

SLANGUAGE – AN EFFECTIVE TOOL OF SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Spoken language becomes a cultural barrier between different countries and regions. In the business world which is a highly individualistic culture that focuses on challenge and competition, prizing efficiency and decisiveness, business people and professionals need to be sure that they are speaking the right language to the right people at the right time. The paper is tackling the question whether the existence of a type of vocabulary (slang) within a language (business language) is an effective instrument in achieving successful business communication.

1. Introduction

The main aim of any language is communication. When uttering something, a speaker tries to convey information and this is done by using words, which reveal their meaning in different contexts. Any language, though, has linguistic features by means of which a speaker may express an attitude, suggest a certain atmosphere or achieve a certain effect. As Stephen Ullmann stated: “[E]verything that transcends the purely referential and communicative side of language belongs to the province of expressiveness.” [Ullmann, 1966:101]

Communication and language are closely related to culture because each culture reflects what the society values in its language. Culture determines to a large extent the use of spoken language - specific words or phrases used to communicate people’s thoughts and needs. Thus, spoken language becomes a cultural barrier between countries because in a particular country, verbal language can consist of several dialects or colloquialisms and may be different from the written language.

Effective communication in a global environment requires sensitivity to cultural differences. An effective strategy for overcoming cross-cultural communication barriers is to recognize that many subtle job-related differences in customs and behaviour may exist. Business world is dominated by a dynamic rhythm of life. Everybody seems to be always busy in this action-oriented culture where time dominates life. As the expression “time is money” indicates wasting time is something that is not accepted. Business culture is a culture where work means success and success means money. It is a highly individualistic world based on challenge and competition, valuing efficiency and preciseness.

2. Group Language. Definition and Types

The “group language” has often been called “jargon” or “social dialect”. [Shibata et al., 1998:277] It is said, according to the same authors, that group language is bad language and should not be used. But there must be a reason why group languages are used. First of all, what is a group? All populations of men, women, and children are divided into groups, and individuals are members of more than one group. Affiliations determined by birth (“ascribed group membership”- [Ajami &Goddard., 2006:210]) are based on sex, family, age and ethnic, racial, or national origin. Those affiliations not determined by birth are called *acquired group memberships* and are based on religious, political, and other associations. Employment, manners, dress, and expectations are often dictated by each culture to its members.

As some specialists argue, group language can be divided into three types according to their function: *argot*, *occupational language* or *jargon*, and *slang*. According to Hulban (2001), the terms *cant* and *argot* are frequently used with the same sense as *jargon*, the former usually replacing the three terms *argot*, *jargon* and *slang*, thus being the most ambiguous of them all. [Cf. Hulban, 2001:249]

a) *Argot* is a characteristic vocabulary and idiom of a particular group, class or profession. It is also known as “thieves” language because very frequently it refers to the special vocabulary and idiom used by the underworld groups. Its necessity is clearly seen in groups where secrecy is important.

b) *Occupational language* or *jargon* is “the technical vocabulary ..., the characteristic idiom of specialists or workers in a particular activity or in an area of knowledge.” [Idem, ibidem] As the vocabulary of a science, art or profession, *jargon* has no expressive force for those who speak it, but it has gained popularity among outsiders. Occupational language is used for efficient communication within a group. Occupations are an important feature of society. Any analysis of how society works is likely to consider occupations - these are a very common feature of social organization, more or less universal in economically developed societies and throughout recorded history. Occupations could not really exist without language, especially those in which many people work together, and need to pass on information about how to do things, or about current tasks.

c) *Slang* is a continuously changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity within a group. Slang expressions can be categorised under the general heading of fixed expressions. Some idiomatic language, particularly when it is used about third parties, creates personalised lexicon, transforming the participants into members. Recent research has shown how small groups, including intimate couples and families, reinforce their intimacy and insulate themselves further against the outside world by developing highly personalised and sometimes humorous and euphemistic fixed expressions. [Cf. Hopper et al, 1981:23-33]

