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**Slang, style-shifting and sociability**

Encounters with what is loosely called ‘slang’ in speech or in print are ubiquitous. In the UK ‘well-brought-up’ speakers move easily in and out of slang in conversation and the previous reluctance by the print and broadcast media to admit slang terms has given way to a tendency to embrace and in some cases to celebrate this extremely informal level of lexis. Interest in collecting and analysing slang is keen especially among adolescent learners, but in Britain, as opposed to the US and certain European countries, teachers and academics have hitherto paid it little or no attention. Although there may be valid reasons for this - it is obvious that the study of non-standard varieties of language is of little use in teaching communication skills or preparing for examinations - we should remind ourselves that any disapproval of slang can only be a social and not a linguistic judgement. Indeed, there are grounds for seeing slang, diffuse and ill-defined as it is as a category, as a particularly interesting aspect of language, both formally in that it mobilises all the morphological and metaphorical possibilities of English (Eble 1996 25-60) - rather as poetry does, but without the dimension of allusiveness and ambiguity - and functionally in that it often occurs in association with heightened self-consciousness and charged social interactions. Lexical innovation is also, of course, a function of cultural change, notoriously raising problems of decoding by ‘non-natives’ (and some natives, too), but worthy of attention for that very reason, especially for working or trainee teachers and translators.

An obvious reason for choosing to concentrate on slang is that it is itself a controversial and spectacular social phenomenon, an ‘exotic’ aspect of an otherwise predictable language environment. An even better reason is that it is a variety which belongs (to a varying degree - of course some young people are quite innocent of non-standard usages) to young people themselves.

The recorded slangs of the past have been quite rightly characterised by Halliday in terms of ‘antilanguages’, the secretive codes of transgressive or deviant subcultures - criminals, beggars, travelling entertainers - with their salient features of relexicalisation and overlexicalisation (Halliday 1978). Later sociolinguists have focused on the role of adolescent slangs in the construction of social identity, among for example street gangs or high school students (Labov 1982, Eckert 1989), showing how acceptance into and exclusion from peer-groups is mediated by slang nomenclature and terminology.

Researchers into adolescent language usage have tended to concentrate on the links between language and hierarchies, status and deployment of social capital. More recently, however, some specialists have started to look at such ‘carnivalesque’ manifestations as profaning, mischief, banter and teasing, the borrowing of ethnically marked codes to signal empathy and solidarity in ‘crossing’ (Rampton 1995), and anticipated a change of emphasis in Bernstein’s words ‘from the dominance of adult-imposed and regulated rituals to dominance of rituals generated and regulated by youth’ (Bernstein, cited in Rampton 2003). None of these studies has taken slang into account although there has been a plea, again by Rampton, for more attention to ‘the social symbolic aspects of formulaic language’.

Eble, in the only book-length study in recent times devoted to North American campus slang, has shown that the slang of middle-class college students is more complex and less a product of alienation than has been assumed in the past (Eble 1996). Her recordings of interactions reveal, too, that the selective and conscious use of slang itself is only part of a broader repertoire of style-shifting in conversation, not primarily to enforce opposition to authority, secretiveness or social discrimination, but often for the purposes of bonding and ‘sociability’ through playfulness.

Eble’s tally of student slang, collected at Chapel Hill, North Carolina since 1979, prompted the compiling of a similar database at King’s College London. A crude categorisation of the London data (as in the American survey largely donated by students rather than recorded in the field) by semantic clusters gives a picture of student preoccupations that can be compared with the US findings (Thorne 2004 forthcoming). Interpretation is problematical - for example, the large number of terms for intoxication do not prove that London students are necessarily drunkards, but suggest that they do enjoy talking about excessive behaviour.

Tentative insights from the lexicology have been bolstered by analysis of conversations in which slang is used extensively. This also shows in many cases that speakers are operating not as deficient or restricted linguists but as empowered actors, not exactly, in Claire Kramsch’s phrase, the ‘heteroglossic narrators’ of recent myth, but enabled to vary their language strategies just as they use assemblage and *bricolage* in their presentations of self through dress, stance, gesture and accessorising.

