Slang and the Semantic Sense of Identity

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Efforts to demarcate what slang is tend to dwell on pragmatics—that is, the relationship of slangy speech to the context in which it is used as, variously: a way of indicating something about its user's identity, a mode of fostering in-group solidarity among interactional participants, a mark of the "informality" of the speech event, and so on. So, for example, Eble defines slang as "an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large" (1996, p. 11). Dumas and Lighter find the common denominator of slang lexemes to be "their undeniable lack of dignity and their deliberate, widespread use within a social group...to defy social or linguistic convention" (1978, p. 16). Among Spears' list of 10 characteristic features of slang, we find many of the same attributes: "1. Slang is not considered suitable for formal or serious matters; 2. Slang terms are usually synonymous for standard terms; 3. Slang terms and slang speech symbolize a lack of allegiance to social conventions..." (1981, p. viii).

In contrast to the distinguishing and diagnostic role attributed to various pragmatic functions of slang, the meaning of slangy words and expressions often appears to be little more than a curiosity, something of merely teratological, ludic, or informational interest. This is due, in part, to a common view of slang terms, given voice in Spears' list, that regards them as largely synonymous with "Standard Language" alternatives, a view that renders the semantics of slang merely a matter of identifying the equivalent, Standard terms for slang words. Coleman, for instance, states that "[m]ost slang words are optional substitutes for synonyms in Standard English" (2012, p. 109). Eble finds that "[s]lang usually provides an alternative vocabulary for referents already named in the language" (1996, p. 49). Indeed, the professed semantic equivalence of slang terms and Standard Language alternatives serves to spotlight the pragmatic functions of slang and, what is more, to divorce these pragmatic functions from the meaning of slang terms. According to Coleman, "Using slang makes it possible to say more or less the same thing in a variety of ways.... Often, by choosing to use a slang term in preference to a Standard English synonym, we're providing information about ourselves and about our relationships and interests" (2012, p. 110). From this perspective, social meaning—divorced from semantic meaning—is at the core of what slang is.

But such an approach, I argue here, fails to adequately account for much slangy English, for which there are no semantically equivalent Standard Language alternatives. Not only do slangy words and phrases in many instances not "say more or less the same thing" as their Standard English counterparts; the semantic distinctiveness of slang terms is an important component of their pragmatic functioning. In this respect, further attention to semantics provides a useful corrective to a common view of slang—and sociolinguistic varieties, styles, and registers more generally—that too thoroughly divorces semantics from pragmatics as autonomous modes of signification. Let me briefly sketch the way semantics and pragmatics have been dichotomized in accounts of language variation before turning back to the distinctive semantics of slang.

1. Different Ways of Saying "the Same Thing" and the Autonomy of Pragmatics

The dissociation of semantic and pragmatic signification in the study of language variation goes back at least to Labov's isolation of the sociolinguistic variable as an object of study. In his influential volume *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, he writes that "[s]ocial and stylistic variation presuppose the option of saying 'the same thing' in several different ways: that is, the variants are identical in referential or truth value, but opposed in their social and/or stylistic significance" (1972, p. 271). In the approach Labov advances, pragmatic signification comes into view where semantic signification is held constant.[1] As the sociolinguistic variable and the semantic equivalence it presupposes have become axiomatic in the study of language variation, the study of social meaning has largely sidestepped attention to semantic meaning. Indeed, in the study of socio-phonetics—the beating heart of the variationist program—the semantic equivalence of variants holds by their very nature. Outside of the phonetic-phonological domain, it is less clear how far this premise holds (e.g., Lavandera, 1978 and Labov, 1978 for a response); that depends, in part, on how much mileage one can get out of an account of semantics grounded in the "referential or truth value" of linguistic form in the domains of morphosyntax and the lexicon. As a methodological expedient, the premise that social and stylistic distinctions begin where semantic distinctions end has proven quite fruitful. But as an account of the nature of pragmatic signaling, it can have the effect of dichotomizing social meanings and semantic meanings in a way that I hope to show is unwarranted.

