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The Pervasiveness of Slang in Standard and Non-Standard English

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of slang constitutes an open question for lexicography and sociolinguistics. Unfortunately, there is little agreement on the identification and definition of slang, so that the phenomenon is currently controversial. The concept of slang has been inaccurately defined by many lexicographers who tend to restrict it to informal or bad language, and the term ‘slang’ has been improperly used by many socio-linguists who conflated it with such language varieties as cant, jargon, dialect, vernacular or accent. This is mainly due to the sheer pervasiveness of slang, since it is constantly moulding the standard language and also extending across a number of non-standard ‘lects’ with its fresh and innovative vocabulary.

The present paper is an attempt to explore slang and hopefully give some contribution to its identification and interpretation. The notion of slang I discuss here is not concerned with the sociological aspects of slang, at least not as a focal point (cf. Eble 1996, Munro 1997, Allen 1998), nor is it concerned with the perception of slang as a stylistic level (cf. Partridge 1947, Flexner 1960, Andersson and Trudgill 1990, Stenström et al. 2002). It is rather concerned with the dominant position of slang within genuine conversations, and the high potential of morphological and semantic innovation which it is capable of achieve and spread across varieties. An example of slang innovation is offered by the word *yob*, which is the back-slang of *boy* having the new sense of ‘a lout or hooligan’¹. In this paper I will consider *yob*

¹ The meanings and explanations of the word *yob* and of the following slang terms

as both an extragrammatical word and a neo-semanticism, and I will explain why this and similar terms are sometimes used instead of standard words.

1.1. The aims of the paper

The primary aims of this paper are to highlight the pervasiveness of English slang across speech, and to show its originality of forms and meanings. I shall illustrate some relevant morphological and semantic aspects characterizing present-day English slang, in particular British and American slang, my hypotheses being that slang stands out for (a) its innovative word-formation processes, and (b) its new meanings and the semantic areas it typically covers. In this way, I wish to enhance the value of slang by demonstrating that this creative phenomenon of a language may cast some light on the possible development of its lexicon and grammar.

Another important aim of this paper is to provide some contexts in which English slang is used, and to focus on its pragmatic purposes and effects. In this way, I wish to demonstrate that slang is a practical linguistic instrument serving heterogeneous purposes and obtaining different, even divergent effects.

As a secondary aim this paper aspires to encourage the teaching of slang in academic settings (at least as a passive competence), as even conventional courses of English as a Second Language (ESL) may well include more authentic language in their curricula and take advantage of the originality and freshness of slang – especially, college slang – as stimulating motivations for students' learning.

1.2. The data of the paper

The data used in this paper has been systematically collected by visiting numerous websites and consulting dictionaries of slang available on the Internet². Then, it has been selected by making comparisons between the consult-

and expressions are drawn from the free access online *Dictionary of Slang, English slang and colloquialisms used in the United Kingdom* (<http://www.peevish.co.uk/slang/>).

² A complete list of the pertinent websites and the online dictionaries is in the References.

ed online dictionaries and such paper dictionaries of slang as Partridge (1984) and Beale (ed.) (1991). I have also found out that most of the selected dictionary entries are included and labelled as 'slang words' in the recent version of the OED.

The actual use of the above data has been tested and ascertained in two different ways. First, I have examined many conversations taken from English film scripts and investigated the slang words in their various co-texts and con-texts (cf. Mattiello forthcoming). Then, I have conducted experiments on young native English students and analysed the words in the specific university context (cf. Mattiello 2005).

2. DEFINING SLANG

Defining slang is a challenging task for two main reasons. Firstly, slang is a time-restricted ephemeral phenomenon³. Many words and expressions that were once regarded as slang are now disappearing or becoming obsolete (e.g. *groovy* 'excellent, wonderful' [1930], *Gordon Bennett!* 'an exclamation of anger or surprise' [1850-1880]), or they have gradually entered the standard lexicon, and are merely considered colloquial (e.g. *telly* 'television') or informal language (e.g. *bird-brained* 'stupid, lacking commonsense'). Secondly, slang has a rather wide, all-encompassing nature. Thus, due to a terminological merging, the concept of slang is often made to correspond to such non-standard language varieties as cant, jargon, dialect, vernacular, or, more rarely, accent. The result is a rich range of opinions and definitions of slang that are often inadequate to characterize the phenomenon⁴.

³ In this connection, Andersson and Trudgill (1990:70) point out that, as slang is subject to change over time and from place to place, «[w]hat is slang for one person, generation or situation may not be slang for another». Eble (1996:12) stresses that «[f]oremost, slang is ephemeral», and Munro (1997:27) on a similar line notices how slang words come and go: «Some slang expressions are no longer recognized by speakers just a few years later, other slang words come to be accepted as standard language, while still others persist as slang for many years».

⁴ Opinions diverge not only with regard to the definition of the concept of slang but also as regards the etymology of the word 'slang', which is presently unknown or dubious for most linguists and lexicographers. Overall, two distinct tendencies have developed which attribute dissimilar origins to slang.

One tendency relates slang to the Scandinavian world. In Skeat (ed.) (1910) the ori-

2.1. *The literature on slang*

In the relevant literature most definitions of slang show a tendency towards a sociological view of the phenomenon. This view is accepted, among others, by Eble (1996:11), who regards slang as «an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large» (see also Munro 1997, cf. Allen 1998). A second fundamental approach is stylistic. In line with it, slang has to be arranged among the «varieties according to attitude» (Quirk et al. 1985:25-27) as it «includes words that are *below the level of stylistically neutral language*» (Stenström et al. 2002:67). A third relevant approach emphasizes the aspects of novelty and freshness of slang, and characterizes it as a language variety that exhibits a leaning towards lexical innovation (Jespersen 1922, Dundes and Schonhorn 1963, Mencken 1967, Olesen and Whittaker 1968, Dumas and Lighter 1978, Sornig 1981).

In lexicography most dictionaries agree that the word 'slang' may be defined with at least two senses. First, slang is the restricted speech of marginal

gin of the word 'slang' ('low, vulgar language') is traced back both to the Norwegian verb *slengja kjeften* (lit. 'to sling the jaw', 'to use abusive language, to slang') and to the Icelandic words *slyngr* or *slunginn* ('versed in a thing, cunning'). In addition, the lexicographer behind this dictionary also reminds us of the Swedish word *slanger* ('gossip'), remarking that all these terms are probably derived from the second grade of the verb *sling* ('to throw, cast'). The supposition of a Scandinavian origin is also contemplated by Mencken (1967:703), who cites two Norwegian dialect words – the neologism *slengjeord* (lit. 'a slang-word') and the nickname *slengjenamn* (lit. 'a slang-name') – reported by Weekly (1921). This assumption is finally supported by Partridge (1970:2), who points out a resemblance between the English word 'slang' and the Scandinavian *sling*, perhaps two derivatives from a shared Germanic root. In contrast, the OED states that the date and early associations of this word make it improbable that there is any connection with certain Norwegian forms based upon the cognate verb *slenge* or *slengje*.

The alternative tendency attributes a cant origin to slang. The word 'slang' may be either an argotic distortion of the French word *langue* or a blending with the English word *language* as second member: e.g., thieves' *language*, beggars' *language*, rogues' *language* (Mencken 1967, Eble 1996), or even *sling language* (Webster and McKechnie (eds.) 1963). This last postulation is motivated by the fact that, when the word 'slang' first appeared in English, about the middle of the eighteenth century, it was employed as a synonym of 'cant', and, less than fifty years later, as a synonym of 'argot'. As observed by Skeat (ed.) (1910:568), the word 'slang' once denoted 'a narrow piece of land', so that currently, in the language of thieves and gypsies, *to be out on the slang* means «to travel about the country as a hawker, encamping by night on the roadside slangs».

or distinct subgroups in society and, second, it is a quite temporary, unconventional vocabulary characterized primarily by connotations of informality and familiarity. In Trumble and Stevenson (eds.) (2002), for instance, slang is described both as «the special vocabulary and usage of a particular period, profession, social group» and as a «language that is regarded as very informal or much below standard educated level».

As a matter of fact, a few distinctions must be made in the following subsections before defining slang. For linguistic purposes, slang must be firstly distinguished from standard language (see § 2.2.) and, secondly, from such other non-standard language varieties as jargon, cant, dialect, vernacular, and accent, although slang shares some characteristics with each of these (see § 2.3.). Thirdly, a subdistinction will be necessary between specific and general slang (see § 2.4.). I will afterwards focus the attention on the fresh and innovative qualities of slang, which seem the most significant guidelines in its identification.

