Varieties of American English

S. Gramley, WS 2009-10
American Slang, Taboo Words, and Euphemisms
Newfoundland

Grammar (one example): the pronoun system

ModE has what might be called a “pronominal gender system” (Corbett 1991:5)
Plus some gender-marked noun endings (-or vs. –ess) (Wagner 2000: 480).

Natural gender is often human vs. non-human and male vs. female within human.
Or: animate vs. inanimate. Plus some special cases in English: boat = she; fill’er up; and “in emotional situations, he can refer to all types of things” (431).

Gendered pronouns.
West Country and Newfoundland:
(a) every thing or object which has a shape of its own (dead or alive) is either masculine or feminine; nearly always the former, e.g. pitcher, tool, book, house, coat, cat, letter = he (481)
(b) It is impersonal or abstract, used to express an action or a noun of the undefined sort, e.g. cloth in the quantity, water, snow, air, weather, hay, beer. This is count vs. mass. Cf. Proto-Indo-European: animate was masculine with the subcategory feminine for female humans and animals vs. inanimate (= neuter). (482).
Newfoundland: relative pronouns (examples)

• Yea, well he was made, you could have it for a bank one time and dey turned into a work box. He was made for a money bank, ya know perhaps dey shoffed deir coppers down it.
• Oh dey have he to put banes into it. [ref to bean jar]
• ... you had a flap roll around it, ‘round the look, keep he dry, perhaps you had a muskrat’s fur, rabbit’s fur ‘round it for the water, hold the water ...
• ... when the great wave used to come rolling, we’d run as fast as we could to get up out of it before he’d get us.
• And he’s [a song] all there but there’s different words in it you know.
• He said dat was, dat was true, he said, their camp’d be down every, made no difference how dey put en up, how strong dey put it up he’d be down flat when dey come back. So dey, his uncle said we considered dere must be something, dere must be must be a grave dey was sot on you know, so dey shift and he never come down no more. (491)
• Oh yes he [a certificate] had to go in wid it [application for old age pension] see, he had to go in wid en, now he won’t be, come back no more ‘fore I gets 70, if I lives till dat. Dey’ll send it back den, dey don’t want it. Dey sent back mi mother’s, my mother’s, they sent back he when she got in her 70’s, and said, we don’t need en no longer, you know. (491f)

What is en (case, gender, number, origin)?
It seems that *en* (sometimes we find *em*) is from the 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular accusative pronoun, cf. the pronouns of Old English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3rd m</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>he</td>
<td>héo</td>
<td>hit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>his</td>
<td>hire</td>
<td>his</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>him</td>
<td>hire</td>
<td>him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>hine</td>
<td>hí, héo, hie</td>
<td>hit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>hý</td>
<td>hý</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just as *hit* lost its initial /h/, so too did *hine* (and also dative *him*). Example (West Country) of *im*:

\[ \text{dí, dr} \quad \text{im} \quad \text{into} \quad \text{díet} \quad \text{`br} \text{uk} \] (they drained him [a field] int that brook)
Slang

by Lennart Reuschenberg
• slang is more than a level of formality
• it is not just informal, colloquial, careless or sloppy language
• slang being group language is the key feature of slang
• slang being typically connected with subcultures of youth is maybe what leads many people to just see it as informal and sloppy language, as the language of the as yet weak and as yet outsiders
• extremely important social function for the groups that create it:
  ● helps establish solidarity
  ● is associated with group identity
Slang

• has nothing to do with grammar
• is more a question of vocabulary
• is more often spoken than written
• in everyday language there are British words that cannot be understood by Americans or vice versa, but that’s not necessarily slang

• slang is informal and colloquial
Most important: true slang is group-related, it is defined by the affiliation to a mostly less powerful group, e.g. criminals and use slang and represent less powerful groups outside the mainstream.

Criminal slang:

- bent cars: stolen cars
- big house: prison
- bracelets: handcuffs

The police for example use slang, too:

- Alabama Lie Detector: Police baton
- Uniform Carrier: Useless or ineffective police officer
Slang may drift upward into the language of the more powerful and outward into that of out-group users, but by the time this happens the group will have turned to a different expression.

There is also a correlation between taboo words and slang.
Defining slang is difficult. One might even say that according to the definition that **slang** is group speech, it is not slang anymore if someone outside the group knows the slang.

