

Slang and the Internet

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In keeping with the ABRAPUI conference theme of “New Challenges in Language and Literature,” this essay shows that the vocabulary type called *slang* has adapted to the new social contexts created by the Internet and continues to serve the same purposes in the twenty-first century as it has since the eighteenth century when slang was first described for English as the vocabulary of underworld groups. Although the social purposes of slang may well be close to the same, the social contexts are vastly different. Scholarship that is to describe slang accurately in the twenty-first century must be attuned to both what is old about slang and what is new.

The study of slang has always faced challenges in the academy because the entrenched language variety of higher education throughout the world is the standard, written variety of a language. And that register excludes slang, thereby assigning it to an inferior position. In western Europe until the eighteenth century, even choosing to write for serious purposes in a vernacular rather than in Latin cast suspicion on the educational credentials of the writer. At major British and American universities, the reading and study of literature written in English became part of the curriculum only in the nineteenth century. For English, the register preferred in the expository writing of the educated in all fields of study has included a high proportion of Latinate and bookish words, and little tolerance of regional and colloquial vocabulary, including slang. Thus it is not surprising that regional varieties of English and vocabulary associated with everyday life or minority groups were perceived as curious and perhaps amusing or quaint but not to be used in serious writing and too trivial to study.

In the systematic study of language now called linguistics, the shift from old-fashioned philology to structuralism to generative grammar in the academy did little to change the lack of interest in slang or improve its status. With few exceptions, the best studies of slang were done by lexicographers and others outside the academy. The leading journals in linguistics throughout the twentieth century almost never published articles on slang (the exception was *American Speech* begun in 1925 and now the official journal of the American Dialect Society). The development in the twentieth century of the disciplines called the social sciences – e.g., anthropology, psychology, sociology, and social history – likewise resulted in little interest in slang. Across the disciplines that sought to bring scientific objectivity to the study of human behavior, slang vocabulary was considered an embellishment to language, a non-essential and accidental component of the lexicon that could be ignored with little loss to the understanding of human behavior. The development of sociolinguistics over the past half century, however, has helped legitimize the study of slang. Sociolinguistics correlates variation and change in linguistic form with social factors. Because slang is essentially a linguistic expression of social affiliation, this type of lexis is central to the concerns of sociolinguistics. Although slang studies do not have to fight for legitimacy in sociolinguistics, the standard controlled fieldwork of sociolinguistics in which factors of gender, race, class, and age are correlated with features of language does not readily lend itself to the study of slang. The social dimensions of slang are not necessarily like those that can be attributed to an internal variable like loss of final consonant clusters. Slang may be better explained, for example, in a social network model. One of the greatest challenges to scholarship in slang is to fit slang into the current conversations going on in sociolinguistics about such topics as identity, power, community formation, stereotyping, discrimination and the like.

This essay first outlines the general characteristics of slang, with particular reference to the slang of American college students. Then it examines the use of slang on the Internet, mainly the World Wide Web. In Internet use, slang has successfully crossed from oral to written realization. Because of its primarily social functions, slang has also adapted to synchronous Internet communication like chatrooms, which take advantage of the group-identifying effects of slang use.

The term *slang* has always eluded precise definition, largely because slang words and expressions are not distinguished by form from other

types of lexis (Eble, “Slang, Argot, and Ingroup Codes” 414). Slang serves the social functions of language, and the recurring characteristics associated with slang are the result of its social function (Eble, *Slang and Sociability* ch. 1).

- Slang is a component of spoken interaction and is seldom used in writing.
- Slang signals informality and often irreverence or defiance.
- Slang is the distinctive vocabulary of groups: the use of the same slang enhances group identity and separates insiders from outsiders.
- Slang meanings are often derived entirely from situational context and can be ironic.
- The slang a group uses changes quickly.