In a somewhat different manner, accounts of language variation in the form of "registers" have also shunted semantic matters to the side. In Silverstein's retooling of the Labovian postulate (2003, p. 212), registers are composed of forms regarded as pragmatically distinctive "ways of saying 'the same' thing" within language users' reflexive models of language use. Unlike Labov's "sociolinguistic variable," enregistered variants need not be semantically equivalent in respect of their referential or truth value; they are merely taken to be semantically equivalent in the eyes of language users themselves, who regard their pragmatic functions as their differentiating characteristic. And, indeed, ideological neutralization of semantic differences appears to be an element in the sort of honorific and multi-glossic register formations that have been at the center of this program. A sense of this can be gleaned from the way differently enregistered variants

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[1] In this respect, the Labovian program remains true to a structuralist mode of analysis; as in the analysis of phonemes or morphemes, the "same" element is said to occur in different guises (e.g., allophones, allomorphs, sociolinguistic variants) allowing the environment that conditions this variation to come into view and to be identified, whether that environment be phonological, morphological, or the social context of the speech event.

are commonly represented as a set of semantically equivalent forms that vary only in their pragmatic (viz., indexical) signification. As in the example in Table 1 derived from Hill and Hill's account of honorific speech in modern Nahuatl (1978), these graphical representations typically illustrate variant ways of presenting the same semantic content.

Levels	Contextual conditions	You (singular)	Imperative (singular) "Tell me"
I	intimacy or subordination	*teh(huatl)*	*xinēchilī*
II	neutral, distance, or first respect level	*tehhuatzīn*	*xinēchonilī*
III	honor, reverence	*māhuizotzīn*	*xinēchonmolhuilī(-htzīnō)*
IV	compadrazgo	*māhuizotzīn*	*ma-nēchmolhuilī(-htzīnō)*

Table 1. Adapted from Table 3 in Hill & Hill, 1978, p. 128; the "reverential suffix" *-htzīnō* is, for the most part, optional.

In this table, the variants are presented as a paradigm organized around a constant grammatico-semantic content ("you" or "tell me!") and a variable context that they indexically signal. One finds similar presentations of honorific variants in a variety of languages—Javanese speech levels (Silverstein, 1979, pp. 219–221), Pohnpeian and Samoan honorifics (Keating & Duranti, 2006), Zulu avoidance speech (Irvine, 1992), and honorifics in Lhasa Tibetan (Agha, 1998). Di- and multi-glossia is often treated in much the same way (Blom & Gumperz, 1972, pp. 412–13; Ferguson, 1959, p. 335). These accounts, for good reason, shift attention from semantics to pragmatics as the differentiating factor among some linguistic forms.

The emphasis placed on the independence of pragmatics and semantics in these analyses has provided much-needed impetus for establishing (social) pragmatics as a domain worthy of study in its own right—a domain essential to account for language structure of the sort evinced in honorific paradigms and to track language change evident in the "orderly heterogeneity" of phonetic variation. But, I want to suggest that this emphasis on the autonomy of pragmatics unduly limits accounts of pragmatic signaling by sidelining the contribution of semantic meaning to social meaning in many instances; such certainly appears to be the case when we turn to slangy "variants" of English.

Take, for instance, the following "synonyms" Eble lists for *drunk*: *blind, blitz-krieged, blown out, crispy, flipped out, fried, invertebrated, juiced, laid out, messed up, obliterated, ploughed, polluted, ripped out of one's gourd, ripped to the tits, saturated, slammed, smashed, totaled out, trashed, toasted, whipped*, and *wiped out* (1996, p. 45). These terms are at best only rough semantic equivalents of the term *drunk*. Some, for instance *toasted* and *messed up*, cover states of intoxication induced by drugs as well as alcohol. *Intoxicated* might be a better equivalent, then, but as a brief survey of slang dictionaries and online usage shows, *messed up* can be used as a synonym not only of *drunk* and *high*, but *crazy, unfair, not right*, and so on. Too much alcohol can lead one to be *slammed*, but so can too much work. And both too much drink and too little sleep can leave one *wiped out*. Though these terms are often used to characterize the result of heavy drinking, their semantic range is more extensive in disparate respects.