Eric Partridge is of the opinion that slang is defined more by informality. The powerful, too, have their slang, but that is a very wide interpretation. For him clergymen, for example, have their own slang, but that would be more like jargon.

Slang should be distinguished from jargon, which is the technical vocabulary of a particular profession.

**Jargon**, like many examples of slang, may be used to exclude non-group members from the conversation, but in general has the function of allowing its users to talk precisely about technical issues in a given field.

Examples of jargon (armed forces jargon):

- **A-O**: area of operations
- **A Teams**: 12-man Green Berets units
- **fast-roping**: a technique for descending a thick rope
The use of slang may be seen as linguistic protest of the subordinated against those in charge.

Distancing oneself from the vocabulary norms of GenE is also a rejection of middle class norms by marginalized groups.

**Literature**


A Study of (American) Slang, Taboo Words, and Euphemisms

Data assembled just over ten years ago gives some insight into areal differences in the use of
• terms of address,
• kinship terms,
• routine formulas,
• color associations,
• slang and colloquial expressions, and
• taboo words and their euphemisms.

In this presentation some exemplary results will be provided.
The Respondents

Region / Country. Of over 300 questionnaires 294 have been evaluated. They represent four English-speaking countries:
- South Africa (131)
- the United States (123 + one Canadian = 124)

They have been supplemented by adding
- 24 questionnaires from Australia and
- 14 from Ireland.

Gender. The respondents consisted of 93 males and 199 females (two respondents did not indicate their gender).

Age, which was concentrated in a range under 30 with a few older people (n = 38), will not be taken into consideration.
**Slang**, the first of the points studied, is a good example of vernacular language inasmuch as it is primarily a product of the *spoken medium*. In the same vein, it is regarded as *informal*, much as everyday spoken language is (not, of course, the more formal spoken genres of lectures, sermons, public addresses, and the like, all of which are remarkably free of slang) (cf. Quirk 1962: 94). Furthermore, it is looked upon as *sloppy* and *careless*, perhaps because it is not seen as suitable for the types of genre just mentioned. So calling someone a *nong* (AusE slang) is no different than calling them a *simpleton*, but the former is strictly spoken language, while the latter is bookish and clearly a part of StE.
Slang is also creative and witty, exaggerated and flamboyant, dramatic, yet opaque. In one of Tony Parsons’ novels, *Starting Over*, we find BrE prose which suggests a non-bourgeois ambient:

“A bloody handprint on the wall. A pair of furry bottles, and everywhere it stank of cigarettes and wacky baccy, and everywhere the carpet was pockmarked with black burns and crumpled stubs” (129)

*Wacky baccy* is a racy way of referring not so much crazy (*wacky*) tobacco (*baccy*) as to cannabis. It is in part a creative derivation from *tobacco*, but also an expression with an allusion to Bacchus, the god over what makes you high (*wacky*). It refers to a controlled substance with suggestions of its non-legal use. Its rhyming nature gives it an air of the witty and creative in language. The scene is dramatic; the term is opaque (for the uninitiated).
Slang is typically associated with
  • groups outside of the mainstream (as suggested by the drug example on the previous slide),
  • groups often characterized by their powerlessness.
But also
  • groups who have a say about who belongs.

Slang serves as a marker of group belonging. It signifies solidarity and group identity. It is, in other words “the in-group language of outsiders” (Gramley 2001: 208).

It is disrespectful of authority (wanker); it is irreverent (Jesus fuckin’ Christ); it is unorthodox and/or impolite (rag “sanitary napkin”).
Slang and informal, colloquial English was elicited to with the question:

What colloquial expression(s) might you use to indicate that you find something to be

(a) very good (e.g. Super! Groovy!)

and

(b) very bad (e.g. That's the pits)?
“Super”

84 items were volunteered, most of them (47) by only one person and are of relatively little further interest. The same applies to all but the items suggested by at least 10% from one or more in the four countries.

Common choices across the board:
• cool (37.8%)
• great (24.5%)
• awesome (23.5%)
• excellent (19.0%)

Further results:
• Brilliant lies over 5% in SAE and IrE.
• Class is frequent (28.6%; n = 4), but only in IrE.
• AusE (over 10%) and SAE (over 5%) share fab(ulous).
• Sweet is strongly AmE (23.4%) and just over 5% in AusE.

