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## Catch Me If You Can! – Slang as a Social Phenomenon and the Issue of Capturing It in Dictionaries

Summary

The article discusses slang language from two perspectives. The author first looks at how slang functions in society, that is, at its very important role of either including or excluding an individual from their closest social environment. As an example of the role that slang plays in various social networks, the author discusses the social networks of adolescents. Besides the more sociologically oriented aspects of slang language, the article also pays attention to a linguistic phenomenon frequently occurring in slang, that is, relexicalization of lexical items. And since slang language, despite what its creators and users might wish, cannot be entirely cut off from the rest of language, the article places slang into the wider scope of language. Further on, the article deals with how slang and offensive expressions are dealt with in dictionaries, be they monolingual or bilingual. Finally, a short discussion of the dictionary treatment of a sample selection from slang and offensive expressions follows, based on a previous longer analysis of lexical items of this type carried out by the author.

**Key words:** slang, social networks, relexicalization, dictionary treatment, labelling

## Ujemi me, če moreš! – sleng kot družbeni pojav in problematika obravnave slenga v slovarjih

Povzetek

Prispevek obravnava sleng iz dveh zornih kotov. Avtorica najprej opiše, kako sleng deluje v okviru družbe. Opisana je izjemno pomembna vloga, ki jo igra sleng – raba slenga lahko posameznika namreč obdrži v njegovem najožjem družbenem okolju, ali pa, na primer ob neustrezni rabi, povzroči, da je posameznik iz svoje družbene mreže izločen. Kot primer vloge, ki jo ima sleng v različnih družbenih mrežah, se avtorica posveti družbenim mrežam adolescentov. Poleg bolj sociološko usmerjenih vidikov slenga, je v članku opisana tudi releksikalizacija, jezikovni pojav, ki je v slengu pogosto prisoten. In ker sleng – ne glede na to, kaj bi si njegovi ustvarjalci in uporabniki morda želeli – ne more biti povsem ločen od ostalih ravni v jeziku, članek umesti sleng v širši, splošnejši okvir jezika. V nadaljevanju beremo, kako so slengovski in žaljivi izrazi obravnavani v slovarjih, tako enojezičnih kot dvojezičnih. Na koncu pa avtorica povzame ugotovitve, do katerih je prišla na podlagi poprejšnje daljše analize slovarske obravnave naključnega izbora slengovskih in žaljivih izrazov.

**Ključne besede:** sleng, družbene mreže, releksikalizacija, slovarska obravnava, raba kvalifikatorjev

# Catch Me If You Can! – Slang as a Social Phenomenon and the Issue of Capturing It in Dictionaries

## 1. Introduction

The following article deals with a linguistic phenomenon occurring in all languages, namely slang as well as with the phenomenon of social networks. Social networks, as we shall see, are exactly that form of social groups which provides the necessary conditions for the development of slang language. Even though social networks exist on all levels of society, I focus only on an example of a social network in the article, that is, on teenage social networks.

Like other levels of language, slang vocabulary receives much attention from lexicologists and lexicographers. It is, however, far from easy to capture slang and confine it to a dictionary, since one of its basic characteristics is its ever-changing nature. While compiling a dictionary of slang, we are constantly faced with the danger that the slang vocabulary we include in the dictionary and try to bring close to the dictionary user will already fall out of use by the time our dictionary (especially if published in book form) sees the light of day.

Apart from specialized dictionaries of slang, slang vocabulary also finds its place in general monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, though of course in a much narrower scope than in specialized dictionaries. The article discusses the difficulties occurring predominantly in the labelling of slang and offensive expressions in general monolingual (learners') dictionaries and in finding suitable translation equivalents in Slovene. I include some conclusions which were arrived at in the course of a longer analysis of a sample selection of slang and offensive expressions.

## 2. Social networks

A fact which was discussed among others by the father of sociolinguistics, William Labov, is that people behave differently if they talk to a perfect stranger than if they have a conversation with someone they are better acquainted with. The effect a social group has on an individual was also discussed by J. K. Chambers in his work *Sociolinguistic Theory: Linguistic Variation and Its Social Significance*. Chambers (2009, 74–86) points out that even though social class is one of the primary social variables in sociolinguistics, linguists are aware that some social groups belong to the same social class but are nevertheless linguistically different. In tightly-structured, relatively homogenous social clusters or *social networks*, such as neighbourhoods or parishes, individuals nevertheless stand apart if we compare their patterns of linguistic variation. The social function of networks can be essentially seen as “a norm-enforcement mechanism” – if a person is loyal to a given network, they will conform to the collective values of the network.

Speaking in terms of sociolinguistics, we can find a parallel to the compliance with a network's 'rules' if we realize that people adapt their linguistic behaviour to that of their environment. The closer an individual's ties within a network are, the more their language will approach the “localized vernacular norms”. Just as an individual's connection with a network may be stronger or weaker, their level of conforming to the local language may vary and the two phenomena

are definitely connected with each other. Studies of social networks consistently come to the conclusion that those individuals who are the most integrated into a network, that is, its core members, are also the ones who use local linguistic variants most often. This conclusion is not surprising, but is the best proof that factors below the level of such variables as social class, age, sex and region are nevertheless important in determining one's speech.

In the work *Language and Society*, William Downes (1998, 223–29; 255, 256) also discusses the topic of social networks. Speakers of vernacular languages who have strong network bonds allow the introduction of a new linguistic element into their language only when this element is not related to an essential characteristic of their network. This means that, as far as a given trait is concerned (the literature I consulted discusses mainly linguistic variables on the level of the pronunciation of sounds such as, for example, (ng), (th), (r), (V), and (A)), the link between the language and the network has to be weakened. If that is the case, a new characteristic can slip through the net of norms oriented towards solidarity and conservatism, since speakers do not connect it with loyalty to the group.

