

WHAT IS SLANG: THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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E-mail: b.sotvoldiyev91@gmail.com**Abstract**

Although slang is considered one of the most extensively researched areas in linguistics, a number of issues related to its definition, structural-semantic classification, linguopragmatic and linguostylistic features still remain unresolved. From this perspective, the present article discusses the existing problems in the field and outlines theoretical views concerning their possible solutions.

Keywords: slang, jargon, argot, informal language, general slang, special slang, unstable, quasi-permanent, pejorative, vulgar, long-living.

When studying slang in English, one can observe that linguists have expressed numerous opinions regarding its essence, distinctive characteristics, and classification according to usage. Among such considerations, particular attention should be paid to views on what slang actually is and what features characterize it. For example, while defining slang, E. Gelderen notes that she prefers the term informal language, emphasizing that both slang and jargon belong to the category of special vocabulary; however, slang is always informal, whereas jargon may at times be formal [1;235].

G. Missikova and M. Adams, discussing the functions of slang, point out that people use it to demonstrate nonconformity to dominant culture, opposition to established norms and rules, and a desire to distinguish themselves from others [2].

Explaining the reasons for the emergence of slang in speech, J. Aitchison states that it arises out of necessity: as words become outdated and lose their expressive force, new and more attractive words come to replace them [3;146]. J. Coleman, in turn, argues that some slang expressions gradually disappear and then regain popularity after a certain period. She supports this view by referring to slang items such as sweet, awesome, cool, and phoney (slang words dating back to the 1770s), which underwent precisely this process [4].

Different views have also been identified regarding the classification of slang into its component types. The classification of slang was first initiated by the well-known scholar E. Partridge, who divided it into two groups: "1) standard/regular slang; 2) non-standard/out-of-the-norm slang." The first group includes slang expressions common to all and consistent with general norms, whereas the second group consists of slang used by particular social groups and standing in opposition to the general norm [5;38].

This classification was later developed further by E. Partridge's followers. In particular, G. Missikova divides slang into the following two types:

1. Primary slang (the newly coined speech of members of a particular group; slang characteristic of that community itself). For example, the speech of teenagers or urban street hooligans.

2. Secondary slang (not selected to express relations within a given group, but used by adopting words employed by others, altering their original meaning, and thereby demonstrating one's superiority, dominance, or intellectual distinction) [6;105].

V. Vilyuman classifies slang according to its use into "1) general slang and 2) special slang" [7;36]. A nearly identical classification is also proposed by A. Stenström, who divides slang into "1) general and 2) specific" types [8;900].

The classification of slang on the basis of the terminology general and special has been accepted by the majority of scholars [9]. According to this view, argot and jargon, as forms of



group language, are included within special slang, whereas slang expressions that transcend group boundaries and are used by the wider public are regarded as general slang.

Having comparatively analyzed the theoretical views of the above-mentioned scholars as well as the definitions provided in academic sources, we would like to present our own observations regarding the status, description, and classification of slang.

As noted above, some scholars have interpreted slang as the secret language of thieves and treated it as equivalent to argot. To a certain extent, this view may be accepted. Indeed, official sources testify that from the second half of the eighteenth century, when the term slang first appeared, until the beginning of the twentieth century, it was regarded as the secret language of thieves and criminals. Even today, the feature of secrecy is partially preserved in slang, especially when representatives of certain subcultures deliberately use obscure expressions in order to conceal their meaning. This can be illustrated by items in slang dictionaries marked as underworld slang or prison slang, such as: A-head; agged; airmal; all day from a quarter; all right!; badge n. 3; ball n. 3; to bank; barbecue n. 2; B dog; bingo; buckwheats n. 1; bug juice n. 5; burner n. 2; businessman n. 1 [10].

On the other hand, this characteristic of slang is typical only of certain units, whereas for other slang items this marker is quasi-permanent [11;810], that is, not constant but only partly stable. Without denying that slang was once used exclusively for cryptological purposes, it should be emphasized that over time slang has undergone a vast process of modification, expanded its sphere of usage, and has now become a form of language understandable to a much broader public. Thus, secrecy is not an inherent feature of all slang, but only of certain units within it.

We have also noted above that another group of scholars evaluates slang solely as a group language. Indeed, slang initially emerges within the communication of various subcultures in society. However, after a certain period, some of these units are accepted by the broader public, enter common usage, and move beyond the boundaries of the original group, thereby becoming General Slang. For example, abbreviated slang forms (AKA; AFAIK; ZZZ; U; FB; ASAP; LOL; home; BMOC; F.A.E.), slang units with anthroponymic components (John; Jane; Bob; Benjie; Suzie; Archer; Holmes; Jack; Jackson; Jesus!; Jim), and slang units with toponymic components (Babylon; Brummagem; China plate; Amerika; Oz; Delhi belly; Jew York) have moved beyond the confines of specific groups and acquired the status of general slang. Such items are frequently encountered in dictionaries. From this perspective, while not denying that slang initially arises among certain social groups (young people, criminals, students, singers, athletes, military personnel, and others), we believe that its character as a group language is not applicable to all slang units, but only to some of them.