In other words, the common choices are largely shared with only a few regional-national differences.
“Sucks”

Very few items show a regional (national) bias. The main such item is

- **SAE kak** (various spellings) named by just over 10% and not mentioned elsewhere

- **shit(ty)** was mentioned by 32.0% of the South African respondents; the special form *shite* was given twice in Ireland and twice in South Africa

- *(It) sucks* is also widely used in SAE (21.6% mentions), but must count as especially American (62.9%)

- there is one shared Southern hemisphere item: *crap(py)* at 14.5% (SAE) and 45.8% (AusE): its origin may be in Ireland (cf. 28.5%)

- these findings suggest a preference for scatological expressions in SAE
“Sucks” (2)

**Gender.** Some of the tabooed items (*shit(ty), sucks*) were checked against gender, and no significant differences in frequency of usage could be found:

• ***Shit(ty):***
  • 24.4% (SAE) of the male respondents and 28.0% (SAE) of the female ones.
  • 9% of the males (AmE) as compared to 8.8% of the females (AmE)

• ***Sucks*** (tested for AmE only): was mentioned by 63.6% of the males and 62.6% of the females.

• euphemistic sound-alikes were, however, offered **only by females** (each only once):
  • *shoot*
  • *darn*
  • *poopie*
“Git”
What colloquial and unfriendly expressions might be used to tell someone to leave (e.g. *Git! Scram!* etc.)

American respondents offered approximately 44 possibilities.

The straightforward (i.e. fully standard) expressions dominate:
• *get out of here* (n = 33),
• *leave* (30),
• *get out* (22), or
• *go away* (16)

However, sometimes they are reinforced as in *get the hell out of here / away* (15).

Variation can be seen in the *off* expression (*beep, buzz, fuck, piss, take*) though none are really highly frequent.

Another type of variation includes *get* * as in *get lost* (10) or the Southern American regionalism *git* (n = 3) as well as those listed above.
Taboo and four-letter words

Like slang, taboo words belong to the spoken language. While there are numerous areas which underlie taboos of the one or the other sort, some of them, such as money or death, do not seem to be associated with specific lexical taboos. Death is often highly tabooed and requires an especially careful vocabulary when talked about (die becomes pass away, go west, go to your reward, etc. – all of which are relatively positively framed). However, the opposite also can be found: bite the dust, drop dead, kick the bucket, etc. None of these words or expressions are, however, four-letter words.

In other cases, however, we have to do with a few closely circumscribed areas of activity which are associated with highly tabooed words (see below).
A taboo exists in the first place because the objects or activities referred to are associated for many people with hidden forces which can affect our lives.

Numerous words from all of these areas crop up as exclamations / expletives (swear/cuss/dirty words) or, as they are also known, “Anglo-Saxon four-letter words” (due to the fact that so many, though by no means all of them, consist of four letters, e.g. shit, piss, fuck, damn, hell). Note: Damn is not of Anglo-Saxon origin, and words like bitch or bastard have more than four letters though both are probably ultimately of Germanic origin.
There is a core of lexical items among the taboo words such as those just listed which are widely shared throughout the English-speaking world even though they can hardly be regarded as being part of StE (if defined as the respectable middle class evaluates it).

Four-letter words can be categorized under the following four headings:
• profanity (*goddamn*),
• obscenity (*fucked up*),
• scatology (*shit*), and
• insulting slurs as a reflection of ethnicity (*yid, wop, spick, nigger*, etc.), sex (*bitch, slut, whore*, etc.), age (*old fart*), region (*yank, rube*), or intellectual capacity (*airhead, boob, idiot, moron, nimcompoop*, etc.).

Most speakers are fairly clearly aware of these taboos. Consequently, reference within these areas is closely monitored and the ways in which these taboos are broken are of great interest.
Taboo words (aka swear words, dirty words, four-letter words)

In the investigation reported here the following areas were asked about:
• sexuality
• excretion
• ethnicity
• age
• religion
• intelligence
• regional origin (slurs)

Results will be reported on region, sexuality, and excretion.
“hick” (regional slurs)

Vocatives. What insulting names are used (in specific or general)?
Example: *Damn Yankee* (= geographical)?

40 geographical items were named by two or more people, but only 11 of these was given in a percentage of more than 10% of the (total number of) the respondents.