2.2. Slang vs. standard language

Slang differs from standard language for its lack of formality. It is frequently seen as colloquial speech (Partridge 1947), or as a level of usage that is «not accepted as good, formal usage by the majority» (Flexner 1960:vi). Andersson and Trudgill (1990:69) even remark that «[t]he most important aspect of slang is that it is language use below the level of stylistically neutral language usage».

Many neutral standard words have at least one, more plausibly several slang synonyms. For instance, *alkey* and *boozer* are slang synonyms for *alcoholic*, and *druggy*, *junky* and *pot-head* are synonymous with *drug addict*. Similarly, such slang abbreviations as *backy*, *ciggy*, *footy*, *supy* and *tommy* may replace their standard counterparts (*tobacco*, *cigarette*, *football*, *supermarket*, *tomato*) in relaxed familiar contexts or in less formal situations.

Another characteristic distinguishing slang from standard language is its effectiveness. Although some slang words are mere informal synonyms of their standard equivalents (e.g. slang *bird*, St.E. *girl*), others add some nuances of meaning to them. Consider, for example, the slang word *bobfoc*, an acronym from the phrase *body off Baywatch*, *face off Crimewatch* which stands for ‘a facially unattractive female who possesses a sexually desirable body’. There is no Standard English equivalent that can express the same concept, and a periphrasis has to be used in its place. A comparable expression is *bimbo*, which is em-

ployed in slang to address ‘a young attractive empty-headed woman’, hence, to simultaneously inform about her (a) sex (woman), (b) age (young), (c) physical appearance (attractive), and (d) intellectual power (empty-headed). No Standard English word would convey, by itself, such a complex meaning.

Most importantly, slang differs from standard language in terms of some word-formation rules, which are typical of slang but are practically absent from Standard English. Examples are the suffixes *-o*, as in *laddo* (‘lad’) and abbreviated *gypto* (‘a gypsy’), and *-ers* (a cumulation from *-er* and *-s*), as in *bonkers* (‘crazy, insane’) and *butters* (‘ugly’), final combing forms like *-head* (e.g. *ginhead* ‘drunkard’, *grasshead* ‘marijuana smoker’), and infixes like *-bloody-* (e.g. *abso-bloody-lutely*, *fan-bloody-tastic*). Other examples differing from Standard English are clippings in which only the first letter is retained (e.g. *C* < *cocaine*, *E* < *ecstasy*), back-slang and spoonerisms (e.g. *spoc* < *cops*, *cunning stunt* < *stunning cunt*), and reduplicatives (e.g. *hells bells!* ‘an exclamation of surprise’, *hip-hop* ‘dance music genre with rapping’) (more in § 3.3).

2.3. Slang vs. other non-standard language varieties

Among the numerous non-standard language varieties, slang finds its room both as a diastratic variety and as a diatopic one. Nonetheless, as a diastratic variety, it diverges from both jargon and cant, whereas, as a diatopic variety, it departs from dialect, vernacular and accent.

2.3.1. Slang is not jargon, a widely used term referring to the specialized vocabulary and phraseology of a set of people sharing trade or profession (OED; cf. Sager 1982, Nash 1993, Burke 1995), although slang may be a choice within jargon. For example, musicians employ a range of specific slang terms to refer to different music styles (e.g. *funk*, *handbag*, *hardcore*, *house*, *jungle*, *techno*, etc.), soldiers use such slang expressions as *atomic monkey* (‘highly modified human’) and *easy money* (‘parasite torpedoes’) in their military life, and doctors, nurses and other medical staff use such technical-looking acronyms as *PFO* (‘pissed, fell over’, *pissed* being slang for ‘drunk’), *PGT* (‘pissed, got thumped’) and *UBI* (‘unexplained beer injury’) to describe the symptoms of their patients to other medical professionals⁵.

⁵ See *Medical Slang* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medical_slang) and *Military Terms and Slang* (<http://www.guildcompanion.com/scrolls/1999/dec/spaceterns.html>).

Slang differs from jargon for its lack of prestige and pretentiousness. In fact, slang terminology is much more familiar and spontaneous than the technical jargon of science, academics, law, bureaucracy, business, etc. Slang may be used within a particular group like musicians, soldiers or medical staff, but it does not exactly deal with status or reputation.

2.3.2. Slang is not cant, the specialized and usually secret language of thieves, professional beggars, and other groups operating on the periphery of the law (OED, see also Barisone 1989, Beier 1995, Gotti 1999, Coleman 2004). Yet, many slang words arise from the language of the underworld and are used for the purposes of secrecy. For instance, drug dealers use such specific slang names as *Charlie*, *rock*, *skag*, *skunk*, and *speed* for drug in their traffics, and criminals use a number of different in-group slang words to refer to the police (e.g. *bill*, *filth*, *fuzz*, *pigs*) in their illicit trades.

Despite its sometimes cryptic character, slang cannot be reduced to the private language of the criminal world. It may be used by those people in society who have reason to hide from actual authority (like drug addicts and criminals), but it may also serve to certain subgroups who want to keep the content of their conversations secret to adult people (like teenagers and college students), either to gain acceptance in a group or to preserve their group solidarity⁶.

2.3.3. Slang is not geographically restricted, like dialect (cf. Chambers and Trudgill 1980, Romaine 1994, Trudgill 1999), even if it is often regional and «may vary from place to place» (Andersson and Trudgill 1990:70). Therefore, what is slang in British English may be standard in American English, or may have a different meaning within the two regional varieties. For example, the slang expression *to go down a bomb* is used in British English to refer to something that is 'very successful', but in American English, some of which is

⁶ The cryptic character of slang reminds of French *verlan*, which is a non-standard language formed mainly by syllabic inversion, hence the name *verlan* (< Fr. *l'envers*). As Méla (1991) states, *verlan* is predominantly spoken by college students, and related to specific semantic areas, such as drug (e.g. *cigarette* → [garɛtsi] 'cigarette'), sex (e.g. *cul* → [yk] 'bum'), intercultural relations (e.g. *portugais* → [gɛtɥpɔʁ] 'Portuguese'), scuffle (e.g. *partouze* → [tuzpɑʁ] 'bunch'), but also to ordinary terms, such as *métro* → *tromé* ('underground'), *poubelle* → *bellepou* ('dustbin'). Méla (1991), who suggests the main patterns for the formation of *verlan*, stresses its use both in clandestine activities, as a secret code, and in peer groups like students, as a marker of belonging and alliance.

gaining currency over Britain, it is used in the exactly opposite sense of ‘to be a disaster’. Similarly, the vulgar slang word *fanny* refers to ‘the female genitals’ in British English, but it means ‘the buttocks’ in North American English.

Despite its local peculiarities, slang is not necessarily associated with one region or social class. Some slang words are of more general use or they happen to be understood by practically anyone within the language community: for example, everybody knows that a *nerd* is ‘an intelligent, obsessive and often socially inept person’ and that *crackers* means ‘crazy’, though they are not accepted as proper British or American English words.

2.3.4. Slang is not vernacular, the native speech of a particular country or district (OED), but it frequently includes variation of sounds or mispronunciation of words which are typical of a limited area. The words *chewing gum* and *football* are respectively mispronounced *chuggy* and *fitba* in Scottish slang, *eejit* and *bejesus!* are Irish slang pronunciations of *idiot* and *by Jesus!*, slang *bluddyell!* (< *bloody hell!*) is Birmingham use, while *bover* (‘trouble’) is a corruption of *bother* derived from Cockney⁷.

As I said above, slang is wider a concept than vernacular (cf. Walker 1984), as it is not strictly indigenous local speech. It is instead a hybrid language and often permeated with foreign lexical material, as in the case of *smack* (‘heroin’), which comes from Yiddish *schmeck*, *ackers* (‘money’), which in turn is a loan adaptation of Egyptian *akka*, and of the Spanish borrowing *dama blanca* (‘cocaine’).

2.3.5. Since slang is pertinent to word form and meaning, it is not accent, which simply refers to word pronunciation (tone quality, pitch, stress, etc.) (see Simpson 1994). In point of fact, some slang words are created by changing some sounds of standard items: *Cor blimey!* and *Gor blimey!* are slang alternative spellings of *God blind me!*, *Heck!* is the slang for *Hell!*, *lickle* (‘small’) is a childlike corruption of *little*, and *thang* is the slang for *thing* originating from Black English (cf. Munro 1989:8).

