

A Sociolinguistics Analysis of Slang in America

Jingzi Zhang

Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710129, China

Keywords: American slang, social function, linguistic feature

Abstract: Slang, as a predominant form of informal language, is widely used in American society for decades. Americans use slang not only for daily communication and spread of information, but also for many social functions, like to create relaxing communication atmosphere, to seek self-identity, to enhance cohesion and to cater people's need for innovate expression. This paper will start with the emergence and development of American slang, which contain the historical and cultural background in America. Then the paper will analyze the linguistic and rhetorical characteristics of American slang from different aspects, and discuss the social functions of American slang. By considering the linguistic phenomenon of slang using under the social situation in America, this paper will give a basic analysis of slang using in America from the perspective of sociolinguistics.

1. Introduction

According to Cambridge dictionary, slang is very informal language that is usually spoken rather than written, used especially by particular groups of people. Slang is an important part in American society, all walks of life use slang frequently, especially the young generation. According to the study by Wentworth and Flexner (1967), the average American knows about 10,000 to 20,000 words, and 2,000 of which are slang, accounting for one-tenth of the total [1]. Different groups use slang for various purposes. Grandparents intend to use it for smooth communication with their grandchildren; particular group feel comfortable using slang within their social circles; adolescents use slang to catch up with the trend. Thus as a language phenomenon, slang using has transmitted to the social life in each domain. The combination of the linguistic analysis of slang and the sociological analysis can help people get a deeper understanding of the unique linguistic form used in American.

This paper will discuss the emergence and development of slang in the first part, then will analyse the characteristics of slang from linguistics and rhetoric. The last part will analyse the social function of slang using.

2. Emergence and Development of Slang

2.1. The Emergence of Slang

American slang originated from the Second World War, during which slang were just jargon used by underclass, such as drugster, criminal and tramp. In criminal's slang, cop means policemen; jack means to steal; ice means to kill. Criminal in America used the slang "street" to indicate society outside of prison, so conditional release was also called as "street-time". There were many drug slang

to imply those narcotics, Heroin can be called as Black Tar, H, Mud, Dragon, Skunk, Thunder, Big H, Smack, and Dope. Those slang users used these jargon to protect their secret social circle and they didn't want others to understand. The slang used by subcultures of criminals and drug users was very specific, and many of the words are actually argot or jargon.

Because of the initial users of slang were unwelcome in society, American high society treated slang with contempt [2]. Webster's Dictionary defined slang as a "low level, vulgar and meaningless" language form in 1928. However, the definition has changed in 21 century. It is defined as "an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech". The attitude toward slang can be reflected on the definition of it.

2.2. The Development of Slang

With the growth of the sub-cultural group, slang using is more common in America. Slang emanates from conflicts in values, sometimes superficial, often fundamental. When an individual applies language in a new way to express hostility, ridicule, or contempt, he may be creating slang.

Under this circumstance, certain races gradually developed their own slang. Black American slang is a typical example. They used slang like sick, Poppin', Yeet to express their praise and excitement. They also developed many oral language like I'm down (I can join you/I will do it), I can't even! (I can't tolerate that anymore!), know what I'm sayin'? (Do you understand what I'm saying?) etc.

Apart from Afro-American, certain social groups are also creating their own slang. American college students, middle school students and teenagers in society are the biggest "creators" and "consumers" of slang. Young people are full of passion, and slang helps them fully express their feelings, so that their words are vivid and fashion. In American youth's education, their schools and families pay special attention to developing their personality, cultivating their thinking ability and creativity, self-control and sense of responsibility. Thus their passion to pursue uniqueness stimulated the development of slang, and using slang can also strengthen their identity. For example, they describe close roomie as froomie (friend+roomie); they say someone or something excellent as GOAT (abbreviation for "greatest of all time"); when they say "Goals!", it means they aspire to be close to the thing they use that word for. Slang used by young generation are varied and quickly developing.