If we look only at insulting (rather than possibly only descriptive) terms we have nine terms, which are largely limited to one country each with the exception of *pom(my)*, which shows up in South Africa (9.2%) and in Australia (20.8%), hence giving us a (very limited) base for collective *Southern Hemisphere English*. Furthermore, it would be reasonable to add one term which lay under the 10% mark, but was the only term with a reasonable spread over all four regions: *Yank(ee)*.
“hick” (2)

The highest scoring terms are (by country):
• SAE: pom(my) (9.2%), vaalie (6.1%)
• AmE: hick (30%), red neck (15.2%), hillbilly (13.6%)
• AusE: wog (25%), pom(my) (20.8%), westie (16.7%), leb(o) (12.5%)
• IrE: frog(ger) (21.4%)

Such details suggest
• that some vocabulary is basically international (Yank(ee)),
• that some follows settlement patterns (pom(my)), and
• that most is oriented towards local regional stereotypes and prejudices, e.g. vaalie (< Transvaal, among largely Cape Town respondents) or Westie (< West Australia in Sydney).

Note that wog (Mediterranean-Middle Eastern), leb(o) (< Lebanese), and frog(ger) (for the French) are as much ethnic as geographic designations / slurs.

The three AmE items given are truly regional slurs.
From the questionnaire:
These questions may be embarrassing, so please regard them strictly as the subject of an investigation. You yourself may not talk about some of these things or use the terms we are interested in finding out about, but you may be aware of what other people of your sex, ethnicity, region, and general level of education use.

1. In the following list a neutral or technical word has been used. We are interested in what the tabooed (impolite, "dirty") words for each of the following are. Can you also indicate what the everyday euphemistic (acceptable, informal, possibly used with children) expressions are?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>neutral</th>
<th>taboo</th>
<th>euphemistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>buttocks</td>
<td>ass/arse</td>
<td>bottom</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked about feces, urine, intestinal gas, penis, vagina, and female breasts. Only the data for penis and piss will be presented.
“Penis” (sexuality)

*Penis* taboo and *penis* euphemisms
American taboo vocabulary is very clear inasmuch as
• the vast majority of the respondents (77.4%) chose the word *dick*
• 22.6% gave *cock*, at a distant second, but still frequent
• all the other words named (there were 22) were far less frequent

**Gender.** In checking for gender differences
• *dick* (taboo) is given by 75.8% of the males and by 78.0% of the females (not statistically significant). However, the word
• *cock* is treated differently, with a response rate of 18.2% of the males and 31.0% of the females. (Why?)
The euphemisms had a clear leader,
• *penis*, with 23.4%, followed by
• *peepee* (16.1%) and
• *privates / private parts* (11.2%);
• there were a further 28 items mentioned, including *dick, pecker, penis, prick, wanger, weeny/weiner, and will*, which appeared in the taboo-word list as well. What this makes clear is that one person’s taboo is another person’s euphemism.
“Penis”

A comparison with SAE show close similarity among the more frequent taboo terms:
• SAE and AmE both have *dick* in first place, but in
• SAE it is less common at just over one half
• SAE has a term unknown to AmE, *piel* (8.4%).

Among the euphemisms there more diversity: The most common term is
• *penis* in AmE (23.4%), which is ranked number two in SAE at 11.5%
• *willy* is top rank for SAE (21.4%), but is negligible in AmE (1.6%)
• *peepee* is second in AmE (16.1%), but is negligible in SAE (2.3%)
• *privates/private parts* (11.2%) is the AmE 3rd place item, but it is only 3.8% in SAE.
• *winky*, on the other hand, 3rd in SAE (9.1%), but is mentioned only once among the AmE respondents.
“Piss” (excretion)

In AmE there seems to be great agreement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>taboo</th>
<th>euphemism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>piss: 102 (82%)</td>
<td>pee: 94 (75.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M: 28</td>
<td>M: 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: 74</td>
<td>F: 73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The taboo word *piss* is also favored in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AusE</th>
<th>IrE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 out of 23</td>
<td>11 out of 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M: 11 / 13; F: 8 / 10</td>
<td>M: 5 / 5; F: 6 / 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SAE is one of the few cases where linguistic behavior shows gender divergence:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>taboo</th>
<th>euphemism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>piss</td>
<td>wee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86 out of 130</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M: 38 / 41; F: 48 / 89</td>
<td>M: 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pee</td>
<td>wee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M: 2</td>
<td>M: 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: 17</td>
<td>F: 9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

46% of South African women (in this study) avoided using *piss* while only 7.3% of the men did.

As the euphemisms show, *wee* is “popular” in British-oriented English (SAE: 46%; AusE: 69.6%; IrE: 27.3%), but not in AmE: 1.6%.