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The Rise and Fall of Slang in America

It is, of course, ludicrous to claim that slang has "fallen" in the United States. It lives a very healthy life. What I mean is that "slang" as an issue of cultural politics has declined in import, that what at one point was a central, pressing concern, generating all sorts of scholarship and polemics—pro and con—has in the past 25 years retreated from the foreground of disputes about language in the United States.

I'll argue, moreover, that this tells us something about why "slang" was such a charged and central issue for nearly a century—from roughly the 1850s to the early 1960s—and why it has been pushed aside by other issues. Slang was important as a form of what I'll call "vernacular nationalism," a mildly progressive nationalism defined against other more hieratic, cosmopolitan understandings of language and culture. Its decline as a central issue in the last quarter century, I think, reflects a basic and deep shift in the cultural politics of the United States.

CS 20

Today, many, many histories and dictionaries find slang everywhere. There is, we are told, the slang of ancient Rome, of African tribes, of the American West, of Shakespeare. Yet the word *slang*, in reference to language, did not appear until the middle of the 18th century. The first reference in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from the 1750s.¹ Upon reading the linguistic discussion of the 18th century, moreover, one quickly finds that word is almost completely unused. It is *not* a part of the standard discussion of the day. It appears in no dictionary published in the 18th century that I know of. The first lexicon that includes the word was one published by Noah Webster in 1806.² In short, *slang* was not an important analytic category.

Moreover, its 18th-century meaning was different from later usage. It was then a synonym for "low" or "vulgar" speech. This gives a hint of why *slang* was not an important word to use in the 1770s. There

were other terms, *low* or *vulgar*, that meant the exact same thing and were also far more culturally resonant. To call some bit of language "low" or "vulgar" in 18th-century English was to conjure up a whole social order. It evoked traditional distinctions of the few and the many, gentry and the commoners, refined and vulgar, high and low. There was not much room or need for the term *slang*.

By the turn of the century, *slang* was also used as a synonym for *cant*. This term referred not to low culture in general, but to the special idiom of specific subcultures, most often that of thieves but also, by the first years of the 1800s, the language of university students. There had been dictionaries of "thieves cant" published in English since the end of the 16th century. *Slang* was also used to describe this idiom in the 18th century.

In the first half of the 19th-century, however, and particularly after the 1820s, the word changes meaning. It becomes associated with a cultural style that has fewer clear ties to a "low" social order. It is a free-wheeling, casual, aggressively colloquial sort of language, but not one linked to either the lower or the specifically criminal classes. Most of the references we have to *slang* or *slang-whanging* in the 1820s and 1830s refer to politicians and newspaper editors, people who might be "vulgar" but who were not "low" in a sociological sense. *Slang* was, as one dictionary defined it, "careless, foolish talk."³ His speech consisted of a dull medley of worn out party slang, the grossest misrepresentation, ran a typical comment, this one dated 1828.⁴ Lewis Tappan, Senator from Ohio, complained on the Senate floor in February of 1840 of the "tirade of newspaper slang and pot-house vituperation."⁵

Almost every example of usage through the 1840s was a negative one.⁶ *Slang* largely functioned as a term of abuse. It was not yet an analytic term in the more formal linguistic discussion of the day. Yet that started to change in the next decade. It is in the 1850s that the first slang dictionary appeared in the English language.⁷ It was in that decade that slang started to be another sort of issue.

Slang became associated with urban life, with fashion, with the breakdown of older ways of life. It was, according to one writer, "that evanescent, vulgar language, ever changing with fashion and taste." People used slang, it was claimed in 1859, "from a desire to appear familiar with the transient nick names and street jokes of the day."⁸

Right from the beginning, people associated slang with the blurring of social hierarchies. It was a way, in other words, for the nation to

trump social class. Walt Whitman, in comments written but unpublished in the 1850s, praised slang as part of a new vernacular nationalism, the new democratic idiom of the United States. Elsewhere he called slang the "lawless germinal element" of language.⁹

