

**SLANG IN CONTEXT: PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS, SITUATIONAL  
CONSTRAINTS  
AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY COMMUNICATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

Slang represents one of the most dynamic, socially embedded, and pragmatically rich strata of natural language. Despite its informal register, slang performs critical communicative functions that formal lexical layers cannot replicate, including identity negotiation, affective amplification, in-group signaling, and economy of expression. This paper examines the situational determinants of slang usage through a sociopragmatic lens, drawing on Dell Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model as an analytical framework for mapping contextual variables to linguistic choices. Through a review of empirical attitudinal data and discourse analysis of authentic speech events across formal, informal, and digitally mediated contexts, the study demonstrates that slang is not a mere deviation from standard norms but a functionally motivated, context-sensitive register governed by nuanced social constraints. Findings indicate that 94% of American English speakers use slang in some form, with over half integrating it into the majority of their daily interactions, yet 97% recognize its unsuitability in high-stakes formal settings. The paper discusses re-evaluation of slang's status in linguistic theory and pedagogical practice, situating it as an indispensable component of communicative competence.

**Keywords:** slang; sociopragmatics; communicative competence; SPEAKING model; register variation; identity; informal language; digital communication

**1. INTRODUCTION**

In the contemporary sociolinguistic landscape, the boundaries between formal and informal registers have become increasingly permeable, particularly under the influence of digital communication technologies and accelerated cross-cultural contact. Slang — broadly defined as the non-standard, ephemeral, and often subgroup-specific lexical layer of a language — has consequently attracted renewed scholarly attention as a site where language, identity, and social structure intersect most visibly (Eble, 1996; Green, 2010; Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Despite its prevalence in everyday speech, slang has historically occupied a marginal position within formal linguistic inquiry, often dismissed as a symptom of linguistic decay or insufficient education (Hughes, 2000). This paper challenges such reductive assessments by positioning slang as a pragmatically sophisticated register whose deployment is governed by intricate contextual, relational, and identity-based parameters. Specifically, we argue that slang is not randomly or arbitrarily distributed across speech events but is systematically conditioned by situational variables that any comprehensive model of communicative competence must account for.

The central analytical apparatus employed here is Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model, which disaggregates the speech situation into eight constitutive components: Setting, Participants,



Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre. This ethnographic framework provides a principled basis for explaining why slang flourishes in certain communicative contexts while remaining markedly absent — or actively stigmatized — in others. By mapping attitudinal survey data and corpus-based observations onto the SPEAKING model's parameters, this study aims to produce a theoretically grounded, empirically supported account of slang's distributional patterns in modern English.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Defining Slang: Boundaries and Debates

Defining slang with precision has proven notoriously difficult, and the literature reflects considerable terminological and definitional variation (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990). Broadly, slang is characterized by its non-standard status, its affective and often ironic or humorous tone, its tendency toward lexical creativity and borrowing, and its association with particular social groups — notably youth, subcultural communities, and speakers in informal interactional settings (Mattiello, 2008). Crucially, slang is ephemeral: terms rise rapidly to widespread use, then fade or become neutralized as standard vocabulary (Coleman, 2012). This dynamism distinguishes slang from other non-standard registers such as dialect or jargon, which tend to exhibit greater stability.

Several properties recur across definitions of slang in the literature (Eble, 1996; Green, 2010):

- High affective loading, frequently ironic, hyperbolic, or humorous in semantic orientation;
- Economy and brevity, fulfilling a preference for compressed, rapid expression;
- Social indexicality, marking the speaker's affiliation with a particular group or subculture;
- Cross-linguistic permeability, with extensive borrowing from contact languages and digital vernaculars.

### 2.2 Slang and Social Identity

A substantial body of research has examined the relationship between slang use and social identity construction. Labov's (1972) foundational work on African American Vernacular English demonstrated that non-standard linguistic features, including lexical items functioning as slang, are not deficiencies but constitutive of group identity and social belonging. This perspective has been extended and refined in subsequent studies of youth language (Androutopoulos, 2005), gender and slang (Stenström et al., 2002), and digital vernaculars (Thurston, 2006; Crystal, 2011). In each case, slang emerges not as a passive reflection of social categories but as an active, performative resource through which speakers construct, negotiate, and contest identities in real time.

