

Usage Slang in a Residential University in Sri Lanka (circa 1980)

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Front Note

[This communication was presented at the 36th Annual Sessions of Sri Lanka Association for Advancement of Science (Section F), held at Colombo on December 15th Monday, 1980, by the first author.]

Abstract

According to Marples (1950), ‘slang is unconventional, non-standard, colloquial speech – anything which in given circumstances is regarded as illegitimate – though who is to lay down the law on the question of legitimacy is another matter.’ A residential university, being a gathering of more or less self-contained undergraduate student community, has its own peculiar organization and social structure. It has its own special activities requiring a special jargon. This study records, as a matter of interest, not without linguistic importance, how English and the two vernacular languages are handled (or mishandled?) by the student body of a residential university. Adopting the method of Tarzie Vittachi (1965), who had described the popular Ceylonisms, the real meanings of over 60 slang words (and phrases), which are in prevalence among undergraduates during the 1980 academic year, are analyzed.

Introduction

Among the primary duties of the practitioners in any field is to originate (and then to refine) a body of terminology sufficiently secret. The existence of this language barrier may assure the professional, a certain amount of happy privacy, with his colleagues in the same field (Beckson and Gansz, 1961). A residential university, being a gathering of more or less self-contained undergraduate student community, has its own peculiar organization and social structure. It has its own special interests and activities, which are in need of special jargon – i.e., slang.

Slang is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, ‘language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or or current words employed in some special sense.’, while Marples (1950) is of the opinion that, ‘it is very difficult to define slang. In the main, it may be said that, slang is unconventional, non-standard, colloquial speech – anything which in given circumstances is regarded as illegitimate – though who is to lay down the law on the question of legitimacy is another matter.’ According to Ferguson (1938), considerable element of humor should also be a component of slang. Brewer (1911) had observed that slang received its name ‘from Slangenberg, a Dutch general, noted for his abusive and exaggerated epithets when he reproved the men under his command.’

Slang received serious attention from some of the 20th century linguists, and the most celebrated expert on the subject is Eric Partridge, one of whose main works is *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, first published in 1937. Marples (1950) published a volume on *University Slang*, which was a compilation of the

distinctive vocabulary of the English speaking undergraduates.

As far as the universities in Sri Lanka are concerned, only the one which is located at Peradeniya, designed on the models of Oxford and Cambridge, is distinctively residential in its set up; and this characteristic of the campus in Peradeniya had contributed to the development of undergraduate slang in a large measure. In the absence of any in-depth study on the usage of slang in the University of Peradeniya, we made an initial attempt to catalogue the slang words and phrases. We were influenced by the study of Donald Simmons (1967) describing the usage at men's dormitory in the University of Connecticut.

Methods

Following the lead of Vittachi (1965) who had assembled a collection of 'Ceylonisms' (usage of English with island flavor peculiar to Ceylon), on the basis of popularity, we collected 66 slang words/phrases (in English, Sinhala and Tamil), and their meanings were elucidated. Alphabets S and T within parenthesis denote their language of origin, namely Sinhala and Tamil. These words/phrases are indicated in italics.

Results

The collected slang words/phrases are presented below alphabetically.

1. *Afan* (S): abbreviation of '*aapana salawa*' (literally, restaurant).
2. *amman kovil* (T): Halls of residence for women students. A Hindu religious metaphor, relating to a temple of woman deity. *Amman*, literally means 'mother'.