By bringing the study of slang into the classroom and helping students to reflect upon their own language practices - especially on how they are potentially or actually able to style-shift and thereby play with identities - we can sensitise them to issues of register, appropriacy and semantic complexity. At a deeper level we can explore together what Bhabha calls the ‘social process of enunciation’ (Bhabha 1992, cited in Kramsch 1997) and bring into play students’ values, feelings and allegiances.

If we turn from the mainly monolingual, although multi-ethnic environment of the London campus to that of the international learner, there seem to me to be potential experiential links which suggest themselves in terms of Byram and Zarates’ notion of the intercultural learner (1994) and more especially Kramsch’s promotion of the ‘third space’ or ‘third place’, a metaphorical or actual setting in which language learners move beyond appropriation or assimilation and explore the actual boundaries between themselves and others, and begin to focus less on the formal features of language and more on the ludic, aesthetic or affective qualities of encounters across languages and cultures (Kramsch 1997). It has been proposed that there are certain boundary activities, including for instance pastiche, re-telling of stories and code-mixing, etc, that are especially useful in this context. To these I would modestly suggest that we could usefully add a number of slang-based activities.

Of course slang itself has gone global; there are now local hybrids, often incorporating English lexis alongside the pervasive effects of dominant inner-circle varieties such as the high school argot propagated by Hollywood movies and TV soaps, and the black street codes of rap and hip-hop. Authenticity - not just a concept among analysts but an emblematic term for members of subcultures - is complicated by the development in the media and in literature of pseudo-slangs (a phenomenon that goes back at least as far as Raymond Chandler and P.G. Wodehouse). So-called virtual or electronic literacies developing for the Internet, email or text messaging have generated new slangs and an enormous proliferation of websites designed to celebrate or decode them.

Looking at young peoples’ small-culture codes, whether these be wide-ranging alternative lexicons or the narrower hobbyist (surfboarding, DJ-ing) or media-influenced (pop music and fashion) or technological (email, text-messaging, internet) vocabularies that shade into jargon, revalues young people as expert linguists and their own experiences as worthwhile and meaningful. In nearly all cultures there are examples of this expertise, sometimes also involving catchphrases, media quotes, one-liners, jokes and puns. Language crossing is also a feature of many slangs, bringing into play the question of linguistic imperialism (I recall lessons looking at Franglais, Chinglish and Spanglish, and, in Slovenia, debating the borrowing of ‘cool’.)

Published materials presenting English slang to international students have generally been limited to glossaries; a recent exception being the listening material prepared by Beglar and Murray (2002). Expertise in slang incidentally is not a requirement of the teacher: definitions, usage guidance and even etymologies can be provided by reference materials or come from students themselves. In the classroom I have used componential and cultural analysis of slang keywords, comparison and contrast of slang vocabularies from various languages and regions, critical reading of slang in the media and literature and scripting of slang-rich interactions. Outside the classroom, students have carried out surveys and ethnographies to observe slang usage and uncover attitudes to it held by different speech communities.

Halliday suggested that ‘a study of sociolinguistic pathology may lead to additional insight into the social semiotic’ (Halliday 1978). I should emphasise that focusing in this way on stigmatised or taboo language, if it is culturally permissible at all, does not, in my experience, restrict learners’ ability to operate with privileged varieties (whether ‘British English’ or EIL); it does not, as some fear, subvert standard usage or devalue it in the eyes of young people but rather the opposite. It helps language users to objectify the way that spoken varieties can be fitted to contexts and enriches their sense of the possibilities of lexical variety.

The idea of the adolescent as the master or mistress of his or her subcultural identity and owner of his or her idiolect and sociolect is not new, nor is the notion of the intercultural learner as a bilingual or multilingual actor consciously operating across boundaries. What is still lacking, however, are materials which set out the kind of ‘boundary activities’ that teachers can draw upon in order to activate third places and empower learners. I have suggested that slang is worthy of the attention of linguists in its own right, but further that, as an exciting and controversial form of language which belongs to young people and to youth culture, it is a valuable entry-point into discussion of sociocultural issues, whether in a monolingual or multilingual setting. Using or talking about slang is only one of many experiences which can be mobilised ‘at the boundaries’ in this way, and as a final *cri de coeur* I would add that whether or not we are interested in slang *per se*, the urgent need is for practical, usable methods and materials - whether developed and exchanged informally or published commercially - which will help the teaching of language-and-culture in the global classroom to catch up with and profit from a decade or more of theory.

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