

## Styles, Slang, and Jargon

---

### Styles

Most speakers of a language know many “dialects.” They use one “dialect” when out with friends, another when on a job interview or presenting a report in class, and another when talking to their parents. These “situation dialects” are called *styles*.

Nearly everybody has at least an informal and a formal style. In an informal style the rules of contraction are used more often, the syntactic rules of negation and agreement may be altered, and many words are used that do not occur in the formal style. Many speakers have the ability to use a number of different styles, ranging between the two extremes of formal and informal. Speakers of minority dialects sometimes display virtuosic ability to slide back and forth along a continuum of styles that range from the informal patterns learned in a ghetto to “formal standard.” When Labov was studying Black English used by Harlem youths, he encountered difficulties because the youths (subconsciously) adopted a different style in the presence of white strangers. It took time and effort to gain their confidence to the point where they would “forget” that their conversations were being recorded and so use their less formal style.

Many cultures have rules of social behavior that strictly govern style. In some Indo-European languages there is the distinction between “you (familiar)” and “you (polite).” German *du* and French *tu* are to be used only with “intimates”; *Sie* and *vous* are more formal and used with nonintimates. French even has a verb *tutoyer*, which means “to use the *tu* form,” and German uses the verb *duzen* to express the informal or less honorific style of speaking.

Other languages have a much more elaborate code of style usage. Speakers of Thai use *kin* “eat” to their intimates, informally; but *thaaan* “eat” is used informally with strangers, *rabprathaan* “eat” on formal occasions or when conversing with dignitaries or esteemed persons (such as parents), and *chan* “eat” when referring to Buddhist monks. Japanese and Javanese are also languages with elaborate styles that must be adhered to in certain social situations.

### Slang

One mark of an informal style is the frequent occurrence of *slang*. Almost everyone uses slang on some occasions, but it is not easy to define the word. Slang has been defined as “one of those things that everybody can recognize and nobody can define.”<sup>12</sup> The use of slang, or colloquial language, introduces many new words into the language by recombining old words into new meanings. *Spaced out*, *right on*, *hangup*, and *rip-off* have all gained a degree of acceptance. Slang may also introduce an entirely new word, such as *barf*, *flub*, and *pooped*. Finally, slang often consists of ascribing totally new meanings to old words. *Grass* and *pot* widened their meaning to “marijuana”; *pig* and *fuzz* are derogatory terms for “policeman”; *rap*, *cool*, *dig*, *stoned*, *bread*, and *split* have all extended their semantic domain.

The words we have cited sound “slangy” because they have not gained total acceptability. Words such as *dwindle*, *freshman*, *glib*, and *mob* are former slang words that in time overcame their “unsavory” origin. It is not always easy to know where to draw the line between “slang” words and “regular” words. This confusion seems always to have been around. In 1890, John S. Farmer, coeditor with W. E. Henley of *Slang and Its Analogues*, remarked: “The borderland between slang and the ‘Queen’s English’ is an ill-defined territory, the limits of which have never been clearly mapped out.”

One generation’s slang is another generation’s standard vocabulary. *Fan* (as in “Dodger fan”) was once a slang term, short for *fanatic*. *Phone*, too, was once a slangy, clipped version of *telephone*, as *TV* was of *television*. In Shakespeare’s time, *fretful* and *dwindle* were slang, and more recently *blimp* and *hot dog* were both “hard-core” slang.

customs. They may represent "in" attitudes better than the more conservative items of the vocabulary. Their importance is shown by the fact that it was thought necessary to give the returning Vietnam prisoners of war a glossary of eighty-six new slang words and phrases, from *acid* to *zonked*. The words on this list—prepared by the Air Force—had come into use during only five years. Furthermore, by the time this book is published, many of these terms may have passed out of the language, and many new ones will have been added.

A number of slang words have entered English from the "underworld," such as *crack* for a special form of cocaine, *payola*, *C-note*, *G-man*, *to hang paper* ("to write 'bum' checks"), *sawbuck*, and so forth.

The now ordinary French word meaning "head," *tête*, which was once a slang word derived from the Latin *testa*, which meant "earthen pot." Some slang words seem to hang on and on in the language, though, never changing their status from slang to "respectable." Shakespeare used the expression *beat it* to mean "scram" (or more politely, "leave!"), and *beat it* would be considered by most English speakers still to be a slang expression. Similarly, the use of the word *pig* for "policeman" goes back at least as far as 1785, when a writer of the time called a Bow Street police officer a "China Street pig."

## Jargon and Argot

Practically every conceivable science, profession, trade, and occupation has its own set of words, some of which are considered to be "slang" and others "technical," depending on the status of the people using these "in" words. Such words are sometimes called **jargon** or **argot**. Linguistic jargon, some of which is used in this book, consists of terms such as *phoneme*, *morpheme*, *case*, *lexicon*, *phrase structure rule*, and so on.

The existence of argots or jargons is illustrated by the story of a seaman witness being cross-examined at a trial, who was asked if he knew the plaintiff. Indicating that he did not know what *plaintiff* meant brought a chide from the attorney: "You mean you came into this court as a witness and don't know what 'plaintiff' means?" Later the sailor was asked where he was standing when the boat lurched. "Abaft the binnacle," was the reply, and to the attorney's questioning stare he responded: "You mean you came into this court and don't know where abaft the binnacle is?"

Because the jargon terms used by different professional groups are so extensive (and so obscure in meaning), court reporters in the Los Angeles Criminal Courts Building have a library that includes books on medical terms, guns, trade names, and computer jargon, as well as street slang.

The computer age not only ushered in a technological revolution; it also introduced a huge jargon of "computerese" used by computer "hackers," including the words *modem* (a blend of *modulator* and *demodulator*), *bit* (a contraction of *binary digit*), *byte* (a collection of some number of bits), *floppy* (a noun or adjective referring to a flexible *disk*), *ROM* (an acronym for *Read Only Memory*), *RAM* (an acronym for *Random Access Memory*), and *morf* (an abbreviation for the question *Male or female?*).

Many jargon terms pass into the standard language. Jargon, like slang, spreads from a narrow group until it is used and understood by a large segment of the population.