefore the slang words associated with the generation were livelier and more creative. The 70s saw a surge in the Rock and Roll Genre as well as Disco music which "prompted the opening of hundreds of dance clubs around the country," and "people became free thinkers, questioning government and demanding that their voices be heard" ("70s Culture"). No longer were people pretending everything was okay, they were fighting back, speaking their mind, and pushing against conservative ways. Their livelier demeanor can be seen through the slang terms they used. "Cool" and "groovy" are far more livelier words than "swell" is, because they are more enthusiastic in their definitions; they're a way of saying something is awesome or excellent. People used "cool" and "groovy" to express *genuine* interest in something. The 90s are known for being ridden with lust, sex, and drugs, which suggests that people during this era were completely going against conservative values, and weren't concerned with what was considered morally right during the time. It only makes sense

then that “wicked” became a popularly used slang term, seeing as it means evil or morally wrong. Since the 80s and 90s weren’t as conservative as the previous generations, the slang words associated with the previous generations were no longer an accurate representation of the new one. Therefore the old slang expressions disappeared, and new ones that *did* match the attitude and expressed the generation’s collective identity formed.

While the above example shows slang’s role in a groups expression of identity, it also exemplifies how slang can be an expression of modernity. Modernity can be thought of as “the self-definition of a generation”, as well as up-to-date and contemporary times— not to be confused with the Modern Era (Snyder). I consider technology to be a good example of Modernity. It is constantly evolving, adapting to contemporary times, and it also defines generations. The 80s will always be remembered for the Walkman, the 90s for the Web, and the 2000s for the iPhone. Similarly, slang is always up-to-date with the times, and as we’ve established it also aids in expressing the identity of a generation. Since generations acquire and form slang that expresses aspects of their generation, I believe that slang is in fact part of a generation’s “self-definition”, and thus slang can be a representation of modernity. Modernity is constantly changing due to its relation to present times, just as slang is constantly changing, because it too, is related to present times. Conversely, modernity is not antiquated; it’s a “departure from traditional styles or values” and the remote past (“Modernity”). This can directly translate to slang, because slang deviates from the past and goes against traditional styles and values.

One instance where slang expresses modernity and is used to go against traditional styles is in 1954, during the “postwar years” (Fisher 1). During the Royal Tour of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip, a controversy occurred when the Queen reportedly said the phrase “this must have cost a packet” after she was gifted a diamond and brooch at a state dinner (Fisher 1). “Cost a packet” is a phrase used in British English, which means to “cost a lot”. In other words, the Queen was expressing that her gift must have been very expensive. Seeing as this was a slang phrase, many people were shocked that the Queen, the epitome of tradition, would use this expression. An Australian magazine called *The Argus* responded to this controversy by assuring people that “she had said it, and further noted that ‘she is a young woman, modern in her outlook, and, naturally enough, given to using the phrases and expressions of the one for a young women to use’” (Fisher 1). In this incident, the Queen’s slang use is being connected to modernity, and the magazines response is suggesting that a modern outlook can be achieved by using slang. Additionally, the positive tone of the response implies that the magazine is encouraging young woman to use slang phrases and expressions. In other words, the magazine is encouraging the idea of women deviating from traditional styles, in this case traditional vernacular, by using slang.

Apart from the incident with the Queen, and in addition to slang expressing modernity, slang also played an integral part in liberating women and giving them a voice during the postwar years. Slang words during this time mainly referenced “male experiences”, such as “grazing, the gold rush, bush life, sport, gambling and the military” (Fisher 1). Women were predominantly excluded from slang references, and slang use in general (Fisher 1). They were expected to be “guardians of correct speech”, and were looked down upon if they used any informal language (Fisher 2).

However, in the 1940's, "the emergent teenage culture provided a new space for girls to use slang terms along with boys" (Fisher 2). Slang started being associated with teenagers, and magazines started using slang in order to address teenagers. Eventually, "more respectable publications" started using slang to address the youth, "which indicated that teenage culture had become mainstream and that the use of colloquial language was seen as a normal part of adolescence" (Fisher 2). The emergence of teenage culture and the acceptability of their slang use made it more acceptable for middle-class women to use slang. Slang "came to be considered an important part of speech" which was "a significant aspect of performing modern middle-class femininity", and it was "promoted and reinforced by women's magazines" (Fisher 3). One particular magazine took things a step further and encouraged women to make their own slang terms, saying "women must use their own brands of today's English, not copy the ones men have developed for themselves" (Fisher 3). Women reacted to these magazines by sending in letters, and "the letter pages of women's magazines were a space within which readers could formulate a distinctive identity as modern middle class women through their use informalities and colloquialisms" (Fisher 3). More importantly, "the language used in these letters therefore worked to create an imagined community amongst readers, which evoked the kinds of conversations women could have over their fences or in their living room" (Fisher 3). The magazines started a conversation among Women, and encouraged them to take control of their femininity, and fight against the belief that women should not use slang. Through these letters and the ongoing conversation between women that was evoked by the magazine, new slang words were created *by women that expressed women* and their experiences. Slang words like "wifey, coz (cousin)...girlie (daughter), only (only child), hubby, sonny, and Miss Pious", were created (Fisher 4). These slang words evolved from the stories women told about their everyday life and experiences in the letters that they sent in to the magazines. Women were able to use slang to break through standards, and to liberate themselves from traditional styles. Additionally, by creating their own terms and expressions, slang enabled women to have a voice and use language that represented women, and to finally bring femininity to Australian English. This example shows how slang can liberate a group: by differentiating them from other groups, and giving them their own unique voice.