Particularly relevant to the present analysis is the concept of register as elaborated by Halliday (1978): language use varies systematically along dimensions of field (subject matter), tenor (interactant relationships), and mode (channel). Slang, from this perspective, constitutes a register variety most strongly conditioned by tenor — specifically, by informal, equal-status, or in-group relationships between interlocutors.

### 2.3 The SPEAKING Model as Analytical Framework

Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model was developed as part of the broader program of ethnography of communication, which sought to describe the cultural knowledge underlying communicative competence. The model's eight components provide a multidimensional framework for analyzing any speech event: Setting (physical and temporal context), Participants (speakers, hearers, and their social relationships), Ends (goals and outcomes of the interaction), Act Sequence (the structure and content of speech acts), Key (the tone or manner of the interaction), Instrumentalities (channel and code), Norms (shared interactional and interpretive conventions), and Genre (the type of speech event). The model has been applied productively to analyses of code-switching (Blom & Gumperz, 1972), politeness phenomena (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and, more recently, computer-mediated communication (Herring, 2007). Its



application to slang, however, remains underdeveloped, representing a significant gap that the present paper addresses.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative-analytical approach, combining a systematic review of existing attitudinal and corpus-based research with theoretical analysis grounded in the SPEAKING framework. Primary empirical data are drawn from published survey-based studies on attitudes toward slang in professional and social contexts, including nationally representative survey data from the United States reporting on slang frequency and register appropriateness perceptions. Discourse-analytic observations are drawn from documented examples of slang use in four key contextual domains: face-to-face informal interaction, digital and computer-mediated communication, subgroup and subcultural communication, and formal institutional discourse.

The analytical procedure involves (a) identifying the contextual parameters of each domain using the SPEAKING model, (b) mapping documented slang frequencies and attitudinal evaluations onto those parameters, and (c) deriving generalizations about the constraints on slang distribution. This approach enables a principled, theoretically coherent account that transcends anecdote and illuminates the structural logic underlying speakers' intuitions about slang's appropriateness.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Situational Distribution of Slang

Analysis through the SPEAKING model reveals that slang use is most strongly conditioned by the Participants and Key components — that is, by the social relationships among interlocutors and the tone of the interaction. Across all domains examined, slang usage correlates positively with: (a) equal or peer-level interactant relationships, (b) high degrees of familiarity and shared social history, (c) informal or playful interactional keys, and (d) private or semi-private communicative settings. Four primary contextual domains emerge from the data:

Close peer interaction constitutes the canonical environment for slang. When Setting is private, Participants are familiar peers, Ends are social-affiliative rather than transactional, and Key is informal and relaxed, slang serves to intensify solidarity, signal shared group membership, and increase the affective texture of discourse (Eble, 1996). Examples include student peer groups employing shared slang vocabularies as markers of in-group coherence.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC), particularly social media and messaging platforms, represents the most rapidly expanding slang environment. The Setting of CMC — characterized by asynchronicity or rapid synchrony, text-based Instrumentalities, and typically informal interactional Norms — strongly favors slang (Crystal, 2011). The structural demands of digital communication (speed, character limits, multimodal contexts) additionally reward brevity and economy, core properties of slang lexis. Terms such as YOLO and on fleek exemplify how CMC slang rapidly achieves broad circulation and cultural visibility before frequently becoming neutralized into mainstream usage.

Within subcultural and community-of-practice settings, slang functions as a powerful marker of Genre membership. Here, Participants share not only social relationships but a specialized communicative repertoire that indexes group identity and excludes outsiders (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The deliberate opacity of subcultural slang — its resistance to comprehension by out-group members — underscores its identity-marking rather than purely referential function.

