

## Slovenly Language and Freedom of Speech at US Colleges

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### Abstract

The present article analyses communicative features of US students, their usage of slovenly language and blend words. The data for the research was obtained at American University, Washington College of Law (AU WCL) students, Washington D.C., USA. The aim of the research was also to discuss the process of creating new words and their usage in a specific situation and by specific community members. The paper studies historic, legal and educational background of using slovenly language by students and how the concept of 'Freedom of Speech' has changed over the century. The case study revealed unique picture of student life as it's really lived today. It describes students' contribution in the research with their findings, adding DC specific slang in educational, legal and criminal context.

From the research findings it can be concluded that despite judicial intervention slovenly language is used without limit by everyone and has thus gone global. Even a court intervention won't stop the teen spirit from saying something 'illegal' or unacceptable. In the process of the permanent change of the language many such units lose their original meaning and function but nevertheless, such coinages are very popular among different users of the language.

**Keywords:** Freedom of speech, US constitution, constitutional amendments, higher education, right to expression, slang

### Introduction

Word-formation has been the topic of global interest and research not only from the side of linguists and scientists, but also from protectors of human rights and even courts. To be more precise, the subject of these excessive discussions has been not the process of creating new words but their usage in a specific situation and by specific community members. According to this, the present research aims at studying the communicative features of US students, their usage of some types of word-formation and namely, slovenly language and blends or words in the structure of which one part of a shortened word is linked to some part of another word. If we say it in teen language the research is devoted to slangs and blangs.

The paper is organized in the following way: Part I analyzes historic, legal and educational background of using slovenly language by students and how the concept of 'Freedom of Speech' has changed over the century. Part II describes most active spheres where new coinages are used by the college students. Part III is a case study and surveys the speech patterns of American University, Washington College of Law (AU WCL) students, Washington D.C., USA. It describes students' contribution in the research with their findings, adding DC specific slang in educational, legal and criminal context. The Conclusion displays the unique picture of student life as it's really lived

today.

### Part I: Historical and Legal Background, the Purpose of Study

'When Harvard University found that its students were describing, in the undergraduate publications, their adventures in baseball in terms not to be found in that triumph of Harvard scholarship, the Oxford Dictionary of the English Language, that venerable institution of learning did not attempt to remedy the supposed evil in the right way. It essayed to abolish baseball slang.' – This is what we read in 'The New York Times' of May 9, 1915 in the article titled "Harvard Ties the Can to Slang". Almost a century later, slovenly language has penetrated all levels of our society infecting the rich, poor and everyone in between, it has become inseparable part of our lives and no one will dismiss you from college or impose strict fines for your slovenliness. As Orwell wrote, 'the English language ... becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts... modern English is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble' (Orwell, 1946). And he was right. If we can get rid of bad habits we can take the first step toward our regeneration, but fight against bad language is not an easy job, especially, when it comes to

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the legal rights of any person. In today's world everyone, even primary school students know their rights and especially if these rights are guaranteed by the Constitution. Not everyone would want to argue about this issue with students, as the latter can protect their arguments by quoting the First Amendment to the United States Constitution which codifies the freedom of speech as a constitutional right. It's also a fact that teenagers and mostly higher education students are most creative and innovative language users, they are privileged linguistically, speaking as they do from a kind of intersection where young and old slang, family and workplace slang, local and global, all mingle with their own original coinages. Like any community leading a self-contained existence out of the boundaries of the social mainstream, students also have developed their own language through which they can label one another, celebrate their shared pleasures, and keep the rest of the world at arm's length. For more than a century such speech patterns made the English teen vocabulary richer.

As mentioned above, usage of slang, newly coined words and expressions, sometimes offensive and even not-offensive vocabulary has been the subject of judicial review. Here is the list of court rulings on specific cases starting from 1969 till today. In *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969), the Supreme Court extended broad First Amendment protection to children attending public schools, which prohibits censorship unless there is "substantial interference with school discipline or the rights of others". Several following rulings have narrowed or affirmed this protection. *Bethel School District v. Fraser* (1986) supported disciplinary action against a student whose campaign speech was filled with sexual ambiguity, determining to be "indecent" but not "obscene". *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* (1988) permitted censorship in school newspapers which had not been established as forums for free student expression. *Guiles v. Marineau* (2006) affirmed the right of a student to wear a T-shirt mocking President George W. Bush, including allegations of alcohol and drug use. *Morse v. Frederick* (2007) supported the suspension of a student who held a banner reading "BONG HITS FOR JESUS" at a school-supervised event which was not on school grounds.