Downes also discusses a specific type of social networks, that is, social networks among teenagers. Peer-groups of young people exert immense normative pressure on their members and are therefore less sensitive to the general norms of society, transmitted by the institutions of the adults and the outside world, for example, schools.

The speech of children and teenagers is closer to the speech of their peers than to that of their parents. As far as the mechanisms of the acquisition of the vernacular language are concerned, linguists are not uniform in their opinion; Labov (1972, summarized in Downes 1998, 225), for example, distinguishes three stages. At the first stage, between two to three years of age, a child gets his or her first experience with speech production. At this stage, the relevant social network is represented by the child's closest family members. At the second stage, between the ages of four and thirteen, the basic vernacular language is created. The most important normative pressure at this stage comes from the social network of peers. However, hypercorrection shows us that the speech of parents nevertheless still serves as a model. As a possible example of this 'battle' between the parents' and peers' influences, I summarize a part of a conversation taking place between two teenage girls on a Ljubljana bus. One of them, explaining her plans for the day to the other, said: "Veš, pol grem pa še z *mami* v trgovino... no, mislm, z *matko*." The fact that she first described her mother by using an expression used in general informal language (*mami*), but then 'corrected' herself to the more slangy expression (*matka*) is probably a reflection of the basic influence of parents being replaced by the more invasive influence of the speaker's peer-group. At the third stage, between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, an individual acquires the norms of the broader community and, after the age of sixteen, the production of prestige (i.e. standard) forms begins. The networks that influence an individual at this stage are also very important for the enforcement of norms, but, in general, their structure is less closely-knit than with teenage peer-groups.

### 3. The language of teenage peer-groups

*Communities differ in the extent to which they stigmatize the newer forms of language, but I have never yet met anyone who greeted them with applause. Some older citizens welcome the new music*

and dances, the new electronic devices and computers. But no one has ever been heard to say, "It's wonderful the way young people talk today. It's so much better than the way we talked when I was a kid." (Labov 2001, 6)

As was already explained, the period of adolescence, of teenage years, is connected with close relationships with peers and gradual separation from the parents' influence. J.K. Chambers (2009, 182–4) states that the passage from childhood to adulthood is often, almost typically, accompanied by extremism. On the surface, rebellion against old norms takes on obvious outer signs, for example, vividly coloured hair, piercing, torn jeans. Also linguistically the rebellion is marked through the use of distinctive slang<sup>1</sup> vocabulary. Expressions which are 'in' serve as markers of group membership. However, since the majority of expressions quickly become dated, those individuals who keep using them are easily labelled as outsiders not belonging to the group. Among expressions which come to mind as dated in Slovene (teenage) slang are *džazno*, *špon(sko)*, *mega*. Unlike these expressions, there are *ful* and *kul*, which have become well-integrated into Slovene informal language and cannot be said to serve as markers of group membership anymore.

In order to serve their social purpose, the outer signs must fulfil two requirements. First, elders have to perceive them as frivolous and extravagant (or, as teenagers would say, they have to be *far out*, *crazy*, *the max*. In Slovene, we could say they have to be *odštekan*, *nori*, *super*.) As far as using slang language as an outer sign of rebellion is concerned, it is essential that elders not have access to the 'inner circle', that they do not understand teenage slang expressions. If the markers gain general acceptance, teenagers have no other choice than to change their style and their vocabulary. People in authority are typically regarded with suspicion and teenage slang abounds in derisory terms for them. Chambers lists for example, *pigs* for the police and *peeps* for parents, which have parallel expressions in Slovene, such as, *kapsi* (for the police), *tastari* (for parents) and we can also add *prfoksi* as a term for teachers.

Second, it is essential that the outer signs be approved of and shared by other teenagers. Teenage slang always has many terms for peers who do not conform (among others, Chambers lists *dork*, *nerd* and *jerk*. Slovene equivalents used in this context of not conforming could be *bednik*, *luzer* and *papak*). Adolescents are typically preoccupied by only a few narrow areas, one of them being school and relationships with schoolmates. And since it is not 'cool' to be seen as a hard-working student, the vocabulary of teenagers is rich in expressions for those learners who work hard and cooperate. Chambers lists expressions such as *suck-holes* and *brown nosers*, obviously having to do with such learners being liked by teachers (or at least wanting to be liked). He lists also expressions for notably gifted learners, who get called such names as *brainiacs* or *cram-artists*. Slovene teenage slang does not lag behind in this field – the successful learners are described as *piflar* or *dudlar*. I have also heard the expression *gik* being used, obviously coming from the English word *geek*.

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster OnLine dictionary defines *slang* as 'language peculiar to a particular group as a: argot (an often more or less secret vocabulary and idiom peculiar to a particular group) and b: jargon (the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group)'. The second part of the definition of *slang* describes it as 'an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech'.

Another area which commonly occupies adolescents is various ways of getting intoxicated. Therefore it is not surprising that we find a number of slang expressions also in this field. Chambers mentions, for example, being *baked*, *blasted* or *stoned*. In Slovene, we can come across terms such as *zadet*, *pribit*, *počen* and *nabasan*, which come about as a consequence of using for example, *alko* (for alcohol), *pir* (for beer), *gandža* or *džoint* (for marihuana) and *čik* (for cigarette).<sup>2</sup>

Music, in all its forms, is very much part of the life of adolescents, so much so that different styles of music give rise to entire subcultures. These subcultures predictably also have their own slang languages, the main aim of which is to separate the insiders from the outsiders. However, important as it may seem to teenagers at the time, the main feature of teenage style, including teenage slang, is its being relatively short-lived. More important than fashion itself is the fact that one follows fashion. As Chambers observes, adolescent networks, unlike the more stable social networks (neighbourhoods, parishes), require active, on-going involvement. The membership is not guaranteed, in order to keep it, one constantly has to be up-to-date.

