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ON SWEARWORDS AND SLANG

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Abstract

Slang lexemes and swearwords are commonly discussed in conjunction with each other as though they were slightly different versions of the same phenomenon. However, they clearly are not, as a careful consideration of their different prototypical functions reveals. Each of these lexical categories has a central or core function, and in each case this function is linked to the obligatory expression of affect. Different kinds of affect are entailed in the prototypical uses of slang and of swearwords, but in the case of both of these lexical types, this affect is incompatible with the formality and deference of honorifics, or, indeed, of much standard discourse. Another area in which slang and swearwords overlap can be found in basic slang lexemes which share with swearwords a connection to an underlying cultural value system, pervasiveness and endurance. The existence of a slang category that shares important features with swearwords further illustrates the different yet overlapping nature of these two lexicons.

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of recent linguistic research has focused on the close analysis of discourse in context. While acknowledging the significant payoffs to be derived from such approaches, I want to make the case that we would also do well to pay attention to those underlying linguistic constructs that are most illuminating when viewed from a distance, that is, when viewed as relatively widespread and stable entities. Two of these constructs are implicated when we refer

to slang and swearwords. Each of these lexical categories is assumed to have an existence that allows us to identify its appearance in discourse, yet the features that are taken for granted as justifying their existence are not always acknowledged. These two categories are also of interest inasmuch they seem to be cross-cultural universals, entities that can be identified in all linguistic communities by virtue of their common functionality, even though some of their specific traits may vary from language to language, or even dialect to dialect (Moore et al. 2010).

One question that is rarely made explicit where slang and swearwords are concerned is that of their common co-occurrence. Frequently these two lexical categories are discussed as though they amounted to the same thing, or, at least, as though their interrelationships were well understood. In fact, the slang-swearword relationship has not received the attention it deserves. This study represents an effort to offer some clarification in this area.

Both slang and swearwords can be described as indexing affect, but they differ from each other in a number of important features such that it is surprising that they should so often be discussed in ways that obscure their differences. Briefly, slang lexemes are commonly described as ephemeral and characteristic of specific social subgroups, whereas swearwords are taboo lexemes that are widely known in the speech communities wherein they occur, do not change quickly from year to year, and are considered taboo by virtue of their semantic link to emotionally charged entities such as human waste and sexuality. Of course, the emotionally charged entities that swearwords reference can also be designated using parallel vocabularies that are not taboo but are redolent of such discourses as may be encountered in doctor's offices or preschools. Nonetheless, it is the semantic link with entities that conjure affect that serves as the basis of the taboo status of swearwords.

SWEARWORDS AND THEIR USES

Though swearwords and slang lexemes are often conflated, they are clearly not the same thing. They are distinguished, for one thing, by virtue of the typical or prototypical functions that each serves. These functions are, for swearwords, the expression of anger, hostility, surprise or similarly intense emotions, and for slang, the establishment or maintenance of a somewhat non-serious, egalitarian ethos. Slang is usually group-specific, and among students, for example, slang lexemes include *sketch* (of dubious quality or character), *dank* (meaning potent in reference to marijuana), and *chill* (relax). Swearwords comprise those taboo lexemes whose use implies a typically temporary lack of regard or respect for “polite society” or some other facet of the predominant social order. George Carlin’s “seven words you can’t say on TV” offers one well-known list of widely recognized swearwords: *shit*, *piss*, *fuck*, *cunt*, *cocksucker*, *motherfucker*, and *tits*. Swearwords are often described as “dirty” in English as well as other languages, their dirtiness metaphorically referencing their unwelcome status in most contexts (Moore, et al. 2010).

In *The Stuff of Thought*, Pinker, referencing Carlin’s list of seven, cites research connecting the use of swearwords to neuroanatomical circuits dealing with affect, particularly intense and aggressive affect. He offers the following “hypothesis about cathartic swearing” in regard to the use of these taboo lexemes:

A sudden pain or frustration engages the Rage circuit, which activates parts of the limbic brain connected with negative emotion. Among them are representations of concepts with a strong emotional charge and the words connected to them, particularly versions in the right hemisphere, with its heavier involvement in unpleasant emotions. The surge of an impulse for defensive violence may also remove the safety catches on aggressive acts ordinarily held in place by the basal ganglia, since discretion is not the better part of valor

during what could be the last five seconds of your life. In humans these inhibited responses may include the uttering of taboo words. (2007:365)

Pinker is careful to take into account culturally learned differences that lead individuals from different linguistic traditions to resort to locally learned lexemes when having to deal with “sudden pain or frustration.” We swear, in other words, using the lexemes that we have learned to regard as taboo in accordance with our culture. Swearing is not a merely automatic response that blasts its way out of the limbic system through our vocal apparatus. Verbal outbursts are shaped through cultural learning; but still, a key to understanding the universal existence of swearwords is to be found in their function in conjunction with intense affect

