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SLANG AND ITS HISTORY

A living language such as English is a dynamic flow of spoken and written terms, eternally evolving. Whenever people use the language they cause it to flow in and around itself, creating new meanings, ways to express.

Term “slang” reflects the dynamics of the language and therefore is very obscure and ambiguous. Although it is spread so much that now can easily be found practically in all kinds of contemporary literary works, yet there is no easy mechanism for identifying it. The absolute truth about slang was revealed by Lighter and Dumas that anyone can recognize slang, but no one can define it.

There is hardly any other term that is as ambiguous and obscure as the term slang. Slang is a controversial topic nowadays, and the debate on its definitions, classification and linguistic relevance is still heated.

Most linguists and lexicographers admit that the origin of the word slang is “uncertain” or “unknown”. One notable exception is Skeat, a lexicographer, who claims that slang (“vulgar language”) is of Scandinavian origin and a derivation of Icelandic *slyngva* (“to sling”), which can be compared with the Norwegian verb *slengja* (“to sling the jaw”) and the Norwegian noun *slengjeord* (“slang word”), used for insulting words. In a similar vein, Partridge referred by Eble in her book “Slang and Sociability; in-group language among college students” says that certain resemblances between English word slang and the Scandinavian *sling* suggest that the words have developed from a common Germanic root.

In contrast, one of the Swedish researchers on slang Anna-Brita Stenstrom, in her article “From slang to slanguage: a description based on teenage talk” shows that one of the Swedish dictionaries consulted “Bonniers Stora Lexicon” maintains that the Swedish word slang comes from English slang, and that the origin is unknown. Also she provides an identical opinion of Swedish encyclopedia “Nationalencyclopedia”, which states that the word slang was not introduced in the Nordic countries until the middle of the 19th century. The first occurrence of the word slang is dated 1756 in the OED, according to which ultimate source is “not apparent”. Consequently, word “slang” appeared in English language earlier than in the languages of Scandinavian countries.

Another view on the appearance of the word slang suggests that it is not an English word; it is the Gipsy term for their secret language. Some other philologists consider it derived from French.

The phenomenon of slang appeared before it got the name “slang”. According to Swift slang is as old as speech, and traces of this may be found as far as we can refer back. Old English Slang was coarser, and depended more upon downright vulgarity than our modern slang. Slang of those days was generally termed “flash” language which represented both cant and slang. It is important to underline that the term “slang” was firstly recognized by Grose in 1785. He defined it as “cant or vulgar language”.

Italian researcher Winona Bullard writes that different dialects and pronunciations in the Middle Ages represented the first meaning of the term “slang”. It was represented by certain writers such as Chaucer, William Caxton and William of Malmesbury. The present-day meaning for slang began to form only in 16th or 17th century. English Criminal Cant is considered to be the starting point of slang. It was a new kind of speech used by criminals in saloons and gambling houses. It was at first believed that English criminal cant originated in Romania or had occurred in France. She also argues that some popular plays of Richard Brome (1635), poems and songs by Copland (1925) already contained some slang words. By the 1700’s the cultural differences in America had begun to influence the English-speaking population, and slang started to expand. During the 18th century slang was thought as incorrect usage of English and was considered forbidden.

Eric Partridge in “Slang Today and Yesterday” notes that from about 1850’s, slang has been the accepted term for “illegitimate” colloquial speech.

John Ayto in the Introduction to the “Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang” writes that the first to which the term “slang” was applied, in the mid-eighteen century, was the special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low and disreputable character. In the earlier centuries it was referred to as thieves’ cant or patter of earlier centuries.

Nowadays slang is not associated with criminals. It acquires its form and is influenced by different cultures and the innovations of technology, which has left the society a variety of slang extremes from Street slang to Afro-American slang.

Moreover, slang tends to originate in subcultures within a society. Slang expressions often embody attitudes and values of group members. They thus contribute to a sense of group

identity and may convey information to the listener concerning the speaker's background. Before an apt expression becomes a slang, it must be widely adopted by the members of the group.