Yet Whitman's nationalism, in his own eyes, was not xenophobic. It was embracing, expansive, open to all, adhesive. Whitman early on called the United States a "nation of nations"; claiming that "the best Americanism is the best cosmopolitanism."¹⁰

This last comment assumes at least three things: (a) there are good and bad forms of Americanism; (b) there are good and bad sorts of cosmopolitanism as well; (c) there is no unbreachable and necessary contradiction between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. And, as he wrote in an essay entitled "Slang in America," U.S. slang exhibited all these characteristics. It came from below (from the people), it accepted and brought in words from everyone (Native Americans, women, African Americans), and it bound a people together.¹¹

In the last half of the nineteenth century, *slang*, for the first time, became an important term in the discussion of scholars. It was in the 1870s that scholars began to argue that slang was an important part of the national idiom, joined by certain literary progressives like Whitman. Whitman, who had written notes about slang since the 1850s, finally got around to publishing an essay on the subject in the 1880s. William Dean Howells also defended slang as a part of "democratic" speech. These writers saw slang as appearing everywhere, but saw it as especially important part of the the democratic culture of the United States. A visiting Irish priest put it succinctly in 1870 after being impressed by the breeziness of the American phrase *Right away!* America, he said, is "a great place for slang."¹²

That is not to say that slang was not opposed. There was, right from the start a robust critical tradition that thought slang quite offensive, a lapse of standards. In 1858 Oliver Wendell Holmes called slang "at once a sign and a cause of mental atrophy." It was what "lazy adults" used who could not be troubled to find any "exact meaning."¹³ This sort of comment continued for a century in newspapers, magazines, and school books. And also in at least some important novels. Horatio Alger's *Regged Dick* (1864) and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1968) are both *bildungsromans* for adolescents. In both, slang is an important and explicit issue. Part of the transformation of the street urchin "Dick" into a middle class "Richard" is to learn not to use slang in certain

Kenneth Cmiel

circumstances, principally in front of women. Jo, the heroine of *Little Women*, has to learn not to use slang at all. Through the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the discussion of slang was riddled with implications for gender. And especially in the earlier period, slang was seen as a male activity.

In the last half of the nineteenth century an ongoing debate over slang opened up in the United States. On the one side were those who understood slang as part of the "American" idiom, as part of a vernacular nationalism disconnected from the hierarchic visions of European society. On the other side were those who thought that some standards had to be maintained and that slang was smothering them.

The politics of this vernacular nationalism were complicated and deserve a whole history of their own. The celebration of slang by no means had the same specific meaning from the 1850s through the 1950s. Those linguists who began analyzing slang in the 1870s were, as I've argued elsewhere, engaged in a project to legitimate the authority of technical experts. H.L. Mencken, who loved slang, also had political opinions that were outside the established nationalisms of the time. In fact, he turned to the study of language two times in his life—during World War I and during the 1930s—both times when his political views were so far outside the mainstream (he was pro-Germany in the teens and hostile to the New Deal in the 1930s) that he needed other forms of support.

If the specifics of those who defended slang deserve more careful parsing, it is nonetheless the case that slang was broadly associated over the years with some cultural vernacular nationalism. H.L. Mencken, whatever his distance from political forms of nationalism, sharply distinguished "American English" from "British English," claiming that they were two distinct languages. Not distinct dialects, mind you, but different languages.¹⁴

As late as 1961, slang was capable of generating enormously heated discussion. It was in that year that *Webster's Third International Dictionary of the English Language* was published. The new lexicon spawned an explosive controversy. Polemics and debate swirled through the daily press and weekly journals of opinion. The disgruntled American Heritage Publishing Company tried to buy out Merriam-Webster in order to change the editorial direction of the company. Journalists such as Dwight Macdonald or Theodore Bernstein of the *New York Times* thought the new dictionary an abomination.¹⁵