Though one might argue that it is possible to substitute *slammed* for *drunk* in all possible sentences without affecting their truth value, the two expressions characterize the reality they represent differently. Much as the expressions *the Morning Star* and *the Evening Star* both refer to the same entity (Venus) but have different senses—that is, they are different ways of characterizing the referent (Frege, 1997)—*slammed* and *drunk* may predicate something equally true of the same person while having subtly distinct Fregean senses. In the next section, I look in more detail at the distinctive semantic space carved out by a set of slang expressions in an effort to show how elements of slang, taken as different ways of saying *different* things, serve as a resource for pragmatic signaling.

2. The Sense of Slang: Relations Outside of a "Relationship"

What does it mean to "hookup"? In popular accounts of the pressing moral and political significance of a phenomenon dubbed "hookup culture," one finds a minor but recurring semantic hang-up: the meaning of the word *hookup* seems to be hopelessly vague. According to one book on the subject, "It isn't exactly anything. Hooking up can consist entirely of one kiss, or it can involve fondling, oral sex, anal sex, intercourse or any combination of those things. It can happen only once with a partner, several times during a week or over many months" (Stepp, 2007, p. 24). In another book on the subject, the author notes the variety of acts that fall under the label *hookup* and concludes that "'hooking up' does not have a precise meaning" (Bogle, 2008, p. 27); this may be due to the fact that "'hooking up' is a slang term and slang by definition is an informal and nonstandard language subject to arbitrary change, so it is not surprising that there is some confusion and disagreement over the meaning of the term" (Bogle, 2008, p. 7). An ABC news report "Want to Have a Hookup? What Does It Mean?" informs us that "it's not altogether clear what everybody is talking about when they say 'hookup.' One new study at a large university suggests that most young people are doing it, although not everyone agrees what 'it' is" (Dye, 2011).

Put another way, it is not so much that the term *hookup* is vague or imprecise; it is that there is no Standard Language term semantically equivalent to it. *Hooking up* is not synonymous with the term *kissing* or *fondling* or *having sex* and so it appears imprecise in comparison. But the non-equivalence of the term with Standard English alternatives is not a sign that the term lacks "a precise meaning," as if the lexical distinction drawn in Standard English between *kissing* and *having sex* is a fundamental metaphysical distinction that must be reflected in all terms for physical intimacy. Although a review of such books along with articles on the subject and online definitions confirms that the meaning of the term *hookup* is indeed imprecise when it comes to the nature of the acts of physical intimacy performed under its heading, the term has a different semantic target: *hookup* emphasizes that an act of physical intimacy, whatever it may be, is performed outside of the bounds of a relationship, relationship expectations, and emotional attachments. (There are other meanings of the form *hookup*, but my focus here is on the term as it is used to describe acts of physical intimacy.) According to students interviewed by Freitas (2013, p. 21), a hookup is "one sexual encounter that has no commitment involved" or is "purely physical [and] emotionally unattached." Indeed, "physical pleasure," on the one hand, and "social-emotional attachment," on the other, appear to form a central conceptual dichotomy that runs through accounts of "hookup culture" and definitions of the term *hookup* (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). If we were to take this distinction as fundamental, we would have to condemn the imprecision of

Standard English terms for acts of physical intimacy (e.g., *kissing*, *having sex*) because they fail to indicate whether such acts were done with emotional investment within the bounds of a relationship, or whether they were done purely for physical pleasure.