Such protections also apply to public colleges and universities. For example, student newspapers which have been established as forums for free expression have been granted broad protection by Courts of Appeals.

In *Lamb's Chapel v. Center Moriches Union Free School District* (1993), the US Supreme Court held that the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment was offended by a school district that didn't allow a church access to school premises to show films dealing with family and child-rearing issues faced by parents.

## Part II: Current Situation

It is evident that despite judicial intervention slovenly language or slang is being used without any limit by everyone and has thus gone global. It contains local hybrids which are incorporated into the English vocabulary along with the pervasive consequences of dominant inner-circle varieties such as the college argot which is most of all propagated by movies and TV soap operas, and the black street codes of hip-hop and rap. Virtual or electronic literacies that are invented for the Internet, email or text messaging serve as the basis of new slangs. In almost all cultures there are numerous examples of this expertise, which sometimes involve catchphrases, on-liners, media quotes, puns and jokes.

Teenagers are especially fond of puns (a Pavarotti for a 'tenner'), borrowings (action gagnée for a successful seduction), and their own version of rhyming slang: Mariah (scary), Britneys (beers), Jekyll (snide). Student slang is not what the linguist Halliday called an 'anti-language' – an insider's code invented by outsiders – it is more a knowing celebration of diversity, and (to use that dreadful word) empowerment. If we look at it objectively, slang is in no way substandard. In fact, it has claims to rival poetry with which it shares all the creative tricks of word-formation – compounds, blends, inversion, etc. and all the rhetorical devices – metaphor, irony, and alliteration. Slang is now admitted into the media and is celebrated there, along with cliché, catchphrase, jargon and all the other sub-varieties of colloquial speech.

Since we are unable to restrict the students from word-ing impolitely let's just watch how they are 'developing' English vocabulary with various words, units and speech patterns.

## Part III: Case study

The present research aims at studying the communicative features of US students, their usage of slovenly language (slang) and blend words (blangs). In this survey students were invited to donate their favorite examples of current slang. Some students contributed their own findings to the existing database which was held in the American University, Washington College of Law (AU WCL), in Washington D.C., USA. The resulting collection of close to 3000 words and phrases provides a unique picture of student life as it's really lived today.

One thing all the groups surveyed have in common is a single-minded pursuit of pleasure, sharing a common linguistic code for getting high ('mashed', 'caned', 'willied' and hundreds of other synonyms), chasing the opposite sex ('yaaing', 'chirpsing', 'checking', 'sharking'), dismissing the unattractive ('mudfish', 'beast-men', 'biffas', ditsy = dizzy + dotty) and presumably avoiding as far as possible

the boredom of study - there are no slang terms at all referring to lectures, essays, exams, or tutors. In every day speech they use a lot of coinages, like: needcessity = need + necessity; diabetesity = diabetes + obesity; dumbfound = dumb + confound; econocrat = economist + bureaucrat; gainsay = against + say; daymare = day + nightmare;; angrageous = angry + rageous; satiscractory = satisfactory + crap and so on. It was also interesting to include in the research the usage of slang in legal, criminal context

It should be noted that when the students across the AU WCL campus were invited to contribute examples of current slang usage, providing a list of terms used or heard with definitions nearly all submissions came from undergraduate students from the Law College.

As a first step in analyzing the data a rough categorization of slang collected at AU into semantic fields has been attempted. The semantic categories are not pre-existing but have been suggested by the data itself, and therefore rely to some extent on the judgment and intuition of those who have analyzed it. The classification appears as follows: romance (sweet – wonderful; tight – awesome; phat – stylish; hot - good-looking; bling-bling - expensive), sex and related body parts (hella – extremely; dope – nice); addressing to each other (dawg – friend; homey – buddy; adolescentertainer = adolescent + entertainer; cotato = couch + potato; ginormous = gigantic + enormous; stupidiot = stupid + idiot) terms of disapproval /disappointment; greetings, farewells and exclamations (sick – very good; bounce – to leave; yo – a greeting; what’s up – hello; wack – undesirable; dude – a person;); social or ethnic categorizations (ghetto – cheap); relaxation (moodical - classical moody music; greedifying - to satisfy your greed for something; habby - something between a habit and a hobby; studentertainer = student + entertainer; amusementertainment = amusement + entertainment; chillax = chill+relax); money; food related (portafue - a portable and nutritious meal or snack; potatomato = potato + tomato; tobaccoffee = tobacco + coffee; sork = spoon + fork); clothes and everyday usage (acknowledgmention = acknowledgment + mention; acquaintroduce = acquaint + introduce; adflation = advertising + inflation; admirespect = admire + respect; aloney = alone + lonely; blog = web + log; braintelligence = brain + intelligence; chamberpotty = chamberpot + potty; chooseselect = choose + select; gamerrymaking = game + merrymaking; narratell = narrate + tell; wifemale = wife + female; pranner - a combination printer and scanner). The next thing done was identification and definition of blends within the slang words.