An analysis of the field of teenage slang and adolescent social networks was carried out by Tina Cvijanović as part of her work for her Master's degree. In the thesis titled *Slengizmi v jeziku mladostnikov* (Slang expressions in the language of adolescents), she analysed the speech of adolescents. She taped it under different circumstances, that is, in a guided conversation, and in spontaneous conversation when the teenagers did not know they were being recorded. Her goal was to see when adolescents are most authentic in their speech.

It turned out that when a teenager's speech is most authentic depends to a large extent on each individual situation. If they are talking to a group of peers they do not know well, or are a passive member in the group, adolescents, wanting to be noticed, to gain recognition or to shock, will overdo the use of slang expressions and especially vulgar expression. In that case, one cannot claim their speech is authentic. After having talked to a number of adolescents, Cvijanović (2007, 70) came to the conclusion that teenagers are most relaxed and authentic when they are talking to their best friends. In such situations, they do not have to try to make a special impression. Cvijanović also writes that the majority of adolescents found the reason for their relaxedness in talking to their best friend also in the fact that their friend knows them so well that he or she would know if they were 'faking it' with unusual, forced expressions. Cvijanović's work shows that the general sociolinguistic findings also hold true for Slovene teenagers. The adolescent social networks have a powerful normative influence upon their members – friends would know when one among them is pretending or trying too hard by using unusual expressions; at the same time these networks are removed from people in authority – when talking to parents and especially when talking to teachers, teenagers do not use their typical slang language to the extent they would otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> A useful source of typical contexts in which the above Slovene expressions are used is the Fida PLUS corpus. It provides material collected from newspapers, magazines, prose and spoken material. Here I list only a short selection of example sentences entered in the Fida PLUS for some of the above expressions: *Kapsi čekirajo predvsem na velikih partijih, in včasih tudi' kej najdejo. Sej bi pršu, pa me tastari niso pustl. Kr neki najedajo. Če ne sicer, se lahko vsaj pri športni vzgoji do sitega norčuješ iz kakega slabotnega piflarja ali počasne špeglaste bunke, kot sem bila jaz. Šofer je bil tako pribit, da je kinkal za volanom, niti ni vedel, kaj se dogaja. Saj alko itak ni problem, jutri bom že trezen, [...].*

## 4. Relexicalization as a characteristic of slang language

Another Slovene author who deals with the field of slang or, as he terms it, the excessive sociolect, is Andrej E. Skubic. In his work titled *Obrazi jezika*, he says that the fact that slang expresses an individual's membership in a group does not make slang that much different from all other identifying types of language. All language which socializes an individual into a specific social group has the characteristic of expressing group membership – however, when people use slang language, the membership in a particular group is *stressed*, which is one of the key reasons for the existence of slang in the first place.

In *Obrazi jezika*, Skubic (2005, 214, 215) presents a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of relexicalization which is typical of excessive sociolects.<sup>3</sup> In excessive sociolects relexicalization is used as a tool to call attention to certain aspects of human existence – typically those which the dominant culture shuns. Usually these aspects are connected with hedonism (sex, intoxication, consumption and excretion of food) and the dominant culture is quick to find euphemistic terms for them. Another area where relexicalization can typically be found are specific aspects of the subcultures themselves (music, dance, semiotics of the body and clothing, etc.). In all these areas a profusion of lexemes appear, which enter into complex relationships with one another and with the cultivated lexemes of the dominant culture:

- □ the expression used in the excessive sociolect can have an opposite sense to when it is used in the non-excessive sociolect (for example, the Slovene *hud* (angry) can mean *dober* (good) or even *lep* (beautiful));
- the expressions in the excessive sociolect can be very broad in meaning; therefore, every time we use them, their exact meaning depends on the context of use or on the way they are pronounced; as above, *hudo* can have either a negative or a positive connotation; *kul*, derived from the English *cool*, can denote either that a person is calm (*ostal je čisto kul*, 'he remained completely cool'), that a thing is likeable (*kul jakna*, 'a cool jacket') or that somebody is good or fair to someone else (*do mene so bili zelo kul*, 'they were very cool to me');
- the expressions within the excessive sociolect enter complex relationships of partial synonymy – this points to the pleasure the speakers get from having a rich vocabulary and from the subtle differences in meaning which are often difficult to capture and which also change very quickly.

In the renaming of the expressions belonging to the broader community, the sub-community can resort, for example, to words borrowed from other languages (Skubic lists *ludnica*, *izi* and *iber* as examples, entering Slovene from Croatian, English and German respectively) or from

<sup>3</sup> In *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*, M. A. K. Halliday writes the following about relexicalization: "The simplest form taken by an antilanguage [i.e. language used by a specific social subgroup, not meant to be understood by outsiders] is that of new words for old; it is a language relexicalized. [...] Typically this relexicalization is partial, not total: not all words in the language have their equivalents in the antilanguage. [...] The principle is that of same grammar, different vocabulary; but different vocabulary only in certain areas, typically those that are central to the activities of the subculture and that set it off most sharply from the established society" (Halliday 1978, 165).

dialects not otherwise used by a given community (for example, *kažin*, *žganjica* or *špinel*). Other sources of renaming are the use of archaic expressions (such as the dated Slovene expression *bojda* ('supposedly')), the use of innovative neologisms (for example, *džazno* ('very good')) or the use of metaphor or metonymy to denote words from the general language (for example, *teta* for a woman, or *pička* for an attractive woman). The sub-community relexicalizes in accordance with its value system or simply for the sake of innovation itself. The swift innovations and also the above illustrated complexity of sense relationships demand that a group member constantly pay attention to linguistic development: the group-membership requires constant attention, otherwise one can quickly fall behind. Therefore innovation has two functions: it reflects the value system of a particular sub-group of society and serves as an immediately recognizable sign of those members who are 'in', that is, who use the innovative forms *correctly*.