3. Slang

3.1. Definition and Characteristics

According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, *slang* is “the language peculiar to a particular group as (a) special and often secret vocabulary used by a class (as thieves, beggars) and usually felt to be vulgar and inferior. Argot (b) the jargon used by or associated with a particular trade, profession, or field of activity.” Also, according to the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, sixth edition, “slang is vernacular vocabulary not generally acceptable in formal usage. It is notable for its liveliness, humor, emphasis, brevity, novelty, and exaggeration. Most slang is faddish and ephemeral, but some words are retained for long periods and eventually become part of the standard language (e.g., phony, blizzard, movie). On the scale used to indicate a word's status in the language, slang ranks third behind standard and colloquial (or informal) and before cant. Slang often conveys an acerbic, even offensive, no-nonsense attitude and lends itself to poking fun at pretentiousness. Frequently grotesque and fantastic, it is usually spoken with intent to produce a startling or original effect. It is especially well developed in the speaking vocabularies of cultured, sophisticated, linguistically rich languages. Characteristically individual, slang often incorporates elements of the jargons of special-interest groups (e.g., professional, sport, regional, criminal, and drug subcultures). Slang words often come from foreign languages or are of a regional nature. Slang is very old, and the reasons for its development have been much investigated.” [The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition, 2001]

Apart from these areas of vocabulary, slang also denotes: “a nonstandard vocabulary composed of words and senses characterised primarily by connotations of extreme informality and usually a currency not limited to a particular region, and composed typically or coinages of arbitrarily changed words clipped or shortened experiencing quick popularity and relatively rapid decline into disuse.” [Idem, ibidem]

In most instances, greater intimacy and strength of group feeling is established by the slang usage. However, slang is the “subject of social stigma”. [Ghisini, Blendstrup, 2008:135] The users of slang are perceived as taking easy and ephemeral linguistic options and its use is seen as inhibiting original expression. On the contrary, slang is referred to by Hayakawa as the “poetry of everyday life” and “vividly express[ing] people’s feelings about life and about things they encounter in life”. [Hayakawa, 1941:194-5]

3.2. Origin and Popularity

The origin of the word *slang* is unknown. Researchers concluded that the word is a development of a Germanic root due to its resemblance in sound and figurative meaning to the noun and verb *sling* and the occurrence of apparently the same root in Scandinavian expressions referring to language. [Cf. Partridge, 1970:2] Another hypothesis is that slang has been formed by shortening the genitive phrases like *beggars’ language* or *rogues’ language*, in which the genitive suffix of the first syllable is lost. [Apud Eble, 1996:50]

Most slang items enjoy only a short time of popularity. Slang exploits existing forms and their current meanings in various ways, drawing on and often mixing resources from the sound system, the word-building processes, paradigms, and the speakers’ knowledge of the culture. Sometimes a new slang form either replaces an earlier form or provides another synonym for a notion already named in slang, like *ramped*, *ranked*, *ted* (from *wasted*), and *toe* (from *torn*) for “drunk”; *bogel* and *hang* for “do nothing in particular”; *squirrel kisser* and *tree nymph* for “someone concerned with the environment”. Sometimes slang extends to new areas of meaning or to areas of meaning of recent interest to the group inventing the slang, like *Tom* (from *totally obedient moron*) for “computer”; *dangling modifier* for “a single, long, flashy earring”; *the five-year program* for “the time it takes to complete an undergraduate degree”. [Eble, 1996:52]

3.3. Occupational Slang. Business Slang

According to Eble, slang serves “the human and not the occupational needs of the user”. [Eble, 1996:56] Slang in occupational areas (computer science, gambling, medicine, warfare) varies in particulars that are pertinent to their common activity. The goal is to get the message across to others in the workplace by using effective communication. Most of the people do not realize how much they communicate on a daily basis and when they are at work they often communicate in a variety of ways, for example, face to face, over the phone, through the written word, and of course, through body language.

