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Editors' introduction

This chapter deals with slang – a subject of perennial interest to college students and to many other age groups. As Connie Eble notes, slang words and expressions cannot be reliably distinguished from other vocabulary items by how they sound or how they are constructed. (Like other vocabulary innovations, they may draw on old words or parts of words, and make use of metaphor, irony, and metonymy.) Instead, slang is usually deliberately chosen over more conventional vocabulary to send a social signal – to mark informality, irreverence, or defiance; to add humor; or to mark one's inclusion in, admiration for, or identification with a social group, often a non-mainstream group. Slang is, as she suggests, vocabulary with attitude.

Slang is most commonly created and used by youth (see chapter 19 on language and adolescence) and it is often ephemeral in nature, like fashions in clothes or cars. But some slang terms persist for long periods, like *bull* 'empty talk,' while others, over time, become general American colloquialisms, like *buck* 'dollar' (which dates from 1856). Slang is most commonly used to describe types of people, relationships, social activities, and behavior (e.g., inebriation, which boasts more slang terms, in the USA, than any other concept), and judgments of acceptance or rejection.

Two important elements in American slang are non-mainstream cultures and music, and from both perspectives the ethnic group that has made the most significant contributions to slang in recent times is African Americans. Through African American musicians, entertainers, and sports figures, as well as the mass media, slang words like *nitty-gritty*, *gig*, *cool*, *diss*, *homeboy*, and *word* have spread from the African American community to young people in particular and the American public more generally. (On rap and hip hop, see chapter 21.) Sharing in-vogue slang words like these provides a measure of psychological security while allowing individuals to adopt and explore more daring social personas.

Language is subject to fashion – just as automobiles, clothing, food, architecture, home furnishings, and other indicators of status are. What is in or out of fashion changes constantly. For example, in the late 1990s the Jeep (now a registered trademark of DaimlerChrysler) became a status symbol. However, the jeep (whose name is probably from the abbreviation *g.p.*, for *general purpose*) began as a no-frills, all-purpose vehicle used by the military during World War II. After the war, the jeep had no glamorous associations to make it a desirable or prestigious purchase for private citizens. It was not then a fashionable car. A half century later,

though, a thoroughly contemporary Jeep came into style in the United States as one of the class of luxurious and expensive *sports utility vehicles* so much in favor in suburbia today. The wartime workhorse turned into a prized thoroughbred, and early models are now collectors' items. The fashion value of items can go down also. Thrift shops throughout the United States are museums of various fashions that have swept the nation: macramé hanging baskets, shag carpets, fondue pots, polyester leisure suits, cabbage patch dolls, teenage mutant ninja turtles, Ataris, Nintendos, and many others. At one point each of these items was perceived nationally as new, interesting, progressive, or fun, and their owners enjoyed the feeling of being up-to-date and in-the-know. Sometimes the outmoded can even emerge into fashion for a second or third life, as happened at the end of the 1990s with extremely short skirts, very high thin heels on women's shoes, swing dancing, and other *retro* styles.

Words and phrases can be items of fashion too, giving their users pleasure and assurance. The use of trendy vocabulary can be just as important to status or image as can preferences in hairstyles, clothing, music, or possessions. Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century who characterize 'something excellent' as *tubular* or 'something repulsive' as *grody to the max* reveal themselves to be behind the times, stuck culturally in the era of Valley Girl chic of the mid 1980s. A decade later in the late 1990s, under the influence of urban African American music and styles, *phat* and *da bomb* became favored terms for 'excellent' among adolescents and young adults, and *skanky* and *ghetto* meant 'unappealing.' Ever-changing fashionable vocabulary of this sort is usually a deliberate alternative to more stable neutral terms that are already available to speakers. For instance, *tubular* or *phat* can be paraphrased with words from the general vocabulary like *excellent* or *exceptionally good*. Yet, in totality of meaning, *tubular* and *phat* are not equivalent to *excellent* and *exceptionally good*. *Tubular* and *phat* send social signals that their conventional counterparts do not. Their use can show what group or what trend in the larger culture a speaker is identifying with or can convey an attitude of extreme casualness, flippancy, or irreverence. Deliberate alternative vocabulary that sends social signals is called *slang*.

