


## IS AMERICAN STUDENT SLANG OUT-OF-DATE?

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The article is focused on evolution of sources of the American student slang and its role in enlarging the vocabulary of Standard English. The authors analyse the scholars' works written in the last century in terms of their relevance at this point in time. Informal English and Standard English have much in common regarding the development process, and the issue of their fruitful coexistence is a unique area for linguistic research.

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Everyone has an idea what slang is, but thoughts of any two people on this subject are likely to be different, and there has been much controversial research on this topic.

While there are a number of excellent collections of American slang – the best and most comprehensive is Chapman's [4] revision and extension of Wentworth and Flexner's dictionary [12]; Partridge [9], whose name is most prominently associated with collections of slang, gives some attention to American as well as British student/college slang – the topic has been poorly studied by English and American linguists, despite a recent surge of interest in theoretical approaches to the lexicon. The single exception to this generalization is the work of Connie Eble of the University of North Carolina, who published a new paper on the slang used by U.N.C. students almost every year [7], and edited *College Slang 101* [6], a short textbook on slang. Among Ukrainian scholars dealing with the topic of slang we can single out Y. Zatsny [2], U. Potyatynnyk [3], V. Balabin [1] and others. Now, when the English language is developing at huge speed, taking into account the emergence of new words almost every day on such resources like *Word Spy* [14] or *OxfordDictionaries.com* [10], we cannot ignore the role of student slang in forming the Standard English.

Defining slang, and college slang in particular, is not as easy as it may seem. Initially one may feel that slang is simply “not proper English” or just whatever is not there in a standard dictionary. Following a number of authorities (especially Dumas and Lighter [5]), however, we claim that a number of

categories of words that might fit these criteria should not be included to the list of college slang: we thus do not consider substandard expressions like *ain't*, regional or “dialect” expressions, and baby talk words like *doggie*, for example, to be slang. The residue of nonstandard language, however, includes not only true slang, but also informal or colloquial language – the sort of words and expressions that anyone might use in conversation or a letter, but that would be out of place in a speech or formal essay.

Most authorities conclude that slang is the language means used to mark the user as a part of a distinct social group, and we have used this criterion in deciding what expressions qualify as college slang. We have usually tried not to investigate informal or colloquial expressions that would be familiar, in the same form and with the same meaning, to any English speaker, but have included mainly expressions that are used by the American college students in general. A few words in our research, however, have almost exactly the same definition with which they would be listed in a standard dictionary: two examples are *inebriated* ‘drunk’ and *strumpet* ‘slut’. Such words are considered to be “revivals” – words that we feel are not in common colloquial use among the general population, being used in the students' vocabulary.

A category of words that is often confused with slang is jargon: the specialized vocabulary of a particular group. While words which begin as jargon (in California, for instance, surfers' jargon) sometimes may be transferred to the general slang

vocabulary of ordinary speakers, we have tried to eliminate true jargon from our research (there is a sense, of course, in which many of the words on our list could be considered student jargon, since they refer to test-taking and other activities not usually practiced by the general population).

The slang expressions come from a variety of sources. Many are derived directly from the standard vocabulary with little or no change in meaning: they may be revivals of old standard words that are no longer in general use (like *strumpet*, discussed above) or new uses of standard words or earlier slang expressions. For instance, earlier slang *bug* ‘to annoy’, a transitive verb, has given rise to an intransitive verb meaning ‘to be annoying’; standard informal *chow* ‘food’ becomes a verb ‘to eat’; standard *perpetrate* ‘to commit (an offense)’ can now be used to mean ‘to act fraudulently’ (detransitivization of standard transitive verbs proves to be particularly common in the student slang). Other slang expressions have completely new definitions for standard words, such as *grovel* ‘to make out’, or *wrap* ‘girlfriend’.

Metaphors play a role in the development of slang vocabulary. For instance, many college slang words for ‘drunk’ derive from standard words meaning ‘destroyed’ or ‘torn’: examples include *blasted*, *blitzed*, *bombed*, *ripped*, *shredded*, *slaughtered*, and *tattered*. Traditional sources frequently note that slang vocabulary is exceptionally “vivid”: we interpret this comment to refer simply to the fact that slang often makes use of novel metaphors. *Blow chunks* initially seems

like a disturbingly colourful way to say 'to vomit', yet the literal meaning of this expression is almost the same as the colloquial *throw up*: the difference is that because we have heard throw up so many times it has lost its power to shock. Many metaphorical expressions in college slang are irreverent – for instance, *Einstein* 'pubic hair' is inspired by the great physicist's wild, curly hair. Some slang words are puns – *Babylon*, for instance, is the place where attractive females (babes) come from, and thus may be pronounced like "baby lawn" as well as in the expected way.

A number of words are derived by what Eble has called "acronymy" [7, p. 24]: we understand this term to mean the use of initials in forming new expressions. A true acronym, of course, is a set of initials pronounced like an ordinary word (like *NATO*, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). Our study includes only a few true acronyms, like *SNAG* 'nice guy' (from *sensitive new-age guy*), and some other expressions which are based on partial acronyms, such as *beemer* 'B.M.W. car.' But there are many other acronymic expressions in student slang consisting of initials pronounced separately, such as M.O.S. 'member of the opposite sex' or S.O.L. 'out of luck' (from *shit out of luck*). As the last example indicates, acronymy is often employed euphemistically. In the dictionary of college slang *Slang-U* by P. Munro [11], the author has followed the convention of writing initials pronounced separately with periods (but no spaces) between them: sequences of initials pronounced as complete words are written without periods.