Allan and Burridge describe the function of taboo words in similar terms: “Most cursing is an emotive reaction to anger, frustration, or something unexpected and usually, but not necessarily, undesirable.” Furthermore, “Cursing intensifies emotional expressions in a manner that inoffensive words cannot achieve” (2007:78). The innate connection between swearwords and intense emotion is also incorporated in Timothy Jay’s Neuro-Psycho-Social (NPS) theory of cursing. Jay writes that “curse words are used primarily for emotional or connotative purposes...because they offer linguistic information about emotions in order to affect comprehension processes.” Further, in so doing, curse words provide “information about feelings and emotional states that other words do not (2000:11). According to Jay’s NPS theory, “there is a module for cursing that is integrated with semantic, syntactic and phonological modules” in the brain” (2000:74). Swearing, as these and other authors have noted, is linked to the right brain in a way that ordinary language is not. In fact, those who have lost their capacity to speak through left brain trauma, often do not lose their capacity to swear (Allan and Burridge 2007; Pinker 2007).

The affective charge of taboo words or swearwords is obligatory. English swearwords, when perceived by native English speakers, have an affective charge whether they are being used to express intense emotion or not. This point can be illustrated, for example, using the Stroop Test, which requires rapid responses in the identification of the colors in which words are printed. The relatively slow reactions of respondents in dealing with taboo words in such tests verify that these lexemes compel an involuntary affective response (Pinker 2007). We can't, in other words, disregard or neutralize the emotionality that swearwords index. It forces itself on us when we encounter these words whether or not we want it to.

This obligatory connection to emotion, usually negative emotion, has been validated through neuroanatomical research and also makes sense in terms of popular understandings of swearwords. However, since there are myriads of non-cathartic contexts in which taboo lexemes are deployed, it is useful to think of the use of taboo terms as having a single core function (cathartic swearing) that is linked to specific parts of our neuroanatomy. The use of taboo words in cathartic swearing highlights the function that is unique to them – no other class of words can quite do the work they do in this role -- but it doesn't exhaust their usefulness. There are a number of extended functions that are in some sense secondary to the core function. This model mirrors extensionist semantics in which a given word or phrase is seen to have a prototypical meaning, as well as a number of secondary meanings. The word "father," for example, refers to one's male biological parent, but can, by extension, also designate a step-father, a priest, a deity, and various other father figures (Kronenfeld 1996). By the same token, swearwords are inherently associated with the expression of intense affect, and the expression of such affect no doubt explains their existence. But their use can also be extended to a number of other contexts,

including many contexts in which slang is called for. But whatever the context may be, their use entails a degree of obligatory affect on the part of those who use or encounter them.

CONFLATING SWEARWORDS AND SLANG

The tendency to gloss over the differences between slang and swearwords is found in such scholarly analyses as that of Stenström, Andersen and Hasund in their London-based study, *Trends in Teenage Talk*. The authors offer a taxonomy in which the category “dirty words,” comprising taboo words, subsumes both a number of slang lexemes (what they call dirty slang words) and several swearwords (2002:64). What draws these two categories together, according to these authors, is their status as “taboo words.”

Dirty words consist of taboo words, i.e. words regarded as offensive or shocking. They can either serve as *slang words* or as *swear words*. As ‘general’ slang words, they are taboo substitutes for an accepted (non-emotional) synonym in the standard language (*piss somebody off, bugger off, screw up*); as ‘reflectors’ they mirror the speaker’s state of mind (*fucked off, pissed off*). As swearwords they can be used as *intensifiers* (*fucking crap*), *abusives* (*you dickhead/sod/motherfucker*) or *expletives* (*for fuck’s sake, shit*). (Stenström et al. 2002:64; italics and boldface in the original)

But the criterion of “use as intensifiers, abusives or expletives” does not correspond to native speaker understandings of what makes swearwords unique nor does it concur with scholarly categorizations of these terms. Distinguishing the expressions *piss somebody off, bugger off, and fucked off* from swearwords by virtue of their status as replacement terms for standard expressions or as reflectors describing the speaker’s state of mind is not particularly clarifying. And, though swearwords may most prototypically be employed in emotive expressions where they serve as intensifiers, abusives or expletives, their use in other contexts

doesn't justify labeling them as something other than swearwords, i.e., "dirty slang words." It would seem to be more in keeping with popular categorizations of these terms if we regard obscene or vulgar lexemes as swearwords whether or not they are used in the expression of frustration, anger, or other intense emotions. If a teenager nonchalantly tells his parent that he thinks he *fucked up* his history exam, the typical parent is likely to scold or punish him for swearing – no matter how calm his demeanor, and despite the fact that *fucked up* is a synonymous replacement for the more standard *messed up*. The bite of the word is in its very utterance, even when that utterance lacks frustration or rage. It would make more sense to refer to swearwords as being used as slang in some contexts rather than attempting to strip them of their status as swearwords.