⁷ The term ‘Cockney’ is applied to usage in the London area and often associated with the tradition of Rhyming Slang. Cockney Rhyming Slang is a process whereby one word is replaced by one or more words that rhyme with it, as in *almond rocks* (‘socks’), *rub-a-dub* (‘pub’), *trouble and strife* (‘wife’). It is now a profuse phenomenon in Britain because many of its usages have been spread by music, television and the media: e.g., *barney rubble* (‘trouble’), *Bradd Pitt* (‘shit’), *Gianluca Vialli* (‘charlie’), *Mickey Mouse* (‘scouse’), etc. More on *Cockney Rhyming Slang* is at the address http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cockney_rhyming_slang.

As anticipated, however, mispronunciation is not the only linguistic strategy of slang: for example, such drug slang words as *amidone* and *rhine* are formed by anagrammatising the bases *methadone* and *heroin*, while *aunt Mary*, *Big Harry* and *el cid* are puns on *marijuana*, *heroin* and *LSD*. Furthermore, slang is frequently a matter of semantics, as it often represents a change of meaning. Illustrative examples are the drug names *airplane* and *baby* ('marijuana'), *ball* and *base* ('crack'), and numerous others which in the ordinary language have a different meaning/referent.

2.4. Specific vs. general slang

In the above subsection, we have seen that slang may be classified both as a social variety characterizing a group (e.g. music slang, military slang, medical slang, drug slang, thieves' slang, teenage slang, college slang, etc.) and as a regional variety distinguishing an area (e.g. British slang, American slang, Irish slang, Scottish slang) or a district (Birmingham slang, Cockney slang, etc.). It must be further subdivided as either specific or general slang⁸.

Basically, specific slang is language that speakers use to show their belonging to a group and establish solidarity or intimacy with the other group members. It is often used by speakers to create their own identity, including aspects such as social status and geographical belonging, or even age, education, occupation, lifestyle and special interests⁹. It is largely used by people of a common age and experience (like teenagers or college students) to strengthen the bonds within their own peer group, keeping the older generation at a distance (see Eble 1996, Munro 1997, Stenström et al. 2002)¹⁰. It is also used by people sharing the same occupation (like military men and computer users) to increase efficiency in communication; or by those sharing the same

⁸ In sociolinguistics some scholars requiring a systematic classification make a distinction between specific and general slang words. Stenström et al. (2002:64), for example, distinguish between those words that are associated with a particular group or trend (e.g. *joint*, *speed*, *spliff*) and those that are not (e.g. *booze*, *fag*, *spooky*) (see § 4.1. below, cf. Allen 1998:878).

⁹ Flexner (1960:xii-xiii): «Slang can be one of the most revealing things about a person because our own personal slang vocabulary contains many words used by choice, words which we use to create our own image».

¹⁰ See the Internet page *College Slang Around the World* (<http://www.intranet.csupomona.edu/~jasanders/judi2.html>).

living conditions (like prisoners and criminals) to hide secret information from people in authority. It is finally used by people sharing an attitude or a lifestyle (like drug addicts and homosexuals)¹¹ to reinforce their group cohesiveness, keeping insiders together and outsiders out (cf. Andersson and Trudgill 1990:158). Items like *ace* ('excellent'), *chick* ('a girl') and *cool* ('great, okay') can be considered specific slang words, as they are related to teenagers and college students and hardly understood by adults, and *grass* ('marijuana'), *rock* ('cocaine') and *solid* ('hashish') are likewise specific, as they belong to the vocabulary of drug addicts and drug dealers, but they have a different meaning in standard language.

General slang, on the other hand, is language that speakers deliberately use to break with the standard language and to change the level of discourse in the direction of informality. It signals the speakers' intention to refuse conventions (cf. Flexner 1960, Dumas and Lighter 1978) and their need to be fresh and startling in their expression, to ease social exchanges and induce friendliness, to reduce excessive seriousness and avoid clichés, in brief, to enrich the language (cf. Partridge 1947:288). General slang words have a wider circulation as they are neither group- nor subject-restricted: for example, items like *bevvy* ('an alcoholic drink'), *caff* ('a café') and *five* ('a five-pound bank note') are much more likely to get established as informal or colloquial English.

3. DESCRIBING SLANG

Describing slang requires discussing the freshness and innovation of its vocabulary. These aspects are indeed the main distinctive features of slang and the primary reasons for its pervasiveness across speech. As Mencken

¹¹ The language of homosexuals, especially in the 1950s and '60s, was called 'polari' (also seen as 'palare'), a corruption of the It. verb *parlare* ('to talk'), via *parlyaree*. Polari was a once extensive cant in Britain and elsewhere, among sailors, itinerants, people in show business (especially, the theatre and circuses). Later it became the language of some homosexual groups, but it has now almost died out. It was more common in the 1960s when gays had more need of a private slang. It featured heavily in the *Julian and Sandy* sketches on the BBC radio program *Round the Horne* in the late '60s. For polari see Pinnavaia (2003a, 2003b), *Queen Slang in the Gay 90's* (<http://www.gaymart.com/6fun/slang.html>) and *Polari-British Gay Slang* (<http://www.chris-d.net/polari/>), for drug slang see *Drug Related Street Terms/ Slang Words* (<http://www.addictions.com/slang.htm>).

(1967:702) interestingly points out, there is «a kind of linguistic exuberance» behind slang, «an excess of word-making energy» that revives the standard language by introducing new words and novel meanings into its lexicon. In fact, slang consists either of new words, such as the neologism *skag* ('heroin'), or the neo-formation *ecaf* ('face') or of current words employed in a new sense, such as the word *dog*, which may take on different context-dependent meanings and be used with either positive or negative connotations (e.g. *She's a dog!* 'a sexually unattractive female', *My dogs 'feet' are barking*, *He's my dog 'friend'*, *That exam was a dog* 'bad thing', etc.).

Word-formation is therefore another relevant aspect of slang, as it often relies on extragrammatical morphology and obtains words that are rather anomalous vis-à-vis the word-formation rules of standard language. Semantics is likewise relevant in slang, as it entails the examination of such processes as semantic change and enrichment, and of such concepts as semantic obscurity and indeterminacy. A further aspect requiring investigation is pragmatics, as it includes the illustration of the primary contexts of slang and of the heterogeneous effects that it produces. The former (freshness, innovation, word-formation, semantics) will be explained below, while the latter (pragmatics) will be the topic of section 4.

3.1. Freshness

Slang is fresh in several different ways. First, it is fresh in the sense of being modern and for fashionable people. When people speak, they do not only communicate a message, but also give information about who they believe they are, i.e. they create their own identity. Hence, using slang allows people to escape the dullness of neutral conventional style and to avoid the monotony of ordinary language. Using such slang words as *britneys* instead of *beers* or *fag* in place of *cigarette* shows that the user is in tune with the times.

Second, slang is fresh in the sense that it is mainly used by young people, like adolescents, teenagers and college students. Young people feel that slang is consistent with their attitudes and trends, and they are stimulated to give their contribution to its vocabulary. They consider slang terms effective shorthand ways to express concepts: to say *That party was da bomb* is more effective than merely saying it was a very good party, as it shares young people's social and emotional experience; to write *cul8r* ('see you later'), *sry* ('sorry') or *thx* ('thanks'), or even use emoticons, such as <:-)> or <:-P>, can clarify peo-

ple's emotional intents in their Internet messages¹². Not only does slang make their communication more effective, but it also reinforces their closeness. Using slang sends an implicit message of intimacy, thus creating a kind of relational identity.

Third, slang is fresh in the sense that it is creative and inventive. Many slang terms are coined every day having the same sense or denoting the same thing as another term in standard language. Most of them are not abandoned because they are synonymous with others, nor are they selectively used as it happens with standard synonyms. For example, the numerous slang synonyms for *homosexual* (e.g. *duke, gay, fairy, fruit, nancy, nelly, pansy, poof, queen, queer*, etc.) are all kept and widely used with approximately the same nuances of meaning and in the same environments. Keeping slang synonyms alive and creating new ones is a major process for enlarging the potential of a language.

3.2. Innovation

As I said above, slang consists of both non-standard terms and non-standard usages of standard terms. It is assumed to be innovative because it constantly enriches the standard language in various ways.