Another area where Skubic (2005, 221) finds differences between excessive sociolects and cultivated sociolects is orthography. The orthography of slang languages often matches the level of spoken language. While the orthography of the hypercorrect sociolect follows the standard norm, the excessive sociolects refuse to accept this norm and try to bring their orthography close to the spoken, locally used language. Moreover, not only is the orthography of excessive sociolects different from the standard norm, it is not regulated even within the excessive sociolect itself – the written form of an excessive sociolect is unsystematic and a given lexical item may have more than one spelling, even with just one writer and in one piece of text (Skubic lists, among others, *malo* and *mal* (as variant forms of the spelling of 'little'), and *zjutraj*, *zjutri* and *zutri* (as possible spellings of 'in the morning'))).

Besides orthography, excessive sociolects differ from the standard norm also in their grammar and syntax; however, as Skubic (2005, 216) writes, excessive sociolects nevertheless do not diverge critically from the cultivated sociolects. After all, slang language is always the sociolect of resocialization, that is, of new and *conscious* alternative self-placement into the society. This self-placement follows the initial, *unconscious* socialization into the sociolect of one's environment. The initial unconscious socialization forms a sound foundation of language on all levels; slang, however, influences predominantly the surface level of language, that is, its vocabulary. That is why Skubic is of the opinion that people have an unnecessary fear that foreign words brought into Slovene via slang languages (for example, *skenslati* ('odsloviti'), based on the English verb *to cancel* or *bejba* (or even *bejb*) ('lepo, privlačno dekle'), based on the English noun *babe*) might achieve dominance over the Slovene vocabulary – elements of slang languages are often temporary and in use only while they are perceived as novel and original. Slang expressions that are in use for a longer time (as, for example, *ful*, *kul*, *šit*, *bed*, *mega* and *stari* used in Slovene adolescent slang) are more an exception than a rule, whereas the Slovene lexical basis is a constant feature one can rely on.

## 5. The place of slang in the broader frame of language

The slang words listed as exceptions which 'outlive' their counterparts somehow negate one of the basic characteristic of slang language, that is, the generally short lifespan of slang vocabulary. A question which arises at this point is whether such persistent slang words would not fit better

into another category of lexical items, namely, colloquial or informal words. Linguists divide the two spheres following a basic rule of thumb: the term *slang* is used with informal (and typically ephemeral) words used by a specific social group (for example, teenagers, soldiers, or criminals). Slang cannot be equated with colloquial language, that is, the informal, relaxed speech used by *all* speakers. Even though slang expressions are often used in informal speech, not all informal words can be termed as slang. In determining whether a word has its place in informal language or in slang language, corpora provide invaluable information. Through the use of corpora, one is able to assess typical contexts and text genres in which a word appears. However, there is no sharp boundary between the spheres of slang and informal language – the division would be better described as a continuum. Even though the majority of slang expressions are short-lived and quickly replaced by new words, some, such as the above-mentioned *ful*, *kul*, *šit*, and *bed* (used in Slovene adolescent slang), rise from the sphere of slang and join the general informal language.

The following diagram, taken from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, provides a useful illustration of where in the vocabulary slang and colloquial lexical items have their place.



Figure 1. Illustration of slang and colloquial lexical items. (Simpson and Weiner 1989, xxiv)

The accompanying explanation of the diagram is as follows:

“[...] The centre [of the diagram] is occupied by the ‘common’ words, in which literary and colloquial usage meet. ‘Scientific’ and ‘foreign’ words enter the common language mainly through literature; ‘slang’ words ascend through colloquial use; [...]. Slang also touches on one side the technical terminology of trades and occupations, [...] and on another passes into true dialect. [...]” (Simpson and Weiner 1989, xxiv)

In the introductory text to *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, Tom Dalzell and Terry Victor quote Partridge’s distinction between technical terminology/jargon and slang:

“The specialization that characterizes every vocation leads naturally to a specialized vocabulary, to the invention of new words or the re-charging of old words. Such special words and phrases become slang only when they are used outside their vocational group and then only if they change their meaning or are applied in other ways [...] But, whatever the source, personality and one’s surroundings (social or occupational) are the two co-efficients, the two chief factors, the determining causes of the nature of slang, as they are of language in general and of style.” (Partridge quoted in Dalzell and Victor 2006, xv)

In the Introduction to *Chambers Slang Dictionary*, Jonathon Green, a leading lexicographer in this field, gives a colourful description of slang:

“Slang is the language that says ‘no’. No to piety, to religion, to ideology and all its permutations, to honour, nobility, patriotism and their kindred infantilisms. [...] Unlike its Standard English ‘cousin’ – which, like slang, is just one more variety of the greater English language, albeit of an alternative register – its words are coined at the society’s lower depths, and make their way aloft. [...] [I]t is sexist, racist, nationalist, prejudiced and welcoming of the crassest stereotyping. [...] In comparison with the Standard English lexis its vocabulary covers a tiny waterfront, but in what depth: 3000 drunks, 1500 copulations, 1000 each of penises and vaginas...a glorious taxonomy of the flesh and its indulgence.

For this and other sins it remains a target: reviled, censored, the repository of sneers, dismissals and condemnations. Slang is unmoved. [...] It is the great re-inventor: its themes – sex, money, intoxication, insults (racial, national and personal), bodily parts and their functions – may not have changed in half a millennium of its collection, but like the alphabet that underpins it, it is capable of a seeming infinity of variations.” (Green 2008, xi)

Not only is the nature of slang such that it sets it apart from the general language, there are also special reasons or circumstances under which people choose to use slang language. Partridge (quoted in Dalzell and Victor 2006, xvi, xvii) offers a list of thirteen reasons:

- In sheer high spirits; ‘just for the fun of the thing’.
- As an exercise in wit or humour.
- To be ‘different’ – to be novel.
- To be picturesque.
- To be startling; to startle.
- To escape from clichés and long-windedness.
- To enrich the language.
- To give solidity and concreteness to the abstract and the idealistic, and nearness to the distant scene or object.
- To reduce solemnity, pain, tragedy.
- To put oneself in tune with one’s company.
- To induce friendliness or intimacy.
- To show that one belongs to a certain school, trade or profession, intellectual set or social class. In short to be in the fashion – or to prove that someone else isn’t.
- To be secret – not understood by those around one.