Standard dictionaries are also unimpressed with the pragmatic, in-context functions of taboo lexemes as an important defining feature. *The American Heritage College Dictionary* (fourth edition), for example, defines swearword as "an obscene or blasphemous word." The on-line *Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus* offers "a profane or obscene oath or word" as its definition. There is no requirement in either of these definitions that a word or phrase be used as an intensifier, abusive or expletive in order to be considered a swearword.

Stenström et al. recognize that their taxonomy, which also incorporates such categories as vogue words, vague words, proxy words and small words, is less than clarifying. Their solution to this confusion is to place all slang terms, along with all swearwords as well as vogue words, etc., into a broad category they call slangy language or "slanguage." But the pragmatics and semantics of slang expressions and swearwords would be better understood if their fundamental differences were appropriately specified rather than glossed over through the use of an all inclusive super-category like slanguage.

Ljung offers the following criteria to designate swearing: utterances containing taboo words used with non-literal meaning, often in formulaic language. Furthermore, he emphasizes that swearing is emotive language, whose “main function is to reflect or seem to reflect, the speaker’s feelings and attitudes” (2011:4).

Ljung’s emphasis on the “emotive” aspect of swearing is important and corresponds to what Pinker, Jay and others have said about it. However, his requirement that taboo words be used with non-literal meaning in order to constitute swearing does not clarify the key, defining qualities of swearwords. Though “swearing,” as a pragmatic act in which emotive language is prominent, usually entails the use of taboo terms in their non-literal senses, the taboo and affectively charged nature of the words so used does not disappear when they are used literally.

Certain words are by convention understood to be taboo, and their use, whether literal or not, signals an attitude or stance on the part of the speaker. Furthermore, their use can be expected to engender a response in interlocutors that would not be provoked by non-taboo synonyms. Certainly the FCC would not let pass an incident on prime time network television in which taboo words were used with their literal meanings. “The congressman tweeted a picture of his dick and requested that the recipient send him a picture of her tits,” will not be Okayed by the censors simply because the taboo terms it uses invoke their literal meanings. Metaphorical or literal, swearwords are charged with affect in a way that renders them taboo. Ljung’s insistence that only their non-literal uses constitute swearing may distinguish a certain kind of usage for them, in fact, their most prototypical usage, but it draws attention away from one of their key features: a pragmatic link to obligatory affect. In the case of swearwords, as opposed to slang lexemes, this affect is justified by its link to topics that are all but unspeakable: e.g., human waste, sexual acts and body parts.

Slang and swearwords overlap in popular usage much as they do in scholarly treatments. In order to determine the extent to which this overlapping occurs in American student culture, I distributed a survey instrument to 66 undergraduates at Rollins College in 2011. These students were given excerpts from a Zora Neale Hurston short story along with a bit of African-American oral poetry collected by Roger Abrahams and asked to circle all the slang terms therein (See Appendix). Though some non-taboo items were identified as slang (e.g., *banked the six, seven cross-side*), a significant minority of the respondents also labeled the swearwords as slang, even when, as in the line, “He pissed on the table, he shit on the floor,” the swearwords were not used metaphorically. Table 1 shows the percentages for all swearwords identified as slang in this survey.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

It is notable that these percentages are similar to those found in data from native Chinese speakers with reference to the widely used Mandarin swearword *tamade* (which means “his mother’s...” and which has obscene implications). In a 2010 survey, 55 Mandarin-speaking respondents were given a list of five words, one of which was *tamade*, and all of which had been elicited in interviews as examples of slang (or what is known in Chinese as *liyu*). When asked to verify which of the terms was, in fact, slang (*liyu*) 26 out of 55 respondents (47%) agreed that the swearword *tamade* was an example of slang (Moore et al. 2010). In other words, in both English and Chinese, a significant minority of respondents tend to identify swearwords as slang. But, though swearwords and slang may be overlapping categories, they are after all, two conceptually separable entities with very different *raison d’etres*.

SLANG: ESSENTIAL AND SECONDARY FEATURES

Slang, a notoriously difficult lexical category to define, is most often associated with a limited number of features including its informal or colloquial tone, its inventiveness, its playfulness, its ephemerality, its association with specific, often marginalized, sub-groups, and its rebellious opposition to formal or dignified discourse (Chapman 1986; Lighter 2001; Eble 1996; Battistella 2005; Allan and Burridge 2006; Adams 2009; Dalzell 2009). But not all of these commonly cited features are equally useful in identifying slang lexemes. That feature most crucial to slang's existence is the one emphasized in Eble's (1996) analysis of student slang, the promotion of sociability. The part that slang plays in promoting sociability, and in doing so ameliorating the effects of social distance and formal hierarchy, is reflected in its invariably informal and often playful features. This informal, non-serious aspect of slang is not present in every slang utterance, of course. But, despite the various uses to which slang can be put in social interaction, the one to which it is particularly well suited is the promotion of egalitarian solidarity. Other features that have been used to define slang or explain its widespread existence – e.g., rebelliousness or usage by marginalized groups -- are secondary to its egalitarian informality.

