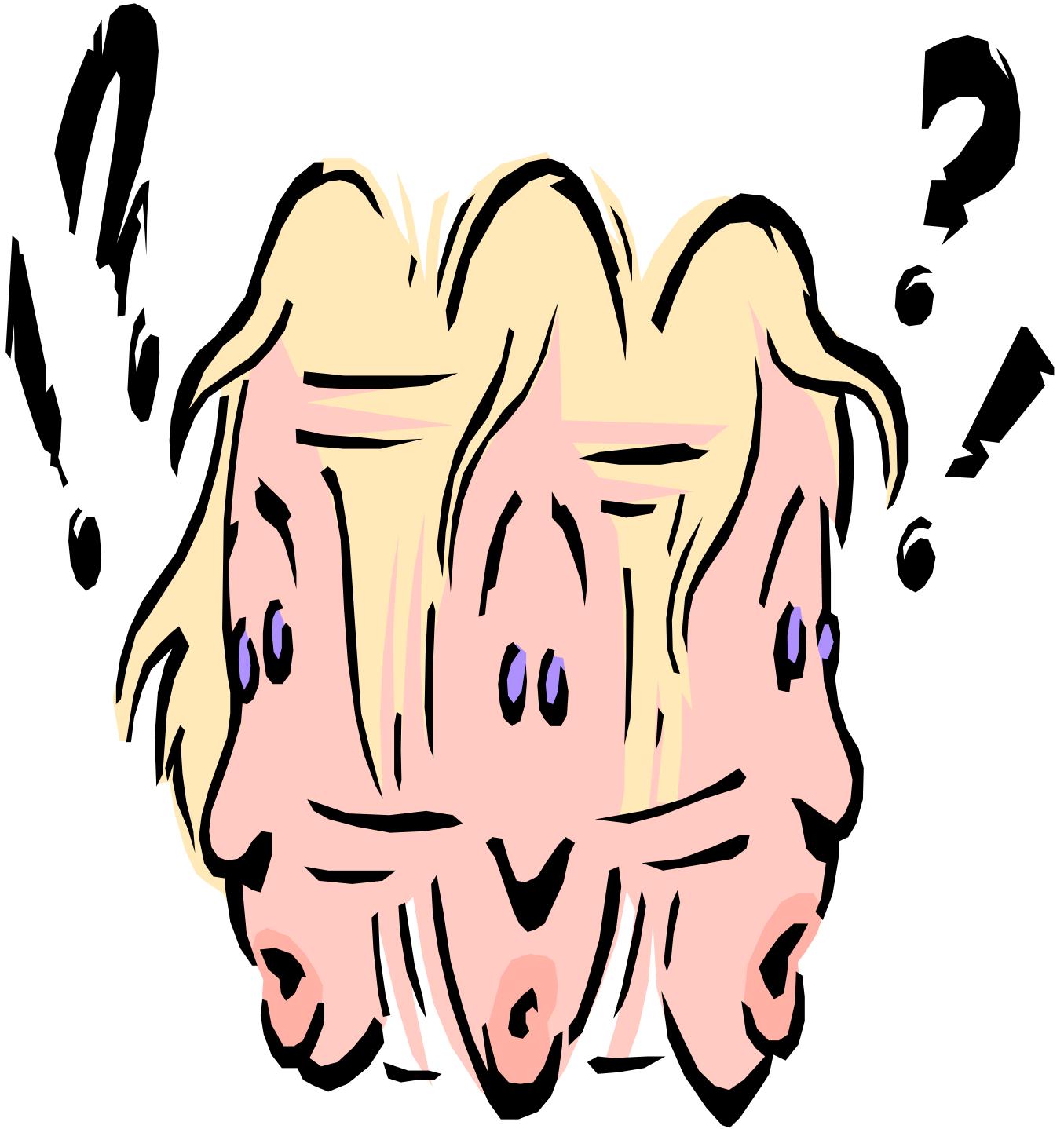


# Slang & Why we Use it



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### Slang and Why We Use It

A people who are prosperous and happy, optimistic and progressive, produce much slang:  
it is a case of play: they amuse themselves with the language.