## 6. Slang and offensive language in dictionaries

Slang, as can be understood from the above descriptions, as well as from previous discussion on the role of slang in social groups/networks, is therefore a part of the (English) language that deserves special treatment, a fact which is supported by quite some specialized dictionaries of slang, be it in book form (for example, *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, based on the work of Eric Partridge, but thoroughly revised and expanded, and *Chambers Slang Dictionary*, the work of Jonathon Green) or available on the Internet (for example, the *Urban Dictionary* and the Slovene *Razvezani jezik, prosti slovar žive slovenščine*). That is not to say, however, that slang expressions are collected only in specialized dictionaries and not included also in general monolingual dictionaries. They are included, but prove to be quite problematic when it comes to labelling individual lexical items. In *Dictionaries, The Art and Craft of Lexicography*, Sidney Landau states:

Slang deserves a category all by itself. It is sometimes grouped with the style labels (*formal/informal*) and sometimes with the status labels (*standard/nonstandard*), but it does not fit comfortably with either. Slang does not represent a vocabulary that one can adopt to suit a social situation, as one can with terms on the *formal/informal* index. In fact, when slang is used appropriately it is on the way to becoming standard speech. Unlike other words restrictively labeled, slang is deliberately nonstandard. Much slang has been introduced by criminals, hucksters and gamblers; [...] Much slang derives also from the cant of musicians and soldiers and other groups that feel isolated or beleaguered. Their private vocabulary percolates through layers of language to become tomorrow's slang, then routinely peppers the conversations of young people everywhere. Some dictionary users mistakenly suppose that slang is necessarily in the category of taboo words. Although much slang deals with off-color subjects, taboo words are not necessarily slang and most slang words are not taboo. There is only an incidental correspondence between the categories.

[...] Since there are no agreed external criteria for identifying slang, we must support efforts to establish them; but in the meantime we must rely on subjective criteria lacking in any authority save that of informed and educated people trained to be sensitive to language style. In day-to-day decisions, words are labeled slang by lexicographers or their advisers because the words are deemed to be extremely informal. This is unsatisfactory; slang is not simply very informal usage. But until we have agreed criteria by which to judge them, slang and informal words will appear in more or less free variation in dictionaries. (Landau 2001, 237, 240)

A similar confusion exists when it comes to deciding which usages should be labelled to warn the dictionary user that an individual item might be perceived as offensive. Landau (2001, 232–4) says that when dictionaries apply labels concerning insult, they follow political and moral guidelines. They warn the dictionary user against using terms which could be perceived as insulting towards, for example, homosexuals, women, racial and ethnic groups, etc. Dictionary labels are therefore chosen on the basis of both the lexicographers' personal opinions and 'the official views of the government under whose laws the business that produces the dictionary operates' (Landau 2001, 232).

Further on, Landau states an important fact which reveals why it is so difficult to label terms of insult appropriately:

Unfortunately, there are no agreed-upon criteria for finding some usages offensive or contemptuous or abusive. There are few studies that shed any light on the degree of offensiveness of specified terms under specified conditions. What matters is the relationship between the speaker and the spoken to, and between the speaker and the spoken about. Do they know each other well or not at all? Are they members of the same in-group? [...] This kind of analysis depends upon usage notes, which dictionaries do try to include wherever possible. Labels cannot tell the whole story.

Insult can be affectionate. There is no basis for the flat assertion that *any* term is insulting under all conditions, no matter how offensive it may be under some. In practice dictionaries' labels of insult are based on the assumption that the speaker does not know the person spoken to well or that both do not belong to the same in-group. The advice is only about *public* behavior, [...]. (Landau 2001, 233)

Another issue that Landau touches upon is the way labelling changed through time:

If, in the past, dictionaries were too slow to label terms of insult, they now seem too quick to do so. Many hundreds of terms are now labeled as *disparaging*, *contemptuous*, or *offensive* in dictionaries, often on the strength of dubious evidence but out of fear that they will be taken as insensitive to some group. (Landau 2001, 234)

Henri Béjoint discusses the topic of usage labels in his *Modern Lexicography: An Introduction*. According to Béjoint, we can learn a lot about the (intended) user of a particular dictionary by looking at the usage labels applied, “since any deviation from the norm is signalled by a label. Labels stigmatize the deviations from the portrait of the average user” (Béjoint 2000, 110). However, as we saw with Landau above, also Béjoint warns that the conclusions we might draw about dictionary users based on the usage labels applied to individual lexical items could prove to be deceptive since “they allow conclusions about the dictionary users as the lexicographers see them, not necessarily as they are” (Béjoint 2000, 110).

Nevertheless, if we set aside the fact that the criteria for deciding what to label as a slang expression, an insulting expression or a colloquial expression are somewhat unreliable, we must admit that usage labels are useful. In monolingual dictionaries intended for (foreign) learners, usage labels and usage notes are indispensable since they act as a security measure to help prevent dictionary users from inadvertently using inappropriate expressions.

## 7. Dictionary labelling

In *A Handbook of Lexicography: The Theory and Practice of Dictionary Making*, Bo Svensén discusses the topic of dictionary labelling or marking. Lexical items which are furnished with a label do not entirely fall in with the majority of items described in a dictionary – their use is restricted in one way or another.