According to some observers, slang's undermining of dignity or formality suggests an inherent rebelliousness that amounts to an opposition to fundamental social values. But slang's opposition is mainly to formal hierarchies, and even this opposition is occasional, not fundamental. Slang does not inherently oppose social values, but the way it is used can do so. What slang does, by its very nature, is express an insistently informal attitude. Consider the following four sentences, from most formal to least, offered by Eble in her discussion of slang's informality:

1. I'm extremely fatigued—I require sleep.

2. I'm really exhausted—I need sleep.
3. I'm really tired out—I need to get some sleep.
4. I'm totally wasted—I need to crash.

The extreme informality or slanginess of sentence 4 does not make it rebellious in and of itself, but were it to be used by, say, a defendant when speaking in a courtroom setting to a judge, its informality would convey a measure of disdain for the dignity of both the proceedings and the judge herself. Of course, we could emphasize the impertinence of slang's informality in such a context by pushing the slanginess of the defendant's utterance up a notch with something like,

5. Dude, I'm friggin' wasted—I gotta crash.

Rather than defining slang mainly in terms of its rebelliousness, it makes more sense to specify that in some contexts, particularly where honorifics and other discourse markers indicating deference are expected, slang's inherent informality can suggest impertinence or even hostility to those in positions of formal authority. And as Bucholtz points out, in her analysis of the slang of a San Francisco area high school, "the social practices of youth are not designed or deployed primarily to rebel against adults but to identify with and distinguish themselves from their peers" (2011:12). As I will argue below, the distinguishing function of basic slang lexemes, when they are first deployed by a youth cohort, is symbolic of opposition to some of the values of older generations. Nevertheless, I agree with Bucholtz that rebelliousness is not the primary function of slang.

The common claim that slang is associated with marginalized groups also requires modification. Dalzell, for example, writing of the subversive potential of slang, adds, "It is no accident that the liveliest language in America is often the product of the ghetto, *shtetl*, slum, *barrio*, barracks, and prison yards" (2010:6). But it would be more accurate to say that slang is

used between individuals where egalitarian sociability is deemed desirable or appropriate. These individuals need not consist of *barrio* inhabitants, criminals, beggars and so forth. Even professors, priests and presidents may use slang, but they typically rely on standard language or even honorifics when they want to emphasize their dignity and the formal power and status that are thought to justify their dignity. I recall a distinguished professor, in conversation with one colleague, criticizing a third colleague by referring to his approach to theoretical constructs as “too *cazh*” (i.e., casual). Anyone who has participated in informal conversations with people who are not marginalized can no doubt recall similar instances where slang lexemes were introduced into the conversation.

The social factor that, more than any other, welcomes slang is egalitarianism. When two interlocutors see each other as equals or, at least, are not trying to emphasize their status differences, both will be in a position to use slang. Marginalized groups, it can be argued, have far fewer contexts in which they feel the need or have the ability to call on whatever formal authority they might command through adherence to standard or “elevated” speech styles. Therefore, slang is no doubt a more commonly occurring aspect of their conversation. But nonetheless, association with marginalized groups is not a defining attribute of slang. At most it may be said that middle and upper class individuals use slang more sparingly than do poor and powerless people, and that they may therefore think of slang as an attribute of marginalized groups. But slang is an attribute of a kind of social relationship rather than of a kind of person or social type.

The one feature that virtually every scholarly definition of slang includes is its unshakable bond with an informal or casual demeanor, and this is the attribute that can lead us to an understanding of the function for which slang lexemes are most useful. Like swearwords,

slang can be said to index obligatory affect. Whenever it is used, some degree of affective or emotional spin is implied. However, slang differs from swearwords in that its most crucial or prototypical function hinges on its insistence on an informal demeanor, not its cathartic capacities. This demeanor, as Eble (1996) has demonstrated, is sociable, and, as Adams (2009) has emphasized is often associated with playfulness.

In his review of slang's various attributes, Adams focuses in particular on its "casual, playful, racy, irreverent" aspects, at one point declaring that "Slang is language with attitude – you can't separate one from the other" (2010:48). Adams implies, without saying it in so many words, that the attitude most prominently associated with slang is one of playfulness. Of course slang can be used aggressively, just as swearwords can be used playfully, but the feature that is most closely associated with slang is an attitude that resists seriousness. In fact, the attitude of playfulness in association with slang is repeatedly referred to by Adams throughout his extensive and thorough survey of this topic.

Certain kinds of jargon are "slangy" in that they approximate "the playfulness, irreverence, casualness or vividness of slang" (2009:31).