At the center of the debate was slang. The dictionary's editors, trained in the science of linguistics, had dropped the label "colloquial" and only hesitantly labelled words "slang." As a consequence, those hostile to the dictionary claimed, too many slang words appeared to be standard English that really weren't. *Ain't*, *psycho*, *tight*, *screwy*, and *square* were all supposedly mislabeled. That the dictionary said *ain't* was "used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers" became a key source of contention, with newspapers all over the nation registering their outrage. The new dictionary, according to one prominent journalist, "has methodically removed all guideposts to usage except for an infinitesimal small number . . . and has turned the dictionary into a bewildering wilderness of words . . . It is permissiveness gone mad."¹⁶

The dictionary had its defenders. Once again, the debate set those who saw the colloquial as a lapse in standards against those with a "scientific" view of the idiom on the other. This was the way that native people spoke, according to the dictionary makers. It was the idiom of the nation.



If this set of tensions structured so much cultural debate for a century, new tensions over language have become far more important in the last several decades. One is obscenity. Slang, understood as a language of extreme informality, nevertheless almost completely excluded, in nearly a century of public debates, obscenity. But in the past few decades that has changed. Once again, it needs to be remarked that obscenity has always existed. What has changed between the 1950s and 1980s, however, is that dirty words have entered media space in ways unimaginable earlier. The hip comedian Lenny Bruce began testing "dirty words" in his routines in the early 1960s. In the course of the 1960s all sorts of barriers dropped, by 1969 the rock group Jefferson Airplane releasing a song entitled "Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers." In 1971 the U.S. Supreme Court said that the word *fuck* was constitutionally sanctioned speech. Within a couple of years it had legitimated *motherfucker*.¹⁷

The story here is complicated by countercurrents and limits, but the general trend was clear. When I was a child (of lower middle class parents) I was still being told to avoid slang words like *kids* (for "children"

instead of "goats" or got (instead of "have"). Recently I had to explain to my eight-year old why *suck* it was offensive to many adults.

One place to see this shift was in the evolution of the English dictionary itself. *Webster's Third*, although condemned as an assault on good standards in 1961, did not include the most "vulgar" words of the language. Indeed, from the sixteenth century to 1961, no standard English dictionary had included the "dirtiest" words of the language. Yet in 1969, the *American Heritage Dictionary*, for the first time in history, included both *fuck* and *cunt*. All over U.S. culture, sexually explicit language was appearing where it hadn't appeared before.

If obscenity appeared as a new issue in the 1950s and 1960s, African-American English became an issue in the 1960s and 1970s. Black pride movements of the 1960s generating new respect for African American forms of speech. Breakthrough research by scholars such as J.L. Dillard and William Stewart suggested that African-American speech patterns were not simply "illiterate" English or variations on American folk speech, but were in fact part of a distinct dialect with an internal structure like any other.¹⁸ This is an issue which has waxed and waned in the public mind for the past several generations, complicated by the tension between racial pride and the demands of the labor market for "standard" English. It has not, however, gone away.

Still a third linguistic battleground of recent years has been that of gender. The pioneering work of the Berkeley linguist Robin Lakoff (*Language and Woman's Place*, 1975) has helped set off a huge discussion on all the different ways that language is gendered, a discussion which by no means is confined to the academy. Thanks to Dennis Baron's very informative book *Grammar and Gender* (1986), we now have a sense of how issues of gender and language have a long history in English. But it was in the 1970s, for example, that sustained debate surfaced on the gendered presumptions of keywords like *mantáná*, *chairman*, or *salesman*. *Chairperson*, for example, as a gender neutral alternative to *chairman*, appears first in 1971. Also dating from the 1970s is the contemporary discussion of whether *his* can be used generically to indicate men and women combined ("A lawyer will always use his reasoning skills"), or whether there should be some other, gender-neutral alternative. By the 1980s there was debate over whether God can be referred to as "he."¹⁹

A final issue that has surfaced recently—this one at the close of the 1970s—is that of bi-lingualism. Here the principal fear—one that I find totally unfounded—was that Spanish immigrants and their children

were not and would not learn English. The ultimate worry was balkanization—a permanent linguistic minority inside the United States, one horribly distant from "mainstream" culture.