No one can distinguish slang from other words or phrases that constitute the ordinary, general vocabulary of a language either by what slang sounds like or by how it is constructed. As a matter of fact, slang almost always arises from recycling words and parts of words that are already in the language and assigning them additional meanings – which is exactly how the non-slang vocabulary grows too. Here are some examples of slang that most Americans would recognize. *Magic bullet* 'something that cures or prevents disease or a problem' is a compound of two readily recognizable English words. The slang words *megatravel* and *megabooks* are formed by adding the trendy prefix *mega-* (meaning 'large quantities of') to standard words. *Freaky* 'frightening' and *peachy* 'wonderful' both add the ordinary adjective-forming suffix *-y* to the nouns *freak* and *peach*, which have different meanings as slang. Little words like *out*, *off*, and *up* are often added to a word to create a slang expression, like the verbs *pig out* 'eat voraciously,' *kick off*

'begin,' and *pick up on* 'notice.' Slang words are often the result of shortening, as in *bro* from *brother* or *OD* from *overdose*. Some words do not change form at all when they function as slang but do evoke a new meaning. For example, the verb *fry* in slang means 'electrocute'; the noun *lettuce* designates 'paper money'; and the adjective *cool* means 'pleasant, desirable.' In evoking new meanings without changing the shape of the word, slang often relies on the same processes of indirect reference that poetry does, making use of figures of speech like metaphor (*porcelain god* for 'toilet'), irony (*bad* for 'good'), and metonymy (*wheels* for 'car').

Slang vocabulary rarely refers to meanings that the ordinary vocabulary does not have words to express. Nor do slang items develop as alternatives to the entire expanse of meaning covered by the standard vocabulary of English. For example, abstractions like *oligarchy*, technical terms like *calibrate*, physical phenomena like *gravity*, and countless words from specialized subject areas do not inspire slang equivalents. Slang tends to refer to types of people, relationships between people, social activities and behavior, and judgments of acceptance or rejection. Common slang meanings are represented by items such as *dipstick* 'stupid person,' *goldbricker* 'shirker,' *big enchilada* 'important person,' *numero uno* 'self,' *fuzz* 'police,' *fink out* 'withdraw support,' *gross out* 'disgust,' and *rip off* 'steal.' Historically, in English the single meaning with the greatest number of slang synonyms has been 'impaired by drinking alcohol.' Standard English vocabulary expresses this meaning with at least three words: ordinary and neutral *drunk* and less frequent and more formal *intoxicated* and *inebriated*. However, slang synonyms for this condition number in the thousands, for example, *blitzed*, *juiced*, *looped*, *polluted*, *smashed*, *soused*, *tanked*, and *wasted*. A speaker who chooses a slang expression for this condition conveys emotional or attitudinal meaning in addition to simple denotation.

The social and psychological complexities encoded in slang vocabulary make the term *slang* difficult to define precisely. For purposes of study, slang must be distinguished from other subsets of the vocabulary such as *dialect words* or *regionalisms*, *jargon*, *profanity* or *obscenity*, *colloquialism*, and *cant* or *argot* – even though slang can share some characteristics with each of these and can overlap them.

Slang is not geographically restricted vocabulary. For example, in southern parts of the USA people across the social spectrum wear *toboggans* 'knit caps' in winter; they *mash* 'press' buttons on elevators and remote controls; they have *hissy fits* 'bouts of temper or agitation'; and they complain that a child's room is a *hoorah's nest* 'untidy mess.' These uses are not slang; they are dialect or regional terms. Yet some slang items can be associated with a particular region, for example, *guy* with North America and *bloke* with Britain.

