

A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF SLANG IN STUDENTS' GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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ABSTRACT— The study aims to explore the semantic referents of slang used by students in their group discussions. A descriptive qualitative method was employed to describe the transcription of discussions and interviews. The data were collected from 63 group discussions by 84 third-year students from Business Communication classes at HUFLIT and interviews with 11 students selected from the population. The findings from the discussions revealed that the slang was categorised into taboo, criticising, and complimentary words. Most of the words the students uttered when discussing in class were taboo and decrying words, whereas very few complimentary words were used. The taboos took three out of nine semantic referents based on Jay's theory (2009), whereas the decrying words fell into the categories of vulgarity and obscenity based on Mattiello's theory (2008). Besides, male students were likely to blurt taboos four times more than their female classmates. On the other hand, females used decrying words more. The findings from the interviews showed that students acquired these informal words mainly from friends and social media.

Keywords: slang, semantic referent, group discussion

I. INTRODUCTION

English maintains a common and global language as a means of communication among the speakers of hundreds of different languages throughout the world. It plays a pivotal role in our interconnected world as a key to enter all fields such as science, technology, economy, tourism, and so on. In education, it helps to connect individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

In Vietnam, English has become the most dominant foreign language in the country since the 1986 Renovation policy opening the door to the world by the Vietnam Communist Party. It is prevalent in the educational system and has also become a mandatory subject at formal schools from primary to tertiary levels for years. It is truly given the status, which is special only second to the Vietnamese national language [1] to meet the demand of integration and globalisation. To achieve the goal, the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training issued Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg to approve the National Foreign Languages 2020 project. In this decision, English is assigned as a compulsory subject from grade 3 to grade 12, and at the university level, it is officially taught as a mandatory discipline for graduation requirements. Although the Minister announced the failure of the project in meeting its target in 2016, it succeeded in increasing the public awareness in teaching and learning English throughout the country. High school students' English ability is regularly examined with official mid-term and end-term tests each semester. Besides, certificates of English are preferred and popular to serve some purposes such as enrolling on a gifted school. These certificates are released by Cambridge ESOL which are based on the CEFR, for example Starters, Movers, Flyers, A2 KEY, B1 Pre, and B2 First. At the tertiary level, students' English ability is usually based on some recognised proficiency test such as TOEIC and IELTS as one of the graduation requirements at most universities.

Although English is taught in all faculties at most colleges and universities, non-majored students learn it mainly for the purpose of graduation. On the other hand, English-majored students learn English not only for graduation, but also use it most of the time for study and communication. They must practise English with assignments, presentations, or group discussions in many courses such as Listening-Speaking and Business Communication. In these discussions, they usually utilise the vocabulary relating to the topics with 'standard' words and structures. Nevertheless, they cannot avoid uttering informal words or slang during the discussions due to the nature of spoken form.

Slang is seen as displaying informality and irreverence towards interlocutors in conversations. People use slang terms as synonyms for standard and formal terms and 'a lack of allegiance to social conventions' [2]. However, slang varies within different social and cultural contexts [3]. This paper focuses on the types of society slang and slang in public schools and universities [4]. Slang used by students reflects some specific features and becomes part of language variations and exists in most students' daily speech. Students use slang to prove that they belong to a particular group of preference. Slang also helps students to keep themselves updated and not separated from the class community. This paper aims to explore the meaning of slang regularly employed in students' group discussions in Business Communication class at HUFLIT with the attempt to answer the following questions:

- What are the semantic referents of the slang that students use in group discussions in class?

- Are there any differences in the use of slang between male and female students?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

SLANG AND ITS SEMANTIC REFERENTS

Slang is defined as very informal words and expressions used in spoken language by a particular group (Oxford Dictionary). It is a set of colloquial words and phrases used to shape one's social identity or cohesiveness within a group of people or with a trend or fashion in the community at large [5]. People use slang to perform some functions of communication. One of the primary functions of slang is to show that one belongs to a certain group of similar school, career, or social class [6]. Furthermore, people, especially the young ones use slang either deliberately or unintentionally to construct or signal their own identity, and it is a display of 'coolness' in youth-cultural trends [7].