Svensén states:

The labelling system of a dictionary consists of a number of part-systems, each of which is concerned with a certain type of characteristic of the lexical items. Each part-system can be

viewed as an area with a centre and a periphery, where different items can be located at different distances from the centre. [...] A labelling system transforms a continuum to a set of degrees on a scale (e.g. ‘colloquial’, ‘popular’, ‘vulgar’). Therefore, it is essential always to keep in mind that a label represents an area that has a certain extension somewhere between centre and periphery. For instance, expressions belonging to the area ‘colloquial’ can be colloquial to varying degrees, i.e. be located at varying distances from the unmarked area or from the one characterized as ‘popular’. (Svensén 2009, 315, 316)

Criterion	Type of marking	Unmarked centre	Marked periphery	Examples of labels
1 Time	diachronic	contemporary language	archaism – neologism	<i>arch., dated, old use</i>
2 Place	diatopic	standard language	regionalism, dialect word	<i>AmE, Scot., dial.</i>
3 Nationality	diainTEGRATIVE	native word	foreign word	<i>Lat., Fr.</i>
4 Medium	diamedial	neutral	spoken – written	<i>colloq., spoken</i>
5 Socio-cultural	diastRATIC	neutral	sociolects	<i>pop., slang, vulgar</i>
6 Formality	diaphasic	neutral	formal – informal	<i>fml, infml</i>
7 Text type	diatextual	neutral	poetic, literary, journalese	<i>poet., lit.</i>
8 Technicality	diatechnical	general language	technical language	<i>Geogr., Mil., Biol., Mus.</i>
9 Frequency	diafrequential	common	rare	<i>rare, occas.</i>
10 Attitude	diaevaluative	neutral	connoted	<i>derog., iron., euphem.</i>
11 Normativity	dianormative	correct	incorrect	<i>non-standard</i>

Table 1. Diasystematic marking in a contemporary general-purpose dictionary. (Svensén 2009, 316)

## 8. Marking information in different dictionaries

Even though the labels in comparable dictionaries may seem identical at a glance, a closer inspection of their explanations reveals that there tend to be at least subtle differences among them. Svensén also discusses this problem:

Comparing the marking information provided by different dictionaries is often difficult. There are several reasons for this. Different dictionaries may use different labels, and the categories represented by the labels may have different ranges in different dictionaries. Moreover, there may be differences in labelling practice, so that, in one dictionary, fewer or more lexical items are regarded as formal or informal, correct or incorrect, etc., than in another one [...]. (Svensén 2009, 316)

In order to see what is meant by individual labels, I looked up their definitions in three widely used learner’s dictionaries, that is, *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (Wehmeier, McIntosh,

and Turnbull 2005; henceforth OALD7), *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (Rundell 2007; henceforth MED2) and *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Woodford and Jackson 2003; henceforth CALD2). They provide the following explanations for the labels most closely connected with the slangy, offensive lexical items that are the focus of this article:

→ *informal*:

- OALD7: informal expressions are used between friends or in a relaxed or unofficial situation. They are not appropriate for formal situations.
- MED2: informal – more common in speech than in writing and not used on a formal occasion
- CALD2: informal – used in ordinary speech (and writing) and not suitable for formal situations

→ *offensive*:

- OALD7: offensive expressions are used by some people to address or refer to people in a way that is very insulting, especially in connection with their race, religion, sex or disabilities [...]. You should not use these words.
- MED2: offensive – extremely rude and likely to cause offence
- CALD2: offensive – very rude and likely to offend people

→ *slang / very informal*:

- OALD7: slang is very informal language, sometimes restricted to a particular group of people, for example, people of the same age or those who have the same interests or do the same job
- MED2: very informal – used only in very informal situations and mainly among people who know each other well. Some dictionaries use the label *slang*.
- CALD2: slang – extremely informal language, used mainly by a particular group, especially young people

Besides these labels, OALD7 often applies also the label *taboo* (“taboo expressions are likely to be thought by many people to be obscene or shocking. You should not use them.”), while MED2 quite frequently employs the label *impolite* (“impolite – not taboo but will certainly offend some people”).

## 9. Dictionary treatment of slang and offensive expressions

We can see that the labels have similar, yet not identical explanations, thus confirming Svensén's findings. In an analysis of lexical items belonging to slang and offensive sphere of language, I looked at the dictionary treatment of approximately 50 lexical items.<sup>4</sup> I primarily wanted to see how the three learner's dictionaries solve the labelling of individual items and what information is

<sup>4</sup> I chose CALD2 as my starting point for comparison of the three learner's dictionaries and compared items which (in CALD2) bear the labels *slang* on the one hand and *offensive* on the other. The random sample selection of lexical items labelled as *slang* included the following items: *bent, bottle, choppers, cottaging, dog, eliminate, faggot, gag, hot, klutz, lush, mug shot, nosh, plug, rap, shooting gallery, sock, wasted, cock sth up, knock sb up, play chicken, take a leak/have a leak, shut your mouth/face/gob, sick as a parrot*. The sample selection of lexical items labelled as *offensive* included the following items: *arsehole, bitch, bugger/buggered/buggery, cow, cunt, frigging, knob, midget, non-white, piss, prick, retard/retarded, shit, slapper, spade, turd, vegetable, whitey, go ape-shit, cover your ass/butt/backside, get your rocks off*.

conveyed to the dictionary user via labels. Secondly, I looked at the definitions and the examples of use provided. And finally, as a native speaker of Slovene studying English, I wanted to see how well English slang or offensive expressions are represented in three English-Slovene dictionaries, that is, the *Veliki angleško-slovenski slovar* (Grad, Škerlj, and Vitorovič 1978; henceforth VASS), the *Veliki angleško-slovenski slovar Oxford* (Krek 2005-2006; henceforth VASSO) and the *Angleško-slovenski slovar* (Vrbinc and Vrbinc 2009; henceforth ASS). Since I obviously cannot include all the material I gathered for the research here, I can only refer the reader to the entries for the lexical items (listed in footnote 4) in the three learner's dictionaries and the three English-Slovene dictionaries.

In the analysis of the randomly chosen sample lists of lexical items, the following results were obtained. As far as the comparison of labels used with the lexical items in the sample selections is concerned, there are the following relationships among the three learner's dictionaries: with some of the lexical items chosen for the analysis, what is labelled as *slang* in CALD2 bears the label *informal* in the other two dictionaries. The three dictionaries therefore situate these items at varying distances, so to speak, from the general, non-marked English language. CALD2 treats them as being farther removed from the general language than OALD7 or MED2. Some examples of this kind are the lexical items *bent*, *klutz*, *lush* and *mug shot*.