3. *anthimai* (S): limit; maximum in satisfaction or frustration.
4. balls: expression of skepticism.
5. batting: talking highly of one's own achievements; used commonly with reference to a lecturer's mannerism.
6. boot: acute failure of an individual on his or her attempt to find a partner.
7. bucketing: a wetting ceremony to indicate the pleasure or displeasure of a group (or an individual) on another group (or another individual).
8. bull: a superlative expression (used as in 'bull-satis', 'bull-chaos', 'bull-ig', 'bull-love'); derived from 'full'.
9. butting: combustion of terminal portions of cigarette.
10. b.y.t.: abbreviation of 'beautiful young thing', referring to young females.
11. campus toddy: one of the physical acts in ragging ceremony; an individual is asked to imitate the act of drinking toddy, and while doing so ordered to spin his body continuously.
12. can: failure of events to take place as planned; derived from 'cancel'.
13. carom board: a female 'figure' without prominent mammalian features; flat chest.
14. catting: vomiting after a dose of alcoholic beverage.
15. con: to talk or converse aimlessly with the same sex; derived from 'converse'.
16. crammer: one who burns the midnight 'electricity'.
17. crucifixion: one of the physical acts in ragging ceremony; an individual is asked to hang with his hands, holding the window grills and imitate Jesus in crucifixion.
18. dips: one of the physical acts in ragging ceremony; an individual is asked to rest the weight of his body on four limbs and commanded to lower or raise the body continuously, dips in water.

19. *duction*: an evening stroll of a courting couple, leading to induction of sensual pleasure; derived from 'induction'.
20. *fresher*: a new entrant to the university; first year student at the university; derived from *freshman*.
21. *frus*: expression of dissatisfaction; derived from 'frustration'; an extreme degree of dissatisfaction is known as 'bull-frus'.
22. *gaje*: partaking meals without paying cost thereof; also widely used for similar behavior in non-gastronomic contexts, such as free loading with a pal in latter's boarding room; derived from 'gad' (idle without fixed purpose), or 'gadfly' (irritating or worrying person).
23. *gal-stare*: hostile glance, experienced by a guy for a prank (mainly verbal) he had done to a female.
24. *gona* (S): prostitute.
25. *gon-part* (S): behavior inappropriate for the occasion.
26. *hara* (S): extreme degree of unsophistication; refers to an individual from rural, non-Westernized background.
27. *handiya* (S): one with attractive facial anatomy; refers to men, derived from 'moon-faced'.
28. *hitch*: two individuals of opposite sex bonded loosely or temporarily.
29. *hom*: choice of a sexual companion, from same sex; derived from 'homosexual'.
30. *hoppers* (S): lesbianism.
31. *ig*: deliberate indifference towards a person, situation etc; derived from 'ignore'; extreme degree of such indifference is labelled as 'bull-ig'.
32. *jack*: lifting the fat of a pubescent girl/woman in a crowded place or in public

transport vehicles.

33. *jocka* (S): light-hearted, jovial person, as opposed to ‘crammer’; derived from ‘joker’.
34. *kade* (S and T): used as ‘...is having a *kade*’, which implies that, ‘...is having a control over a group of girls/women (analogue for *badu*). *Kadai* in Tamil literally means, a petty shop.
35. *kadu* (S): English language; derived from substituting the native word for ‘sword’.
36. *kammala* (S): Engineering faculty; used in derogation by the students in the social sciences discipline.
37. *kathaya* (S): not so pleasant facial anatomy; as opposed to ‘*handiya*’.
38. *kiri-kiri* (S): superb; extremely good; often used with respect to female anatomy. ‘*kiri*’ literally means ‘milk’; as the word is alliteratively repeated twice, it’s used as a euphemism for breasts.
39. *kola-kudu* (S): everything went for a ‘six’ (in cricket lingo); i.e., being trashed over the fence; upset!
40. *koozhi* (T): woman’s breast. The word literally means ‘hen’ (the bird). A livestock metaphor related to capturing a hen, by giving a soft squeeze in pelvic region. Derived from the source (hen), during such capture.
41. *koozhi pidithal* (T): intentional rubbing of young women’s breast by men, in crowded places (esp. buses and temple festivals).
42. *kukula* (S): a playboy. ‘*Wali kukula*’ refers to jungle fowl in Sinhala.
43. *kult* (S): an expression relating to adoption of modern Western culture, as opposed to ‘hara’.
44. *legana* (S and T): physical manipulation of women’s leg, carried out with legs under

the table, especially in the environs of library reading rooms. Adopted from pressing 'legs'.