First, slang enriches the language with neologisms (cf. Maurer and High 1980, Lehrer 2003). It often forms new terms having an onomatopoeic colour, such as the verbs *blub* ('to sob'), *boak* ('to vomit'), *wazx* ('to urinate'), which have a great phonological identity and expressiveness. It also coins new derogatory expressions, such as those for 'an idiot person' (e.g. *bumbaclot, dingo, gobbin, meff, pranny*, etc.), which may be perceived as less offensive because of their semantic obscurity. It finally coins new names to call drugs (e.g. *ching* 'cocaine', *ganja* 'marijuana', *skag* 'heroin'), which are useful to those people who require an indecipherable private slang (like drug addicts and criminals).

Second, slang enriches the language with novel meanings. It is likely to establish new extra senses, most of which derive from figurative language: for example, *diamond* is something 'wonderful' par excellence, *poison* is the metaphoric name for 'alcohol', and *bad* ironically means 'good'. Sometimes an additional sense is more arbitrarily given to the standard words: therefore, *chicken* is a curious slang name for 'a young person', and *fish* peculiarly stands for 'a woman'.

¹² See *Internet slang* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_slang).

Novel meanings may also be given to grammatically regular words. The addition of the English suffix *-y/ie* to nouns can depart in slang from the original hypocoristic meaning: e.g., *towny/-ie* is a slang term meaning ‘a young person who typically wears casual, brand-name sportswear’, and *wally* is used to mean ‘an idiot or imbecile’. Compounds may likewise obtain an extra slang meaning, like *old boot*, which is oddly used for ‘an objectionable, ageing, unattractive woman’, and *hot air*, which in slang means ‘empty talk, nonsense’.

Third, slang enriches the standard vocabulary with novel word-forms. It is much richer than standard language in terms of word-formation patterns, some of which are typical of slang, like the intrusion of an infix inside a word (e.g. *absobloodylutely* ‘absolutely’) and some abbreviatory patterns which depart from accepted back- or fore-clipping. A few examples are *ecky/E/XTC* (‘ecstasy’), *triffic* (‘terrific’), *T.V.* (‘transvestite’), sometimes with the addition of a suffix *-o*, as in *arvo* (‘afternoon’), *lecko* (‘electricity’) and *muso* (‘musician’).

Novel word-forms are sometimes semantically obscure, as they may convey new meanings. This is the case of Rhyming Slang, which always obtains a new meaning rhyming with it (e.g. *Gianluca Vialli* ‘charlie’). This is also the case with back-slang, which may obtain a new specific slang meaning, as in *job* (‘a lout or hooligan’) deriving from *boy*. Suffixation may convey a new meaning to adjectival bases, as in *wide-o* (‘an insensitive and objectionable person’) and *bottie* (‘a sexually attractive person’), and variation has a similar function in *parlatic* (‘extremely drunk’) deriving its metaphoric sense from *paralytic*.

3.3. *Word-formation*

A debatable question of slang is word-formation. Some slang formations are in fact grammatical and follow the rules of standard language. For instance, slang behaves regularly in the forming of both denominal adjectives by *-y* suffixation (e.g. *chordy* ‘moody’ < slang *chord* ‘a bad mood’, *gobby* ‘mouthy, offensively outspoken’ < slang *gob* ‘the mouth’), and deverbal adjectives by *-able* suffixation (e.g. *shaggable* < slang *to shag* ‘to fornicate’, *fuckable* < slang *to fuck* ‘to copulate’). It regularly uses the suffix *-ette* with personal substantives to denote female sex, as in *punkette* (‘a female punk, i.e. a person who enjoys listening to punk rock’) and *rockette* (‘female who uses rock, i.e. crack’). Like Standard English, it uses the verbal prefix *de-* to convey a sense of removal or deprivation to the base, as in *de-bag* (‘to remove a person’s trousers, usually without his/her consent’ < slang *bags* ‘trousers’).

Most slang formations however tend to belong to extragrammatical morphology, though they exhibit a certain regularity and stability.

3.3.1. Slang has some productive suffixes which are either novel (e.g. *-o/oo*, *-eroo*, *-ers*) or used differently from Standard English (e.g. *-ed*, *-er*, *-s*). The slang suffix *-o* (and its graphic variant *-oo*) deserves particular attention for its occurrence in derivatives associated with the meaning of either ‘a stupid, unintelligent person’ (e.g. *dumbo*, *thicko*) or ‘a person with a particular habit or characteristic’ (e.g. *saddo* ‘a pathetic or contemptible person’, *sicko* ‘a disturbing and unsavoury person, a pervert’). This suffix seems to be also productive in the making of forms of address (e.g. *kiddo*, *yobbo*) and of words having an onomatopoeic colour, such as *wazoo* and *doo doo*.

A cumulation of the suffix *-er* with *-o/oo* produces *-eroo* in slang, as in *smackeroo*, meaning the same as *smacker* (‘one pound sterling’) but with a more light-hearted slant (see Wentworth 1972). Another prolific slang cumulation is *-ers* (from *-er* and *-s*), as in some pair nouns (e.g. *cobblers*, *conkers*, *knackers*, *nadders* ‘testicles’, *knockers*, *milkers* ‘women’s breasts’, *trainers* ‘running shoes’), plural nouns (e.g. *choppers* ‘teeth’, *trousers* ‘pants’), and, unexpectedly, uncountable nouns (e.g. *ackers* ‘money’, *uppers* ‘amphetamine’). The slang suffix *-ers* often occurs after abbreviation, as in *bathers* (‘bathing costume’), *brekkers* (‘breakfast’), *preggers* (‘pregnant’), *taters* (‘potatoes’), etc.

Interestingly, the suffix *-s* is apt to lose its inflectional value in slang, where it is rather used to convey new meaning to the base: e.g. *afters* (‘dessert’), *flicks* (‘the cinema’), *messages* (‘groceries’), *readies/spends* (‘money, usually cash’), etc.

The special use of *-ed* is also noteworthy in slang. Here it is frequently attached to nouns instead of verbs to obtain adjectives with the meaning ‘intoxicated by alcohol or drug’, as in *box* → *boxed*, *brain* → *brained*, *hammer* → *hammered*, *rat* → *ratted*, *stone* → *stoned*, *trouser* → *trouserred*, etc. The suffix *-er* is worthy of attention for similar reasons. In slang, and differently from Standard English, it preferentially follows nouns rather than verbs conveying new unpredicted senses, as in *belter* (‘an excellent thing or event’), *boner* (‘an erect penis’), *bottler* (‘a person who easily gives up, or loses the courage to complete a task’), *ghoster* (‘a late night work shift, done immediately after a day shift’), etc.

3.3.2. Initial and final combining forms (alias prefixoids and suffixoids) are generally not part of neo-classical compounds in slang. Initial combining forms are rather abbreviations of other words (e.g. *bashb-* < *hashish*, as in *bashcake*, *butt-* < *buttocks*, as in *butt ugh*), often with an intensifying function: *butt*

naked and *butt ugly*, for example, indicate the qualities of being ‘completely naked’ and ‘extremely ugly’. Final combining forms mainly originate words by analogy with other constructions: e.g., *-ache* forms *ballache* (‘a troublesome and inconvenient task’), *earache* (‘a talkative person’) and *face-ache* (‘a miserable-looking person’) by analogy with *headache*, and the nicknames *Gaychester*, *Gunchester* and *Madchester* are coined after *Manchester*. Remarkably, some slang final combining forms re-interpret lexemes that already exist in standard language (cf. Warren 1990): for example, *-head* in slang refers to ‘a stupid, contemptible person’ in *bonehead*, *bubblehead*, *fat-head*, etc. and to ‘an addict of –, generally a drug’ in *crackhead*, *hash-head*, *smackhead*, etc. Like many other suffixoids of slang (e.g. *-brain*, *-face*, *-mouth*, etc.), it seems metonymic in nature, as it represents the part (the *head*) for the whole (‘a person’). However, the sense acquired by the corresponding derivative is much more specific than the general sense of ‘a person’, and it is basically derogatory, as substantiated by such similar forms as *bollock-brain* (‘an idiot, imbecile, stupid person’), *crater face* (‘a person having a face with pock marked skin’) and *big mouth* (‘someone who is very talkative’) (more in Mattiello 2003).

3.3.3. Infixes are virtually unknown in Standard English (Bauer 1983:18), being a peculiarity of slang. Here, such expletive infixes as *-bloody-* and *-fucking-* are used to provide information about the speaker’s attitude, since they emphasize the superlative meaning of either adverbs (as in *abso-bloody-lutely*) or adjectives (as in *fan-fuckin’-tastic*).

