

## **Slinguistics or just lemon meringue?**

**Tony Thorne**

I was somewhat surprised to be asked to address a gathering devoted largely to important issues such as widening participation and technology-based learning, and somewhat relieved (and not at all offended) to be told that I was there to provide some light relief. In this spirit I have used a question and an opposition as my title. I'll explain the first part of this facetious contrast right away and the second element a little later.

One of my own students, president of the College hip-hop society, was inspired to undertake a PhD, the subject of which is the influence of hip-hop language (including rap) and associated attitudes on adolescent behaviour. As he became enthused by the subject area and began to consult the wide range of both orthodox and unorthodox sources available, he declared that he had discovered an obscure but exciting new practice which he dubbed 'slinguistics'. I'd like to suggest that he was not completely deluded in choosing to treat this once (perhaps still) stigmatised language variety and its practitioners seriously.

In the past twelve months there have been several irruptions, if that is the right word, of slang in to the national conversation. Each of them was in its way an example of linguistic 'unseemliness'. The first one was a public complaint by a head teacher that pupils were communicating using a slang code, heavily influenced by the language of hip-hop (reports focused on 'bling', one of the few well-known items in their lexicon), to the presumed detriment of their studies. Although such assertions are regularly reported in the USA, this was the first example I had come across in the UK, and the head teacher in question was no conservative but the head of Lillian Bayliss Technology School in Lambeth, South London, a flagship of multicultural education. Some months later the same school was in the news again on the occasion of an official visit by the Prime Minister and the then Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly. During the visit pupils were reported to have booed their distinguished guests. When questioned by reporters these teenagers claimed that they had in fact been chanting the word 'boom', a slang term of admiration and approval. I was consulted by several newspapers and confirmed that 'boom' is indeed an afrocaribbean word which usually means a wild party or celebration, but suspected that the pupils may indeed have been booing and had been clever enough to exploit a resemblance and usage which outsiders were unfamiliar with.

More recently still there was a very different instance of slang-based controversy, when the radio DJ Chris Moyles was taken to task for dismissing a ring-tone as 'gay' on air. He was using the word as a non-homophobic, generalised term of derision in the way that many British teenagers have been doing since around 2000 and US adolescents since the early 1980s. The debate which followed was conducted at a surprisingly sophisticated level with some gays actually defending the inevitable mutation of language, some parents and teachers underlining the risks of moving to accept ambivalent, discriminatory terminology and others highlighting the appropriation of adolescent language by adults, its motives and its implications.

I would like to show you, with one eye on the notion of light relief, three further authentic examples of slang and the discussion of slang, this time in all cases 'managed' by young people themselves, rather than by the press or professional academics.

The first one is a study entitled 'Rudeschool versus Dudeschool', carried out by a university undergraduate among contemporaries at an art school in the South of

England, investigating how members of a particular clique of art students were creating an identity for themselves, differentiating themselves from the rest of the student body. Rudeschool was this small in-group of self-designated 'cool' students who were studying animation and graphics; Dudeschool was their term both for tedious outsiders, and for the student union premises, where conformists congregate. They refer to other students dismissively as 'dudents'.

ED: Yes all right...in a minute...yeah ...all right, shall we go to the Dudeschool?

RICK: Let's go to the union!

ED: I hate the union!

MARK: Woo-hoo! Dudeschool!

ED: I hate the union, mass instigator!

JO: What's going on?

JADE: We're going to Dudeschool.

MARK: Gemma's there. She was gurning like last night

ED: Man, that's a shit mission. Dudeschool.

JO: Yeah she's fully dudeschool...she's fucking dudent.

ED: She's a freaking artfag...she's like...she's mad for her woolly jumpers man...she's mad fine art.

JADE: Isn't she on your course?

JO: Yeah but she's still fine art.

ED: She's mad fine art, fucking pretentious spod. I hate her.

JADE: At least she's doing something.

ED: Nah, I hate her...Rudeschool!

ALL: Rudeschool!

At first sight the repetition of catchphrases and emblematic terms, the profanity and (deliberate) inanity of the conversation confirms dismissals of slang use as impoverished, restricted, semantically uninteresting. The function is familiar, that of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion by a peer group. As linguistic behaviour this banter has something in common with boasting, 'capping' or one-upmanship, or ritualised 'cussing out' (denigrating). In the context of the study what is interesting is that the recordings and analysis were shared with Rudeschool members who then shared them in turn with a selection of 'dudents', leading to a fruitful –predictably lively - debate about social identities, behaviour and status.