"[P]layful is a characteristic of slang recognized in most of the dictionary definitions and scholarly accounts discussed [earlier]" (2009:176).

"That...is their slanginess, the power of extreme metaphor and compact utterances to rebel against the norms of speech playfully and skillfully...(2009:187).

This final quote suggests that such aspects of slang as metaphor, compact utterances and infixes are, in effect, a kind of play. Slang is often described with reference to verbal play and to poetry-which is itself an exalted form of word play. In fact, the very subtitle of Adams' volume – *Slang: The People's Poetry* - points to slang's poetic aspects, and, as the author notes, both

Emerson and Whitman compared slang to poetry. These features of verbal play, as well as innovativeness and intimations of humor, have all been attributed to slang, and all can be regarded as entailments of its fundamental inclination toward the playful. That aspect of play that favors innovation, by the way, also helps explain the ephemerality of most slang.

That slang is fundamentally informal, often characterized by a playful attitude and not given to taking dignity and formal hierarchy seriously, casts it in a role supportive of a distinctly casual ethos. Such an ethos is particularly characteristic of egalitarian social contexts. Slang may serve a number of functions, but its primary one, the one to which, I would argue, it owes its existence, is the promotion of sociability within egalitarian social groups. This is a point that Eble has convincingly made where university students are concerned. “The *raison d’être* of slang is social,” she writes, and, according to her analysis, the “social” factor is mainly aimed at promoting sociability through slang’s emphasis on informality (1996:120). Eble describes slang as so markedly informal as to call attention to itself in ways that ordinary casual or informal speech does not (1996:118). On the basis of data she collected from student conversations, she concludes that

Slang occurs where language serving mainly social purposes is expected to occur – in talk about social life and at points in a conversation where rapport between the participants is established and reinforced. (1996:106)

And further: “Slang functions at the opening of conversation as a way to establish rapport” (1996:108). Even slang’s opposition to authority “appears to be rather playful...” (1996:129). Eble also notes that slang is not typical of what she calls “the intimate register,” that is the mode of speaking typical of couples in private conversation. For such couples, Eble argues, group

membership is irrelevant, and so is slang, which, she maintains, is most commonly used to negotiate one's identity in a group (1996:115).

Reaching conclusions that parallel those of Eble, Kiesling describes the term of address *dude* as indexing a stance of cool solidarity, a casual stance that calls to mind sociability. Kiesling also argues that *dude* has a second order indexicality in that it expresses dissatisfaction with careerism and other features of the social order of the 1980s and 90s when it first began to flourish (2004). To address someone as *dude*, rather than *sir*, for example, is to imply a rejection of the careerism and a connection to a youth-based counterculture. The multiple indexicality of this pervasive slang term of address will also be seen to characterize those lexemes I refer to below under the rubric "basic slang."

There is an interesting parallel between the sociable and often playful qualities characterizing slang, and the lighthearted quality of a type of relationship that anthropologists have identified in small-scale, non-literate societies around the world, the so-called joking relationship. Such relationships encourage or even require individuals to treat each other in a manner that entails humor and often teasing. According to Radcliffe-Brown, such relationships are most typical of individuals in ambivalent relationships, e.g., in-laws who come from different clans or social groups (Radcliffe-Brown 1940). Where linguistic aspects of such relationships are concerned, Thomson has described two distinct lexical categories that are used among certain Australian aboriginal groups to express either hostility or sociability. He describes two types of swearing among these people, the first of which the aborigines use as "taunts to goad an enemy to fight" (1935:469). Those using such swearwords are described as "mouth foul" in the native language (*ibid.*:470). The other type, referred to as "half-swearing" consists of words somewhat similar to the serious ones, but different enough to comprise a separate list of lexemes, and it is

this lexemic category that is used in joking relationships. This non-serious half-swearing is “obligatory between those who stand in certain [kin] relationships,” and, when used, is “supposed to induce a state of euphoria” or, to “make everybody happy” as a native speaker told the author (ibid.:469). The “half-swearing” that Thomson has identified among Australian aboriginal people bears a striking resemblance to much of what we would call slang, both in its function and in its relationship to hardcore swearwords.

The sociability of slang emphasized by Eble is fundamentally egalitarian. The easy use of taboo lexemes is well suited for egalitarian sociability because these lexemes express an inherent disregard of those social standards that one is expected to maintain in polite public discourse particularly where hierarchical relations prevail. By uttering them, a speaker signals his or her willingness to make light of or disregard the demands of those styles of discourse that defer to people of prominence, people Dumas and Lighter in their classic definition of slang (1979) referred to as “statusful.” Again, it need not be assumed that statusful people avoid slang, but for the less statusful to indulge in slang in the face of those higher up on some social hierarchy would ordinarily be regarded as a kind of impertinence or rebelliousness.