With some other examples, such as *choppers*, *cottaging*, *nosh* and *wasted*, two of the dictionaries (mainly CALD2 and OALD7) treat the lexical items as belonging to slang language. The third dictionary (mostly MED2) applies the label *informal*, therefore again bringing the items closer to general language than the other two dictionaries do.

Examples such as *eliminate*, *hot*, *shooting gallery* or *play chicken* are all similar in the fact that the three learner's dictionaries use very different labels to mark them. With *eliminate*, in the sense of 'to murder', CALD2 provides the label *slang*, OALD7 the label *formal* whereas MED2 provides no label. With *hot* and *shooting gallery*, OALD7 is the one to give no label, while CALD2 labels the items as *slang* and MED2 as *informal*. *Play chicken* is an example where CALD2 provides the label *slang* and the other two dictionaries give no label at all.

MED2 differs from the other two dictionaries in some examples as it provides a warning attitude label (i.e. *impolite*, *offensive*) where they provide a usage label (*slang* or *informal*). Among these examples are *take a leak*, *shut your mouth* and *knock sb up*. However, it has to be said that with at least some of the examples, the other two dictionaries convey the warning, transmitted by the label in MED2, as part of the definition.

The three dictionaries are in agreement, that is, all provide the label *slang* or its equivalent label, *very informal*, in only one case in the sample selection, namely, *gag*. In this case, however, the sample selection paints a very misleading picture – if we check the entire entry lists of the three learner's dictionaries and focus on the two corresponding labels (*slang* and *very informal*), we can easily see that the overlap between the three dictionaries is much greater and that they are in agreement in quite some cases.

The sample selection based on the label *offensive* in CALD2 also revealed some similarities and some differences among the three learner's dictionaries. A number of lexical items have the

following combination of labels – CALD2 and MED2 label them as *offensive*, whereas OALD7 provides the label *taboo, slang*. Some such examples are *arsehole, cunt, frigging, retard* and *spade*. OALD7 therefore treats these examples as obscene and shocking and conveys its strongest warning against their usage.

Another combination of labels also appears quite often in the sample selection, that is, CALD2 marks the item as *offensive*, OALD7 as *taboo, slang* and MED2 only as *impolite*. Examples with this combination of labels are certain senses of the items *bugger, piss, shit* and the item *get your rocks off*. In these cases, MED2 apparently perceives the lexical items as causing milder offence and consequently its warning is not as pronounced as with the other two dictionaries (another explanation for the difference in labels applied is that MED2 label *impolite* is broader in application and thus covers also offensive/taboo senses). It has to be said, however, that MED2 is sensitive to the seriousness of offence an item might cause with lexical items which in one of their senses refer to a person. Such examples are *prick, shit* and *turd*, where the senses referring to people are marked with the label *offensive* even though the other senses carry the milder label, *impolite*.

Considering the definitions and examples of use the three learner's dictionaries provide for the lexical items in both sample selections, one can see that they are efficient in conveying and illustrating the meanings of the chosen lexical items. It is true that with individual lexical items one dictionary may be more efficient or successful in transmitting the meaning than the other dictionaries. It is also true that some examples of use are more useful or crucial for the correct understanding of a given lexical item than others. However, since all three dictionaries are composed by well-versed lexicographers, it is only to be expected that the definitions and the examples of use are individually of high quality, though some might be better than others when placed side by side in the comparison.

The last substantial part of the comparison of dictionaries was the comparison of translation equivalents entered for the items in the two sample selections, in three English-Slovene dictionaries.<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, VASS was the least successful in providing suitable translation equivalents. A number of items chosen for the two sample selections have no translation equivalents in this dictionary, for example, *lush, wasted, cock sth up, cunt, frigging, knob* or *slapper*. In some other cases, VASS provides translation equivalents only for the general-language senses, for example, for *bent* (translated as *upognjen, skrivljen*) and *arsehole* (only the anatomical sense is translated as *ritnik*). There are also cases where VASS provides translation equivalents which do not match the original expressions stylistically – they can be seen as too formal (e.g. *prick* translated as *penis*), too neutral (*plug* translated as *udariti s pestjo, streljati, ustreliti*) or old-fashioned (*dog* translated as *ničvrednež, zagovednež; sock* translated as *biti, pogoditi koga (s kamnom); bitch* as *vlačuga*). That is not to say, however, that VASS does not provide any usable translation equivalents, but they are fewer in number if compared with the other two English-Slovene dictionaries.

The two 'new' English-Slovene dictionaries, especially VASSO, have to be complimented on their treatment of slang and offensive expressions. They clearly reflect the change in mentality of dictionary-making that obviously occurred in the time from when VASS was created. VASSO

<sup>5</sup> With polysemous items, I took into consideration only those senses which belong to the slang/offensive spheres and disregarded translation equivalents provided for senses used in the general language.

and ASS do not try to hide the potentially repulsive, insulting nature of slang and offensive expressions and give the dictionary users a fair presentation of these spheres of language, controversial as they may be.