Jargon is, strictly speaking, the vocabulary needed to do a job or to pursue a specialized interest, for example, *phonology*, *syntax*, and *semantics* for the study of language or *iambic pentameter*, *free verse*, and *villanelle* for the study of poetry. Of course, in addition to jargon people who work together or have a

common interest can develop a slang vocabulary, which usually conveys feelings and attitudes and unity of spirit. Americans who devote their weekends to reenacting Civil War encampments and battles, for instance, have a term for those who lack commitment to absolute historic authenticity. They are called *farbs* (perhaps from *barf* ‘vomit’ spelled approximately backwards). The synthetic fabrics of their long underwear are *farby*, and their general *farbiness* is not admired by the painstakingly accurate reenactors who call themselves *hardcores*. Civil War reenactors are careful to use precise jargon for armaments and maneuvers, but in their casual interactions they reinforce their solidarity by using slang vocabulary that changes and develops from one weekend to the next.

The taboo subjects of a culture customarily give rise to vocabulary that the general society judges profane or obscene. In the United States, as in many other parts of the world, sex and bodily elimination have traditionally been uncomfortable topics for conversation, and many words and expressions that refer to these topics are objectionable in public settings. Yet only some of these expressions are slang, for example, *slampiece* ‘sexual partner’ and *dump a load* ‘defecate.’ Moreover, most American slang expressions – particularly those items sustained by the national popular culture – are not obscene, though they may certainly be inappropriate in some contexts for reasons of insensitivity rather than obscenity. Slang *croak* or *buy the farm* instead of standard *die* would probably not be said in offering condolences to a grieving friend.

Colloquialisms belong to the spoken part of language and are seldom written except in direct quotation of speech. Because slang is largely spoken rather than written, it is usually colloquial. But not all colloquial expressions are slang. Sayings like *poor as Job’s turkey* and *scarcer than hen’s teeth* and the nationally used *shut up* for ‘be quiet’ or *That’s incredible!* qualify as colloquialisms. Yet they are not slang.

Cant and argot refer to the specialized and sometimes secret vocabulary of underworld groups whose activities often skirt the borders of what is lawful. The group-identifying vocabulary of thieves, con-artists, prisoners, drug addicts, and other marginalized segments of society has always been a major source of slang and colloquial vocabulary in English. The argot of the racetrack, for instance, is responsible for a number of words that now apply more generally than to horse racing: a *piker* is an ‘unimportant or inconsequential participant,’ a *ringer* an ‘illegal substitution,’ and a *shoo-in* an ‘easy win.’

The compiling and publication of lists and dictionaries of English slang has gone on steadily for over two hundred years. However, only in the past twenty years has the analysis of slang been undertaken as a part of the expanding inquiry into the intersection of language and social factors. In a pioneering article in 1978, two linguists explored the inadequacy of the definition of the term *slang*. They showed that slang is a category of vocabulary that is identifiable by its effects rather than by its form or meanings. Slang is like an inside joke and depends on the consciousness of shared knowledge between speaker and hearer. Fundamentally,

slang arises from the social rather than from the ideational functions of language (Dumas and Lighter 1978).

Despite the difficulty of defining the term, slang does have some consistent characteristics. Slang is ephemeral, entering the lexical choices of its users and falling into disuse at a more rapid rate than the vocabulary as a whole. Slang is used in informal situations where spontaneous rather than planned language is the norm. Slang identifies its users with a group or an attitude. Slang projects at least a nuance of irreverence or defiance toward what is proper.

Most slang is created, used briefly by a small number of speakers, and forgotten before it is ever recorded in a list of slang expressions or noticed by a dictionary maker. Among themselves, for example, suitemates in a college residence hall might use the name of an overly anxious parent to refer to 'nervous agitation,' as in "Don't be so marianna – you're gonna ace that test." At the end of the semester the suitemates go in different directions, interact with different people, and no longer think to use *marianna* in this way. The life cycle of one slang word has thus been completed. Thousands of other slang words may enjoy longer and more widespread use, sometimes retaining the flavor of slang but sometimes moving into the colloquial and less formal ranges of standard usage. The American *buck* for 'dollar,' first attested as slang in 1856, is probably now more accurately classified as a colloquialism. On the other hand, *bull* 'empty talk' and its vulgar equivalent *bullshit* have been in use for a century and are judged by dictionary makers still to convey the nuances of slang. Like fashion, many items of slang exhibit peaks of popularity. As an expression of enthusiastic approval, *the cat's pajamas* is associated with the roaring 1920s, *groovy* with the drug culture of the late 1960s, and *awesome* with the surfing and Valley Girl image emanating from California in the 1980s. Also like fashion, old slang can reemerge with renewed vigor. The adjective *hot* 'sexually attractive' is abundantly documented from the 1920s as used by males to refer to females. Its popularity soared again in the more gender-egalitarian 1990s, but then just as likely used by females to refer to males and giving rise to *hottie* for 'good-looking male; boyfriend.' Commonly, one slang term yields to another. For instance, for commenting negatively, *the pits* lost ground to *sucks*: "This weather is the pits" vs. "This weather sucks." As with fashion, value is associated with the newest version.