This dichotomy informs the meaning of other slang terms and these terms likewise have no close Standard English synonyms. For instance, a number of terms for types of "sexual partner" used in contemporary slangy English emphasize relationships that are not, in fact, "relationships." *Friend with benefits*, for example, is 'a friend with whom one has sex *without a romantic relationship or commitment*' (Friend with benefits, n.d.; emphasis added). Similarly, *fuck buddy, booty call,* and *one night stand* all denote people who engage in sexual relations outside of a relationship. Standard English has very few terms for sexual partners outside of "relationships" (cf. the somewhat archaic *mistress* and *paramour*) and those that exist denote the sexual partner of someone who is married (the term *lover* is something of an exception). This set of slang terms, in contrast, provides a rich taxonomy of sexual relationships in which sexual gratification apart from emotional connection or romantic involvement is the prime concern (as studies reported in Jonason, 2013 and Wentland & Reissing, 2014 have found; non-scholarly accounts echo these findings, e.g., Mr. Ethical Slut, 2008).

While these terms can be defined in Standard English using periphrastic equivalents, they stake out a semantic space that is not lexicalized in Standard English. Like the meaning of *hookup*, the semantics of these relationship terms are informed by a conceptual distinction between social-emotional involvement and the "purely physical" that—as accounts of "hookup culture" indicate—is highly significant in the social worlds mediated by this sort of talk of physical intimacy and of relations outside of a "relationship."

3. From Semantic Sense to Pragmatic Significance in Talk about Hooking Up

With their distinctive semantic focus on physical intimacy outside of a relationship, terms like *hookup*, *fuck buddy*, and the rest, provide semantic grist for the pragmatic mill; specifically, semantic difference provides semiotic material with which to constitute a voice (Bakhtin, 1981), a distinctive identity-conferring position on some matter. As a helpful point of comparison, consider Hill's dissection of the "voices of Don Gabriel" (1995) as Don Gabriel narrates the story of the murder of his son, a local municipal leader who became entangled in a for-profit community bus enterprise. The moral heart of the story concerns the conflict between local values of reciprocity and community solidarity, on the one hand, and market-oriented, capitalistic values of accumulation and profit, on the other. As Don Gabriel recounts, he had told his son to keep his distance from these business dealings, and in the telling of the story Don Gabriel himself keeps his distance from the language of business. Hill's careful analysis of the narrative, which proceeds in both Mexicano and Spanish, centers on the semantically distinctive language of business-for-profit—business (*negocio*), ambition (*ambición*), savings (*ahorro*), personal interest (*interés*), surplus (*sobra*), treasurers (*tesorero*), agreements (*convenio*), and the like. Mexicano has no indigenous terms for business-for-profit, Hill tells us (135); there is no alternative way of saying "the same thing." As Hill has elsewhere shown (1985), among Mexicano speakers Spanish itself has become associated with the world of wage labor and business, the world of the capitalist marketplace. But in her close analysis of this story, she shows how Don Gabriel constitutes his own identity—his voice—by distancing himself from Spanish business terminology in particular, putting such terms in the mouths of others or producing them with conspicuous dysfluency. It is not only the Spanish language

qua code that serves a pragmatic function here; Spanish is, in fact, sprinkled throughout the narrative. It is a subset of the Spanish language lexicon—terms with no semantic equivalent in Mexicano—that serve as a resource Don Gabriel uses in formulating his voice, situating himself linguistically at a distance from business as a way of thinking and being, a set of values and interests.

Like talk about business-for-profit in Don Gabriel's account, talk about physical intimacy outside of a relationship is central to a variety of language-mediated, identity-enacting social activities. On college campuses, where much of the research on "hookup culture" has taken place, such talk ranges from tales of sexual exploits that mediate homosocial relations (DeSantis, 2007; Flood, 2008; Knight et al., 2012; Sweeney, 2014) to badmouthing those involved in *hookups* (e.g., "slut shaming"; Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, & Seeley, 2014; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Eder, 1995) to assessing the status of relationships and strategizing about the future. Much like the Spanish lexicon of business-for-profit, the use of terms like *hookup* and *fuck buddy* alone do not serve to constitute a voice: two completely opposed perspectives on *hooking up* constituting two distinct voices—for instance, that of the "sexual conquistador" bragging of their own *hookups* and that of the "slut shamer" pointing out another's—may both draw on the semantic resources afforded by these terms. Rather, the terms establish a distinctive perspective in conjunction with other means of indicating the footing (Goffman, 1979) or stance (Du Bois, 2007) of speakers—that is, the ways speakers affiliate with or distance themselves from the terms they use and their denotata.