Regional vernacular contexts, in which slang co-occurs with local dialect features, represent a fourth distributional domain. Here, slang serves an additional function of territorial or local identity assertion, connecting the speaker to place-based communities of belonging (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998).

#### 4.2 Formal Context Exclusion

The data confirm unambiguously that slang is strongly suppressed in formal institutional contexts. Survey evidence indicates that 97% of American English speakers judge slang



inappropriate in job interview settings, and 89% characterize it as unprofessional in general formal contexts (cf. Mattiello, 2008). Within the SPEAKING framework, formal institutional events — academic papers, business correspondence, professional presentations — are characterized by public Settings, hierarchical or status-differentiated Participants, goal-oriented Ends, formal Norms, and institutionally prescribed Genres. These parameters collectively suppress informal register variation, including slang, in favor of standard, prescriptively correct, and register-neutral language. The use of slang in such contexts violates interactional norms sufficiently severely to trigger negative evaluations of the speaker's credibility, competence, and professional standing (Goffman, 1967).

#### 4.3 Pragmatic Functions of Slang

Beyond its distributional patterns, slang performs a range of pragmatic functions that distinguish it from other register varieties. Four principal functions are identified:

**Identity construction and group membership signaling:** slang indexes social affiliations and enables speakers to perform group belonging dynamically and interactionally (Butler, 1990). The deployment of shared slang items functions as a membership categorization device, simultaneously including in-group members and demarcating group boundaries.

**Affective amplification:** slang items characteristically carry heightened emotional valence relative to their standard equivalents, enabling more intense or nuanced expression of affect (Allan & Burrige, 2006). This function is particularly prominent in peer interaction and social media contexts where relational and expressive goals predominate.

**Humor and irony:** slang is frequently deployed to create humorous, self-deprecating, or ironically distanced discourse frames (Chiaro, 1992). This function reinforces solidarity by creating shared frames of reference and demonstrating interactional competence.

**Economy of expression:** slang lexis typically encodes complex social meanings and evaluative orientations in compact form, enabling efficient communication in fast-paced interactional environments (Coleman, 2012). This function is especially salient in digital communication, where brevity is structurally incentivized.

#### 4.4 Quantitative Evidence of Slang Prevalence

Empirical attitudinal data reinforce the theoretical analysis. Approximately 94% of American English speakers report using slang in some form, with 54% acknowledging its presence in the majority of their daily conversations. These figures suggest that slang is not a marginal or deviant phenomenon but an integral component of the communicative repertoire of virtually all speakers. Its prevalence, far from reflecting linguistic impoverishment, indexes the breadth and functional versatility of speakers' sociolinguistic competence. This evidence aligns with contemporary frameworks that conceptualize communicative competence not merely as grammatical knowledge but as the ability to deploy language appropriately across a full range of social contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980).

### 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has revealed that slang is a pragmatically sophisticated, contextually conditioned linguistic register whose distribution is governed by systematic sociolinguistic constraints. Through the analytical lens of Hymes' SPEAKING model, we have demonstrated that slang use is most powerfully determined by the social relationships among participants and the interactional key of the speech event, flourishing in informal, peer, and digitally mediated contexts while being actively suppressed in formal institutional settings. Rather than constituting a deficiency or deviation, slang performs indispensable communicative functions: identity construction, affective amplification, humor and irony, and expressive economy. Its near-universal prevalence among speakers of English underscores its status as a core component of communicative competence.

These findings carry implications for both linguistic theory and language pedagogy. Theoretically, they support a model of register variation in which slang occupies a principled and



functionally motivated position rather than a residual or stigmatized one. Pedagogically, they suggest that effective language instruction must include explicit attention to register appropriateness — helping learners understand not only what slang means, but when and with whom it may be deployed. Future research should extend this analysis cross-linguistically, examining whether the contextual parameters identified here generalize across languages and cultural settings, and should employ corpus-based methods to track the rapid evolution of slang in digitally mediated environments.

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