45. *mara* (S): superlative term, meaning great, fine, huge; as in 'mara-cram', 'mara-lunch', 'mara-con', 'mara-sal', 'mara-badu'.
46. *menna* (S): excellent; immense, everything is super, as in 'menna-size', as referring to women (derivation of the word is said to be from gynecological root).
47. *muskade* (S): Medical faculty; used in derogation by the students in the social science discipline. Literally refers to 'meat shop'.
48. O.G.: abbreviation for 'outside girl', meaning a woman not within the campus group.
49. *naya* (S): boasting.
50. parts: snobbish; unwillingness to move with the proletariat clique.
51. pass mark: an expression used to describe a 'figure' of acceptable nature, referring to women students.
52. rag/ragging: a session of organized fooling or teasing of freshers by the senior students (mostly by 2nd year students), during the first two weeks at the beginning of an academic calendar.
53. rooma: an individual with whom, one shares living apartment; often a lot more (dresses, toiletries, cosmetics etc.) is shared with that individual; derived from 'room mate'.
54. R.S.: abbreviation for 'wrong statement'; i.e., inaccuracy as regards to language or figures.
55. sabo: to undermine; failure to keep an appointment; derived from 'sabotage'.
56. sal: to talk or converse aimlessly with the opposite sex to the maximum amount of

time; derived from 'salivation', as well as 'sallapam' (T). This term is flexed into prefix or suffix to produce nick names, such as 'Sal Pope', 'Al Haj Sal Haj'.

57. *satis*: pleased with the situation; derived from 'satisfaction'. Extreme degree of such happy feeling is expressed as 'bull satis' (bull relates to 'full').
58. *scholarship*: one of the physical acts in ragging ceremony; a fresher is shown where a 'scholarship' can be found and various impediments are put in his path; for e.g: he has to crawl naked under a bed, simulate swimming across the ocean, jump on knees, in order to qualify himself to obtain the 'scholarship'.
59. *shan* (S): an act of frotteuism-toucherism on young women in crowded public places. See also, number 18, duction.
60. *see you*: an expression of leave taking.
61. *shyd ekeng* (S): involved in an indirect manner, to help a mate in the dealings with the opposite sex; not in the main line of business. 'shyd' is derived from 'side'.
62. *siharam* (T): a code word used by Tamil students, referring to Sinhalese students. Reference is to the first alphabet 's' indicating Sinhalese.
63. *thalaiya*(S): a code word used by Sinhalese students, referring to Tamil students. Reference is to the first alphabet 't' indicating Tamils.
64. *tuts*: abbreviation for tutorials.
65. *vul*: expressions and connotations not aired in cultured circle; derived from 'vulgar'. Also used as a prefix to introduce a nick name.
66. *udhalla* (S): to distract one from the main focus at the university, namely 'cramming'.

Discussion

The usage of slang is discussed under the following three sub-topics; (1) formation of slang, (2) topics contributing to slang, (3) Merits of using slang.

(1) Formation of slang

Slang words/phrases had been formed by one of the four patterns.

- (A) Shortening: New words are formed by shortening existing words. Since the tendency in slang is toward short, informal usage, shortenings are common. A word may be shortened by back clipping, front clipping or by abbreviation and acronym.
- (i) **Back clipping:** The most common pattern is by clipping a syllable or syllables from the back of a word to form a stump word. Standard speech has, for example math(ematics), memo(random), exam(ination), among many others. Campus slang had produced, can(ce), con(verse), frus(tration), hom(osexual), ig(nore), sabo(tage), sal(ivation), satis(faction), tut(orial) and vul(gar).
 - (ii) **Front clipping:** New words are also formed by clipping the front syllable or syllables from an existing word. Old and standard front clippings include, (a)mend, (de)spite, (uni)v(e/a)rsity etc. The slang ‘duction’ is purported to be a front clipping of (in)duction. In frequency, front clippings are less than back clippings.
 - (iii) **Abbreviations:** Because slang is primarily spoken rather than written, hardly any abbreviation exist for single words. However, slang phrases are sometimes abbreviated into its initial alphabets for each word. Thus, had arisen, R.S. (for ‘wrong statement’) and O.G. (for ‘outside girl’).