The injection of slang decreases the formality or dignity of speech or writing. In general, styles of language use that are comparatively formal are deemed suitable and sometimes necessary for serious and important occasions. As a result, vocabulary that conveys little about the speaker or the speaker's attitude toward the subject matter or audience has been the norm in impersonal public contexts, and slang is avoided. Compare "The Secretary of State appeared *uninformed* about the border dispute" with "The Secretary of State appeared *clueless* (*out to lunch, an airhead, spacey*) about the border dispute." However, the ability of slang momentarily to disrupt the serious tone particularly of spoken pronouncements can make it a useful means of adding humor, easing tension or establishing

rapport with an audience. In one case of this kind, a government official had been diagnosed with cancer and was undergoing treatment for the dreaded disease. At the end of a press conference about public policy, a reporter, voicing the concern of everyone present, asked about the official's health. The official diffused the tension with the answer: "Chemotherapy sucks."

Because in the USA today most forms of social interaction, including language, have been moving in the direction of informality, the criterion of informality as a defining characteristic of slang is probably limited. Laborers' denim overalls have become expensive designer fashions. Baseball caps are seen everywhere out of doors, and most wearers do not feel compelled to remove them indoors. Few restaurants enforce a coat-and-tie dress code for men or a no-pants policy for women. Widows no longer observe a prolonged period of mourning by wearing black. Many offices have designated Friday as "dress down day" when employees eagerly wear jeans, tennis shoes, and tee-shirts to work. Conventions and colors of table settings are more varied and creative. Receiving lines at wedding receptions have been replaced by the happy couples circulating among the guests, and at large banquets the head table with its diners awkwardly facing the entire assembly is disappearing. Many college professors invite students to call them by their first names, and twenty-something Americans are not uncomfortable using first names with people of their grandparents' generation.

Language use reflects this more comfortable approach to social interaction. Rarely in spoken American English is formal discourse more appropriate than informal. Even in discussions of the most pressing problems facing the United States conducted in highly structured formats, informal vocabulary occurs frequently. The weekly program *Washington Week in Review* features four prominent journalists interpreting the important events of the preceding week for the public television audience. The subject matter is important and serious, and the panelists have expert knowledge. Yet the interchange between participants gives the impression of casual friendliness, and informal vocabulary peppers the discussion. For example, commenting on the coming congressional election, one said, "California is the odd-man-out in this election" (David Broder on October 16, 1998). Another described the State of the Union address as "a speech to the nation and Congress that said, 'I ain't going nowhere'" (Mara Liason on January 22, 1999). When formality is called for, as on ceremonial occasions such as inaugurating public officials or burying them, speakers usually read from a prepared written text.

In the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, the editor traces the escalation of informality in America to the tremendous explosion in mass communication that took place around the beginning of the twentieth century. Improved technology allowed the print media for the first time to reach a national and multi-class audience. Between the Civil War and World War I, the number of daily newspapers in the United States increased over ten times, many carrying the new vernacular art form of the 1890s, the comic strip (Lighter 1994: xxvi–xxvii). Soon phonograph records, movies, radio, and television quickly expanded the

means of disseminating a national popular culture, making the national spread of slang and other ephemeral vocabulary possible. By the 1990s the alliance of technology and marketing made the fashionable vocabulary of the United States a sign of being in-the-know throughout the world. Slang is the distinctive vocabulary of groups or of people who wish to identify with a popular or avant-garde style.