It was the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 that set off this controversy. The act mandated that non-English speaking students in U.S. public schools were to be taught in their native language until they could learn English. In the last half of the seventies and through the eighties, a huge debate erupted on what these programs actually accomplish, what those who administrate them actually want to happen. In 1983, an organization called "U.S. English" was formed. Its stated purpose was to make English the official language of the nation. In 1987, fully 37 of the 50 states discussed making English the official language of the state. A number of them passed such laws in the next couple of years.²⁰



These are the language debates that now generate passion in the United States. In this environment, it is somewhat difficult to grasp what was so important about that century-long debate over slang and informality. This is not to say that slang dictionaries are no longer produced; that there is no longer popular literature claiming that "America is a great place for slang." In fact, in the past several weeks I've held such texts in my hands. What has happened, though, is that slang is no longer a central issue. What could raise hackles for a century is now so tame that it seems quaint.

What has happened? One thing to notice is the distance that progressive or left forces have now opened up from the very notion of vernacular nationalism. Three of the new debates—those over obscenity, gender neutrality, and African-American English—appeared as part of a direct challenge to ideas of vernacular nationalism.

Consider obscenity. No rank obscenity was a part of that celebration of the vernacular, the 1961 *Webster's Third*. Lenny Bruce, on the other hand, defined himself not as embodying mainstream vernacular but as challenging it. This was a pattern that would continue in obscenity disputes for the next several decades. The push for more liberalized public culture was defined against the evasiveness and continued prudishness of vernacular nationalism. *Slang* became a side issue.

Or consider the discussion of African-American English. Early twentieth-century linguists had thought that to understand Black English as a variation of American speech was progressive. It first of all showed that Black vernacular was not simply vulgar, uneducated, illiterate speech, as white cultural conservatives of the day argued. Second, this understanding folded Black English into the American vernacular. By understanding much of the Black idiom as an adaption of rustic white speech, the claim was being made that Black English was part of the national vernacular.²¹

By the 1970s, however, this idea was attacked as not only wrong about Black speech, but driven by racist presumptions. Scholars such as J.L. Dillard argued that Black English owed its roots to African speech, and that it was a distinct dialect from white folk speech. Here was a challenge in the name of cultural pluralism to the idea of vernacular nationalism.

The same thing can be said in feminist discussions of language. It is the ways in which everyday patterns of speech—not just elite, refined, literary patterns, but everyday vernacular patterns—it is the way that they *all* have contributed to the diminution of women's status that is at issue. Take the example of *chick* used as slang for "woman" ("That chick is something else"). The word worked its way into the American vernacular at the turn of the twentieth century and became widely used after the middle of the 1930s. Into the 1960s, it was a common piece of the popular idiom.²² Today, in many educated circles in the United States, it is a sure sign of tastelessness and vulgarity, of lack of respect for women.

Bi-lingualism is a more complicated subject. While there are some who definitely believe in using such programs to preserve separate cultures, there are others who want bi-lingual education to help bring disparate people together. But whatever the complications, this debate has made argument over slang positively irrelevant.

What was an extraordinarily prominent issue for a century has receded. In large part, progressive culture has edged away from what I've called vernacular nationalism. As that has happened, slang has ceased to be a compelling issue.

In these debates, conservatives are largely reactive. Today conservatives feel compelled to fight against what they often term "political correctness" in speech or to battle against the intrusion of obscenity into public media such as rock music lyrics. With progressives

moving on to issues other than slang, it appears to have dropped out as an important issue for cultural conservatives.

The debates which have dominated the last quarter of a century in the United States are good signs of how cultural difference has moved to center stage in progressive thinking. Terms like "cultural pluralism" and "multiculturalism" themselves have varied meanings. Yet from establishment liberal to the edge of the left, such terms are often used against some claim to a unified nationalism. Indeed, in many articulate progressive circles, nationalism can only be seen as part of a right-wing, reactionary force. The vernacular nationalism that energized Walt Whitman, that generated the defense of slang, that was a part of what the labor historian Gary Gerstle has called "working-class Americanism," has now faded from cultural discussion.²³ Today nationalism is seen as a conservative force, not one that can melt into cosmopolitanism. All those popular books telling readers that the United States is a wonderful place for slang continue to sell the myth, but increasingly to an audience that does not shape the debate. The love of slang, born on the eve of the U.S. Civil War as a celebration of "the people," now fades in the face of the post-nationalist imagination.