Though popular accounts of "hookup culture" tend to focus on the more salacious details, it appears that "hookup culture" on college campuses, to the extent that it exists, is constituted more through this sort of talk about hooking up than through hooking up itself. As several surveys have shown (Barriger & Vélez-Blasini 2013; Lewis et al. 2007; Scholly et al. 2005; Stephenson & Sullivan 2009), the perception among college students that their peers are more sexually active than they are is, in fact, a misperception, one fostered by the prevalence of talk about hooking up (Holman & Sillars 2012). In other words, the pragmatic work of establishing social identities and relations in the somewhat distinctive social world of college is accomplished at least as much through distinctive ways of talking about physical intimacy as it is through distinctive practices of physical intimacy. Through talk about *hooking up*, *fuck buddies*, and the like, speakers locate themselves and other interactional participants in relation to an intricate social world mediated in part by physical intimacy, laden with the values, personae, ways of thinking and acting that are associated with different varieties of physical intimacy and different types of social relationships. The semantic difference between *hooking up* and other ways of interacting with others (e.g., *dating, hanging out*) provides material out of which pragmatic signals of identity are forged.

In an interdiscursive echoing common in the propagation of slang terms, the term *hookup* has been extracted from the social world of colleges in the formulation of other voices as well. In popular media and academic accounts, the term *hookup* often appears as a sort of ethnographic curio from the land of predominantly white, middle and upper-middle class undergraduates. In anthropological fashion, it is deciphered in the intimate yet distant voice of an ethnographer and, incorporated into the label *hookup culture,* serves as an emblem of the lifestyle and mindset of this group of people. The anthropological voice cultivated in such popular media accounts distances the speaker from the term *hookup*, its denotatum, and associated practices and values in an enactment of identity, one

that is often part of an effort to alert policy makers and parents to the reality and the dangers of "hookup culture."[2]

The term *hookup* and its incorporation into the expression *hookup culture* stake out semantic ground that is used to formulate voices and otherwise inform interactional practices. At this interface of semantic sense and pragmatic significance, speakers affiliate or distance themselves from *hooking up* in enactments of identity and, in the process, give shape to the meaning of the expression—the values and identities that this activity is linked to. My point here is that what goes under the heading of "slang" does its pragmatic work in part by dint of the semantic distinctiveness of its terminology. Distinctive ways of talking about the world are components of distinctive voices and distinctive socio-communicative practices; and slang is, in part, a lexical repository of distinctive ways of characterizing the world.

4. Conclusion: The Pragmatics of Saying "the Same Thing"

In emphasizing the importance of the meaning of slang words and expressions as an element of their pragmatic significance, I want to make clear that I am not suggesting that all language users share a common definition of these terms. What for some may be a different way of saying "the same thing," will for others have a distinctive meaning. More than that, whether two terms are taken to be different ways of saying the same thing or not is itself, potentially, of pragmatic significance.

A case in point is an expression that has exploded in use over the past three years: *throw shade*. Now ubiquitous in the popular media, the term is widely used as a synonym of the Standard English term "insult," or, according to the Oxford online dictionary's definition, 'publicly criticize or express contempt for someone' (Throw shade, n.d.). But there has been a backlash against this use of the term, evident in efforts to police its use in, among others places, "Shade Court," a series of posts on *Jezebel* where uses of the term by the media and reported in the media were adjudicated for their correctness. A lodestar for efforts to preserve the "original" meaning of the expression is Dorian Corey's metasemantic discussion in the 1990 film *Paris Is Burning*, which documents drag ball culture in 1980s New York City. The following is Desson Howe's account of Corey's definition, from his review of the film in the *Washington Post*:

> Corey explains other voguing terminology, such as "reading" and "throwing shade." To read is to insult imaginatively – in opposition to the blunt gay-bashing taunts of the straight world. Reading is gay-to-gay sparring. Thus, when two black queens call each other "black queen," says Corey, "that's not a read, that's just a fact." Throwing shade is reading at a refined level; it's the curve to the pitch. If someone says they won't call you ugly because you already know, well, you just got thrown a shade. When enmity reaches fever point and pride is involved, it's time for voguing. This is direct

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[2] One of the first studies of *hookup culture*, which introduced many of the themes taken up in later accounts, was undertaken for the Institute for American Values (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001), an organization "devoted to contributing intellectually to the renewal of marriage and family life." Others have pushed back against the very notion of "hookup culture," holding the expression itself at arms-length using scare quotes. An opinion piece in Duke University's newspaper opens: "'Hookup culture' is a myth" (Becker, 2014), before going on to characterize the personae and interests of those who deploy such a term in earnest.

competition, when contenders take their fight to the ball floor: the equivalent of jousting, dueling or stepping outside the bar. (Howe, 1991)

Reading, in Howe's account, is defined in contrast to blunt gay-bashing taunts. *Throwing shade* is defined in contrast to *reading*. And all are ultimately connecting to *walking* or *voguing*, the apogee of the ball.

Such rich and nuanced accounts of the meaning of *shade* open up and in some cases constitute the evidence for arguments that the use and abuse of the term constitutes a form of cultural (mis)appropriation. In the conclusion of an article from the *New York Times Magazine*, Saeed Jones and the author Anna Holmes comment on the meaning of the expression and what differences in its usage say about those who use the term with different meanings:

Jones laments the way in which the "haute-couture rhetoric" of shade has been cheapened "into ready-to-wear," explaining that shade actually "requires a really critical reading you can't do casually." He adds: "I think when most people talk about shade, they're describing being mean." … It would be a shame if shade, like other African-American art forms that have been taken up by mainstream culture, became diluted, its meaning encompassing any and every insult and attempt at one-upmanship. But maybe that's inevitable. "It's absolutely in line with the tradition of American culture realizing that black people have figured something out," Jones says, with just a hint of, yeah, shade. (Holmes, 2015)

In this account, the subtle art of throwing shade and the subtle art of identifying and talking about it are merged. The semantics of "shade"—in all its subtlety—when understood and deployed correctly marks out a space of distinction for its user: one identifies oneself as an appreciator of a high verbal art form—a "haute-couture rhetoric."[3] The metasemantic discussion in this article slips seamlessly into a metapragmatic one: the semantic degradation of *throwing shade* as simply an alternative way of saying *being mean* is constituted as an act of cultural appropriation as well as an indication of a meanness of spirit that is incapable of appreciating the artistry of throwing shade.

This is, of course, only one attempt at regimenting the semantics of the term; but it demonstrates neatly the way metasemantic discourse is simultaneously metapragmatic discourse. More than that, it points to a way in which semantics serves as a resource for pragmatics; the way in which an identity, a self, a voice are constituted through semantically distinct ways of speaking. Slang terms, then, are not always alternative ways of saying "the same thing;" in some cases, the pragmatic significance of slang terms hinges on the fact that they are ways of saying something different altogether.

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[3] While I focus on metasemantic discourse in this section, it is worth reflecting on the pragmatic significance of the semantics of this term for outlets like *gawker.com* that have been pushing this term relentlessly. Identifying instances where people—particularly celebrities—*throw shade* at each other is precisely the sort of dishing that these sites trade in. In its emphasis on conflict and, at times, in the subtlety of its observations, the voice cultivated and sold to readers is one attuned to the secret spectacle of "real-life" celebrity melodrama. The semantic meaning of the expression *throw shade* summons readers to a delicious gossip session with a source that knows its stuff, one wherein they can eavesdrop on celebrities and join in in assessing the "shadiness" of the goings on.

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