Likewise, we believe that the opinions of scholars who regard slang as short-lived or unstable can only be accepted in part. Indeed, youth slang, student slang, and internet slang are often characterized by rapid renewal. However, such an assessment cannot be applied to all slang. Dictionaries contain slang units that have remained in use for a very long time. For example, the slang word duds (clothes) dates back to the fifteenth century; to neck (to swallow) and bubbies (breasts) go back to the sixteenth century; slang items such as bog-trotter (an Irish person), job (a criminal venture, usually a robbery), grub (food), and stiff (a corpse) date back to the seventeenth century; Jemmy / Jimmy (a wig), bog / bogger (lavatory), and doss (sleep) originated in the eighteenth century; backhander (a blow with the hand, a heavy cuff or slap), Jim Crow (racially segregated, reserved for black people), jink (money), to job (to rob, to steal, to cheat), and John Hancock (a person's signature) date back to the nineteenth century; and bang (a sexual act) has continued to function as slang from the beginning of the twentieth century up to the present day. This demonstrates that the property of rapid change is characteristic only of certain categories of slang, while other types remain permanently stable in speech.



As mentioned above, there are also claims that slang cannot be assimilated into the literary language. On the one hand, such views may be supported. Due to their strong emotional-expressive, pejorative, and similar qualities, slang units are often harshly criticized or rejected by representatives of literary language norms. On the other hand, in present-day English literary language there are words which, at the time of their emergence, were slang units, but later became colloquialisms and today constitute an inseparable part of the literary language: bus (a type of large vehicle); jazz (a type of music); dang (a less offensive version of damn); random (unexpected); balmy (warm and pleasant air, weather); mortarboard (a black cap worn at graduation); snob (a person who respects only those of a high social class).

The words cited above were used as slang for a certain period, after which they were assimilated by colloquial speech and literary language. This indicates that many slang units are indeed capable of entering literary language. Therefore, in our view, the majority of slang units are rejected by literary language, yet some of them, after a certain period following their emergence, are able to join the literary language stream.

Some reflections on slang also claim that it is used mainly by the lowest strata of society and by uneducated people. We cannot fully agree with this position either. It is no secret that vulgar and coarse words and expressions are used today not only by poorly educated individuals or those who disregard moral norms, but also by members of the social elite, including famous writers (W. Shakespeare, Ch. Dickens, B. Shaw, M. Puzo, J. Rowling), celebrated singers (E. Presley, Eminem, Big L), and prominent political figures (L. Johnson, D. Trump, J. Biden, H. Clinton).

According to statistical data, the most active users of slang in the nineteenth century were not lower-class, illiterate people, but rather upper-class pupils and wealthy, educated young men. During the First World War, specially trained infantry soldiers, and during the Second World War, officers of the Royal Air Force (RAF), were recorded as the most frequent users of slang [12;19]. It may therefore be concluded that this characteristic of slang, too, is typical only of certain units, while for others it remains quasi-permanent. In present-day practice, slang is used across all layers of society.

In addition, as mentioned above, some researchers define slang as always containing pejoration, irony, and ridicule, while any kind of elevated or positive coloring is supposedly alien to it. Indeed, many slang units are used for insult (Christ-killer – Jew; chocolate – a Black person; frog – Frenchman; riceman – Chinese person; Abdul – any Arab man; white mice – Vietnamese police; cabbage-eater – a German or Russian immigrant), irony (old lady – a young girl or woman; old man – a young boy or man; frosty – meek; cool water – strong homemade whiskey; sleep – cocaine; to liberate – to steal; good and plenty – heroin), and open mockery of others (Greek – incomprehensible language; har-de-har-har – used to mock the way someone laughs; Aesop – a gambler who entertains with all kinds of stories; newsy – an inveterate gossip; potato head – a stupid or foolish person; canary – a police informer; octopus – a sexually aggressive young man). However, not all of these features apply equally to all slang units. Among slang expressions there are also speech units with a positive, elevated meaning, such as: atomic – very strong; peachy – pleasant, attractive; peachy-keen – excellent, great; nicey-nice – very wonderful; keen – excellent, good; happening – modern, fashionable; fab – very wonderful; equipped – fashionable, up-to-date; groovy – pleasant, very wonderful. This shows that not all slang carries negative connotations; some of its units are also used to express a positive referent.

On the basis of the opinions expressed by world and Uzbek linguists, we consider it appropriate in the present study to employ the definition of the phenomenon slang proposed by B. Sotvoldiyev: slang consists of words and expressions characteristic of spoken language which a) are sometimes used covertly in the speech of various communities united by a common purpose; b) are in some cases employed in broader circles; d) are sometimes rapidly renewed; e) are at times highly stable and long-living; f) may at times enter the sphere of literary language; g) may



function as insult; h) sarcasm; i) ridicule; j) humor; and k) may in some cases also reflect an elevated or positive coloring [13;25]. In our opinion, this definition corresponds to the principal functions of slang and is acceptable as a working definition.

In our view, none of the features listed in the working definition can be rigidly regarded as permanent and invariable for slang. The reason is that slang units belong to spoken language and are relatively unstable and prone to change. For this reason, we believe that the quasi-permanent nature of slang should be taken into account when defining it.

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