Moreover, Internet catalyzes the forms and content of slang. Because of the anonymity, diversity and virtuality of Internet, people's created more slang used in Internet. There are many abbreviations for the brief communication: NSN (Not So Nice), DBA (Don't Bother Asking), TLTR (Too Long To Read), LOL (Laugh Out Loud). People use these abbreviations to exchange thought quickly, which is common in the Internet chat. Now American society is still full of cultural exchange and collision, so the slang in America develop quickly in this age.

3. Characteristics of American Slang

3.1. Linguistics Features

3.1.1. Voice

Many American slang utilize euphony to make slang vivid, rhythmic and easy to say and remember (Li Qun, 2004) [3]. Rhyme is frequently used to achieve the purpose of humor and strong rhythm. There are many examples in American slang: hobnob (socialize with people of an artificially higher status); kiss ass (win someone's approval by being servile); chit-chat (chat); dilly-dally (waste time); cop-shop (police office); razzle-dazzle (razzle). People use these rhythmic slang to communicate

more breezily and smoothly. Reduplicated word used in slang can also achieve the purpose of euphony, such as blah-blah (nagging), dum-dum (idiot), no-no (taboo).

3.1.2. Vocabulary

Vocabulary used in American slang are vivid, humorous and brief. When saying slang, people often have a sense of tableau. When saying coach-potato, people can imagine a lazy and fat person lying on sofa; When saying face lace, people can easily think of wrinkle; When saying red-eye flight, people will recall their dozy night flight; When saying cold-fish, someone indifferent will emerge in mind. Slang always use simple and vivid words to fully express the meaning and emotion.

About the word formation, many American slang are acronym [4]. Sometimes the acronym can Achieve multiple effects. For example, people know that NATO is acronym of North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but American gave new meaning to NATO, which is “No Action, Talk Only”. This creation of slang was satire to the hypocrisy of North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Moreover, Organization named “Group against Smoker’s Pollution” was abbreviated as GASP, which carries the meaning of the word “gasp” itself. This slang vividly shows the pollution of smoke is so severe that people have to “gasp”.

3.2. Rhetorical Features

3.2.1. Metaphor

The use of metaphors makes American slang lively and smart, which is an important reason for its enduring popularity in American society. The use of metaphors in slang also conforms to the liberal and open character of Americans. In American slang, for example, “a pie in the sky” means an unrealistic plan; “to be over the hill” means someone has passed the gold age; “to be down on all fours” means the depression of economy or people; “There are plenty of other fish in the sea” means full of opportunities. Using metaphor can make slang more interesting and easy to understand [5], it can create a relaxed communication atmosphere at the same time.

3.2.2. Exaggeration

Exaggeration is frequently used in slang to fully express speaker’s meaning and emotion. Examples of exaggeration in slang can be seen in following examples. “Time-killer” use the vivid description to infer something to spend time on; “down to earth” is used to describe a person who humble enough that can even “down to earth”; “I can’t feel my face” also use exaggeration to express someone is shameful or embarrassed. These expression are full of exaggeration and can vivify the conversation.

3.2.3. Euphemism

Euphemism uses euphemistic and roundabout ways of expression to replace direct expression. A variety of euphemisms are often used in slang to refer to sensitive, private topics that people do not want to talk directly. The use of this kind of slang can ease the tone of communication, eliminate the awkwardness of both parties, and promote the progress of the conversation [6]. For example, there are many slang to indicate death, like “took their last breath”, “Shuffled off this mortal coil”, “Gave up the ghost”, “Six feet under”. Euphemism can also be used to avoid being gross. People tend to use slang like “restroom”, “to go to the ladies’ room”, “to powder one’s nose (typically for women)”, “to go to the men’s room” to replace “go to the toilet”. Euphemism is an important function of slang.