3.3.4. Compounds are often morphotactically complex and morphosemantically opaque in slang (cf. Mattiello 2003). For example, slang assimilated compounds (e.g. *alright* from the exclamation *all right*) and those combinations where hapology has applied (e.g. *dimbo* < *dim* and *bimbo*) are complex due to underlying phonological reasons. Slang nominal compounds like *looksee* (‘a look, an inspection’) and *down under* (‘Australia’) are complex due to the syntactic class of their members (i.e. verbs, prepositions). By contrast, such nominal compounds as *air guitar* (‘an imaginary guitar played by rock music fans’), *old bag* (‘an objectionable, aging, unattractive woman’) and *cake-hole* (‘the mouth’) are opaque due to lack of transparency of one or both members.

3.3.5. In slang, conversion is anomalous in the case of adjective → noun transposition, as in *high* (‘a pleasantly intoxicated state’), *massive* (‘a group of people closely united by community and social interests’), *previous* (‘a criminal

record'), etc. Other atypical cases originate from prepositions: e.g., the adjectives *in* ('connected with drug suppliers'), *out* ('openly living as a homosexual') and *up* ('intoxicated by drugs, high'), and the verb *out* ('to declare publicly the homosexuality of someone').

3.3.6. Abbreviatory processes (clipping, blending, acronyming) may exhibit some anomalies in slang. For example, some slang clippings are formed from initialisms (e.g. *Beeb* < BBC 'British Broadcasting Corporation'), or from back-slang (e.g. *eeek* < *ecaf* 'face'). Other atypical slang abbreviations are *morph*, retained from the word *metamorphosis*, and *spac*, a contraction of *spastic*. And still others are clippings in which only the first letter is retained (e.g. *g* < *gram/grand*, *H* < *heroin*, *j* < *joint*, *K* < *kilogram/kilobyte/Ketamine*, *M* < *marijuana/morphine*, *O* < *opium*, *P* < *peyote*, *V* < *valium*).

A type of clipping that is idiosyncratic of slang concerns Cockney Rhyming Slang. Sometimes, the second element of Rhyming Slang is kept, and rhyme is preserved: this happens with *riddle* ('an act of urination') from *jimmy riddle* rhyming with *piddle*, and with *tart* ('woman') from *jam tart* rhyming with *sweetheart*. More commonly, however, the first element is retained: for example, the noun *boat* ('face') comes from *boat race*, *dig* ('a shave') from *dig the grave*, *gary* ('a tablet') from *Gary Ablet*, and *tom* ('jewellery') from *Tom Foolery*. In Rhyming Slang also adjectives and verbs may be clipped (e.g. *elephants* 'drunk' < *elephant's trunk*, *taters* 'cold' < *taters in the mould*, *bubble* 'to inform' < *bubble and squeak*, *rabbit* 'to talk' < *Rabbit and Pork*), with a consequent loss of rhyme and opacity of meaning.

Slang blends peculiarly follow non-prototypical patterns, as in partial blending: e.g. *gaydar* (< *gay* and *radar*), *dirty-mac* (< *dirty* and *mackintosh*) and *hoolivan* (< *hooligans* and *van*). Slang acronyms and initialisms are similarly uncommon: for instance, *24/7* (< *24 hours a day*, *7 days a week*), and such partial initialisms as *c-word* (< *cunt* and *word*), *f-off* (< *fuck off*), *special K* (< *special ketamine*) and *tommy k* (< *tomato ketchup*).

3.3.7. The process of inversion including back-slang and spoonerisms seems to be proper of slang. A few illustrative examples are back-slang *ecaf* (< *face*), *riah* (< *hair*) and *yob* (< *boy*), and the spoonerisms *Betty Swollox* (< *sweaty bollocks*), *fitsbaced* (< *shitfaced*) and *wafty crank* (< *crafty wank*) (cf. French *verlan*).

3.3.8. The process of reduplication includes both ablaut and rhyming reduplicatives in slang. Ablaut (apophonic or antiphonic) reduplicatives common-

ly exhibit vowel gradation, which is a systematic alternation of the stressed vowel: e.g., *big bag* ('heroin'), *crisscross* ('amphetamine'), *tic tac* ('PCP'), *wishy washy* ('feeble, stupid'), etc. The same alternation with extension of one of the members is in *jimjams* ('pyjamas'). Rhyming reduplicatives are combinations that normally exhibit rhyming constituents and apophony of the initial consonant, as in *boulder boulder* ('a brassiere'), *banky-panky* ('sexual misbehaviour'), *bubbly bubbly* ('a waterpipe used for smoking cannabis or marijuana'), *mani wanie* ('marijuana from Hawaii'), *micky ficky* ('a way to say mother fucker'), *roister doister* ('a cheery and boisterous person', 'an affectionate term of address'). Here either the first or the second constituent is meaningful (e.g. *boulder* in *boulder boulder* and *bubbly* in *bubbly bubbly*), while the other constituent (in these cases, *boulder* and *bubbly*) is felt as its playful partner whose primary function is to reproduce sounds creating rhyme and musicality.

When both bases are meaningful the resulting combinations are rhyming compounds, such as, for example, *bum-chum* ('a person with an apparently overly close friendship with another person'), *chick flick* ('a film, often romantic and with a happy ending, and typically enjoyed by females'), *chill pill* ('something that reduces anxiety and stress, and promotes relaxation'), *cop-shop* ('a police station'), *double-bubble* ('double time, overtime worked at a twice the usual rate of pay', 'cocaine'), *double-trouble* ('depressant'), *bells bells!* ('an exclamation of surprise'), *kick stick* ('marijuana cigarette'), *mellow yellow* ('LSD'), *pee wee* ('crack'), *pocket rocket* ('marijuana'), *rumpy-pumpy* ('sexual intercourse'), *snail-mail* ('post mail, contrasting with the much speedier e-mail'), etc.

As seen, slang departs from what is generally regarded as grammatical or predictable, and is likely to pioneer original word-formation processes which pave the way for further morphological research. This starts off a debate on whether slang has to be marginalized, as it actually was up till now, or should rather be appreciated for the opportunity it offers to enlarge the area of morphology and its parameters of analysis.

3.4. *Semantics*

The semantics of slang is a rather intricate topic involving such processes as semantic change and enrichment, and such aspects as obscurity and indeterminacy.

3.4.1. The vocabulary of slang changes by the extension of existing forms to new meanings. Sometimes these are simply more specific meanings of existing

words becoming part of in-group or technical vocabulary: e.g., *dope* or *stuff* are used in drug slang to indicate ‘drugs and narcotics’. Some are more obviously figurative in origin, like the negative term *poison* (‘alcohol’) or unmentionable *shit* (‘cannabis or marijuana’) alluding to the bad effects of alcohol and drugs.

Figurative language (i.e. metaphor, euphemism, irony, hyperbole, simile, etc.) plays an important part in the creation of slang vocabulary. Metaphoric extension is the cause of many new meanings, such as drug slang *bean* for ‘an ecstasy pill’, teenage slang *blood* used as a friendly form of address, or general slang *damage* meaning ‘a cost, an expense’. Euphemism is also frequent at associating novel meanings, for example, to the adjective *clean* (‘having no drugs, weapons or illicit goods’), or to the expressions *family jewels*, *private parts* and *unmentionables* referring to ‘the genitals’ and avoiding linguistic taboos. Irony (or even sarcasm) categorizes the tendency of slang words to evoke opposite meanings: *bad*, *dark*, *sick* can all mean ‘good’ when signalled with appropriate ironic intonation, and the exclamations *Big deal!*, *No shit*, *Sherlock!* and *Shock horror!* are used sarcastically to express ‘no great surprise’. Hyperbole (or overstatement) signals the tendency of slang words to amplify the quantity or quality of something or somebody: for example, college slang produces exaggerated expressions for ‘dancing a lot’ (e.g. *to dance your socks off*), ‘having a very good time’ (e.g. *to have a whale of a time*), ‘working very hard’ (e.g. *to work one’s guts out*), etc. (cf. Mattiello 2005). Most frequently, exaggerated figurative meaning is in the form of simile: for instance, *cheap as chips* means ‘extremely cheap’, *chuffed as nuts*, *happy as Larry* and *happy as pig in shit* stand for ‘extremely pleased’, *common as muck* for ‘very common’, and *hard as nails* for ‘very difficult’.