Slang is rooted in social connections. The power to evoke feelings of being connected to other – of belonging to a group, of being accepted, and of being socially secure – distinguishes slang from other sorts of informal vocabulary. People who use the same slang feel connected to each other and disconnected from those who do not. *Dank* and *swell*, for example, are denotatively comparable. Both mean ‘good’ in the sentences “That concert was *dank*” and “That concert was *swell*.” The choice of *dank* rather than *swell*, or vice-versa, gives no distinguishing information about the concert, but it does give distinguishing information about the speakers. It reveals the different groups that the speakers identify with and feel connected to.

Slang is associated with groups. Knowing and keeping up with constantly changing in-group vocabulary is often an unstated requirement of group membership, and inability to master the slang can result in discomfort or estrangement. The group-identifying functions of slang are not disputable, perhaps because they are so obvious and have been experienced by nearly everyone. Speakers use slang when they want to be creative, clear, and acceptable to a select group. In addition, a group’s slang often provides users with automatic linguistic responses that assign others to either an in crowd or an out crowd. For example, during school year 2006-2007 undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill¹ had at least 26 nouns to label someone negatively and 34 words and phrases to name or characterize a positive experience. See Table 1.

¹ For a description of the way in which I have collected student slang at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the limitations of the corpus, see Eble, *Slang and Sociability*, 4-6.

TABLE 1
2006-2007 University of North Carolina Student Slang
Evaluative Terms

Negative: *asshole, bama, bizmarkie, d-bag, douche, douchebag, douchebat, douche cannon, fag, fucker, hater, heffa, hoodrat, jackass, jerk, lawyer, loser, mark, player, shithead, sketchball, tool, toolbag, toolbox, trailer park trash, and winner*

Positive: *baller, banging, beast, bitching, the bomb, boston, bumping, choice, clean, cool, crazy, dank, dope, fetch, fly, hot, hotsauce, ill, killer, like steak, money, nasty, phat, popping, rad, rocking, sexy, the shits, sick, sweet, the ticket, tight, wicked, win.*

It has been well documented in English-speaking contexts since the eighteenth century that particular kinds of groups are breeding grounds for an idiosyncratic vocabulary to enhance their solidarity. Groups that operate on the periphery of society—prisoners, thieves, drug dealers, con-artists, gamblers, musicians and nightclub performers, carnival workers, and enlisted personnel in the military, to name a few – seem particularly adept at creating slang. Some slang-producing groups engage in activities that are disreputable or illegal. Others, like low-ranking military personnel, feel isolated from mainstream society because they lack freedom and ordinary access to the channels of power. Most groups whose colorful slang has been reported in numerous popular publications for more than two centuries lead lives in which the printed word, mastery of the standard written forms of language, and formal education are not important. By contrast, the oral language of these groups is often rich, complex, and powerful, and they live by using it effectively (Eble, “Slang and Antilanguage” 265-66).

Robert Chapman calls the specialized social vocabulary of subcultures primary slang (xii). The primary slang of groups is often appropriated into general slang. It strikes members of the mainstream who adopt it as novel, rich, and imaginative. It suggests a way of life with greater fun and excitement than the well-regulated lives of most. Adopting the vocabulary is a way of sharing vicariously in the daring while remaining apart from what is unsafe or objectionable about the way of life in the subculture. The argot of the racetrack, for instance, is responsible for a number of words that now apply more generally than to horse racing: a *piker* is an ‘unimportant or inconsequential participant,’ a *ringer* an ‘illegal substitution,’ and a *shoo-in*

an 'easy win.' Current American English is filled with vocabulary of varying degrees of formality that originated in the slang of groups: *asap* 'as soon as possible,' *chew out* 'reprimand severely,' and *midnight requisition* 'thievery' from the military; *cool* 'excellent' and *square* 'dull, conventional' from jazz musicians; *dark horse* 'unlikely winner' from racetrack gamblers; and *blow someone's mind* 'dazzle, amaze, shock' and *cold turkey* 'total and abrupt deprivation' from narcotics addicts. At the end of the twentieth century, the primary slang of young African-Americans in urban ghettos was propelled throughout the world by the commercial success of rap music.