Now that we've seen what slang can do for a group collectively, it's important to consider what slang can do for members of a group. Consider once more Sirbu's claim: "common language is the one of the most important features of a community" (Sirbu 1). Sirbu specifically says a *common* language is of great importance within a community, in that it's the fact that a community has a language that everyone understands, that makes language a significant part of a community; it provides a commonality between groups of people. I think slang can be considered a "common language" within a group, because each group has particular slang words and expressions that is common in *their* group, and that all members understand. Considering slang is a common language within a group it can then be deduced from Sirbu's claim about common language; that slang is an important feature of a community.

An example of where slang proves to be an important feature of a community/group is on college campuses. Just as it differs from group to group what particular slang they use to communicate with each other, every college campus has slang particular to their own campus. A study on

campus slang found that in order for students to effectively communicate with each other and cooperate with each other, “the first important thing is to speak one common language, that is, campus slang” (Wang 4). A group can have more of an understanding for each other when they use a common language such as slang, which in turn increases the level of communication and cooperation. My personal research resulted in similar findings, with 60% of respondents saying slang can be used for agreeability between individuals, and establishing friendliness between one another. Slang offers commonality to a group or community, and establishes the similarities between members of a group, therefore increasing the cohesiveness of a group.

Another finding during the study on campus slang was that members use slang simply because it’s fun and creative. The study explains that because the formation of slang entails creating new words, and new meanings out of words, that slang provides college students with “more space for the imagination and creativity” (Wang 3). Similarly, Professor of English and studier of slang Michael Adams says, “There is creative value in the creation of new language among different social groups” (Adams). Surprisingly, only 3% of respondents to my survey said that slang is used in order to be creative. I believe this response is due not to the fact that people don’t think slang is creative, but rather that people don’t use slang with the conscious purpose of being creative, or being seen as creative. It is without question that creativity is strongly associated with slang, because the formation of slang entails innovative, creative, and original thinking.

Another important factor about slang is that it is often times found in humorous situations, and usually used to convey humor, lightheartedness, and casualness. While observing a particular conversation between three young women over the social media app Facebook, I noticed that the intention behind the majority usage of slang was to be humorous. Consider the following interaction between three members of a group chat:

Person 1: (Persons name), shut the fuck up what r u trying to do

Person 2: (Person’s name), you need to chill

Person 3: ahahahahah damn didn’t mean to start beef

The term “start beef”, is a humorous way of saying “to have a grudge with another person” (“Beef”). In this example, slang is used to alleviate the tension in the conversation by inserting humor. Consequently, it makes the conversation more lighthearted. If Person 3 had answered something like, “I apologize, I did not mean to start a problem between you two”, it would just add to the seriousness of the conversation and most likely increase tension. In addition to my observations, the survey I posted resulted in 58% of respondents saying slang makes conversations and situations more humorous. Humor aids in making a conversation more casual, and makes situations more relaxed. Therefore, I think the presence of humorous slang allows individuals to let their guard down. This relates with my own research, where 73% of respondents said that slang makes conversations more casual and relaxed. The combination of the humor and casual tone that can be achieved by using slang takes away any stiffness and tension in a situation.

A specific example of how slang can be used to make conversation more casual is in regards to talking about taboo subjects. Slang “serves to change the level of conversation from formal to informal, allowing users to handle awkward social situations. Slang is often used to discuss semi-



taboo subjects, such as: drunkenness, sexual organs and activities, drugs and drug use, ‘elimination’ and ‘bodily waste’” (Hess). While I believe that slang can make awkward conversations easier to navigate because it takes away some formality from the conversation, I also think it makes it easier to talk about the above taboo subjects because completely new names are given to them. That way people can talk about taboo subjects without ever directly needing to say taboo terms. For example, it’s a lot easier to casually talk about genitalia by using slang words, rather than using the scientific terms. What way would you find it more comfortable to ask a friend about drunkenness: How intoxicated are you currently? Or, how hammered are you? I’m guessing the latter, because it allows you to ask about a taboo subject without explicitly needing to say anything. Additionally, an overwhelming 82% of respondents to my survey agree that slang makes it easier to discuss the taboo subjects stated above. Considering all this information, I think slang acts to take away stress associated with formal situations, which in turn relaxes individuals, and makes communication easier, and more casual.