Occupations develop their own special language features, and use those of the common language in new or distinctive ways. Occupations are a source of language change, while attitudes to language may in turn be causes of change in the way occupations work. To increase efficiency of communication foreign words are used, words are shortened, and new meanings are added to existing ones, leading to words which are not understood by people outside the group. Being able to verbalize information to colleagues, superiors, and clients in a succinct manner is a skill that will carry them well through their career. Knowing when and how to use the right terminology in any given

situation is necessary in order to be taken seriously in the business environment, while the lack of this knowledge could seriously impede career.

3.3.1. Wall Street Slang

Like many occupational groups, brokers and traders have an extensive body of slang, known mainly to those working on Wall Street. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides citations for *bear* (An investor who has a negative view on a market and is likely to be net short) in 1709 and *bull* (an investor who has a positive view on a market and is likely to be net long) in 1714 as stock market terms.

The world of Wall Street invents slang constantly because people working on Wall Street talk a great deal in their work. Traders shout and chat on exchange floors all day, while brokers spend their time on telephones trying to make a sale. Traders work on the *floor*, the term for exchanges, brokers work *upstairs*, the term for brokerage offices. There, the apprentice brokers, *Whartonites* (brash young Wharton, University of Pennsylvania's Renowned Business School graduate who wants to make it big in the finance world) sit in an open space called the *bullpen* and try to find new customers making calls, a practice known as *dialling and smiling* or *dialling for dollars*. *Big producers*, brokers who bring in large commissions, have their own individual offices with several telephones.

Brokers like to start their conversations with jokes, anecdotes, and slang terms, including nicknames: "Want to buy some Bo Dereks? Or some James Bonds?" *James Bonds* are bonds which matured in 2007 and *Bo Dereks*, which were issued when the film "10" starring Bo Derek was in the cinemas, are bonds which matured in 2010.

Traders have always liked slang terms with sexual references. In the 1960s, according to magazine articles, the people working on Wall Street called Mattress Company *America's Playground* and Italian Development Bonds *Lolas*. [Cf. Ricks, Michaels, 1990:227] *Scarlett O'Hara* (the protagonist in Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* and in the later film of the same name) was used for Southern Bell Telephone and *Zsa Zsa Gabor* (a Hungarian American actress on stage, film and television) for Continental Can. Traders refer to many stocks by women's names. Londoners traded *Floras*, *Berthas*, *Claras*, *Coras*, *Noras*, and *Sarahs*. In the U.S.A., the brokers used names like *Becky*, *Amy*, *Old Mona*, *Maggie*, *Jennie Tell*, *Weeping Mary*, *Rebecca*, *Minnie*, *Alice*, *Annie*, and *Molly*. Stocks are referred to as prostitutes in a popular stock market proverb: "When the paddy wagon comes, they take the good girls with the bad" (when the market crashes, strong stocks fall along with weak ones). Also, market is represented as female and subject to sexual tactics. Traders *straddle* the market when they execute *spreads*. They perform *in-and-out trading*. Among the orders traders carry out are *touch but don't penetrate* the market and *participate but don't initiate*.

The semantics underlying gender-related insults in some ways are stable because the cultural values referenced by gender-related insults (for instance, attractiveness) are stable. However, the dynamics of the words used in slang and obscenity are different. An important feature of slang that makes it different from obscenity is that the lexicon of slang is more subject to additions and deletions of words than is the obscene lexicon, which tends to be fairly stable over time. Slang is always changing to meet the needs of its speakers. The particular slang words considered as insults are continually refreshed and reinvented. As Eble noted: "[M]any negative and derogatory terms in the general informal vocabulary of English originated as blunt and coarse references to sexual acts, body parts, and bodily functions. With increased use in a variety of contexts, such terms lose their shock effect, sometimes even becoming euphemistic." [Eble, 1996:58]

Commodity traders use slang familiar outside of Wall Street when describing the market in female terms: "For many traders the market is a 'bitch,' a 'cunt,' a 'whore,' an 'old lady.' ... If you 'fight' it or 'go up against it,' chances are you'll be screwed..." [Tamarkin, 1985:110] According to Ricks, "the sexual nature of the language reveals the traders' need to assert their masculinity and cultivate a macho image." [Apud Tamarkin, 1985:110]

3.3.2. Money Slang

Slang money words and expressions appear widely in the English language, and most of these slang words have interesting, often very amusing, meanings and origins. Many slang expressions for old English money and modern British money (Pounds Sterling) originated in London, being such a vast and diverse centre of commerce and population.