On October 27, 2010, in a much remarked on exchange on the *Daily Show*, host Jon Stewart addressed President Obama as “dude.” Given the “cool solidarity” with which *dude* is associated, this non-honorific address can’t be regarded as inherently aggressive or mean spirited. But what made it memorable was the host’s failure to use the proper honorific construction, “Mr. President,” in addressing his high status guest. Stewart’s use of slang signaled that he was speaking from the heart in some sense. There was an affective spin to his discourse that would not have been evident had he said “Mr. President” instead of “dude” and it was this affect that caused some commentators to describe the exchange as disrespectful.

Swearwords can be used in the same way that standard slang lexemes are used in the leveling of hierarchies and the relaxing of potentially awkward social relations. In a public lecture, Žižek described an incident from his experience in the Yugoslavian army that illustrates this point. He was serving in a unit with an Albanian, that is, a man from a different ethnic group from his own, and one that had long suffered from discrimination in Yugoslavia. At first their interactions were rather stiff, but one day the Albanian greeted Žižek with “I fuck your mother!” to which the latter responded, “Sure, after I fuck your sister!” Following this exchange, the two became friendly and relaxed in each other’s presence (Žižek 2009).

Slang, despite its prototypically playful function, can suggest something other than egalitarian sociability when certain outsiders who hear it spoken consider the speakers to be members of a dangerous group. Under these circumstances, those hearing the slang may feel intimidated. Hearing these supposedly dangerous types using swearwords may also have this effect. Both kinds of verbalization suggest a disregard for certain conventions that can be perceived as potentially leading to violence. Roth-Gordon’s analysis of the *gíria* (slang) of the Rio de Janeiro favelas, and the reaction to it by middle class Brazilians, illustrates one way in which slang (here including swearwords as one of its elements) can be perceived as anything but sociable. But, of course, this perception is constructed by outsiders and, as her revealing study shows, may well cast entirely innocent *gíria* speakers in the role of criminals merely by virtue of their informal speech (Roth-Gordon 2009).

Swearwords, despite their prototypical function as conveyers of cathartic emotional expression, can then serve the same kind of sociable function that ordinary slang does in the latter’s most characteristic role: the enabling of a sociable ethos for informal interaction in an egalitarian context. Though swearwords differ from ordinary slang in that they are enduring,

pervasive and strongly taboo, they can work in slang contexts given that they entail an implicit rejection of those niceties, including the use of honorifics, that are called for in deferring to the formal social order.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Honorifics comprise a category of lexemes that are oppositional to slang lexemes and, even more pointedly, to swearwords. Honorifics are marked by the very formality and deference that the latter categories inherently lack. To address an individual as Madame, or Your Honor or Mr. President is to emphasize the hierarchical social order that these terms index and whose existence is reinforced by their very use. Slang and swearwords are to honorifics what impulsive affect is to deferential propriety.

BASIC SLANG

The close association between swearwords and slang can also be seen in light of those lexemes I refer to as basic slang. Basic slang terms are so-called because of their pervasive and enduring status as commonly used slang terms of approval. In a sense, they can be seen as default option slang lexemes in that they are semantically vague but undeniably informal. In American English, *swell* served as a basic slang term starting in the 1920s and continued in this role until the 1960s when it was replaced by *cool*. In contemporary China, *ku* has served as a basic slang term since the mid-1990s.

Whereas most slang lexemes are narrowly specific in their semantic referents, relatively ephemeral and linked to a specific social group (e.g., *sketch*, *dank*, *chill*), basic slang terms share none of these features. They resemble swearwords in that they can endure for decades, if not longer, are widely known within a society, and, rather than referencing a specific or narrowly defined entity, are employed as general terms of approval. Like swearwords, basic slang terms

are linked to cultural value systems. Starting around 1920, *swell* was used in a way that indexed the anti-Victorian values of that era's young generation, while the Mandarin word *ku* currently indexes the rising value of individualism that characterizes China's millennial generation (Moore 2004, 2005).

An examination of the current status of *cool* will illustrate the pervasiveness of the value system to which a basic slang term like this is linked. As the values associated with "coolness" became prominent in mainstream American culture, ca. 1965, they drew a good deal of scholarly attention. Sociologists Lyman and Scott, for example, defined "coolness" in one study along these lines:

the capacity to execute physical acts, including conversation, in a concerted, smooth, self-controlled fashion in risky situations, or to maintain affective detachment during the course of encounters involving considerable emotion. (1968:89)

In general, the ability to control a situation without "breaking a sweat" is linked to the concept of mainstream cool as described by Lyman and Scott, just as it was in the Beat culture through which middle class America became acquainted with these values.

Nellis and Graziano (1975) describe college students on a Midwestern campus as maneuvering to claim status as the "cool guy," the one whose verbal skills show him able to control a variety of situations, while avoiding "earnest," i.e., uncool, competition. More recent efforts to describe the values associated with cool include those by Majors and Billson (1992), Danesi (1994), Connor (1995), Frank (1997), Pountain and Robins (2000), and MacAdams (2001).