It has been well documented in English-speaking contexts since the eighteenth century that social groups are breeding grounds for an idiosyncratic vocabulary to enhance their solidarity (Lighter 1994, Bailey 1996). Groups that operate on the periphery of society – thieves, drug addicts, musicians and nightclub performers, con-artists, carnival workers, prisoners, and enlisted personnel in the military, to name a few – seem particularly adept at creating slang. Some of these groups are indeed on the edges of respectable society and engage in activities that are immoral if not illegal. Others – like low-ranking military personnel – feel isolated from society because they lack freedom and ordinary access to the channels of power. Most groups that are known for creative and colorful slang lead lives in which the printed word, mastery of the written forms of English, and formal education are not important. By contrast, their oral language is often rich, complex, and powerful, and they live by using it effectively. Rap music is a recent and commercially successful product of one marginal group's cultivation of language as a social weapon, the group being young African Americans from urban ghettos.

The group-identifying functions of slang are indisputable, perhaps because they are so obvious and have been experienced by nearly everyone. Speakers use slang when they want to be creative, clear, and acceptable to a select group. Slang can serve to include and slang can serve to exclude. Knowing and keeping up with constantly changing in-group vocabulary is often an unstated requirement of group membership, and failure to talk the talk can result in discomfort or estrangement. In addition, a group's slang often provides users with automatic linguistic responses that assign others to either an in crowd or an out crowd. For example, in 1998 undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill had at least sixteen nouns to label someone negatively: *bama*, *busta*, *chode*, *donut*, *dork*, *geek*, *gimp*, *goober*, *gromit*, *herb*, *loser*, *muppet*, *sherm*, *tool*, *wienie*, and *zero*. Among the same speakers, a positive experience could be *all that*, *bad*, *blaze*, *da bomb*, *bout it*, *cool*, *dope*, *groovy*, *hype*, *kickass*, *neat*, *phat*, *radical*, *rocking*, *the shit*, *slamming*, *smoking*, *sweet*, and *tight*.

Some slang indicates knowledge of contemporary currents in popular and widespread culture rather than affiliation with a particular group. If expressions like *channel surf* 'use a remote control device to sample television programs quickly,' *chick flick* 'film that appeals to females,' *go postal* 'lose control, act insane,' and *senior moment* 'temporary loss of thought or memory' can be considered slang at all, they are a kind of national slang and say little or nothing about group identification. This kind of vocabulary has been called *secondary slang* (as opposed to the *primary slang* of groups) and one lexicographer predicts that in the future it will be the major type of slang in the United States (Chapman 1986: xii). Words and expressions that become part of secondary slang may well

be acquired from groups, but usually via television, films, music, and the like rather than through personal interaction with members of the originating group. For example, the terms *high five* and *raise the roof* and their accompanying gestures now serve as ‘signs of affirmation, exhilaration, or victory’ to all ages and classes throughout the United States. But they were originally innovated and made popular by African American sports figures and performers. Another item of secondary slang from African American sources spread by the mass media is *attitude* ‘uncooperative, resentful, hostile, or condescending state of mind.’

Slang is vocabulary with *attitude*. It opposes established authority. Groups that have historically developed colorful slang usually have little political power or may have reason to hide what they know or what they do from people in authority. They stand outside the publicly sanctioned structures of power – a relationship that inspires *attitude* rather than cooperation. The attitude projected by slang can range from downright subversion to slight irreverence. Regardless of the degree of opposition, however, as one commentator observed during the roaring twenties, “the spirit of slang is that of open hostility to the reputable” (McKnight 1923: 46). Incarcerated criminals offer an example of the subversive end of the continuum. Prisoners wield their language like a weapon, sometimes for contest and display – using it to release pent-up aggression, to express fear and terror, to retaliate against their treatment, and to gain authority among fellow prisoners. For many other groups that cultivate slang and for those who use secondary slang, the irreverence is ordinarily targeted at social customs, and the opposition to authority consists of breaches of good taste. For instances, *brain fart* for ‘mental error’ is indelicate, and *asshole* for ‘incompetent or unlikable person’ is vulgar. Even an innocuous expression like *couch potato* for ‘someone who lies around doing nothing except perhaps watching television’ carries a tinge of irreverence – toward the work ethic that is widely honored as the basis of the success of the USA.