-W. Summer, A. Keller,  
M. Davie (sociologists), 1927

Considering language then as some mighty potentate, into the majestic audience-hall of the monarch ever enters a personage like one of Shakespeare's clowns, and takes positions there, and plays a part even in the stateliest ceremonies. Such is slang, or indirection, an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably.

Walt Whitman, "Slang in America"

I want you to stop and think for a moment, think about all the English classes that you have taken through out your life time. In all of the papers you have written, has slang ever been acceptable in the majority of your writing? If you don't have the answer let me answer it for you. The answer is NO. Slang isn't often accepted as correct social grammar when it comes down to writing for the mainstream. Slang has been part of everyday life since almost the beginning. Slang is used in everyday speeches, conversations, visual signs, and almost all other translations of communication. This form in verbal communication dates back till almost the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Bullard and Thorne page 3). In this research paper my goal is to discuss what slang is and isn't for many people and why it's used.

Before we can get into slang and how it's used in today's society we must first take the time to define what slang is. There are many opinions of what slang is so it would be best to look at more then one definition from more then one source. In an online article by Tõnu Tender. Tartu, who is a Professional Linguistic, provides a very interesting interpretation of slang. He says, "Slang is considered to be a colloquial language, which has highly variable, transitory and informal vocabulary and is characteristic of any definite social group, class, professional group or circle of friends." According to the alternative definition slang is a language, which has two main

characteristics - hypersynonymy and hyperpolysemy. According to this definition the main characteristic feature of slang is total synonymality. Synonymality is a condition of lexemes none of which is the primary designation for its designatum in its language. In terms of this definition the vocabulary of slang consists of alternative linguistic expressions or units

In Linguistics, where definitions at best are often imprecise and leaky, that of slang is especially notorious. The problem is one of complexity, such that a definition satisfying to one person or authority would seem inadequate to another because the prime focus is different (Chapman, Ph.D page xi). Finally Microsoft Encarta 97 Encyclopedia says, slang can be described as informal, nonstandard words or phrases which tend to originate in subcultures within a society. Slang often suggests that the person utilizing the words or phrases is familiar with the hearer's group or subgroup it can be considered a distinguishing factor of in group identity. Microsoft Encarta states: "slang expressions often embody attitudes and values of group members." In order for an expression to become slang, it must be widely accepted and adopted by members of the subculture or group. Slang has no societal boundaries or limitations as it can exist in all cultures and classes of society as well as in all languages.

I think personally slang is a quick way to express yourself and at time a great way to express ideas, places, and things that have not yet been given a word that might completely symbolize something. A good example of this is the use of the phrase "off da hook"; I think that this is a great way to express something that lacks the right words for something that was very impressive or enjoyable. I also believe it has a negative connotation to it. I think it's thought of as something negative or it comes from someone who lacks education. If you really think about it though, slang is used in hospitals, court, and in almost all businesses.

There isn't much information on what slang is not and there isn't much information or studies provided on such a controversial topic. Things that slang is not are "what ever is new or popular in the way of language" (Historical Dictionary of American Slang"). More importantly they are not catch phrases, such as cultural phrases which derive their meaning from a cultural reference with which the speaker and listener must both be familiar (crystal 178).

I agree that slang is not a catchy phrase or what ever is popular at that time. But I do think that slang is a big influence based off of what's seen on TV and heard on the radio. I think a lot of times slang is mixed up with popular phrases such as Hasta la vista, baby which comes from the popular SCI-FI movie *Terminator*. I think they are mixed up many times when you discuss slang. I have always been told from my parents that the slang we use today are the same words they used just said a little different so it is possible that slang is based off of what's popular but just formed and molded to fit the current situation and century. As you can tell there is a very thin line many times on what slang is and what's just popular culture for that time.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, French and Latin were the only two languages able to maintain the same. Because of slang, words and meaning changed very fast and it was hard to keep anyone type of language. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, scholars started pushing for a standard language. However, our present day meaning for slang did not begin forming until the 16th or 17th century. At this time slang was beginning to be present in popular plays The first appearance of the slang was in a play by Richard Brome's and later

appeared in poems and songs by Copland. By the 1700's the cultural differences in America had begun to influence the English-speaking population, and slang began to expand. Almost all of the slang words during this time were anatomical and well known all through Britain and in America due to the British colonists.