Secondary slang, on the other hand, functions for purposes of a breezy, trendy, or avant-garde style or attitude more than for identification with an easily delineated group. Examples of current American English secondary slang are *nuke* 'heat in a microwave oven,' and *pump up* 'fill with enthusiasm or energy.'

Secondary slang often indicates knowledge of contemporary currents in popular and widespread culture rather than affiliation with a particular group. If expressions like *channel surf* 'use a remote control device to sample television programs quickly,' *chick flick* 'film that appeals to females,' *go postal* 'lose control, act insane,' and *senior moment* 'temporary loss of thought or memory' can be considered slang at all, they are a kind of national slang and say nothing about group identification. Chapman predicts that in the future secondary slang will be the major type of slang in the United States (xii).

Words and expressions that become part of secondary slang may well be acquired from groups, but usually via television, films, music, and the like rather than through personal interaction with members of the group. For example, the terms *high five* and *raise the roof* and their accompanying gestures serve as 'signs of affirmation, exhilaration, or victory' to all ages and classes throughout the United States. They were made popular by African-American sports figures and performers. Another item of secondary slang from African-American sources that was spread by the mass media is *attitude* 'uncooperative, resentful, hostile, or condescending state of mind.'

The group that has had the greatest impact on American slang in general has been African Americans. According to Robert Chapman's preface to the *New Dictionary of American Slang*, "Close analysis would probably show that, what with the prominence of black people in the armed forces,

in music, in the entertainment world, and in street and ghetto life, the black influence on American slang has been more pervasive in recent times than that of any other ethnic group in history” (xi). Many expressions of African-American origin have been adopted into general informal use, and their users may even be unaware of their African-American origins, for example, *bug* ‘pester,’ *the nitty-gritty* ‘harsh reality,’ *ripoff* ‘theft,’ and *do one’s own thing* ‘follow one’s own inclination.’

A study of college slang at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill across two decades, 1972-1993, showed that seven of the forty most frequently submitted terms entered the student vocabulary from African-American usage: *jam* ‘have a good time, perform well,’ *diss* ‘criticize, belittle,’ *bad* ‘good,’ *homeboy/homey* ‘person from one’s hometown, friend,’ *dude* ‘male,’ *word/word up* ‘I agree,’ and *fox/foxy* ‘attractive female, attractive’ (Eble, *Slang and Sociability* 84).

Another often-noticed characteristic of slang is its informality. In the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, Jonathan Lighter traces the escalation of informality in America to the tremendous explosion in mass communication that took place around the beginning of the twentieth century. Improved technology allowed the print media for the first time to reach a national and multi-class audience. Between the Civil War of the 1860s and World War I, the number of daily newspapers in the United States increased over ten times, many carrying the new vernacular art form of the 1890s, the comic strip (1: xxvi-xxvii). Soon phonograph records, movies, radio, and television quickly expanded the means of disseminating a national popular culture, making the national spread of slang and other ephemeral vocabulary possible. By the 1990s the alliance of technology and marketing made the fashionable vocabulary of the United States a sign of being in-the-know throughout the world.

American slang today shows both continuity with the past and elements of fresh appeal required by fashion. Aside from the primary slang of counter-cultural groups in which age is often not a factor, slang is associated with youth or with an effort to project a youthful image. Adolescents and young adults do not attempt to be *cool* by imitating the behavior, styles, or vocabulary of the middle-aged and elderly. The direction of imitation is the opposite. Although older people may be the models and arbiters of standard language use, young people are the purveyors of slang. In the twentieth

century in the United States, mass communication made a national youth culture possible. Over the decades, the two most important and consistent elements of youth culture have been borrowings from non-mainstream subcultures and music. When advances in technology made the transmission of music easier, quicker, and less expensive, music became a defining, and often defiant, characteristic of subcultures. Today rap music is the primary vehicle of the international youth culture spreading across the planet.