As stock market and general slang reveal, money is associated with dirt, as in filthy rich, and losing money is expressed in terms of getting cleaner. A person who *takes a bath*, gets *taken to the cleaners*, or gets *put through the financial wringer* (to subject to a severe trial or ordeal) loses money. To be *wiped off* or *cleaned out* leaves the person metaphorically cleaner. *Washing the market* takes money out of the market and puts it in a swindler's pocket. Money obtained illegally needs to be *laundered*, that is moved through a number of financial channels until it appears to be respectable.

a) Nowadays, *quid* is the most common slang term for a pound. *Nicker* is also used, but it is an older term. There are many other terms for the pound, now mostly obsolete: *note* (from the period when paper money was substituted for gold sovereigns), *bar* and *smacker* (presumably from the noise it made when you were counting out a sum in pound notes on a counter).

The ten pound meaning of *cock and hen* is 20th century rhyming slang. *Cock and hen* - also *cockerel and hen* - has carried the rhyming slang meaning for the number ten for longer. Its transfer to ten pounds logically grew more popular through the inflationary 1900s as the ten pound amount and banknote became more common currency in people's wages and wallets, and therefore language. *Cock and hen* also gave rise to the variations *cockeren*, *cockeren and hen*, *hen*, and the natural rhyming slang short version, *cock* - all meaning ten pounds.

Cockney rhyming slang is an amusing and much under-estimated part of the English language. Originating in London's East End in the mid-19th century, Cockney rhyming slang uses substitute words, usually two, as a coded alternative for another word. The final word of the substitute phrase rhymes with the word it replaces (for example, the cockney rhyming slang for the word 'look' is *butcher's hook*). From cockney rhyming slang, *bread and honey* gave rise to the secondary rhyming slang 'poppy', from *poppy red* (bread). Bread also has associations with money, which in a metaphorical sense can be traced back to the Bible. Bread meaning money is also linked with the expression 'earning a crust', which alludes to having enough money to pay for one's daily bread.

In the eighties, people referred to money by a woman's name, the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher who had a noticeable tendency to mimic some of the more regal characteristics of Her. *Maggie* was used for the then new gold-coloured one-pound coin, because, it was said, "it's brassy, two-faced and thinks it's a sovereign".[Apud <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-are-some-slang-terms-for-money-in-the-united-states.htm>]

Bank Machine Limited operates ATMs throughout the United Kingdom . Customers can go to a bank machine, put in their *Huckleberry Finn* (PIN number) and withdraw *sausage and mash* (cash). They can also specify the amount of their withdrawal in rhyming slang; taking out a *speckled hen* (£10) from the *rattle and tank* (bank).

b) In the USA, there are many commonly used slang terms for money. Perhaps the most common is the term *buck* as a reference for the dollar. A hundred bucks is \$100 US Dollars (USD). *Cold, hard cash* is another of the slang terms for money, which simply denotes cash in hand but does not distinguish an amount. *Clams, smackers*, and *greenbacks* are used in the same context, the latter being based on the color of paper dollars. Each of these slang terms for money refers to dollars, but none of them indicate specified amounts.

On the face of many American bills there are pictures of past presidents, hence the phrase *dead presidents*. Not all bills feature a US president, however. The Americans use a man's name for the \$100 USD bill, featuring Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamins*. \$100 USD bill is referred to in other slang terms like *C-note* or simply *C*. Another letter used in reference to a specific monetary denomination is *K*, meaning \$1,000 USD. From the 1960s, becoming widely used in the 1970s, *K* has now mainly replaced 'G' in common speech and especially among middle and professional classes. For the same amount of money, another common slang term was *grand*. It was shortened to *G* and was first used in the 1920s. It became popular slang in fast-moving business, trading, and the underworld. It usually retains singular form (*G* rather than *G's*) for more than one thousand pounds, for example 'Twenty G'.