The influence of semantic areas on the productivity of slang vocabulary is also important, as these areas provide an established framework to shape the meaning of new words. In slang, the semantic area of ‘destruction’ sets the pattern for the proliferation of terms for being ‘drunk’ and for being ‘under the influence of drugs’ (e.g. *battered*, *blitzed*, *bombed out*, *hammered*, *mashed*, *slaughtered*, *smashed*, *stoned*, *trashed*, *wasted*, *well gone*, etc.). Most of them are used to refer to a high-degree of alcoholism or intoxication, and often allude to the physical or mental effects of overusing alcohol or drugs: for example, *legless* and *paralytic* (‘very drunk’) derive from an individual’s weakness after excessive drinking, while *brained* (‘extremely intoxicated’) suggests that a great quantity of a drug may affect an individual’s mental faculties.

Other prolific semantic areas of slang are ‘nobility’ and ‘criminality’, which set the pattern for new slang forms meaning ‘a homosexual’, but providing more information about either the referent or the user. For example,

queen and its derivatives (*curry queen*, *dinge queen*, *dizzy queen*, *drag queen*, *gym queen*, *pissy queen*, *prissy queen*, *rice queen*, *scat queen*, *size queen*) are all slang terms expressing slight nuances of meaning, such as the referent's preferences for different sexual partners, sexual habits and lifestyles, which are not included in the Standard English corresponding word. By contrast, the slang derogatory compounds *arse-bandit*, *bum bandit*, *butt pirate*, *shit-stabber* and *turd burglar* rather express the user's preventive attitude towards homosexuals, and so convey more negative connotations than neutral *homosexual* or *effeminate*.

Semantic change (i.e. the neo-semanticisms of slang) and lexical enrichment (i.e. the proliferation of slang synonyms) are therefore accompanied by semantic enrichment (i.e. the semantic expansion of some slang words as compared with standard language vocabulary). As I said when trying to distinguish slang from standard language, slang words often specify some shades of meaning that cannot be expressed in one standard word, without recourse to detailed periphrases or longer explanations. The above derivatives of *queen* are used to qualify different kinds of homosexuals: for instance, *curry queen* and *rice queen* designate a homosexual who prefers Asian partners, a *dinge queen* is rather attracted by black homosexuals (from slang *dinge* meaning 'black'), and a *size queen* by partners having large genitals, while *drag queen* refers to 'a male homosexual who dresses in women's clothes and affects extreme effeminate mannerisms', and *gym queen* to 'a muscular homosexual male, who obviously works out in a gym'.

3.4.2. As anticipated, semantic change and enrichment often lead to such consequences as semantic obscurity and indeterminacy. I refer to 'obscurity' as a factor of low transparency and consequent difficulty in penetrating meaning, and to 'indeterminacy' as blurred reference due to a lack of biuniqueness or even uniqueness in terms of referent identification. Both aspects affect many drug slang words, which formally correspond to standard words, but have a totally different meaning. An example is *coke*, which is the abbreviated standard name of the drink *Coca-cola*, and earlier of a type of coal, but in slang it refers to 'cocaine'. Other ambiguous drug names are *angel* ('PCP'), *animal* ('LSD'), *baby* ('marijuana'), *ball* ('crack'), *base* ('cocaine'), and numerous other secret or private items which in the ordinary language have a different meaning or reference.

Semantic obscurity and indeterminacy are also relevant concepts in many slang names related to the sexual world: for example, *banana* and *sausage* are used for 'the penis', *backdoor* and *box* for 'the anus', *bush* and *cabbage* for

‘the female genitals’, and *fruit* and *iron* for ‘a homosexual male’. The above are standard terms referring to food or common objects, but used with a new slang meaning for euphemistic reasons.

Obscurity and indeterminacy are also pertinent when considering terms such as *belt*, *brew*, *jar*, *piss*, or *sauce* to signify ‘an alcoholic drink’. The mechanisms which lay behind the association of new meanings to existing words are complex and heterogeneous, and range from metonymy (container for contained, as in *jar*), to metaphor (liquid substance such as *brew*, *piss* and *sauce*), and more obscure processes, as in the case of *belt*, derived associatively from another slang meaning (‘a hit’), and metaphorically alluding to something very unpleasant as drinking hangovers.

Obscurity and indeterminacy are finally pertinent when standard nouns such as *jellyfish*, *nut* or *pig* are referred to a person who correspondingly is ‘weak and ineffectual’, ‘insane and eccentric’, or ‘unpleasant and dirty’. Metaphor gives explanation for an attempt at associating a weak person with a spineless animal (*jellyfish*), or a dirty person with a muddy animal (*pig*), but the correlation of an insane person with a *nut* remains opaque. For obvious reasons, one tries to be less direct when insulting other people, and to use a semantically indeterminate slang word instead of explicit standard rudeness.

4. CONTEXTUALIZING SLANG

Slang can serve heterogeneous purposes and obtain different effects in accordance with both the speaker’s intentions and the relevant context. The speaker’s linguistic choices may vary in line with his purposes to either be cryptic and keep information secret, or be straight and more openly condemn, mock, or even sympathise with his hearer. Accordingly, the contexts of slang use may be situations requiring secrecy or establishing intimacy, arising jocularity or causing offensiveness, entailing sympathy or, in general, mitigating the seriousness of the dominant tone.

The following is an exploration of the different contexts of slang illustrating its primary purposes and effects. The contexts are parts of scenes selected from more or less recent English films (*Grease*, *Fever Pitch*, *Full Monty*, *Meet the parents*, *Notting Hill*, *Trainspotting*). The effects obtained by the use of slang words by English native speakers are, as we will see, varied, and range from secrecy and intimacy to jocularity and offensiveness, and to sympathy and mitigation.

4.1. Secrecy

The speakers in extracts (1) to (3), taken from *Trainspotting* (1996), are young boys who are familiar with the cryptic language of drugs. They have a more or less identical social background, middle class, and the lifestyle of drug addicts.

In extract (1) Swanney and Renton are discussing about having another dose of a drug:

- (1) SWANNEY: You'll need one more hit.
RENTON: No, I don't think so.
SWANNEY: To see you through the night that lies ahead.
RENTON (voice over): We called him the mother superior on account of the length of his habit. He knew all about it. On it, off it, he knew it all. Of course I'd have another shot: after all, I had work to do.

This short extract contains some specific slang words (*habit*, *hit*, *shot*) which should be given particular attention because of their semantic indeterminacy. Since they belong to the semantic area of 'drug', the meanings associated to them in the context of drug addiction depart from their standard denotational meanings. In drug slang, *habit* specifically refers to 'the habit of taking drugs', *hit* metaphorically refers to 'a dose or injection of a drug', and *shot* to 'an amount of cocaine'. The interactants obscure the word meanings by making metaphoric allusion to the bad effects of having a dose of a drug (*hit*, *shot*) or by mentioning a general item (*habit*) and meaning a specific one ('addiction to drug with physical dependence'). Undoubtedly, the topic involved (i.e. drug) requires secrecy and privacy, and here is the case. The audience of *Trainspotting* or the readers of the film script are invited to make reference to their world knowledge, and then are called to disambiguate the items through inferential processes.

Extract (2) is another boys' conversation about the same topic. Sick boy is persuading one of his friends, Renton, to buy some drug:

- (2) SICK BOY: There's a mate of Swanney's. Mikey Forrester – you know the guy. He's come into some gear. A lot of gear.
RENTON: How much?
SICK BOY: About four kilos. So he tells me. Got drunk in a pub down by the docks last week, where he met two Russian sailors. They're fucking carrying the stuff.

This extract illustrates the use of two slang words (*gear*, *stuff*) which refer to ‘illicit drugs’. Drugs and narcotics are often referred to by using such general terms as *dope*, *gear*, *junk* and *stuff*, which however convey a new specific slang sense in the drug traffics.

Extract (3) illustrates the use of *skag*, *grand* and *tough* within the drug underworld. Renton, Begbie and Sick boy are talking about a drug trade:

- (3) RENTON: So we’ve just come from Tommy’s funeral and you’re telling me about a skag deal?
BEGBIE: Yeah.
RENTON: What was your price?
SICK BOY: Four Grand.
RENTON: But you don’t have the money?
SICK BOY: We’re two thousand short.
RENTON: That’s tough.

skag, *grand* and *tough* are three clandestine in-group terms which drug dealers use to communicate privately. The slang nonce formation *skag*, despite its extensive use among drug dealers to mean ‘heroin’, is hardly understood by the authorities because of its semantic obscurity. The words *grand* (‘£ 1,000’) and *tough* (‘morally callous and/or commercially unscrupulous’) are likewise difficult at disambiguating meaning because of their semantic indeterminacy, as they correspond to Standard English terms having a different sense.