The vocabulary of rap that originated in African-American urban experience and was hungrily seized by devotees of rap music expanded its sphere of influence – as had happened earlier with vocabulary from jazz and jive. In the 1980s and 1990s, at the same time that hip-hop insiders espoused competing stylistic developments inside rap music and held strong convictions about the political and social messages the music conveyed, an outmoded and stereotypic portion of the insider vocabulary of hip-hop was reaching an extensive and largely politically uninvolved audience by means of MTV (Music Television), cable television programming, and sit-coms and talk shows on the major networks. It would have been difficult for anyone in the United States in the 1990s to have escaped hearing expressions like *dead presidents* ‘money,’ *def* ‘good,’ *diss* ‘criticize,’ *hood* ‘neighborhood,’ *wanna-be* ‘phony,’ and scores more. By 1998 many Americans who had never willingly listened to rap music were talking about the newly designed paper money issued by the U.S. Department of the Treasury and calling it *benjamins* ‘money, a hundred dollar bill’ – without realizing that the trendy new expression had come directly from rap lyrics.

The advent of the Internet changed social communication, the ordinary context of slang. David Crystal, in *Language and the Internet*, which was published in 2001 and required a second edition by 2006, says, “The Internet is an electronic, global, and interactive medium, and each of these properties has consequences for the kind of language found there” (26). No longer is face-to-face interaction a requisite for connectivity. Via the Internet, people use language to communicate within seconds across oceans and across political boundaries. Two of the standard major characteristics of slang – its restriction to oral communication and its role in the maintenance of groups – would appear threatened by Internet communication – which is mainly written and has no group boundaries.

Written language rather than spoken language is the norm of Internet communication – though now with the ability to send video clips, transmission

of language via the Internet may soon not depend on the written word. Most linguistic studies of Internet communication to this point have focused on the relationship between oral and written linguistic interaction, research which Crystal summarizes well in his 2006 book (28-30, 45, 47).

The notion of *group*, which has always been the primary generator of slang, must now include networks, often of connected strangers, who do not form a set on the traditional bases of kinship, location, or face-to-face acquaintance.

Despite the change from oral to written medium and the change in what *group* means, slang is thriving in Internet communication, particularly American slang. Anyone on the planet with an Internet connection has access to it.

The easiest place to find slang nowadays is the World Wide Web. In 2002 I looked at slang lexicography on the web by classifying and describing the dictionary components of a sample of 70 sites (“Slang Lexicography,” “The Expanding World”). My search for the word *slang* using google.com on July 24, 2002, yielded 873 entries. (The same search on May 28, 2007 yielded 21,700,000 hits.) In 2002, I looked at roughly ten percent of the sites (i.e., ninety) by selecting every ninth page of the display, from p. 9 through p. 81. Of these ninety entries, 20 were either inaccessible or had nothing to do with the meaning of *slang* in the study of language. Thus my impressions are based on a corpus of seventy Internet sites that pertained in some way to the type of vocabulary called *slang*.

Thirty-three, almost half, had language as their main focus – this number may be a bit high because it includes, for instance, grammar handbook pages and a site for copy editors. The other half of the sites incorporated slang within a wider topic; i.e., the purpose of the site was not mainly to give a list of slang but to include slang as it pertains to a particular interest group. For example, one site displayed and sold reminders of home to expatriate South Africans and included a glossary of slang.

Another major division was based on the purpose of the site – whether or not the primary aim was to sell goods or services. Slightly more than one-third, 29, seemed to be commercial in intent, although sometimes it was hard to tell. An interesting one is www.peakenglish.com. In 2002 and 2003 PEAK English displayed a trademark symbol on its home page and called itself the “online, interactive English school for the ESL/EFL

community.” PEAK English used slang as a tantalizer. The word-of-the-day in July 2002 was *blimp* for ‘fat person.’ The entry provided a definition and a citation as well as a cartoon-like graphic. Ten months later, the “slang of the day” was *low-life*, explained by a cartoon, a sound-byte pronunciation, a definition, two sample sentences, and two synonyms. Additional features were a Slang Forum, a Slang Dictionary, and Slang [Greeting] Cards that a subscriber could send to friends by email. By May 2007 PEAK English had become part of Distant Learning, Inc., and required registration to get further than the home page. The use of slang might well have contributed to the site’s success in luring paying customers.