The second example is from a project carried out by undergraduates in collaboration with secondary school students in three West London secondary schools. Its purpose was a limited survey of slang usage, and a comparison between the three schools to see if there was a core lexicon that the three schools had in common. A list of the most frequently cited terms is appended, showing that transgressive language is prestigious, that over 80% of terms collected originate in Black speech (and incidentally that register may indeed pose problems even for researchers, who here have glossed some slang terms with slang definitions). Reproduced here is a sequence from the interviews that took place with key informants.

S: It's like there was like this guy in um our school called S\*\*\*\*\* like he used to use so much slang and like before he came into our form like all of us were just normal, but ever since he came everyone, the whole class, just literally picked up all these

words and stuff and like we started using them as well, and it's like if you listen to a song that's newly out and you keep listen [sic] to the song obviously you're gonna get used to the words and you'll know the lyrics off by heart and it's the same like with S\*\*\*\*\*, like the words he kept using we picked them up.

I: Who is this guy?

S: Oh he got um permanently excluded.

I: Oh [laughs] so obviously I can't interview him. Why did he get excluded?

S: I think he stabbed someone or something.

This little extract points up what we already know about slang; that there are in the user community slang impresarios, expert users, and they influence their fellows. We do not have S's ethnic profile, but it's quite likely that he's an Afro-Caribbean male, or a Bengali male, given the inversion of social status that obtains in the slang-user community (he may alternatively be a 'wigger'- see below). He is obviously a leading transgressor, seeming to confirm slang as an 'anti-language', as a transgressive code employed by what Halliday called an 'anti-society' within a dominant society.

In 2004 there was a report by a marketing agency designed to help manufacturers sell youth culture to the youth market. Its main finding, not surprisingly, was that black culture, loosely conceived as 'hip-hop culture', had become dominant, particularly since there is currently no alternative, subversive white youth movement that could appeal to young people. Again, that emblematic word *bling* and its connotations were picked up on in the report. It seemed to me that, although conducted partly in slang, the online discussions that took place after publication, prompted by the posting of this report on websites, were again sophisticated, going into some depth about how the media views hip-hop culture and how each manipulates the other, how adults view its attitudes and language, and how young people relate to its often controversial poses. The following is a brief edited extract.

*'Yo Blingland!*

*Whereas previous white generations had acid house or punk, today's teens have to look to black culture for their inspiration....many mainstream adults find black music and culture inaccessible and shocking... An increasing number of white youths now talk with a Jamaican patois which they have dubbed 'Blinglish' - a reference which suggests the marriage of English to black street culture's love of ostentatious displays of wealth, known as 'bling'.*

TRBI agency report

GAZELLE: They am chattin fluff –dis bling thing. It's bling or bling-age or blingage, but it don't exist. It's blang anyway. Blinglish...hahahah, when these wigga words mentioned it's nothing to do with hip-hop.

THRILLA: I thought everyone knew that word, it's not wigger-talk lol it's called SLANG a way for youths to communicate and I agree wit whoever said the Jamaican accent ain't needed and it isn't I'm white and I talk a little slang and I type slang cos it's easier...

ANNI: What is it with the changing up words bizness? It's not just black these days, peeps is using asian too. Like pata or pati means the same as mashup or mampi. Nangin is from asian and yout say that everywhere.

We don't know of course the age, gender or ethnic background of these people – although we can guess that the first one may be Afrocaribbean or at least sees themselves as an expert user of Black British vernacular, which is what they're posting

– ‘chatting’ – in. They ridicule the way the report and the media talk about ‘bling’ or ‘bling-lish’. And they talk about ‘wigger words’ – ‘wigger’ is a ‘wannabe or white nigger’, somebody who has impersonated an expert user of Black language. But then Thrilla – Thrilla says he or she is white – dismisses the categories of wigger talk or bling because the simple term ‘slang’ now characterises the language of youth. Anni, who may or may not be from a South Asian background, says young people are incorporating Asian terms, too, like *pata* or *pati*, actually obscure terms meaning (like the Afrocaribbean ‘mashup’ and ‘mampi’) messy, disordered, unacceptable. But ‘nanging’ or ‘nang’, which (s)he also singles out are more significant terms in that some youngsters employ ‘nang-slang’ as a catch-all designation of their new code. Nang probably originates in a Bengali word for naked and has become a widely recognised emblem of London street language, adopted across the UK.

