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## Slang: Awful Spector of Sloth?

Frank Bramlett

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*, [fbramlett@unomaha.edu](mailto:fbramlett@unomaha.edu)

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# FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY DR. FRANK BRAMLETT



Frank Bramlett, Ph.D., teaches English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is a specialist in the area of linguistics.

they have at their disposal is slang. The out-of-the-blue creation of new words (called "coining") is relatively rare, whereas "innovation," the use of old or current words in new ways, is very common and comprises a good deal of linguistic change in general.

Interestingly, some slang terms have ways of being picked up by the out group. Words that today are considered standard English were at one time slang — *jazz*, *pants* and *rock'n' roll*. No one today would complain that these words are bad or dangerous, but that wasn't always the case. In fact, the linguist Geneva Smitherman says that *jazz* originally referred to sexual activity.

While some terms become part of the standard, widespread vocabulary, others have a way of maintaining their slang status over time. If we hear terms like *to catch some Zs* or *to hang out*, we recognize their highly informal nature. We would be very unlikely to use these terms in a memo to our boss, a letter of application for employment or a research paper for a college professor although, according to linguist Edward Finegan, even great literary artists often use slang in their work, including Chaucer and Shakespeare.

In contrast to the long shelf life of terms like the Shakespearean *beat it*, a slang term meaning

it, it is known by so many people that there no longer seems to be an out-group for it. (A fine line between slang and informal language exists, and sometimes it's difficult to determine which group a term belongs to.)

While informality plays a large role in determining the status of a term, it is certainly not the only criterion a word or phrase must meet to be called slang. If a teenage daughter, speaking to her best friend on the phone, says "Let's hook up later on for the bling bling," her mother, especially if she is *un-hip*, might not understand what her daughter is talking about. But current slang usage tells us that the daughter wants to *hook up with* (meet) her friend, perhaps at the mall, to look at or purchase some *bling bling* (jewelry). In effect, slang usage serves not only to maintain social distance but, if not understood by the out group, also to carry rebellious undertones.

So slang terms indicate individualism, independence, group membership, and often have a slight flavor of danger or rebellion. What's wrong with that? Americans tend to promote these characteristics as valuable, admirable, and worthy of being called American. That lexical items unknown to the majority groups exist should not be a cause for alarm. Indeed, I take heart that our linguistic faculties have a built-in capacity for slang.

In short, it's the creativity of human beings that slang attests. When people can create brand new terms or change the function of extant terms in order to express themselves in ways previously unknown, it evinces their abilities to be linguistically independent and, dare I say, artistic. What comes to mind is the poetry of current rap, hip-hop, and R&B groups. For instance, Mary J. Blige sees no reason for *hateration* or *holleratin'* in her recent hit "Family Affair." Destiny's Child sings about love and financial obligations, including the telephone bill and the "automobil" in the song "Bills, Bills, Bills." They further expand the boundaries of slang in their Stevie Nicks-inspired "Bootylicious." These terms, used in contemporary poetry, may or may not be picked up and used in the day-to-day vocabulary of R&B fans, but if they are, then they could take on the status of slang within those groups. If they became wildly popular, they could enter into general usage and, over time, even make it into the standard, edited form of English.

I don't believe slang does anything to interfere with "good English." In fact, these terms help strengthen the identity of social groups and encourage creative linguistic play, so in that light I think slang is actually good for us and for English itself.

## Slang: Awful Spector of Sloth?

Rarely is there a time when someone in America isn't worried about the state of our language. This worry generally arises in two forms: "our children don't know how to use proper English" and "there are too many immigrants who don't know how to speak English."

Often the concern about the lack of "proper" English arises in response to that awful specter of alleged sloth — slang. Most linguists define slang as vocabulary items used in informal settings. If a new car (*wheels*) is appreciated by someone's peers, then that *ride* or *hot rod* might be called *hot*, *cool*, *sweet*, or *phat*, depending on one's generation, circle of friends, and range of ability with slang terms. If, on the other hand, this car barely runs, has smoke coming out of the tailpipe, has four tires of four different sizes (one being white-wall, the other three lettered), then that car might be *a piece*, *a junker*, or just plain ol' *jacked*, again depending on one's generation or group of intimates.

Historically, slang serves as a way of forming and maintaining "in-group" and "out-group" identities. If one group wishes to maintain social distance from another group (usually one with more social, political and economic power), then one language-based technique

"leave this place immediately," some terms stay with us only briefly. We hear terms that become popular, if only in the media, but then fade rapidly. One such word is *fly*, meaning super-hip or radically attractive. This word lost currency in the late 1990s. What may have hastened its demise was the tongue-in-cheek song, "Pretty Fly for a White Guy," by the group The Offspring. This song makes some rather sharp commentary about in-group and out-group status and the phenomenon of the *wannabe*, a person on the outside who so obviously wants to be on the inside that he *sticks out like a sore thumb*.

It is unclear why some slang gets moved into the category of acceptable, standard speech while other terms remain slang. Some in fact do neither; they remain very informal but are known by the majority of English speakers and lose their "rebellious" connotation. One of the most famous terms in the world is *okay* — this term, whose origins are still a bit mysterious, is so widely used in English that it has even been borrowed into other languages. I'm okay; you're okay; they're okay. Spanish speakers say *okay*; French speakers say *okay*; Japanese speakers say *okay*. So even though *okay* still retains its infor-