There are slang terms for smaller bills such as \$5 USD (*fiver* or *fin*) and \$10 USD (*sawbuck*) bills. Fives and tens are sometimes called nickels and dimes, which leads to other slang terms for money, such as "Don't *nickel* and *dime* me", indicating that a person wants to be paid in full rather than a little at a time. The slang term *Two bits* is used to describe 25 cents or one quarter. A quarter is a coin that represents one fourth of a dollar. This term is also used as an expression that something is low quality, low class, or cheap.

c) In Australia, although there seems to be a few locally used expressions here and there, none of them have become a part of the colloquial speech. The Australians seem to have been happy to merely borrow the US term, *buck* to refer to any Dollar amount. Yet, there are some more memorable terms: ten shillings: *ten bob, half a quid, half a fiddly* (a play on words derived from *quid*), *teddy*; one pound: *quid, fiddly*; five pounds: *fiver, spin* or *deep sea diver* (rhyming slang); ten pounds: *tenner* or *brick* (because it was red). The following is a list of possibly regional terms for Australian decimal banknotes, most of them used in Australian colloquial speech: \$1 (brown) - *brown bomber, queenie* and *bung buck*; \$2 (green): *sick sheep* (referring to the colour and the sheep) or *Greenback* (borrowed from the US); \$5 (purple): *fiver, sky diver* (rhyming slang), *pink lady, prawn, piglet and rasher* (of bacon); \$10 (blue): *tenner, blue swimmer, blue heeler* or *banjo* (referring to Andrew Barton "Banjo" Paterson, an Australian bush poet, journalist and author. He wrote many ballads and poems about Australian life, focusing particularly on the rural and outback areas. Banjo Paterson's image appears on the \$10 note, along with an illustration inspired by "The Man From Snowy River" and, as part of the copy-protection microprint, the text of the poem itself.); \$20 (red): *red lobster* or *lobster, redback* or *rusky*); \$50 (yellow): *pineapple, yellow peril* and *banana*; \$100 (grey paper): *grey nurse* (shark), *ghost* or *bradman* (a reference to Sir Donald George *Bradman*, often referred to as The Don, an Australian cricketer, widely acknowledged as the greatest batsman of all time); \$100 (green polymer): *jolly green giant, green soldier* (referring to General Monash, a civil engineer who became the Australian military commander in the First World War), *avocado, watermelon, tree frog* or *peppermint*.

4. Conclusions

There are companies in the world which have a relaxed corporate environment that allows many styles of speech, such as vernacular, slang and even a light tolerance of abusive language. However, by far the large majority of companies firmly do not tolerate any abusive language and only accept slang and vernacular when used with customers.

Most companies and organizations view speech that is not business appropriate speech as having a negative effect on the company. While slang is the least detrimental, it is certainly the most common form of language used in the workplace. There are several reasons behind it, but the main one is that it is a bit annoying to waste a lot of words in using long explanations. However, while this may seem like a good excuse on the surface, slang has the effect of creating confusion and unprofessionalism.

Many of the sexual slang terms that develop to describe in- and out-group members are intended as insulting or pejorative names. These kinds of insults emerge in every occupation where there are power and status differences because slang insults are created to release the tensions of work.

The origins of slang money expressions provide amusing and sometimes very significant examples of the way that language develops, and how it connects to changing society, demographics, political and economic systems, and culture.

The slang helps to make the language more interesting and unique. American and British English are interchangeable as far as comprehension goes, but the slang for each is very different. Knowing the slang is an important aspect of communicating with native speakers in a natural way, and in understanding the culture of the speakers. The importance of powerful communication skills in the workplace cannot be stressed enough. People want information, they want answers, they want explanations and in order to satisfy them, whether they are customers, clients, or corporate managers, they must be able to convey their message in a way that makes sense and is understood by the other party.

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