Jay [8] stated that native speakers acquire folk knowledge of slang including taboos. He classified the slang into nine groups with their semantic referents, namely *profane and blasphemous (OMG, damn)*, *sexual references or discrimination (cunt)*, *scatological and disgusting objects (crap, douche bag)*, *animal names (chicken, pig)*, *ethnic - racial - gender slurs (nigger, fag, dago)*, *insulting references (psychological, physical, or social deviations) (freak, retard, wimp)*, *ancestral allusions (bastard)*, *substandard vulgar terms (on the rag)*, and *offensive slang (suck)*. Mattiello's theory [9] argued that slang played a key role in sociological characterisation. One display was speaker-oriented properties with the category of vulgarity with vulgar terms (*fat face, on the rag*) and obscenity (*bum, basic*).

Although slang is considered informal and unofficial language knowledge not being taught in class, it has drawn attraction from researchers for decades. Kurniati [10] explored 20 students who regularly posted on Instagram using slang at least once a week and found that the participants gained some advantages in practising vocabulary and improved their writing skills in class. On the other hand, slang brings some drawbacks besides its positive effects. Indera and Ali [11] investigated the difficulties of Internet slang of Malaysian students. The results revealed that the students had to face and struggle with the familiarity of Internet slang and how it worsened their English proficiency. Sikandar et al. [12] examined the impacts of slang in academic writing of 70 undergraduate students in Pakistan. One bitter finding was that the students were unaware of using slang in their academic writing and included them as part of their vocabulary knowledge. Gender is also one affecting factor to the use of slang. Salma [13] conducted a study of junior high school students using slang and recognised that males applied more slang than females. Despite the negative side that slang affects students' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking skills, slang is officially taught in effective ways in some places [14].

Partridge [4] categorised slang into three types, public-house slang, society slang, and slang in public schools and universities. Public-house slang consists of informal words which are usually cheerful. Society slang is widely used by people in society to prove selves belonging to a particular social class. Slang in public schools and universities is employed by students in their daily speech. It helps them to be recognised and show their youth and their disciplines or majors.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study design is qualitatively descriptive, and a content analysis approach was used, which allows researchers to examine artifacts of social communication [15] and it is ideal for providing insights into contextual conditions and influences [16]. The study lasted within six weeks during the first semester of the academic year. There were 84 students participating in the study, who were in their third year from two Business Communication classes at Ho Chi Minh City University of Foreign Languages - Information Technology (HUFLIT).

IV. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

There were 63 group discussions during class time recorded with consent when the students were discussing the given topics. After that, interviews were conducted for deeper insights into the issues with 11 students including six females and five males who were selected from the population.

The interview consists of two questions to get the participants' insights. In the first question, the participants provide information of what slang they use during the group discussions in Business Communication classes, and what it means. The second question asks which source the participants get the slang from.

The data collected from recordings and interviews were then transcribed, coded, and labeled into categories. After that, the themes emerged from these categories, and they were interpreted, as the following part. The participants were coded as follows:

- Participants from recordings of group discussions: capitalised letter. For example, A.
- Participants from recordings of interviews: capitalised letter + number. For example, A1.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first research question “*What are the semantic referents of the slang that students use in group discussions in class?*”, data from the group discussion recordings were analysed and three themes of slang emerged, as follows.

Table 1. Slang uttered by the students in group discussions

Themes	Example words from data
Taboo	<i>OMG, chicken</i>
Criticising	<i>drag, knock</i>
Complimentary words	<i>next level, boujee, fancy, slay</i>

Table 1 shows the themes or categorical labels emerging codes from data transcription. Most of the slang the participants uttered belonged to three types, namely taboo, criticising, and complimentary words. In the taboo label, *OMG (Oh my God)* and *chicken* are most frequently used, and they also criticised their friends saying *drag* and *knock*. However, they showed their emotions by complimenting their friends on their constructive opinions or appearance, as in the extract of students discussing a situation of upset audience below.