Certain events happened in the 18th century that helped the development of slang such as, Westward expansion, the Civil War, and the abolitionist movement. By this time scholars such as Walt Whitman, W. D. Whitney, and Brander Matthews all considered slang to be anything that sounded new, and that was not in the "glossaries of British dialects". Walt Whitman considers slang to be the life of the language. Whitman wrote "that slang was a wholesome.....of common humanity to escape the form bald literalism, and express itself illimitably". This was a turning point for slang as it was starting to escape the harsh criticism of being associated with criminals or foreigners (<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/whitman.html>).

It was not until the early 1920's that slang had gained the interest of popular writers. It was during the post-World War I era that society gained new attitudes about slang. There was now a demand for entertainment, mass media, and slangy fiction. Today, modern American slang has been shaped and reshaped by the different cultures and the emergence of technology, which has left our society with varieties of slang from extremes like Street/Drug Slang to African-American Slang (Bullard and Thone page 4).

Slang has many different meanings in society and has a great time line of historical development over the decades that can't be clearly dated and detailed but I have provided the general idea and history of what slang is and how it began. Why people use slang is one of the hard topics to come to an agreement on. People such as Judi Sanders and Pamela Munro, who are linguistics professors at California Polytechnic University, believe that people use slang as a form of unity amongst a group of people and not creating barriers among groups. They have done several years of studies and research on why their student's use slang. They agreed that slang was very useful language because it reflects people's values and how they feel. They agree that slang is just a great way for people to communicate and relate to a certain set of words used in that area. These two women have done separate research projects on slang but have come to several like ideas.

Pamela Munro feels that a lot of times there are words that are considered slang but have been around in the English language for centuries. One example that she provides is the word "mooch", meaning to borrow without tending to repay, or to "sponge off" of someone. Munro points out that this isn't really a slang word because it was created by Shakespeare but has never been accepted as a regular word. Munro feels that after all of her studies and research that many times people are unaware of the use of slang and that many times words that are used aren't even slang or shouldn't be considered slang words.

When I think about slang I realize that slang all over the world slang is used verbally and there are many variations of the same ideas and thoughts when using slang. With the reason of no unified words, I think that slang should only be spoken and not written. There is no way to effectively create a set definition for most slang words because there are at least a hundred different variations of the same word or meaning. Besides that the implication of trying to unify and agree on any set meaning for each word is completely impossible.

Judi Sanders states that she doesn't think that slang should be avoided but you should be careful when you use it. Being able to communicate through verbal communication while being comfortable is one of the reasons why she feels people use slang. Through her research she believes that slang is widely used within different groups due to the fact it helps to unify groups and provide a way of communication. She thinks that speaking slang is ok, but it shouldn't be written. Sanders believes that writing and conversation are two different forms of communication and that the downfall of slang is that people start writing the way they talk; she thinks they need to remain two separate ways of communication (<http://www.csuchico.edu/jour/catbytes/s99/slang.htm>).

Other such people such as Kelly Fox a great linguistic scholar and the historical Dictionary of American Slang feel that most people use slang as a form of uniqueness. She states that slang has been in existence for as long as language has been in existence. They agree with the fact that slang is largely used to communicate while being unique and not following the rules of speech and communication.

Fox's idea that slang many times is used for a form of uniqueness relates to the reason why I use slang myself in order to set myself aside from everyone else. I might change the way I say something or state an idea to make me stand out from the rest. I see slang at times as a great way to be different from your peers.

The Historical Dictionary of American Slang points out that many groups "use slang largely because they lack political power." It's simply a safe and effective way that people rebel against the establishment. Many have condemned the use of slang as a form of communication such as business, schools, and the legal system. It's believed that it undermines the standard language and reflects poorly upon its users. Often, however, it appears that slang is ever present and exists even in self-satisfied times. It is created by individuals and carried on based upon its usefulness and applicability. Almost every place uses slang even if they are aware of it or not. Usually slang is used in places like telemarketing for a quicker way to communicate a large amount of information or in places such as law enforcement when they don't want their surrounding environment to understand what's being talked about. These are some of the reasons that The Historical Dictionary of American Slang provides as reasons of the use of slang.