In her recent linguistic study at Bay City High School, Bucholtz (2011) uses the expression "cool kids" to refer to a variety of different student types. Each of the categories of

cool kids that she describes -- white-oriented or black-oriented, mainstream or alternative in style -- can be considered cool by virtue of having attained status in terms of a given value system. What is constant for each value system is that within each one the slang lexeme *cool* means “approved.”

In other words, the indexicality of the word *cool* will vary depending on the perspective of the speaker. It can index the widely recognized high school popularity system, according to which the “cool mainstream kids” are identified, but it can also index those who are cool from the perspective of different subgroups or individuals, as is the case, according to Bucholtz, for the non-mainstream, black-oriented hip-hop fans or other non-mainstream alternative groups including punks, Goths, skaters and granolas.

A Florida-based middle school student of my acquaintance once explained to me her own multi-valued sense of *cool* by distinguishing what she called cool-1 from cool-2. Cool-1 kids, she explained, were the popular ones. But cool-2 kids, with whom she identified, were more on the nerdy side, but, in her opinion, much more interesting and fun (i.e., “cool”) than the cool-1 kids. Like the California students Bucholtz described, this student recognized different value systems, and, like Bucholtz, used *cool* to refer to the peak status in each of them.

Of course, *cool* continues to be used as a generalized expression of approval. Eble’s data, collected from her students over a period of decades, reveals that cool, as late as the 1990s, was listed as one of the most common slang terms. And the following email messages that I’ve received from young people in my acquaintance illustrate its continuing durability (names changed to ensure anonymity):

From a male Tufts University student (2008):

Chloe told me you might be interested in having lunch some time, and I think that's a pretty cool idea. Let me know

From a female University of North Carolina student (2011):

She's a really cool woman -- she's been fighting for [her hometown] to have its own library for over twenty years.

Cool is characterized by multiple indexicality, as, according to Kiesling, is *dude* (2004).

And, like *dude*, *cool* works on the first order of indexicality by expressing a kind of casual informality. On the second and subsequent orders, it can reference more specific cultural values. What those values are can vary from individual to individual, but they incorporate the original notion of being capable of mastering a situation. Whether that mastery entails being class president (cool-1) or expressing oneself in a unique and witty manner (cool-2) depends on individual tastes, but both of these concepts of cool, like those described by Bucholtz, are ultimately linked to an ability to prevail. *Cool* also carries with it the possibility of referencing aspects of the prototypical cool image originally passed on to mainstream culture via the Beats: the emotionally restrained but knowing African-American male in dark sunglasses. This emotionally restrained referent is indexed in the line, "I'm cool with that," and its shorter derivative, "That's cool," meaning "That's acceptable."

Expressions like *swell*, *cool* and *ku* are slang terms in that they signal informality, but they are different from most slang terms in that they are pervasive, enduring and linked to an underlying value system that, via the second order indexing that is left unsaid, is nonetheless undeniably present in the cultural system wherein the terms are used. The broad similarity between basic slang terms and swearwords is illustrated in Table 3, which is an expanded version of Table 2.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Basic slang terms occupy a peculiar in-between position vis-à-vis ordinary slang and swearwords in that like the former they serve mainly to index an informal ethos, but like the latter they derive their longevity, pervasiveness and emotional charge through their connection to underlying cultural values. The existence of this special category of slang reflects the need for speakers, on certain occasions, to be able to index an attitude of approval that is akin to the easy-going sociability identified by Eble. A student who describes someone she admires as “a really cool woman” may not necessarily be trying to establish solidarity, but she is displaying an affective tone that would be appropriate to such solidarity. This highlights a function of basic slang, and helps explain its widespread existence and endurance. Basic slang lexemes are handy and widely recognized devices for displaying an informal and positive affective tone, a tone that might be described as fundamental to egalitarian sociability. The individual who uses an expression like *swell* or *cool* indexes in that usage affect that may not itself engender sociable solidarity with a specific other, but expresses the kind of informality on which such solidarity is likely to be constructed. Basic slang exists to express the kind of benign affect that is a component of sociability. It endures and manages to maintain its relative freshness, by virtue of its indexing of a widely shared underlying value system. These two features mark its links to slang on one hand (sociability) and swearwords on the other (endurance and pervasiveness due to its indexing of values). Formerly popular basic slang terms are often used in a manner best described as ironic or even corny, a reflection of the attitude a culture-transforming youth cohort is likely to hold regarding some of its elders’ values. Thus *swell* is often so used as in this tongue in cheek comment from a mini-review of the 1952 film, *The Greatest Show on Earth*: “Big package of fun from DeMille, complete with hokey performances, clichés, big-top

excitement, and a swell train wreck” (Maltin 2006: 529). Also, the expression “bully for you,” incorporating the lexeme *bully* that appears to have been the basic slang of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, survived as an ironic comment well into the 1950s.