Extract 1:

- Student A: I think we could wait for him to calm down, make a slight joke, or give him another time to explain the topic carefully.
- Student B: Wow, good idea! Ya going to the *next level*, dude!

Extract 2:

- Student C: Wow, is your blouse a new brand?
- Student D: Yup.
- Student C: *Slay* huh!

It could be seen that students used slang not only for engaging themselves in a particular group, but they still had the demand to encourage each other with complementary words.

Table 2. Types of taboos frequently uttered

Types of taboos	Example words from data
Profane and blasphemous	<i>OMG, damn, Oh Lord</i>
Animal names	<i>chicken, pig</i>
Offensive slang	<i>suck, crippled</i>

Table 2 details the types of taboos uttered by the students during their group discussions. Most of them take three categories of semantic referent based on Jay’s theory (2009) [8], namely *profane and blasphemous*, *animal names*, and *offensive slang*. As depicted in the previous table, *OMG* was still most habitually used, then coming next was *damn*, and sometimes *Oh Lord*. These slang words belong to the type of profane and blasphemous, which displayed discrimination and offending religious beliefs. On the other hand, the students employed *chicken* and *pig* very often. They unintentionally insulted their friends by comparing the fellows with familiar animals. They even offended each other by disgracing them in many utterances, as in the following extract.

Extract 3:

- Student E: Tomorrow is our group turn to present the roles of manager and employees. I don’t bring any suits with me to the dorm.
- Student F: You *suck*! Our teacher talked about it on the first day.

Table 3. Decrying words based on Mattielo's theory (2008)

Type of Decrying words	Example words from data
Vulgarity and obscenity	<i>bastard, bum, basic, cringe</i>

Table 3 displays the decrying words that the students often said, which fell into the type of vulgarity and obscenity based on Mattielo's theory (2008) [9]. These decrying words spread through the language of adolescents and are known as 'pubilect' (p.218). The most used vulgar word was *bastard*, whereas the obscene *bum* was uttered less. The word *basic* means normal and not special, and *cringe* means being embarrassed. Let us look at the extract below.

Extract 4:

- Student G: ... no, no, it's not like that, we have to do as the instructions on slide 4.
 Student H: I'm talking. Wait till I'm finished. Don't try to interrupt me, *bastard*!
 Student I: Haha... you look so *cringe*!

The data from interviews illustrates the similar picture of slang used by the participants. The students admitted employing *OMG* most, *chicken* and *suck* were the second widely used when they discussed in class. When they felt happy or had the demand to compliment their friends, they used *boujee* and *fancy*. They stated that using slang made them feel part of the team. The following extracts from interviews elaborate on the slang the students frequently used and its meaning.

Extract 5:

- Researcher: What slang words do you often use when talking within group discussions?
 Student A1: Yes, madam... it's like *OMG*, madam.
 Researcher: Do you know what it means?
 Student A1: Yes, I think it's like I'm calling the God, and I think it's like exclamation word.
 Researcher: Where do you get that slang word?
 Student A1: I got it from social network, and all of my friends say it!

Extract 6:

- Researcher: What slang words do you often use when talking within group discussions?
 Student A2: It's *suck*, Ms.
 Researcher: Do you know what it means? When do you think you will use it?
 Student A2: Oh, yes. It means bad. I use it when I feel upset or irritated at my friend's opinions or attitudes.
 Researcher: Where do you get that slang word?
 Student A2: It's popular, Ms.! Everyone says it, on Facebook, Instagram, and my group members say it often when we talk, when we discuss.