4. Social Function of Slang

4.1. Create an Intimate, Easygoing Atmosphere for Conversation

Slang is the informal register in linguistics, and the use of slang can warm the conversation and generate a sense of intimacy between the two parties [7]. Nowadays, celebrities and politicians in the United States also like to use slang to show their approachable. For example, blacks living in New York's Hawham district are generally wary of educated black lawyers or doctors among them. They think that those educated people are in a better social position and no longer have much in common with themselves. Therefore, those lawyer will not treat them genuinely. But it once happened that a black lawyer met an normal black man in the office, whose social status was much lower than the lawyer. As soon as they met, the lawyer greeted the man with authentic black English and slang, "Hey baby. How you doing baby?" The other side immediately felt that the lawyer was approachable and felt relaxed, and trusted him with the case.

4.2. Enhance the Cohesion

Slang is often used in a specific social circle, and members of the social circle can convey information and express ideas within the group with their own unique slang, so as to strengthen the relationship between individuals and the group. Slang can help consolidate and strengthen partnerships among society and group members. Group members tend to use representative language patterns, including slang, which outsiders find obscure but that they themselves find interesting [8].

A foreigner who comes to the United States and speaks standard American English may not feel like he really fits in. But if the person has mastered the slang and used it correctly, the locals may feel more connected, and himself may feel more connected to American culture. Some special slang words are so obviously exclusive that they are consciously shrouded in mystery and become codes for insiders. They use the ability to speak certain slang to test whether the other person is "one of their own" or "a fake." Therefore, the use of slang is a good way to unite the group.

4.3. Satisfy People'S Pursuit of Freshness and Uniqueness

One of the remarkable characteristics of Americans is the freedom and openness, the pursuit of individuality. With the pace of life speeds up, people's psychological pressure is increasing. In order to get rid of the dreary and monotonous life, people pursue novelty and vulgarity, break the boring routine and cliché, create a witty and humorous atmosphere, and seek to cultivate new psychological stimulation and freshness, thus they create a lot of slang [9]. The pursuit of novel expression is most common among American teenagers, who often like to use language to advertise their uniqueness. Hippie Sayings is an example, they used some specific words and quotes like "let your freak flag fly" to show off their individuality.

5. Conclusion

The use and development of language is closely related to society. The reason why slang can rise and be widely used in the United States has a lot to do with the historical background of the United States, the wide range of subcultural circles and the characteristics of Americans [10]. The analysis of the linguistic characteristics of American slang and the discussion of its social functions can deepen the understanding of this linguistic phenomenon. As language learners, a deep understanding of the connotation, scope of use and social function of slang can help us better understand American society and culture. The study of linguistics is not single. It combines linguistics with social background to

study the motivation behind language more comprehensively and systematically, and promote cross-cultural communication at the same time.

References

- [1] Jinmei Liu, "The Sociocultural Psychology of American Slang", *Journal of Hubei University for Nationalities*, vol.23, pp. 104-106, 2005.
- [2] Jiwen Li. "Analysis on the Characteristics of American Slang and the Reasons for the Prevalence". *Journal of Suzhou Education Institute*, vol. 20, no. 5, pp. 56-57, 2017.
- [3] Qun Li. "The Humor and Liberalization of American Slang". *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 107-110, 2005.
- [4] González, F. *Abbreviations and American slang*. *English Today*, 8 (3), 39-44, 1992.
- [5] Han Cui, Fengli Hua, et al. "The Rhetoric and Translation of American Slang". *Modern Communication*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 89, 2016.
- [6] Xiongyong Cheng. "A New Study on the Characteristics of Modern American Slang from the perspective of Sociolinguistics". *Foreign Languages Research*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 66-69, 2015.
- [7] Li Wang. "The Origination and Social Function of American Slang". *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Engineering*, vol. 26, no. 8, pp. 156-158, 2006.
- [8] Yanchun Zhou, Yanhong Fan. "A Sociolinguistic Study of American Slang". *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 3, no. 12, No. 12, pp. 2209-2213, 2013.
- [9] Jiaying Hu. "Basic Features and Social Functions of American Slang". *Academic Exchange*, vol. 18, no. 8, pp. 154-156, 2003.
- [10] Jiulin Guo. "Slang: A mirror of American subcultures". *Journal of Dalian University for Nationalities*, vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 59-64, 2001.