4.2. Intimacy

The speakers in extracts (4) to (6), from *Grease* (1978), are a group of high school boys going back to school (Rydell High) after their summer holidays. They belong to the same male gang called ‘T-birds’ and have more or less the same educational background.

In extract (4) the group leader, Danny Zuko, is telling his friend Sonny about an Australian girl he met at the beach last summer:

- (4) DANNY: I did meet this one chick, she was sort of cool.
SONNY: You mean she puts out?
DANNY: Come on, Sonny, is that all you ever think about?
SONNY: Friggin’ A!

Here the boys use teenage slang words and expressions that disclose their intimate relationship. For example, the word *chick* is commonly used among male teenagers to refer to 'a girl'. It is semantically indeterminate because it comes from the standard word *chick* 'a young bird', thus metaphorically alluding to the silly childish attitude of 'a young attractive female'. Another recurrent teenage expression is *cool*, which in slang is not used in its standard meaning of 'cold', but rather as a positive adjective to mean 'excellent, great' (*she was sort of cool*). The vulgar verb *to put out* meaning 'to readily agree to sex' and the exclamation *Friggin'*, which is a general intensifier replacing the cruder *Fucking*, are similar in-group expressions which Sonny uses to create a situation of intimacy and familiarity.

The extract below is another boys' conversation. Kenickie is telling some of his friends his intention to race at the Thunder Road with his car, when a few boys belonging to the rival gang, the 'Scorpions', arrive:

- (5) KENICKIE: I'm racing at the Thunder Road.
BOY: Thunder Road?
KENICKIE: Yeah, you wanna make something of it?
DOODY: Uh huh, I wanna see you make something of this heap.
KENICKIE: You cruisin' for a bruisin'.
BOY: What are the Scorpions doing here? This ain't their turf.
DANNY: Think they wanna rumble? Well, if they do, we're gonna be ready for it.

This extract illustrates the use of some different in-group slang expressions. One is the humorous term *heap*, referring to 'a thing that is old and dilapidated, like a vehicle', another is *turf* used among young boys for 'the area felt to belong to a person or gang', and still others are the reduplicative verbal phrase *cruisin' for a bruisin'* ('acting in a manner that will get one into trouble, or a fight') and the onomatopoeic verb *to rumble* meaning 'to discover, to find out'. All the above testify to the speakers' closeness and their need to find a common fresher vocabulary to share with their peers.

Forms like *wanna* for *want to* (*you wanna make, I wanna see, they wanna rumble*) and *gonna* for *going to* (*we're gonna be*) are examples of reduced simplified pronunciation (phonological reduction) which typically co-occur within teenage slang.

Extract (6) is a private exchange between Danny and Kenickie about their feelings:

- (6) KENICKIE: Hey Danny, what's up, do you still think about that chick?
DANNY: What are you, nuts?
KENICKIE: Well, I'm not! I just think...
DANNY: Go on, don't think so much.
KENICKIE: Well, that's cool, that's cool.

This extract shows an alternative slang sense of *cool*, which is here used to maintain that something is 'okay' (*that's cool, that's cool*). It also shows the slang use of the funny adjective *nuts*, which is much more intimate and friendly than standard *crazy* or *insane*.

4.3. Jocularit 

Extracts (7) to (9) are drawn from two different films (*Grease* 1978, *Fever Pitch* 1997). The speakers are close friends, either male (Doody, Sonny) or female (Marty, Betty, Jan; Jo, Sarah).

Extract (7) emphasizes the musicality of slang. Marty is sitting at a table of the canteen with the other girls (Betty, Jan) belonging to a gang called 'Pink Ladies'.

- (7) MARTY: Oh, double doo doo.
BETTY: Please.
JAN: What was that?
MARTY: One of my diamonds just fell in the macaroni!

This short extract shows how a children's slang expression like the repetition *doo doo* for 'faeces' may make a situation humorous and droll. Marty, who is a clumsy girl of the gang, reinforces the repetition with a consonance (*double doo doo*) to create jocularit  and appear playful to her fellow students.

Extract (8) lays emphasis on the slang use of a funny form of address (*cocky cow*). Jo and Sarah are running together in a park, but Jo is much slower than Sarah, who feels obliged to wait for her friend.

- (8) JO: You might have the decency to run.
SARAH: Then we wouldn't be doing it together.
JO: Cocky cow.
SARAH: It's just a fact. Look.

In this extract Jo has no insulting intentions, but she uses an apparently offensive way of address (*cocky cow*) to jocularly show her endearment and affection towards Sarah.

Normally, *cocky* is used as a slang adjective to mean ‘foolish, silly’, while *cow* is a derogatory and aggressive slang synonym for ‘a contemptible woman or a bitch’. However, when the expression *cocky cow* is pronounced with a proper ironic intonation as in (8), the general intention is to appear joking and to express friendliness.

In extract (9) Sonny addresses to Doody by using another humorous form of address (*fruit-cake*):

- (9) DOODY: Move over, slick.
SONNY: Hey, fruit-cake, you got it on backwards.

fruit-cake used in this way is ironic: it is apparently related to sweetness, but is actually intended to express annoyance and provocation. In slang, it generally denotes ‘a crazy or eccentric person’, thus, Sonny uses it as a mocking appellation for a friend.

4.4. *Offensiveness*

Extracts (10) to (12) are taken from *Full Monty* (1997). The speakers are a group of unemployed men who live in the Yorkshire area, at Sheffield, and use typical Northern British English expressions.

In extract (10), where Dave is looking for some food, the emphasis is on *tubby*:

- (10) DAVE: Hey... Lomper! Where's me rice?
LOMPER: Try the cylinder head... tubby.

tubby used by Lomper is a derivative from *tub of lard*, a derogatory slang expression referring to ‘a fat person’. It shows another effect of slang (offensiveness) produced by the speaker’s cynical derisive attitude and his sarcastic language.

Offensive vocabulary is often applied in slang to physically unattractive people, especially to focus on their physical defects, like fatness, shortness, bodily or facial ugliness, etc.

Extract (11) illustrates the use of another offensive way of address (*divvy*). Lomper wants to commit suicide and Dave ironically suggests him to get drowned:

- (11) DAVE: Drowning. Now there's a way to go.
LOMPER: I can't swim.
GAZ: You don't have to fuckin' swim, you divvy. That's the whole point. God, you're not very keen, are you?
LOMPER: Sorry.

divvy is a derogatory slang expression for 'an idiot', thus applied to mentally insane people, generally to insult them. With reference to idiot, objectionable, feeble or socially inept people, the number of offensive terms broadens in slang. The terms may be either metaphors, like *article* ('an objectionable person') and *jellyfish* ('a weak and ineffectual person'), or nonce formations whose origin is unknown, like *divvy* and *dork* used interchangeably for 'an idiot, a contemptible person'.

Extract (12) shows the use of a vulgar slang expression (*deaf twat*). Gaz is trying to convince his friend Dave to do a striptease in the manner of the famous Chippendale dancers, but Dave does not want to:

- (12) GAZ: Dave. Oi, you deaf twat!
DAVE: Oh, what d'you want now? I've told you, I'm finished with it.

twat is in fact a polysemous slang word, since it may be used to indicate either 'the female genitals' or 'a contemptible person, an idiot'. Hence, like many other coarse slang words (e.g. *arse* 'the buttocks; an objectionable person', *cunt* 'the female genitals; a despicable person', *dick* 'the penis; a contemptible person'), *twat* as a rule causes offence to the hearer. Here it is further stressed by the adjective *deaf*, which does not refer to a real deafness, but rather to Dave's careless disagreeing attitude.

4.5. Sympathy

Extracts (13) to (15) below are taken from *Notting Hill* (1999). The speakers are the bookshop owner William Thacker, his slovenly flatmate Spike, and his friends, typical middle-class Londoners.

Extract (13) is a conversation between the host Max and one of his guests, Tessa. Max offers some wine to Tessa, while the woman tries to cheer William up:

- (13) MAX: Wine?
TESSA: Oh, yes, please. Come on, Willie, let's get sloshed.
MAX: Red or white?
TESSA: Oh, red.