Informal and colloquial vocabulary, including slang, is thriving as the USA enters the era of the *global village* made possible by the end of the Cold War and by the rapid development of the information superhighway. American slang today shows both continuity with the past and those elements of fresh appeal that are required by fashion. Aside from the primary slang of counter-cultural groups in which age is often not a factor, slang is associated with youth or with an effort to project a youthful image. Adolescents and young adults don’t attempt to be *cool* by imitating the behavior, styles, or vocabulary of the middle-aged and elderly. The direction of imitation is the opposite. Although older people may be the models and arbiters of *standard* language use, young people are the primary purveyors of slang.

The phrase *youth culture* did not emerge until 1962 (Lighter 1994: xxxviii), but the first signs of youth culture and its linguistic manifestations appeared in the 1920s (Dalzell 1996). The Great Depression of the early 1930s took young people off the farms and out of the workplace and put them together in high schools, thus creating a generation we now refer to as *teenagers* (Dalzell 1996: 26).

In chronologically cataloging the slang of successive generations of middle-class American youth, *Flappers 2 Rappers* describes the crucial role of mass communication in making a national youth culture possible.

Many patterns and consistencies are apparent in thousands of slang expressions from across the decades, and two particularly noteworthy ones are the importance of non-mainstream cultures and the importance of music (Dalzell 1996). These are indeed the two salient factors at work in current American slang, where the music and styles of African Americans dominate.

The group that has had the greatest impact on American slang in general has been African Americans. According to the *New Dictionary of American Slang*, “Close analysis would probably show that, what with the prominence of black people in the armed forces, in music, in the entertainment world, and in street and ghetto life, the black influence on American slang has been more pervasive in recent times than that of any other ethnic group in history” (Chapman 1986: xi). Some 435 slang items in the dictionary are associated with African Americans (Eble 1996: 80–83). Many of these have been adopted into general informal use, and their users may be unaware of their African American origins, for example, *bug* ‘pester,’ *the nitty-gritty* ‘harsh reality,’ *ripoff* ‘theft,’ and *do one’s own thing* ‘follow one’s own inclination.’ For a period of five years ending in 1998, one linguist tracked the occurrence of sixty-nine verbal expressions associated with African Americans in the *Daily Press*, a mainstream newspaper of the Virginia Peninsula (Lee 1999). Although she found instances of the items in articles of local, national, and international scope, as well as in syndicated columns and stories from wire services, they clustered in editorials and comic strips and in portions of the newspaper dedicated to celebrities, sports, and entertainment. That is, African American expressions were more typical in those parts of the newspaper that pertain to culture and personal opinion than to newsworthy events. The items of highest frequency were *cool*, *gig*, and *hip* – now a part of at least the recognition vocabulary of all generations and all segments of American society. Americans in general have a largely unconscious and superficial knowledge of vocabulary of African American origin, but young adults in mainstream America have knowingly and eagerly adopted that vocabulary. A study of college slang at one American university during the period 1972–93 showed that seven of the forty terms most frequently identified as slang entered the student vocabulary from African American usage: *jam* ‘have a good time, perform well,’ *diss* ‘criticize, belittle,’ *bad* ‘good,’ *homeboy/homey* ‘person from one’s hometown, friend,’ *dude* ‘male,’ *word/word up* ‘I agree,’ and *fox/foxy* ‘attractive female, attractive’ (Eble 1996: 84).

