



YOUTH LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: THE ROLE OF SLANG IN SOCIAL IDENTITY FORMATION

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Abstract: Slang is an important element of youth language and social stratification, playing a major role in defining social identity and group affiliation. This article analyzes how slang affects social stratification, linguistic innovation, and communication dynamics among young people. It also focuses on aspects of slang such as creating differences between social groups, its use as linguistic capital, and its dissemination through modern technologies. The article also examines the changing nature of slang and its impact on language and social relations.

Keywords: Slang, youth language, social stratification, linguistic capital, sociolinguistics, identity formation, linguistic innovation

Аннотация: Сленг — язык молодежи и важный элемент социальной стратификации, играющий важную роль в определении социальной идентичности и



принадлежности к группе. В данной статье анализируется, как сленг влияет на социальное расслоение, лингвистические инновации и динамику общения среди молодежи. Он также фокусируется на таких аспектах сленга, как создание различий между социальными группами, его использование в качестве языкового капитала и его распространение посредством современных технологий. В статье также исследуется меняющаяся природа сленга и его влияние на язык и социальные отношения.

Ключевые слова: Сленг, молодежный язык, социальная стратификация, языковой капитал, социолингвистика, формирование идентичности, лингвистические инновации.

Annotatsiya: Slang yoshlar tili va ijtimoiy stratifikatsiyaning muhim elementi bo‘lib, u ijtimoiy identifikatsiya va guruhga mansublikni belgilashda katta rol o‘ynaydi. Ushbu maqola slangning yoshlar orasida ijtimoiy tabaqlanish, lingvistik innovatsiya va muloqot dinamikasiga qanday ta’sir qilishini tahlil qiladi. Shuningdek, u slangning ijtimoiy guruhlar o‘rtasida farqlar yaratish, lingvistik kapital sifatida ishlatalishi va zamonaviy texnologiyalar orqali tarqalishi kabi jihatlariga e’tibor qaratadi. Maqola, shuningdek, slangning o‘zgaruvchan tabiatini va uning til hamda ijtimoiy munosabatlarga ta’sirini o‘rganadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: Slang, yoshlar tili, ijtimoiy tabaqlanish, lingvistik kapital, sotsiolingvistika, o‘zlikni shakllantirish, lingvistik innovatsiya

Language is not merely a communicative tool but also a marker of identity, social belonging, and group membership (Sapir & Whorf, 1956; Giles & Coupland, 1991). For adolescents, slang is an effective instrument for asserting individuality, making peer bonds, and differentiating themselves from other social groups. Yet although there has been



considerable research on linguistic variation and youth identity (Labov, 1972; Eckert, 2000; Tagliamonte, 2016), fewer studies have considered more directly the use of slang as a means of social stratification in youth. Labov (1972) addressed more broadly the relationship between language and social class based on phonological variation, and Eckert (2000) with the use of linguistic alternatives in peer identity construction. In the same manner, Tagliamonte (2016) also investigated slang as a marker of linguistic change instead of social stratification. Although these investigations have been carried out, the intersection of social stratification and youth slang is still underresearched. This research seeks to fill this gap by examining the use of slang as a marker of social distinction and stratification among young people. The study adopts qualitative and quantitative approaches, such as corpus-based linguistic analysis and ethnographic interviews on youth speakers with varied backgrounds.

Slang is not just a linguistic phenomenon but also closely linked with social identity and stratification. Although previous research has examined its use in the communication of youths, its use as an indicator of social differentiation warrants further investigation. This section discusses the connection between slang and social stratification based on identity construction, linguistic capital, and sociolinguistic processes of informal language use.

Slang and Social Identity Creation. One of the main uses of slang is its utilization in identity construction. Adopting Eckert (2000), language variation in teenagers is not simply a reflection of social background but a continuous social categorization process. Slang, being a non-standard language practice, is an effective tool for young people to build in-group solidarity and distinguish themselves from other social groups. This is also corroborated by Giles and Coupland's (1991, pp. 78-80) Communication Accommodation Theory, which tries to account for how people shift speech patterns in a bid to identify or disidentify with certain social groups.



This is parallel to Labov's (1972) examination of linguistic variation and social stratification, wherein he speaks of the view that language is one of the chief indicators of social class differences. Labov's study of phonological variation showed that language use is not just a tool for communication but also a mirror of one's social identity and status. Likewise, Bourdieu (1991) proposed the idea of linguistic capital wherein certain linguistic practices, such as slang, may provide or deny access to social mobility based on their prestige in various social settings.

Sociolinguistically, slang also works as a boundary marker across groups, reinforcing group membership and creating boundaries between those who "belong" and those who do not (Milroy & Milroy, 1985). The use and spread of slang within youth communities reflect not only linguistic innovation (Tagliamonte, 2016) but also social stratification within and across youth groups. Those people who know how to employ certain slang words properly and at the right moment gain symbolic capital in their peer groups, and those who are unaware of such words can get socially excluded.

Slang and Social Stratification. The connection between slang and social stratification is also tied up with power relations and symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1991) contends that language is a type of social currency in which some varieties of language are more desirable than others based on the social group one is operating in. In this case, slang is an inclusive and exclusive language practice, which reproduces social hierarchies in societies.

In youth communities, slang is usually employed in the construction of in-group and out-group membership, especially among youth from varying socioeconomic statuses. Researchers have established that working-class teenagers standardize and utilize more location-specific slang terms, whereas upper-class teenagers can employ a greater number of lexical innovations based on media and electronic communication (Tagliamonte, 2016). This pattern confirms Labov's (1972) research on social class differences in linguistic



variation, in which speech pattern phonological variation was linked to socioeconomic status.

Second, slang is viewed differently depending on the institutional context of its use. Slang among casual peer interactions is common, yet its application in the workplace or academic environment provokes judgmental conclusions about a person's degree of schooling or intelligence (Milroy & Milroy, 1985). This view of slang as a "low-status" component of language has been enhanced by prevailing ideologies of language advocating standardization above vernacular speech.

Slang and Linguistic Creativity. Apart from social stratification, slang is also a significant driver of linguistic innovation. Language change is a process, and slang has a part to play in the development of new terms and modes of discourse. Tagliamonte (2016) observes how slang acts as a force for lexical innovation, adding new words and phrases into common usage. These innovations tend to emerge within youth communities and spread ever more widely over time.

Technology and online communication also affect the spread of slang. The rise of social media websites like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram has facilitated the transfer of slang terms across regions and social classes (Crystal, 2008). Slang on the internet in the form of abbreviations (e.g., "LOL," "OMG"), memes, and viral slogans has become a staple element of modern digital communication, eroding boundaries between spoken and written language.

Additionally, slang is a place of linguistic experimentation and counter-normativity. Eckert (2012) observes that young speakers utilize language play as a strategy to counter the prevailing norms and establish their own cultural identity. In this manner, slang is a way of countering authority and reconceptualizing social stratification, especially among marginalized communities.



In this manner, slang is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a critical aspect of identity construction. Slang is a dynamic linguistic strategy that enables individuals to lay claim to membership in specific social groups and, at the same time, to differentiate themselves from others. This process of identity construction through slang is particularly salient in informal peer-group interaction, where language is being employed as both an inclusionary and exclusionary force.

In summation, slang is a natural component of both linguistic development and social identity formation. Slang mirrors societal hierarchies at large, offers a window into group processes, and illustrates the ongoing development of language. Further research could persist in examining the influence of slang on intercultural communication and how it affects linguistic norms across generations and social environments.

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