Swearwords and ordinary slang lexemes arise in response to different social functions, but their differences fade in importance given their indexicality vis-à-vis the affective end of this continuum. The ease with which swearwords can be recruited and used as slang to promote egalitarian sociability in some contexts is one way in which this shared indexicality overrides less fundamental differences as is the existence of the in-between category of basic slang.

CONCLUSION

That both linguists and laypeople often treat swearwords as though they were slang is a function of the inherent connection to affective expression characteristic of these two lexemic categories. This connection, it turns out, can be more compelling than their fundamental functional differences. Slang lexemes and swearwords differ in their prototypical functions, the former serving mainly to promote an ethos of egalitarian sociability within certain groups or contexts while the latter have as their primary function the cathartic expression of intense affect. The affective charge of both of these types is disinclined to defer to that social order which is supported by standard registers but which is most emphatically recognized through the use of honorifics.

Honorifics are marked above all by a disposition of seriousness and deference, dispositions that are in some ways the virtual opposites of, those entailed in the use of slang lexemes and swearwords. It could be argued that slang lexemes, unlike swearwords, resemble honorifics by virtue of being pro-social insofar as they typically promote group solidarity, but this solidarity is generally egalitarian and thereby dismissive of the hierarchical structures to

which honorifics pay homage. The opposition of slang and swearwords to the insistently formal and typically hierarchical category of honorifics is a reflection of a fundamental semiotic opposition according to which behavior is arrayed on a continuum contrasting the brazenly affective with the socially deferent, or the impulsive with the proper. Sharing a position on the affective end of this continuum makes slang and swearwords natural consociates.

Basic slang terms also serve an affective function. Like ordinary slang, they express an attitude that invites an egalitarian sociability, though they do so with no reference to specific group membership. They can be regarded as a kind of default option slang whose usual purpose, beyond expressing approval, is to signal an informal and potentially sociable attitude. On the other hand, they resemble swearwords given their longevity, pervasiveness and their indexicality with reference to an underlying value system. In fact, it is this indexicality that explains their unusual endurance and pervasiveness.

TABLE 1

Swearwords from African-American Street Poetry Identified as Slang (n=66)

	Number of Respondents Identifying the Swearword as Slang	Percentage
Motherfucking	29	44
Pissed	25	38
Goddamn	23	35

TABLE 2

Key features of (most) slang lexemes and swearwords.

	SLANG	SWEARWORDS
Indexical of obligatory affect	+	+
Affect that is inappropriate in formal contexts	+	+
Widely used – not associated with a subgroup	-	+
Usually enduring for at least a number of decades	-	+
Semantically linked to specific cultural values	-	+
Taboo by virtue of this semantic link	-	+

TABLE 3

	ORDINARY SLANG	BASIC SLANG	SWEARWORDS
Indexical of Obligatory Affect	+	+	+

Affect that is inappropriate in formal contexts	+	+	+
Widely used – not associated with a subgroup	-	+	+
Usually enduring for at least a number of decades	-	+	+
Semantically linked to specific cultural values	-	+	+
Taboo by virtue of this semantic link	-	-	+

APPENDIX

Students were asked to circle all the slang terms in the two excerpts below.

From Zora Neale Hurston's "A Story in Harlem Slang" (*American Mercury* July 1942: 84-96).

"I been rased in the church. I don't bet, but I'll doubt you. Five rocks!"

"I thought so!" Jelly crowed, and hurriedly pulled his empty hand out of his pocket. "I knowed you'd back up when I drawed my roll on you."

"You ain't drawed no roll on me, Jelly. You ain't drawed nothing but your pocket. You better stop dat boogerboosing. Next time I'm liable to make you do it." There was a splinter of regret in his voice. If Jelly really had had some money, he might have staked him, Sweet Back, to a hot Good Southern cornbread with a piano on a platter. Oh well! The right broad would, or might, come along.

"Who boogerboosing?" Jelly snorted. "Jig, I don't have to. Talking about me with a beat chick scoffing a hot dog! You must of not seen me, 'cause last night I was riding round in a Yellow Cab, with a yellow gal, drinking yellow likker and spending yellow money. Tell 'em 'bout me, tell 'em!"

From Roger Abrahams *Deep Down in the Jungle* (1970:150)

He broke the balls and ran one, two and three.

He said, "Hold this cue stick while I go and pee."

He pissed on the table, he shit on the floor.

Came back and run balls three and four.

Now he shot the balls, and shot 'em all, and turned around and shot the five.

Brought hot, scalding water from the baboon's eyes.

He banked the six and seven cross-side.

He took the motherfucking eight for a goddamn ride.

He shot the 'leven, he shot the twelve.

By that time, the baboon said, "To hell! Go to hell!"

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