There are, I think, two very different images of democracy at play here. Vernacular nationalism depended upon faith in "adhesiveness," to use Whitman's term, the sense that difference can be melted into one plebeian whole without losing one's particularity in the process. That was Whitman's classic dream of what American slang might do. Recent debates, however, question that assumption. Progressive discussion now presents an image of democracy that is not adhesive, binding, sucking everyone into a great embrace, but demanding some sense of autonomous space and recognition. The positive valence for separate space, for not colonizing others, even inadvertently, has become one of the key ways that dignity is accrued. The public recognition of these differences is a second way dignity is built, hence the increased interest in gender issues, bilingualism, and African-American English. This is, comparatively, a more formal vision of democracy, given to *grazitas* instead of *ecstasies*. Democracy is envisioned not as a collective embrace but as acknowledging the worthiness of different peoples. Instead, in other words, of a celebration of slang, we watch our own words and try to respect those of others.

Notes

- 1 c.v. "slang" in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition (Oxford, 1989).
- 2 Noah Webster, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (New Haven, 1806).
- 3 c.v. "slang" in Richard Thornton, *An American Glossary* (New York, 1962). This is a historical dictionary.
- 4 *Richmond Enquirer*, February 14, 1828, p. 2.
- 5 *Congressional Globe*, February 25, 1840, p. 230.
- 6 c.v. "slang" in Thornton, *An American Glossary*; in *A Dictionary of American English*, Sir William Craigie, ed. (Chicago, 1940); and in *A Dictionary of Americanisms*, Mitford Mathews, ed. (Chicago, 1951).
- 7 Richard Camden Hotten, *A Dictionary of Modern Slang* (London, 1859).
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.
- 9 See Walt Whitman, *An American Primer* (Boston, 1904). These were notes on language originally made in the 1850s. For "lawless germinal element," see Walt Whitman, "Slang in America," *North American Review* 141 (November 1885): 431-35.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. viii-ix.
- 11 Whitman, "Slang in America."
- 12 Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Language in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1990) 159-60, 63.
- 13 Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* (1858; reprinted ed., New York: Signet Classics, 1961) 292-93.
- 14 H.L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York, 1919).
- 15 See Herbert Morton, *The Story of Webster's Third: Philip Gove's Controversial Dictionary and Its Critics* (Cambridge, 1994); James Sledsd and Wilma Ebbitt, *Dictionaries and THAT Dictionary: A Casebook on the Aims of Lexicography and the Targets of Reviewers* (New York, 1962).
- 16 quoted in Morton, *The Story of Webster's Third*, 179.
- 17 On Lenny Bruce, see Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (Chicago, 1965); for other discussion of the shifts in "dirty" speech, see Kenneth Cmiel, "The Politics of Civility," in David Farber, ed., *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill, 1994) 263-90; Kenneth Wilson, *Van Winkle's Return: Change in American English, 1966-1986* (Hanover, 1987).
- 18 J.L. Dillard, *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (New York, 1972); William Stewart, "Foreign Language Methods in Quasi-Foreign Language Situations," in Roger Shuy, ed., *Social Dialects and Language Learning* (Washington D.C., 1965).

- 19 For the emergence of these debates, see Dennis Baron, *Grammar and Gender* (New Haven, 1986).
- 20 For a useful primer of information and discussion, see Bee Callegos, ed., *English: Our Official Language?* (New York, 1994).
- 21 For an excellent example of this reasoning, see George Philip Krapp, "The English of the Negro," *American Mercury* 2 (June 1924): 150-95.
- 22 c.v. "chick" in *The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (New York, 1994).
- 23 Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Cambridge, 1989)