The vocabulary of slang changes rapidly: what is new and exciting for one generation is old-fashioned for the next. Old slang often either drifts to obsolescence or becomes accepted into the standard language, losing its eccentric colour. *Flapper*, for instance, started life in the late 19th century as a slang term for a young or lively woman, but subsequently moved into general language as a specific term for such a young woman of the 1920s. Similarly, the use of *gay* in the sense "homosexual" has its roots firmly in slang, but is now widely accepted as standard terminology. Slang has always been difficult to locate, to explain and to grasp as a unitary phenomenon. This has discouraged overall formal accounts. Therefore, the concept of slang has been inaccurately defined by many lexicographers who tend to restrict it to colloquial or bad language, and the term has been imprecisely used by many sociolinguists who conflate it with such language varieties as cant, jargon, dialect, vernacular, or accent. Galperin in "Stylistics" stresses that "no other European language has singled out a special layer of vocabulary and named it slang, though all of them distinguish such groups of words as jargon, cant, and the like". Many attempts have been made to define slang, but many have been unable to come up with a distinct meaning. In addition to the complexity involved in finding a more accurate definition to the term, is the attitude that the public and scholars alike have about slang. The word "slang" evokes different reactions among the general public, scholars and linguists in particular. These reactions are often antagonistic and discordant, ranging from a perception of slang as simply "bad" English to slang as creative language variety worthy of academic investigation.

Some linguists and lexicographers give a rather sweeping definition of the term "slang". Quirk et al. mentions slang as a variation from casual to vulgar, but the distinction cannot be specified, since it is all the matter of attitude. Others, such as Dumas and Lighter (1978) avoid definitions altogether by instead providing identifying criteria, for instance, "its presence will markedly lower, at least for one moment, the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing" and "it is used in place of the well known conventional synonym".

Other researchers define slang in direct opposition to the conventional and standard language, and view it in terms of deviant and rebellious nature. They argue that slang is improper,

unsystematic, unacceptable language usage, and unconventional vocabulary that diverges from that of standard lexicon (Munro, 1997; Burke, 1939; Lighter, 1994).

Elisa Mattiello (2008) investigating the definitions provided by different scholars concludes that there are different approaches in composing a definition of slang. Most definitions of the term show tendency towards a sociological view of the phenomenon. The followers of this approach define slang as a social means of identification and cohesiveness of a group. According to Mattiello (2008) “within the sociological approach, slang is ascribed the two opposite purposes of keeping insiders together and outsiders out”. For instance Eble (1996) stresses the social and interpersonal aspects of slang and its function “to establish and reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large”. Obviously, use of the same slang vocabulary helps to gain the acceptance in a group and to preserve group solidarity. Slang in sociological approach serves such social purposes as being on the same speech level with one’s audience, facilitating social intercourse, and inducing friendliness or intimacy.

Another approach to define slang is the stylistic approach. Within this approach it is defined as a level of usage. Partridge (1947) neutrally and rather vaguely defines slang as “the quintessence of colloquial speech”, or as in Flexner (1960) that it is “not accepted as good, formal usage by majority.” In brief, slang is put into opposition to formal language: namely, it is below standard discourse and the neutral stylistic level, and typical of informal relaxed speech. Furthermore, slang is also juxtaposed to other non-standard varieties: it is neither dialect nor register, nor can it be assigned to the concepts of cant, argot, or jargon. Slang is changing rapidly; therefore it can be regarded as a short-lived ephemeral vocabulary that is expecting either to pass into obsolescence or becomes accepted in standard language.

According to linguistic approach slang is regarded as the use of ordinary words in extraordinary senses or of extraordinary words in ordinary senses. This approach emphasizes the aspects of novelty and freshness of slang. Jespersen (1922) states that slang “finds amusement in the creation and propagation of new words and in attaching new meanings to old words”. Sornig (1981) defines slang as “an experimental language”. Mattiello (2008) highlights that slang distinguished from standard language in its morphology and its semantics. In morphology, “it is characterized by clear insubordination as regards the standard word-formation rules”, and in

semantics, “it only renames everyday objects, but also enriches, qualifies and complexifies them”.

If on the one hand, it is agreed that slang is a certain lexical layer, then giving to it the rank of language leads to miscomprehension and ambiguity. But, if slang is a language or a dialect, then it should be characterized not only by its peculiar use of words but also by phonetic, morphological and syntactical peculiarities. Nowadays slang covers both the specific and general sense. Usually it consists of new words and novel or extended meanings, and develops from the attempt to find fresh, vigorous, colourful, pungent or humorous expressions.

To conclude, the theme should be investigated more carefully, because slang is changing rapidly. It is obvious that even existing researches are not enough in the sphere of slang investigation. Therefore, additional researches should be carried out.