Given the difference in size of the two dictionaries, it is not surprising that VASSO provides translation equivalents for a larger number of lexical items in the sample selection than ASS does. This, however cannot be taken simply as a disadvantage of ASS, but as an important piece of information an attentive dictionary user should not miss – since ASS is based on the 40,000 most frequently used words, one can quickly see which slang/offensive lexical items or which senses of individual lexical items belong to this ‘pool’ of words. One could therefore conclude that lexical items which have translations equivalents only in VASSO are a) either too controversial or too recent to be included in VASS and b) not used often enough to be part of the 40,000 most frequently used lexical items and thus included in ASS. The sample selection included a number of such lexical items, for example, *bottle* (in the sense of ‘courage’), *choppers*, *cottaging*, *klutz*, *shooting gallery*, *knock sb up*, *cunt*, *frigging*, *slapper*, *whitey* and *get your rocks off*. Two of the lexical items listed, *cottaging* and *shooting gallery*, are included in VASSO, but have only descriptive translation equivalents (‘homoseksualna srečanja na javnem stranišču’ and ‘[med uživalci mamil] kraj, kjer si narkomani kupijo in vbrizgajo heroin’ respectively). The descriptive translation equivalents are a good example of how difficult translating slang and offensive expressions can be. In some cases, a translator has little choice but to depart from the style level of the original expression (for example, the slang expression *choppers* has two rather neutral translation equivalents in VASSO, namely, *zobje*, *proteza*; another such example is *mug shot*, translated as ‘slika obraza (zlasti za policijsko zbirko)’ in VASS and as ‘1 (Am.) [v policijski kartoteki] fotografija obraza 2 (šalj.) fotografija’ in VASSO) or even explain rather than translate (see the translation equivalents for *cottaging* and *shooting gallery*).

As was said before, colloquial and especially slang expressions often prove to be quite elusive and ephemeral. However, underlying concepts, for example, relationships among peers, sexuality, leisure activities, etc. being described in slang terms are relatively constant. This means that even if dictionaries do not manage to provide a translation equivalent that suits a text completely, they are invaluable in pointing a translator in the right direction in their search for a suitable translation equivalent. The translation equivalents provided by VASSO and ASS for the lexical items in the sample selection are for the most part suitable; some, however, could be further ‘colloquialized’ to suit the sphere of contemporary slang language better. Two such examples are the translation equivalents for the slang sense of *bottle* (translated in VASSO as ‘korajža, pogum’) and *to knock sb up* (translated in VASSO as ‘narediti otroka’). It is not difficult to imagine contexts which would call for ‘dirtier’ translation equivalents – the first lexical item could thus be translated also as ‘jajca’, whereas the latter could be translated as ‘napumpati’. Even descriptive translation equivalents, though perhaps less directly usable in a text, can be used as a starting point for creating a translation equivalent. For example, taking into consideration the definition of *shooting gallery* (‘a place where addicts congregate to buy and inject drugs’, entered in *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*) and its descriptive translation equivalent from VASSO ([med uživalci mamil] kraj, kjer si narkomani kupijo in vbrizgajo heroin), a translator could form a slangy translation equivalent in Slovene. Since the original expression

is an extended meaning of ‘a shooting range’, one might attempt a similar derivation also in Slovene. Taking ‘strelišče’ as the starting point, one could create something like *zadevališče*, which would include the form of the base word (‘strelišče’) and apply to it the informal verb connected with shooting up drugs, *zadeti se*.

The final issue to be looked at is some of the usage labels applied to the chosen lexical items by the three English-Slovene dictionaries. As with the translation equivalents provided, also here the change in the perception of certain lexical items can be noticed. For example, *take/have a leak* and *cow*, which are labelled as *vulgar* in VASS, bear milder labels in VASSO (*pogovorno* and *pogovorno, slabšalno* respectively). On the other hand, *spade*, which is labelled *colloquially* in VASS, has two labels in VASSO, namely, *pogovorno* and *žaljivo*. These two examples show how the perception of what is taboo changes through time – if terms of excretion were considered vulgar at the time when VASS was published, they are now obviously perceived as causing milder offence. Contrary to this, potentially racist terms are now labelled as offensive and the dictionary user is warned against their usage. Another difference in the usage labels applied exists between VASSO and ASS. With some lexical items, VASSO applies the label *pogovorno* whereas ASS applies the label *sleng* – some examples of this difference are the entries for *dog*, *hot* and *bitch*. The two dictionaries provide the same or very similar translation equivalents (*pes(jan)* and *pes* for *dog*; *pretihotapljen* and *tihotapski* for *hot*; *psica*, used in both dictionaries for *bitch*), however, the difference in the usage labels applied situates the lexical items at different distances from the unmarked core vocabulary and might prove to be confusing to dictionary users. At the same time, this very difference is an example of the difficulty of the task of labelling slang/colloquial vocabulary, as well as of the issue discussed by Svensén, that is, the fact that an individual label can be ‘stretched’ and can cover a different scope of vocabulary in one dictionary than it does in another.

## 10. Conclusion

All in all, I have to say that this journey through the colourful world of slang has been an interesting and enlightening one. It revealed just how important the role of slang is in people’s lives, especially in their teenage years when it may prove to be one of the deciding factors in whether a person is accepted in their peer network or not. Slang, inconstant as it may be if we focus on individual expressions, is therefore nevertheless an ever-present phenomenon in all societies.

Another aspect of slang which revealed itself is how difficult, not to say impossible, it is to capture the nature of slang expressions in dictionaries and to provide uniform labels. As was observed with the lexical items *eliminate*, *hot*, *shooting gallery* or *play chicken*, dictionaries sometimes vary widely in their choice of labels. Such differences in labelling are clearly problematic, since the information conveyed to the dictionary user differs quite considerably. At the same time, these differences are a reflection of the difficulty of applying a uniform label to lexical items belonging to the elusive field of slang. Even when we try to look at slang and offensive expressions in isolation, we are quickly faced with the fact that we simply cannot analyse them without considering the effect they have when used in real life. It is much more difficult to be completely certain that one has taken into consideration all senses and especially all connotations when dealing with this sort of vocabulary, than if, for example, analysing vocabulary belonging to technical language.

Slang expressions and offensive expressions all have their special appeal – the former for their ever-changing, often witty nature which does not let the reader or the listener ever be bored and the latter for the fact that nothing ever is black and white and that what some may perceive as extremely offensive may even be considered affectionate in other circumstances. These spheres of language definitely are worth exploring and it is not difficult to see why some lexicographers and sociolinguists devote much of their time to research of this kind.

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