- (iv) Acronym: The letters forming an abbreviation for a phrase may be allowed to form and be pronounced as a new word. E.g: byt (for ‘beautiful young thing’).
- (B) Corruption: A word’s (or a phrase’s) pronunciation may be corrupted to form a new word, though this happens very seldom. E.g: bull (from ‘full’), gaje (from ‘gad’ or ‘gadfly’), jocka (from ‘joker’), fresha (from ‘freshman’, rooma (from ‘room mate’) and Afan (‘*Aapana Saalawa*’).
- (C) Rhyming slang: It has been suggested that slang is sometimes used for the pure joy of hearing sounds. This might have resulted in the formation of one or two rhyming slangs. E.g: *kiri-kiri*.
- (D) Spoonerism: As Marples (1950) had noted, ‘Some other features of university slang are more in the nature of freaks, than the legitimate outcome of linguistic evolution. One of these is Spoonerism.’ Spoonerism is derived from the name of Rev. William Spooner (1844-1930), one time Warden of New College, Oxford. He acquired a reputation for his witty transpositions of sounds, technically known as metathesis. At the Peradeniya campus, spoonerism is practiced by some young men to refer to their opposite sex friends or their peculiar characteristics, as a code word. E.g: *Lama* (for ‘Mala’, a first name), *Gayil Mala* (for ‘Mayil Gala’).

(2) Topics contributing for slang

- (A) Sex talk: It is evident from the slang list provided that ideas related to sexuality (such as body anatomy, courtship, types of sex orgy indulged by male

undergraduates) contribute a large portion of slang terms. Examples are, *boot, carom board, duction, gona, hitch, hom, hoppers, jack, kade, kiri-kiri, kooli, kukula, legana, menna, O.G., pass mark, sal, shyd eking*. The observations of Wentworth and Flexner (1975) for the abundance of slang words for sexual attraction and for a variety of sexual acts, positions and relationships need stress here. According to these lexicographers, ‘standard non-taboo words referring to sex are so scarce or remote and scientific, that slang is often used in referring to the most romantic, the most obscene, and the most humorous sexual situations.’

- (B) Ragging: A session of organized fooling or teasing of freshmen by the senior students, during the first two weeks of an academic calendar, also had contributed few words to campus slang. E.g: campus toddy, crucifixion, dips, scholarship and bucketting.
- (C) Multiplicity of sub groups: There exists a multiplicity of sub groups within the undergraduate population; ethnicity, education levels, social background etc. form the major lines of fission. Campus slang has abounded in words reflecting the fear, distrust and dislike of individuals belonging to a variant subgroup other than one’s own. This intolerance is shown by the presence of many derogatory, ridiculing slang words used as codes, segregated by the lines of division.
- (i) Ethnicity marker: *thalaiya, siharam*.
 - (ii) Social background: *hara, kult*.
 - (iii) Education marker: *kamala, muskade*.
- (D) Sports: A few words of campus slang are derived from sports. E.g: batting, boot

and carom board. These are among the most frequently used.

(3) Merits of using slang

Merits for using slang by undergraduates preponderantly include (a) facilitates quick communication, makes it more personal, than a standard word; (b) absence of a standard word, to describe a specific interaction; (c) usage of slang avoids sentimentality, status respect and formality that standard words occasionally assume. (d) for specific occasions, slang is preferred for a comment/objection about a person or a situation experienced as an aside, without too much commitment to what is being said. (e) finally, slang is used by the campus students to indicate 'outsiders' as well as remind themselves of their educational status, group interests and membership roles.

Conclusion

Wentworth and Flexner (1975) indicated that three cultural conditions contribute to the creation of a large vocabulary of slang. These are, (1) existence of a big number of diversified subgroups, (2) democratic mingling between these subgroups and the dominant culture, and (3) hospitality to or acceptance of new objects, situations and concepts. All these cultural conditions being satisfied, we infer that the residential university of Peradeniya, along the years have become a fertile bed for proliferation of campus slang. What had been reported in this study is merely a tip of the iceberg.

Acknowledgments

We are indebted to our numerous friends at the Arunachalam and Jayatilleke Halls of residence, who helped to provide adequate data needed for this communication. We also

thank Dr. R. Sivakanesan, who lent his collection of past issues of the University Annual dance souvenirs.

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