There are some common and understandable assumptions made about this language universal: that it’s unproductive, of no use whatsoever for examinations or job interviews, hence irrelevant to teaching and learning. I am not here to suggest slang should occupy some central role in your attention or your practices, only that it deserves your consideration. The other suspicion which was voiced in a discussion with the Former Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead, is what he called ‘adolescent incoherence’: that slang contaminates and subverts. It doesn’t in my experience. Certainly young people play with slang in code mixing, style shifting, and some indulge in flamboyant displays of slang usage in both relevant and inappropriate contexts. In my experience there is no correlation between using slang and any deficiency in other aspects of language, quite the reverse in fact. It’s often the case that expert users of slang show a heightened awareness of language issues, and a heightened ability to deploy and manipulate language, and a keen understanding of appropriacy. There is always that suspicion that the recording of such subcultural or pop-cultural phenomena is wanton, is self-indulgent or frivolous; (Simon Frith, authority on popular music, once dismissed my own compilation work as ‘trainspotting’). But the learners I have worked with are not interested in learning about slang for ‘prurient’ reasons or because they view it as an easy option. They become engaged when they perceive that it’s their language, which they can explore in tandem with teachers and with other pupils, in other schools, in other settings, with other age-groups, and of course in, or in comparison with, other countries.

There is an extreme view – which I’m hovering on the edge of – that the use of slang is becoming much more than a stylistic preference, is more than a transient phase in adolescent behaviour. If you think about it, the constraints that formerly induced people to abandon slang are no longer there. The family, the school and the workplace are no longer in a position definitively to restrict and censor this kind of language. In schools like Lillian Bayliss the pupils will tell you that it is their common language. ‘My home language is Hindi or Bengali or Gujarati or Creole or Turkish –or English; my shared language, my inter-language, my pidgin, is slang.’ In *Linguistic Innovators: the English of Adolescents in London*, a study which you may be familiar with because it has featured both in academic publications and in the national press, Paul Kerswill and Jenny Cheshire are investigating ‘...the effects of a multiracial vernacular...on mainstream speech’ from a dialectal, a phonological point of view. They have identified an emergent common vernacular, a dialect, heavily influenced by Afrocaribbean and Asian speech patterns, spoken by young people across swathes of Greater London. There is a possibility that this variety may well have a lasting effect because those social pressures that stop people taking their youthful language practices forward into middle age are no longer in place. In fact the print and broadcast media, other electronic interactions and peer-pressure on the street and in the playground actually

encourage this blurring of generations and blurring of distinctions between 'standard' and 'non-standard' usage.

Last year a local radio presenter interrupted a studio discussion of slang and dialect to exclaim, when he heard that I was compiling an archive of slang and new language at King's College London. 'Surely you can't be getting paid to do this? After all it's just lemon meringue!' (its equivalent, of course, in rhyming slang). In vain I explained that I had scarcely any funding, that slang shares (in fact exceeds) the linguistic potentials of poetry, that disapproval of it can only reflect a social, not a linguistic judgement.

I hope nevertheless that I've managed, along with exposing you to some exotic and amusing language, to suggest that the study of slang, if necessarily peripheral to what we as teachers and researchers are primarily do, is more than just 'lemon meringue', even if it does not quite merit the designation ('slinguistics?') of a discipline in its own right. Despite meeting all our expectations of profanity, fatuity, irreverence and even suggestions of criminality, as language it is rich, complex and fascinating. More importantly it is a kind of language that is by definition close to the experience of our students, in some cases is felt by them to belong to them, and which they deserve the opportunity to explore.

(With thanks to Mark Chan Poon, Joyti Ghedia and Dana Stevens)

### West London Slang

Bre	Male person
Stush	To be quiet/shut up
Murk	To slap [punish, humiliate]
Shank	To knife
Bora	To knife
Long	Boring, lengthy
Mash	To have sex
Blunt	A roll-up [cigarette]
Deep	'Out of order' [unacceptable, offensive]
Whagwan?!	A greeting
Bredrin	A friend
Whitey	A white person
Dark	Out of order
Bare	Lots of...
Yard	Home/house
Kotch	Chill out [relax]
Bop	A [rolling, sauntering] way of walking
Crew	Gang/ clique/group of friends
Mandem	Same as crew but male
Gash	Female/girl

Tick	Good looking
Drum	House/home
Pier [peer]	Lots/new
Galdem	A female 'crew'
Gully	Good
Kris	Good looking
Chung	Good looking
Tonk	[of a person] Huge/[well-]built
Bunnin	Smoking
Zoot	A spliff [marihuana cigarette]
Blem	A cigarette
Teng	Good
Brass	Bad
Prong [prang]	Scared
Bong	Shisha [hashish pipe]

Parentheses [ ] indicate a second gloss or alternative form inserted by the author.