Another common source for slang expressions is clipping, the shortening of standard words. Often this involves simply dropping a part (usually the end) of a word: *def* comes from 'definite' or 'definitely'; *ob* is from 'obvious' or 'obviously'; *veg* is from 'vegetate'. *Dis* 'be mean to' is an unusual case, from which everything has been clipped except the negative prefix *dis-*: it's not even clear what the source of this word is – 'disregard' or 'disrespect' or 'disappoint'. Sometimes more than

one clipped word may be combined, as in *sped* 'slow, stupid person' (from *special education*). Other items on the list are blends of two separate slang or standard words, like *dimbo* 'dumb bimbo' and *gork* 'loser', an apparent blend of the slang words 'geek' and 'dork'.

Still other new slang words are formed from both standard and slang words by regular English derivational processes. For instance, *-ette* is suffixed to create feminine forms of *stud* 'person who has done something outstanding; conceited person' and, perhaps more surprisingly, *mazeh* 'gorgeous guy', a word based on a Hebrew expression (and reportedly coined by former Hebrew school students). The adjectival suffix *-y* combines with *suck* 'to be bad' to form *sucky* 'awful'. The negative prefix *un-* plus the familiar slang word *cool* 'very good, excellent' yields *uncool* 'not good, unfair, tactless'. Compounding is also a common source of slang vocabulary, as words like *beauhunk* 'boyfriend', *brainfart* '(exclamation used about a sudden loss of memory or train of thought)', and *studmuffin* 'strong, muscular person; cute person, achiever' illustrate.

Another process that operates in the development of slang vocabulary (and helps it mystify outsiders) is the ironic use of a word to indicate its semantic opposite [2, p.116]. The slang use of *bad* to mean 'good' is well-known; our research also includes such examples as *mental giant* 'unintelligent person', pretty 'ridiculous', and *Yeah, right!* 'I don't believe you!' Often such new uses originate with heavy sarcastic intonation, but when the new meaning gains acceptance, this special intonation is no longer required. A number of words of college slang have two dramatically different meanings, of which the negative one is original: *badass* 'very good' / 'bad', deadly 'very good' / 'very bad', *killer* 'fantastic' / 'bad', wicked 'excellent' / 'bad'.

As Eble observed, many student slang expressions correlated with popular culture, with movies in particular [7, p.34]. Examples on our list include *Sally* 'meticulous person' (from *When Harry Met Sally*, 1989), *Heather*

'superficial girl' (from *Heathers*, 1989), *bushbitch* 'ugly girl' (from *Eddie Murphy Raw*, 1987), *have missile lock* 'to concentrate on or make a target of someone' (from *Top Gun*, 1986), *McFly* 'person with no intelligence' (from George McFly, a character in *Back to the Future*, 1985), and *slip (someone) the hot beef injection* 'to have sex with (someone)' (from *The Breakfast Club*, 1985). Most such expressions came from the media of the middle to late 1980s, but others persist from earlier periods: *bodacious tatas* 'breasts' is from *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982); *ralph* 'penis' is from Judy Blume's book *Forever* (1975). Expressions relating to old cartoon shows endure especially well: these include *wilma* 'ugly woman' and other expressions based on "The Flintstones," *scoob* 'to eat, have some food (especially snacks)' (from "Scooby Doo"), and *Magoo* 'old man slowly driving a car' (from "Mr. Magoo").

This correlation is still productive. The term *nuke the fridge* was coined in 2008 "in the wake of 'Indiana Jones the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull,' in which Indy survives an atomic bomb blast by hiding in a refrigerator. *The Spielberg face*, which refers to director Steven Spielberg, was coined last year by Kevin B. Lee who compiled a video essay of these close-up shots of actors with "eyes open, staring in wordless wonder in a moment where time stands still," a look that "has come to be shorthand for a cinematic discovery on the part of the characters and the audience [13].

Slang words allude not only to popular culture but also to classical mythology. Cf. *adonis* 'extremely nice-looking [of a male]; extremely nice-looking young man' and *nectar* 'alcoholic beverage; outstanding'. *Carpe diem!* 'Go for it!' is a mixture of modern and classical: the Latin phrase for 'Seize the day!' was introduced to today's students in the 1989 movie *Dead Poets Society*.

Chapman's dictionary reveals that Black English is an extremely important source of slang expressions. This is obvious with expressions like *homeboy*, which are popularly

identified with black culture; our citations from Chapman show that many other expressions, such as *boss* 'great', *ripped* 'drunk', and kick back 'to relax', also come from Black English. Real or imagined Black English pronunciation is responsible for other items, such as *ho* (from *whore*) and *thang* (from *thing*).

In addition to words like those discussed above, whose etymology is fairly clear, our list also includes some completely new words that do not appear in any form in standard dictionaries or in collections of slang such as Chapman's. Some examples from our list include *foof* 'superficial person', *Yar!* 'Good!', and *zuke* 'to vomit'. As Maurer and High observe, such "true neologisms" are the rarest source of new additions to vocabulary [8, p.191].

Slang words come and go. Some slang expressions are no longer recognized by speakers just a few years later, other slang words come to be accepted as standard language, while still others persist as slang for many years. Hence, the answer to the question in the article title is definitely negative. American student slang is not only the productive source of Standard English, but also a wide field of linguistics to be researched and studied.

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