Among the five most frequent topics of my 70 sample sites was ESL/EFL. In my google searches of September 2006 and May 2007 among the top hits was www.slangcity.com, a site for non-native speakers. The upper left of the homepage displayed a photograph of laughing Asian girls. The opening page had warnings that the site contained “bad language,” and the screen was filled with many opportunities in tiny print. The section “New Song Translations” gave English lyrics containing slang along with a translation in standard English. There were also “New Movie Translations.” The site www.slangcity.com came up again in my google search for *slang* on May 28, 2007, this time as #8: “Yeah, baby! It’s the online home of American slang!” Still on a mission to disclose “bad words,” the site allows visitors to click the cursor on a body part in a work of art and to get the standard English word and a display of synonyms of five degrees of badness. For example, for standard English *penis*, the least bad degree, for “Kids,” lists *wee-wee*. “Super Polite” is *thing*. “Okay” are *Johnson*, *dick*, *weiner*, *weenie*, *sausage*, and *little + name of person*. “A little bad” are *dong*, *schlong*, *pecker*, *tool*, and *shaft*. “Bad” are *cock* and *prick*.

For 90% of the sites in my 2002 sample, the language was English. The two Japanese sites were actually bilingual – one was Japanese “slangs” for interpreters, and the other was lesson four of a commercial site for learning Japanese. The Spanish and Russian sites seemed to be commercial ones selling “coolness.” The sites in Polish and Hungarian were lexicons of professional quality posted by established scholars. The list of Tagalog slang is a small part of an impressive educational site on Filipino cultural and linguistic resources housed at Northern Illinois University.

What do these forays onto the web in search of slang suggest? The largest portion of Internet locations identified by a google.com search for

slang consists of lists of words and phrases and their meanings – that is lexicons – with little discussion of what the existence of such a lexicon implies. Though most slang lists on the Internet do not make the distinctions among sub-types of vocabulary that linguists might call *jargon*, *regionalisms*, *slang*, and *colloquialisms*, the people who established these sites understand that an ordinary way of marking some portions of human experience as special is by creating a special shared vocabulary for it. The social essence of slang vocabulary is at least intuitively understood by the authors of and contributors to these websites. The sites support a distinction between the primary slang of groups and the secondary slang that identifies users with a style or trend. Instead of serving to exclude people from group membership, which is often a characteristic of primary slang, many sites are inclusive and welcoming. Anyone who is interested may participate. Commonly, sites invite contributions of vocabulary, and some even identify the contributor of an item. None of the sites asks for evidence that a submission is authentic usage rather than a coinage by the contributor. The site www.pseudodictionary.com even proclaims itself as “the place where words you’ve made up can become part of an online dictionary!” The notion that slang admits new words is implicit in many other sites too. So is the notion that language choices have social consequence – as shown by warnings about objectionable language on some sites.

The World Wide Web has brought the collection of words into a new era for both professional and amateur dictionary makers. Publishers like Merriam-Webster and Random House maintain free, attractively designed, and user-friendly websites about words, many of which are slang. However, more sites are maintained by individuals. Sometimes success with an individual’s website comes with a price though. *The Totally Unofficial Rap Dictionary*, which used to reside amidst a colorful, high tech display of the latest information about rap, rappers, and how to buy favorite CDs, folded into Wikipedia and now seems like part of the establishment. Webpages devoted to slang are as ephemeral as slang itself, with new ones being born and others falling into neglect every day.

Although websites are the most accessible Internet sources for repositories of slang (and the only Internet application that I have studied), more interesting to language change are the uses of slang words and phrases in various types of Internet communication—like email, chatrooms, instant messaging, and games. Although much has been published on the

language of email and chatrooms, the use of slang in these linguistic exchanges is barely mentioned in the research. (The index to Crystal's 276-page book points to brief mentions of the term *slang* on only five pages.)