It is clear that slang is extremely complex, and has a significant role in our daily lives, as well as significance in what it does *for* our daily lives. There are many important functions of slang, some subtle and some obvious. I see no reason to believe that slang use entails laziness, stupidity, or for lack of a better term, uneducated. In fact, I believe individuals should be impressed with what slang can achieve. My ultimate belief about slang is that it is an impressively powerful tool that we use to break barriers between one another. Consider once more the women during the post-war years who used slang to break the barriers between themselves and men through the use of colloquial language, or the conversation between the three girls where slang was used to break barriers by cutting the tension and inserting some lightheartedness in the situation, and also the fact that slang allows people to break barriers by enabling them to talk about awkward subjects in a casual way. Additionally, the fact that slang establishes agreeability and friendliness with one another, takes away tension in situations, and allows us to cooperate with one another, further proves how slang is used in order to break barriers.

I’ll leave you with a personal experience, that didn’t make sense to me until my newfound understanding of slang. I am half Serbian and half Lebanese, but I have always been more in touch with my Serbian counterpart. Though I was born in America, Serbian was my first language. I’ve noticed over the years when travelling to Serbia, that my sister and I have a very easy time conversing with and connecting to adults. We’re able to fully understand what they are saying, and they are able to understand what we are saying. We’ve acquired many meaningful relationships with adults from Serbia, whether they are our aunts and uncles, friends of my mom, neighbors that live in my grandmother’s apartment, or even the cashiers at the local markets. What’s strange however, is that my sister and I have gone to Serbia every summer of our lives and we still haven’t really connected with our cousins, which are the only people we encounter there that are our age. This always confused and frustrated me because no matter how much time we spent with them there was always a disconnect, and we just weren’t able to become close with them. It took me years to realize that this disconnect was due to language or more specifically, slang. My sister and I had an immensely hard time understanding what they were saying, and this confusion only occurred when we were talking with our young cousins, but never with adults.



It soon became apparent that it was their slang use that confused us, as we weren't familiar with Serbian slang. We learned Serbian through my mom, and the only person we talk in Serbian to throughout the year is with my grandmother during our weekly phone calls. We learned how to speak Serbian by only listening to and talking to adults, and therefore we never picked up any of the slang that is popular among the youth in Serbia. Looking back at our conversations with our cousins, I've realized that we spent a significant amount of time asking what certain slang words they used meant, as well as them trying to clarify those slang words to us. Our conversations consisted mostly of talking about the Serbian language itself and what certain slang words mean, rather than actually talking about meaningful topics that could help us to get to know each other. My sister and I often didn't understand their jokes seeing as a lot of them involved slang words, and eventually they stopped directing their jokes to us but rather with one another, because our reactions were often blank stares. Similarly, my sister and I started having more and more side conversations between just ourselves when in the presence of our cousins, because we found it awkward trying to have a conversation with them, seeing as it had failed so many times before. To this day, I feel like I barely know my cousins, and every time I see them it feels like we have to introduce ourselves to each other all over again.

I now *strongly* believe that if we understood Serbian slang, my sister and I would have been able to break through the barriers between us and our cousins a long time ago. We would be able to joke around using the same slang terms they do, we wouldn't need to ask them to explain the slang words/phrases they use, and they wouldn't hold anything back in fear that we wouldn't understand what they are saying. Additionally, our conversations wouldn't just stay at the surface, as if we were merely acquaintances rather than family. We never had an understanding for each other because our vocabularies for slang were drastically different. Now, I'm not saying that people who belong in different groups and who are familiar with particular slang can't interact and having meaningful connections with people from other groups who have their own set of slang their familiar with. I just believe that it's hard to fully understand each other, if we don't have the same understanding of particular words and phrases. Perhaps this is why older generations are always talking down the slang that is used by the younger generations, simply because they don't have an understanding of the slang they use. A common language between people is extremely important in order for cooperation, agreeability, and understanding, and without it, a significant disconnect can occur.

Ana is an undecided major, born and raised in Boston to Serbian and Lebanese parents. Writing has always been a passion of Ana's, and she created this research essay as a final project for her Composition II course. She notes that "it was a topic that became increasingly interesting the more I researched it. I was thoroughly surprised by the complex history and function of slang, and I gained a new perspective on the role of language in our daily lives." Other than writing, Ana's biggest passion is traveling, and she loves discovering new places, meeting people from all around the world, and learning about different cultures.

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