It was not difficult to identify that in most cases blang words are created for the purpose of naming new hybrids. Such units are created in order to give more emotional coloring and expression to the original concept they denote. Examples of such units are: citringe < citron + orange; yakow < yak + cow; beefalo < beef + buffalo. Rogernomics. The lat-

ter, a blend of Roger and economics, was created by analogy with Reaganomics in order to describe the economic policies followed by New Zealand Finance Minister Roger Douglas from his appointment in 1984. It should be admitted here that the morpheme –nomics started to obtain the status of a suffix when the portmanteau Nixonomics was created with it as one of the constituents. Nixonomics was a trend in American economic policy, elaborated in August, 1971 at Camp David, where President Richard Nixon has convoked the advisors to overcome the inflation. Lately, the suffix-nomics was successfully used to create the following words bimbonomics, flexinomics, lawsonomics. Nowadays, in economic and political terminology blend words Clintonomics or Bushonomics are quite wode-spread. The latter was coined by John Cassidy, who used this word as a headline for his article in ‘New Yorker’, on May 12, 2003.

The media, advertising and show business have been responsible for an especially large crop: advertorial (an advertisement written as though it were an editorial); From the sphere of entertainment students use animatronics < animated + electronics, rockumentary < a rock documentary. It’s important that the liberated use of all our language’s potential doesn’t replace formal or literary styles, rather it extends our linguistic repertoire, pushes the boundaries of the sayable. For example, if you drive not far from AU and drop in at AMC Loews Georgetown 14, you will hear a lot of unknown words from local ‘jargonauts’ (people who use an excessive number of jargon terms when speaking or writing): celebreality < the real life of a celebrity; a TV show format in which one or more celebrities participate in real-life situations, also: celeb-reality, celeb reality; and you can get ‘confuzzled’ (confused and puzzled) and will be in need of some ‘goy’ (a girl who wants to be a boy) in order to ‘gesplain’ (to explain something as you are gesturing, similar to the way Italians speak) what these words mean. You will look around and see ‘giraffiti’ (graffiti painted in a very high spot) or meet some girls participating in ‘girlcott’ and not the boycott. Now you are really tired and decide to watch a docutainment (a documentary written as entertainment, with variable felicity concerning actual events) or a movieoke (a form of entertainment in which a person acts out scenes from a movie while a silent version of the movie plays in the background). And here, you hear the sound of propaganda (Music that is popular with the general public, and has purpose or is trying promote particular ideas)? Gosh, you are completely lost. You still remember your name but what about the simple things like month? For sure, it’s noctvember (new month between October and November). If you just ask a very simple question to a college student, something like how his day was at the university don’t be surprised if he tells you a story like this: ‘My first morn class was a real killer and I was blown away by all new assignments that the prof

gave us. Later I was tempted to cut my aftn class but since it was a cake class I decided to go anyway. The teacher handed the quiz and I aced it so... no sweat. After classes I had to hit the books. I thought I could have to pull an all-nighter to cram for the mid-term so I crashed for an hour before dinner. I'm bummed 'cause I won't have any chance to kick back at night'. You have to be a college student to understand the details of that very busy talk with its regional expressions, jargons, metaphors, etc. One should be aware that 'cake' can't be used only as a noun it can also be an adjective, bummed is another word for being upset and killer class is an excellent, cool class, also, to blow away is to overwhelm.