Chatrooms and Internet social networks ought to be a natural venue for slang because they are anchored in group formation. They are one means of forming a social group – an “in-crowd” – out of people who cannot be or who are not in the same location. Crystal explains, “Maintaining the identity of the group is the important thing, especially as there is no other sort of identity to rely upon, given that personal anonymity is the norm” (172). Furthermore, Crystal observes that slang is a means of creating group identity, saying “Although the use of non-standard formations, jargon, and slang varies from group to group, all synchronous chatgroups rely heavily upon such processes, presumably as a mechanism of affirming group identity” (171).

Crystal's description of the relationship among participants in a chatroom (171-76) could just as readily fit American college students interacting face-to-face and using slang. In his discussion of chatrooms, Crystal says,

even in the most contentless and incoherent interactions of the synchronous setting, the social advantages outweigh the semantic disadvantages. The atmosphere, even when a topic is in sharp focus, is predominantly recreational (as the common metaphor of ‘surfing’ suggests). Language play is routine. Participants frequently provide each other with expressions of rapport. Subjectivity rules: personal opinions and attitudes, often of an extreme kind, dominate, making it virtually impossible to maintain a calm level of discourse for very long. If you are looking for facts, the chatgroup is not the place to find them. But if you are looking for opinions to react to, or want to get one of your own off your chest, it is the ideal place. Trivial remarks, often of a strongly phatic character, permeate interactions. ‘Gossip-groups’ would be a more accurate description for most of what goes on in a chatgroup situation. And gossip, as in the real world, is of immense social value. (174-75)

The use of slang in chatgroups (and other kinds of synchronous Internet interactions) will depend at least in part on how readily the effects of slang match the aims of chatgroups. Table 2 lists the slang terms most frequently submitted by my students at the University of North Carolina

from April 2006 through April 2007. A cursory examination shows that, like the conversations within chatgroups, student slang is “contentless” and “recreational” and provides “expressions of rapport.” It pertains overwhelmingly to social life and to who and what are admissible to the group.

TABLE 2
Slang Items Most Frequently Submitted by University of North Carolina Students
Spring Semester 2006-Spring Semester 2007
In Order of Frequency

SKETCHY/SKETCH	— suggestive of danger, causing suspicion
FACEBOOK	— look someone up on www.facebook.com
SOROSTITUTE	— young woman who behaves in a sexually seductive manner
WORD	— affirmation of agreement or encouragement
PEACE OUT/PEACE	— goodbye
HOLLER/HOLLA	— be in communication with another; goodbye
SWEET	— excellent, admirable, enviable
DANK	— of superior quality, excellent
CHILL OUT/CHILL	— relax, do nothing of consequence
HOT	— extremely attractive
BUTTERFACE	— female with an attractive body but an ugly face (< but her face)
FRATASTIC	— highly favorable by the standards of fraternity life
HELLA	— extremely
OWN/PWN	— dominate another person or prevail in a challenging situation
BALLER/BALLA	— someone with admirable athletic or social skills
BEAST	— dominate another person or prevail in a challenging situation
CRUCIAL	— excellent, admirable
CRUNK	— crazy acting and drunk
DIME	— beautiful female, a #10
DOUCHEBAG/DOUCHE	— disagreeable or unlikable person
HOOKUP	— partner in any kind of sexual activity
WHAT’S GOOD?	— greeting
SHORTY/SHAWTY	— girlfriend
BADONKADONK	— buttocks
DOPE	— of superior quality
GRUB	— food
WHACK	— weird, strange, unusual
WHIP	— car