In this extract Tessa chooses the expression *let's get sloshed* to express her understanding and tenderness towards William and exhort him to forget anything by 'getting drunk'. As said before (§ 3.4.1.), slang owns numerous adjectives defining drunk people: e.g., *airlocked, banjaxed, banjo'd, bevved up, bladdered, bloated, bobbed, elephants, fubared, gatted, lagered (up), lagged/laggered, languered, lashed up, leathered, plastered, polaxed, ratted, ripped, rubbered, shit-faced, sloshed, sizzled, steamboats, steaming, stewed, stinking, tanked up, tight, trousered, twatfaced, wellied*. Some of them may be used with an endearing aim, and, depending on the situation, to show sympathy to the hearer.

Another situation entailing sympathy is in (14), where Bernie admits to be a real incompetent:

- (14) BERNIE: Yeah, well, um, you know, it seems they're... er, shifting the whole outfit much more towards the emerging markets. Um, and of course... well I was a total crap, so...
TONY: A toast to Bernie... the worst stockbroker in the whole world.

The offensive slang term *crap* is here used by Bernie to arouse the pity and compassion of his friends (cf. Stenström 1999). The term is also emphasized by the adjective *total*, contributing to make the self-accuse stronger.

In (15), where Spike and William are talking about an American film star with whom William has fallen in love, the attention focuses on *innit* and *to slip someone one*:

- (15) SPIKE: I don't want to interfere or nothing... but she's just split up from her boyfriend. That's right, innit?
WILLIAM: Maybe.
SPIKE: And she's in your house.
WILLIAM: Yes?
SPIKE: And you get on very well.

WILLIAM: Yes.

SPIKE: Well, isn't this perhaps a nice opportunity to... slip her one?

WILLIAM: Spike, for God's sake. She's in trouble. Just get a grip.

inmit is an assimilated question tag (from *isn't it*) frequently used among close friends, and particularly common among younger speakers as an invariant marker, since it can be tagged on to any statement, regardless of the preceding verb or verb form (Stenström 1997).

Another typically male slang expression is *to slip someone one*, which is used by Spike to refer to the act of fornication in a colourful way, thus trying to make the situation amusing, and to establish an intimate sympathetic relationship with his friend.

4.6. Mitigation

Extracts (16) to (18) below are taken from *Meet the parents* (2000). The speakers are an engaged couple, Greg and Pam, and Pam's father Jack.

In extract (16) Greg has just finished his shift at the hospital and meets his girlfriend Pam:

(16) GREG: Oh, shoot, I forgot to change my shoes.

PAM: That's okay. You don't have to change. You know I can't resist a man in nurse's shoes.

Here Greg uses the euphemistic slang expression *shoot* instead of the taboo standard word *shit* to mitigate his exclamation. In general, there is a widespread use of euphemisms and code words in slang. Some of them are phonetically similar to the taboo words (e.g. *shoot* for *shit*, *chuff* for *fuck*, *heck* for *hell*), others are assimilations of blasphemous expressions (*Blimey*, *Cor Blimey*, *Gawd Blimey* and *Gor Blimey* for *God Blind me*), or their abbreviations, like *Jeez* for *Jesus* (cf. Apte 1998).

In extract (17) Greg is arguing with Jack about the drain, and trying to accuse Jinxy, the family cat, of its blockage:

(17) GREG: I saw little Jinxy come in last night and, um, he took a little, squatted, relieved himself.

JACK: Jinx knows not to use that toilet. And even if he did, he'd never flush it.
GREG: What does it matter?
JACK: The matter, Greg R.N., is that when this toilet is flushed, it runs. And when you have a septic tank that's nearly full and a toilet... that's been running all night, then you could have a helluva problem.

Here Greg prefers to use the slang verb *to squat* in the place of the corresponding standard verb *to defecate*, and Jack likewise answers by using the expression *septic tank*, which is a Rhyming Slang on *yank* ('an act of masturbation'). The conversation is on the whole euphemistic because the interactants avoid using direct language and adopt more implicit forms of speech.

In extract (18) Greg is politely invited not to sleep with his fiancé Pam in her parents' house:

(18) JACK: I'm a realist, I understand it's the twenty-first century and you've probably had... premarital relations with my daughter, but under our roof it's my way or the Long Island Expressway. Is that understood?
GREG: Uh, of course, yeah.
JACK: Good. Keep your snake in its cage for seventy-two hours.
GREG: Okay.

snake is an abbreviation from *one-eyed trouser-snake*, a slang jocular way of referring to the male sexual organ. It is mainly used by Jack to mitigate his request, to soften the seriousness of the dominant tone, and to rather assume a more familiar tone.

5. LEARNING AND TEACHING SLANG

The foreign language that is taught at school and, afterwards, at University, is usually a neutral language referring to an abstract standard model and having merely educational goals. Yet, young people, and also students of English, often come across less neutral uses of the language, including slang, such as are found in rap song lyrics, film scripts and interviews to pop stars or football players.

The vocabulary of slang is neither neutral standard language nor the formal vocabulary of knowledge and erudition normally heard within the academic system. It is rather the state-of-the-art vocabulary which people use in

familiar relaxed conversations, in such contexts as home, pub, sport, music, or general free time, in which educated formal registers would be situationally inappropriate and unconventional language is instead privileged.

All of us nowadays use slang words and expressions, but many people, including teachers, feel them to be inappropriate, at least in certain situations, because of their high informality and, sometimes, derogatory character. Other people probably object to slang expressions simply because they are new and bizarre. And yet other people dislike specific slang items because they happen to be associated with a social group of which they are not members. However, the pervasiveness and expressiveness of slang seem to be rather convincing motivations for teaching it, especially to students of modern languages.

Foreign language undergraduates should acquire an extensive knowledge of the language they are specializing in, which means – among other things – becoming familiar with both its neutral stylistic level and its different registers, varieties, and levels of speech. Slang is therefore important in foreign language learning, and students must be well aware of it: first, a passive knowledge of slang is often vital for understanding conversations in the media and real situations and may allow learners to identify people's origin and their belonging to a social group or place; second, some active knowledge of it will also allow learners to act in everyday life, to socialize and to create intimacy with their peers; third, some aspects of slang will make the learners' speech vivid, colourful and interesting, and will get them closer to the expressive trends and styles of native speakers.

All of this is important in foreign language learning and teaching, because mastering a language is not only acquiring its vocabulary and grammar, but also the cultural and social world of its speakers¹³.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This exploration of slang has demonstrated its pervasiveness across standard and non-standard language. We have seen how ephemeral slang can actually

¹³ Besides being familiar with slang – which is above all a lexical matter – a good knowledge of levels of speech and registers includes some familiarity with a morphosyntax that often departs from that of Standard English (but this aspect goes beyond our interests here).

be accepted and rapidly become part of standard language. We have also seen how it can share some characteristics with such diastatic varieties as jargon and cant, having often the functions to create social identity and to communicate secretly, or with such diatopic varieties as dialect, vernacular and accent, being often peculiar of a geographic area and verbal communication.

This exploration has also demonstrated the expressiveness and innovativeness of slang vocabulary, which is typical of young or fashionable people contributing to its growth and expansion. In particular, it has illustrated some original word-formation processes of slang and some novel or extra senses which it can take on when used by specific subgroups or subcultures in society.

The study of actual data in their contexts of use has shown that slang allows linguistic strategies serving heterogeneous purposes and obtaining different, even divergent effects. The main effects of slang range from secrecy and intimacy to jocularity and offensiveness, and to sympathy and mitigation as well. For example, some in-group slang words are used to hide secret information from people in authority (e.g. *habit, hit, shot*) or to establish intimacy with the other group members (e.g. *chick, cool, nuts*). Other general slang expressions are used in jest to mock other people (e.g. *cocky cow, fruit-cake*), but may become offensive when used with added sarcastic intonation and in situations of contrast or conflict (e.g. *deaf twat, tub of lard*). Still other slang expressions are used to show one's sympathy (e.g. *let's get sloshed*) or to arouse other people's pity (e.g. *I was a total crap*), and yet others are used to avoid pronouncing social taboos (*shoot, chuff, beck*) or, in general, to soften the seriousness of the dominant tone (*septic tank, one-eyed trouser-snake*).

Such richness on a pragmatic level makes slang a suitable subject in foreign language teaching: it is in fact not only a vital way of speaking and an original language constituent serving informal situations, but it may also be used as an effective teaching instrument to make learners active participants in the learning process, and to make them aware of the evolution of the language, since much slang is still waiting for acceptance and recognition as standard language.

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