In the process of working with the volunteer students one of the most important parts of the research was the usage of slang in legal, criminal context. Most part of the students at the AU were residents of Washington, DC but even the non-residents and the international students were aware of the most actively used words by the citizens who fail to abide the law, also criminal authorities and related subgroup in address of the law enforcement bodies and their representatives. Most important and popular among them were the following: Ape < derogatory reference to Capitol law enforcement, specifically riot control ("Capitol Armed Interdiction Police"), but college students sometimes refer to any Capitol law officer who is especially rough on civilians. Big Brother < a Brotherhood representative, pulling rank on officers involved in a case; Boss < term for senior officers from lieutenant to captain, deputy inspector, inspector, and commissioner; Cape < more polite reference to Capitol Armed Interdiction Police (riot police), but sometimes used as an allusion to rough behavior by a police officer; Central < Central Dispatch, which coordinates Dawn Alert's agents in the field and off it; dee wee < driving while intoxicated; DOA < dead on arrival, any dead person, murdered or otherwise; DT < street slang for a detective; go down < get arrested; gun run < search for a weapon reported sighted in the hands of a "perp"; Hit < tactical assault on a criminal location; Job < service in the agency; e.g., "I've been on the job five years"; Loo < affectionate slang for "lieutenant"; OC < "organized crime"; open carrier < police officer or vehicle with an open radio; indicates that conversation should be guarded for the sake of those who may be listening in; Perp < perpetrator, criminal; puzzle palace < police officer's term for headquarters; usually indicates that their orders are a source of mystery; rat squad < officers and detectives assigned to the Internal Affairs Bureau; Rip < loss in pay due to a disciplinary infraction such as unauthorized moonlighting; Squad < short for "detective squad", attached to the specific precinct; white shirts < term for lieutenants and above, who wear white uniform shirts; generally, "office types", the "upstairs management" who aren't blue-collar like the average policeman. It should be noted that the abovementioned slovenly language is used only in the Washington Metropolitan Area, as each state and region has its own unique language.

tioned slovenly language is used only in the Washington Metropolitan Area, as each state and region has its own unique language.

### Conclusion

It should be admitted that old distinctions between respectable and unacceptable have been dissolved, and even so-called taboo language can be used without any limit. The terms used by linguists – 'nonstandard', 'stigmatised' - are out of date, but even if we admit that slang, jargon and the rest are not a top priority for teaching, definitely, they value studying as a part of various registers, codes, dialects and not as something inherently marginal or exceptional. Slovenly language is no more or less a 'non-standard variety' than is the language of bureaucracy and corporate culture (metrics, deliverable, iteration) or of academic critical theory (discourses, performative, intertextuality). Even a court intervention won't stop the teen spirit from saying something 'illegal' or unacceptable.

The way it is defined, slovenly language itself is a language phenomenon which involves and of course requires the attention of our students, and one which, it could be said, cries out for our attention, too, in that it permeates the life of the campus and the school. The study of slang, and particularly, the slang of adolescent subcultures, including students, has received substantial attention from scholars worldwide who have generally focused either on sociolinguistic or lexical-semantic aspects.

Collection and sorting of samples of campus slang and blend words among them using a lexical field approach is a first stage, designed mainly to facilitate the publication of glossaries and dictionaries and the development of teaching materials. A second stage is the carrying out of in-depth micro-studies, at formal aspects relating to etymology, diachronic change, etc. Recording slang usage in the context of authentic interactions had been carried out with some success, particularly by students themselves operating as participant-observers within their peer-groups. Work in progress includes conversational analysis of data recovered in a wide variety of settings, and a comparison of usage in neighboring institutions.

As can be seen clearly blangs break the boundaries of colloquial speech and are original components of the language. They mostly have colloquial coloring. Their usage in scientific and technical terminology is also not rare in coining new names, brands, advertisements. Great amount blangs is accepted by the language and are registered in dictionaries. In the process of the permanent change of the language many such units lose their original meaning and function but nevertheless, such coinages are very popular among different users of the language.

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## Internet Resources

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom\\_of\\_speech\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_speech_in_the_United_States)
- <http://www.answers.com/topic/portmanteau-new-word>
- <http://www.aclu.org/freespeech/youth/36618prs20080902.html>
- <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2005/SO/AW/RestrictSpeech.htm>
- <http://www.aclu.org/freespeech/youth/35333prs20080401.html>
- <http://thinkzone.wlonk.com/WordFun/PortWords>
- [http://www.wordiq.com/define/Portmanteau\\_word](http://www.wordiq.com/define/Portmanteau_word)
- <http://www.search.com/reference/Portmanteau>
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