Extract 7:

- Researcher: What slang words do you often use when talking within group discussions?
 Student A3: *Chicken*, Dr. I use it often after *OMG*.
 Researcher: Do you know what it means? When do you think you will use it?
 Student A3: Yes, Dr. It says someone is not good or skillful. Actually, my friends are quite ok, but I use it as a habit more than decrying my friends.
 Researcher: Where do you get that slang word?
 Student A3: Oh, my friends we all say it.

Extract 8:

- Researcher: Do you use slang? What slang words do you often use when you need to encourage or compliment your friends?
- Student A4: Yes, I use slang a lot. I use *OMG* and *suck*. Oh, when I want to commend my groupmates, I say "*boujee*"!
- Researcher: What does it mean?
- Student A4: Oh, it means when my friends are like... behave as she or he is an elegant person, or supreme. So I will say it.
- Researcher: Where do you get that slang word?
- Student A4: On social media, Ms.

Extract 9:

- Researcher: Do you use slang? What slang words do you often use when you need to encourage or compliment your friends?
- Student A5: Yes, I use slang like my friends, they use slang too. I often use *fancy* to praise my friends.
- Researcher: Do you know what *fancy* means when you use it?
- Student A5: Yes, it means I admire someone who is interesting and great.
- Researcher: Where do you get that slang word?
- Student A5: From my friends, teacher.

In short, the findings from recordings of group discussions and from interviews have shown a number of slang words the students regularly used and their semantic referents. They utilised slang because their friends used it; besides, they got it from social media, too.

To answer the second research question "*Are there any differences in the use of slang between male and female students?*", the data from recordings of group discussions were analysed and shown in the following table.

Table 4. *The use of slang between male and female students*

Gender	N
Male	545
Female	132

Table 4 illustrates the number of times that two genders uttered slang. Male students were likely to blurt taboos four times (N=545) more than their female classmates (N=132) when they discussed in class. On the other hand, females used degrading words more to scoff their friends, such as their clothing. The following extract was from a discussion in Business Class.

Extract 10:

- Female student J: Look at you! Your blouse *sucks*!
- Female student K: Oh, oh. Leave my *bum* alone!

From interview data, male students also admitted that they used slang more than their female fellows when discussing.

Extract 11:

- Researcher: Do you use slang?
- Male student B1: Yes, I do.
- Researcher: Do you see your female friends using slang?
- Male student B1: Yes, they use it too. But actually, we say more ... hihi...

Extract 12:

- Researcher: Do you use slang?

- Male student B2: Yes, I think it's normal, Ms.
 Researcher: Do your female friends use slang?
 Male student B2: Yes, they use it a lot. But it's just normal ones. Boys say worse slang, Ms.

Extract 13:

- Researcher: Do you use slang?
 Female student B3: Yes, teacher.
 Researcher: Do your male friends say it?
 Female student B3: Yes, a lot, teacher. Not all of us say it often. But my male groupmates use it all the time. Some of my girlfriends avoid using it.

In short, the students were likely to use slang more and more frequently during group discussion in class, and they recognised that they could not remove it in their daily conversations. Using slang made them feel part of and unseparated from their community. Most slang were taboos falling into *profane and blasphemous*, *animal names*, and *offensive slang* groups. They also used *vulgar* and *obscene* words to embarrass their friends. Besides, males used slang more than females in most situations.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The study aims to qualitatively explore the semantic referents of the slang uttered by the students during their group discussions in Business Class. Most of the slang were taboos; however, good slang words which fell into the complimentary group were also utilised by the students. The results revealed that male students were likely to blurt taboos four times more than their female classmates, and females used decrying words more. Additionally, they acquired these informal words mainly from friends and social media.

Slang is popular in spoken form and exists in everyday conversations and it is like fillers in students' speaking. The question is sometimes the students' utterances do not relate to the topic of the discussion, but they exploited slang as much as they could to maintain the relationship with other groupmates. Therefore, the findings could be implied for further studies which focus on whether slang should be taught formally in some lessons for better use in group discussions.

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