Eric Partridge was a great scholar and lexicographer of his time. He did many different studies on language. Eric Partridge (1894-1979), people use slang for any of the following 15 reasons and that 13 and 14 are the most significant. He was a famous writer of his time that wrote a book called "Slang of Today and Yesterday." He developed a list of 15 reasons after doing several years of research on why people use slang. He was a great man of his time. He spent many years trying to develop and discover why people use slang. Here are his reasons why.

1. In sheer high spirits, by the young in heart and the ones who are young in age; or just to be doing it for the fun of it.
2. As an exercise either in wit and ingenuity or in humor
3. To be different, to novel
4. To be charming (either positively or- as in the wise to avoid insipidity-negativity).
5. To be unmistakable arresting, even startling.
6. To escape from clichés, or to be brief and concise.
7. To enrich the language.

8. To lead an air of solidity, thickness, to the abstract: of earthiness to the idealistic; of immediacy and appositeness to the remote.
9. To soften the tragedy, to lighten or to prettify the predictability or death or madness, or to mask the ugliness or the pity of profound turpitude and/ or thus to enable the speaker or his auditor or both to endure, to carry on.
10. To speak or write down to an inferior, or to amuse a superior public; or merely to be on an informal level with either ones audience or ones subject matter.
11. For ease of social intercourse.
12. To induce either friendliness or intimacy of a deep or durable kind.
13. ***To show that one belongs to certain school, trade, or profession, artistic or intellectual set, or social class; in brief, to be in the swim or to establish contact.***
14. ***Hence, to show or prove that someone is not in the swim***
15. To be secret-not understood by those around. (Partridge Ch. 2)

These are some of the reasons why researchers feel that slang is used in today's society based off of their own research and personal experiences. I have provided view of several types of people of different age groups, gender, and century. All of these people have been proven to be credible people worth listening to. This paper is not trying to persuade but more to inform on in why and what slang is but to research information so that you can make your own discussion of what slang is, was, and could be.

After spending many weeks researching this topic I have developed my own opinion on slang. In the beginning of this paper I shared two poems. The first one is by W. Keller. I would have to say I don't really agree with that poem. I don't think slang is formed or based off of the mood of a person at that time, but is a form of communicating the necessary feelings and ideas of that person through words outside of the box or norm. I think the writer had a very closed mind about how slang is formed and used. Looking at the second one I would have to say that I agree with its ideas of what slang is and does. The second one points up how slang is used to be different and how to be outside the norm or society.

I think that in our English language it is constantly changing and has been ever changing since the beginning of language. Words that were unacceptable 300 years ago are now common words. Things such as the Amendment that grants and guarantees freedom of speech has helped push the change of language. I think slang is a trademark of language is used by people in today's society as a comfortable way of communication. I believe that every person I have listed who stated why they think people use slang were right for one reason or the other but I don't completely agree with everything. I believe slang is usually created by children and or teens who seek social status, to be unique, or to choose words that fit there situations better then words that are considered to be in the "norm." But in no way do I feel that these are the only ways slang are created and used. I think slang is given a negative connotation because it's usually used by youth, so it's naturally assumed there is a lack of education or upbringing. Over all I don't think that there is just one reason why people use slang. But I do know that slang is part of communication in one form or the other.

Even though slang usually has a negative assumption and isn't widely used by the upper class or high social status its part of language and its used in all types of situations of when people are not aware of it. They do not realize that the way they speak differs from the way that their predecessors spoke. People opposed to language change only defend their dialect, which will die out anyway, and prove their intolerance of change. Language will be thought of differently in the future because new mediums of communication will be used, the largest one being the Internet.

We use slang in everyday situations and we are not even aware of it. In today's society slang is used in public relations, automotive, sports, and even in the streets. Slang is usually used for different reasons but in different ways which is to express them selves very quickly and uniquely. The slang of that location or group is usually the only slang excepted and anything else is looked up differently. Street slang and internet slang I think are the most widely used and are looked down upon the most in the political eye. But overall they are the most unique way of uniting, socializing, and expressing ideas, feelings, and emotions as our world of language changes. Slang is what makes our generation stand out from the ones before us and generations to come.

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