Vocabulary from non-mainstream cultures often strikes mainstreamers as novel, rich, and imaginative. It suggests a way of life with greater fun and excitement than the well-regulated lives of most. Adopting the vocabulary of a non-mainstream culture is a way of sharing vicariously in the plusses of that culture without having to experience the minuses associated with it. Users of selective vocabulary drawn from other than mainstream cultures are, in the words

of one dictionary maker, “*pretending*, momentarily, in a little shtick of personal guerilla theater, to be a member of a street gang, or a criminal, or a gambler, or a drug user, or a professional football player, and so forth – and hence to express one’s contempt, superiority, and cleverness by borrowing someone else’s verbal dress” (Chapman 1986: xii). In the USA at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is the hip-hop scene developed by African Americans that is the alluring non-mainstream culture.

The power of music to form connections among people separated by distance, class, ethnicity, opportunity, and even language cannot be disputed. Conservative older generations in democratic societies as well as totalitarian governments have recognized the ideological potential of music and have sought to censor it. When advances in technology made the transmission of music easier, quicker, and less expensive, music became a defining, and often defiant, characteristic of non-mainstream cultures. Today rap music is the primary vehicle of the incipient international youth culture spreading across the planet. The elder statesman of the verbal art form, Chuck D. of *Public Enemy*, writes, “I’ve been to 40 countries, and I testify that this grass-roots transformation of culture has spread over the planet like a worldwide religion for those 25 and under” (Chuck D. 1999: 66). There is even a twenty-five-page scholarly study written in German analyzing “the appropriation and the re-coding of American hip-hop culture in Italy” (Scholz 1998: 257). (For more on the topic of hip hop, see chapter 21 of this volume.)

Like other items of fashion, slang is a human strategy for keeping in balance the unique, isolated self and the social self. A distinct vocabulary shared with others can bolster psychological security, helping people to both enjoy and endure life together. A fashionable vocabulary gives people a way to adopt another self – a more daring and exciting social self – whose day-to-day life is governed in large part by interaction with others and by the expectations of the culture.

Suggestions for further reading and exploration

The name most associated with slang and other kinds of non-mainstream vocabulary of the English-speaking world is Eric Partridge. In numerous revisions and reprintings, his books *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1984) and *A Dictionary of the Underworld, British and American* (1968) represent the best-known collections of English slang of the twentieth century.

Three major dictionaries of American slang have been published in the past forty years. *Dictionary of American Slang* by Wentworth and Flexner (1960) included many words of everyday American life that had never been printed in a dictionary before, as well as appendices of word lists organized by word-building processes, users, and subject matter. Flexner’s explanation of the nature and use of slang (“Preface to the *Dictionary of American Slang*” [reprinted in Chapman 1986: xvii–xxviii]) has still not been surpassed. A completely revised dictionary based on Wentworth and Flexner was published in 1986 with the title *New Dictionary*

of *American Slang* (Chapman 1986). It has now been revised and the original title reinstated (Chapman 1995). Among the innovations of these most recent revisions are typographic marks called *impact symbols* that warn readers of the relative offensiveness of a slang expression. The multi-volume *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (Lighter 1994 and 1997, with further volumes to come) is the most ambitious project of American slang lexicography. It is the work of a single scholar, who began collecting slang as a teenager, and the first volume contains an excellent essay on the history of slang in America. Dalzell (1996) traces the development of the slang of middle-class American youth, and *Cool: the Signs and Meanings of Adolescence* (Danesi 1994) illustrates the role of talk among high school students in Toronto in the early 1990s. *Slang U!* (Munro 1989) shows the in-group vocabulary in use among students at UCLA during a single academic year.

The world wide web has brought the collecting of words into a new era for professional and amateur dictionary makers alike. The publishers Merriam-Webster <http://www.m-w.com> and Random House <http://www.randomhouse.com> maintain free user-friendly websites about words. Customarily they feature “new words” and a “word of the day,” many of which are slang. Word lovers surfing the web need not be content with the sites of commercial publishers, however. *World Wide Words* <http://www.quinion.com/words/> contains articles about the origin, usage, and meaning of various words, as well as lists and citations of brand new words, mostly from British sources. Webpages devoted to slang are as ephemeral as slang itself, with new ones being spun and others turning into cobweb sites every day.

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