Most items in Table 2 are evaluative terms, labels to pigeonhole someone or something as acceptable or unacceptable. The most frequently submitted term by far was SKETCH/SKETCHY, meaning ‘suggestive of

danger'. It can apply to a person, as in "I don't like to go to Josh's apartment—his roommate is sketch." Or it can apply to a situation, as in, "That parking lot looks sketch. Let's take a different route back to the house." DANK, HOT, BALLER, CRUCIAL, DOPE, and SWEET are positive assessments. WHACK means 'weird, strange' and can apply to people and things. ADOUCHEBAG is a 'socially inept person,' definitely not favored by the group. The terms FRATASTIC (<fraternity + fantastic) and SOROSTITUTE (<sorority + prostitute) allude to the social organizations for men and for women on American college campuses. HELLA is an intensifier for both adjectives and adverbs. To OWN and to BEAST mean 'to dominate.' Three items refer to females: DIME is a 'beautiful female' (a #10); a BUTTERFACE is a 'woman with a beautiful body but an ugly face'; and a SHORTY is a 'girlfriend'. BADONKADONK is 'buttocks,' particularly large and rounded and belonging to a female. GRUB is 'food' or 'to eat'. CRUNK blends *crazy* + *drunk*. CHILL/CHILL OUT means 'to take it easy', and CHILLAX is a blend of CHILL + *relax*. HOOK UP is 'to find a partner for romance or sex'. WHIP is 'a car'. WORD is a sign of agreement or acceptance. Others are part of the systems of greetings and farewells: WHAT'S GOOD?, PEACE OUT, and HOLLA.

Two are influenced by the Internet. PWN alludes to a mistyping of OWN. Now students deliberately type it PWN and even pronounce it /pon/ rather than /on/: "He poned me in basketball." FACEBOOK means 'to look someone up on the Internet social network www.facebook.com. It is accompanied by FRIEND, 'to list someone as a friend on facebook' and DEFRIEND, 'to remove someone from one's list of friends on facebook.'

The slang vocabulary of students is clearly amenable to chatrooms, though with some strictures that do not apply on campus. In chatrooms, language choice is the sole means available for gaining entry to the group and finding a place there. Unlike in face-to-face interactions, body language, appearance, and clues from the setting are not available. Neither is intonation to show enthusiasm on the one hand or sarcasm on the other. Getting slang right is even more important and precarious in chatrooms than in face-to-face conversation.

The remarkable and instantaneous success of Internet social networks attests to young people's desire to identify with a group rather than with the anonymous world. On college campuses in the U.S. now, the most

prevalent is www.facebook.com. It is designed to allow users to be as exclusive or inclusive as they like, creating their own network of “friends.” Thus it appears that slang, the kind of vocabulary that has always served group identity, still has a place in the twenty-first century, when one’s group may have members in China, Brazil, and Egypt.

In sum, the rapid changes to its habitat over the past two decades have not made slang an endangered species. On the contrary, slang is even participating in the global economy. Sixty flashcards of American slang for the “nerdy, uncool, or simply suburban” eager to learn the latest slang are now retailing at www.knockknock.biz for \$14.95.

Slang as a type of lexis is thriving in the new media and social contexts created by the rapid changes in technology at the end of the twentieth century. Rather than mainly the group-identifying vocabulary of various marginalized and small groups, slang is now worldwide the vocabulary of choice of young people (who compose the majority of the inhabitants of the earth) and reflects their tastes in music, art, clothing, and leisure time pursuits. The study of the new breed of slang, however, lags behind. Foremost, it is not yet an integral part of sociolinguistics. The strongest type of extant slang scholarship, lexicography, is threatened by market conditions. Printed dictionaries of slang based mainly on written corpora – though still of long term value for historic purposes – are extremely time-consuming to produce and prohibitively expensive. For example, a well-established and reputable American publishing firm recently cancelled its reference division, including its unfinished slang dictionary. Lexicographers and sociolinguists now have the possibility of observing, collecting, and disseminating their analyses of current slang very quickly and in imaginative non-print formats. The study of slang is a wide open research opportunity for those convinced that slang vocabulary gives insight into human characteristics that are not trivial and who also can apply their imagination to twenty-first century technology.

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