

The Analysis and Application of Slang in Business English

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Abstract

As global business activities become more and more frequent, English slang is also widely used. However, slang has its own metaphorical and local meaning, so it is tough for non-native people to recognize and understand. Unnecessary loss and misunderstanding in business will arise easily if there is some inappropriate comprehension and translation. The thesis tries to elaborate some unique features of English slang and analyze its proper usage in business

Key words: business English; slang; features of slang

Introduction

Slang is a kind of language that can stimulate people's imagination and creativity. With its vividness and humor, it comes to be most active, expressive and inspiring language form in English. On account of these features, slang is not only used in daily life, but also becoming more commonly used in business English. Business English as a branch of special English, has its unique background and culture. Additionally, slang is hard to distinguish and comprehend and its translation cannot fully convey the original meaning. Consequently, mutual communication may be affected to some extent. In business practices especially in important trade symposiums, if a business man cannot understand slang well enough, he is going to be at a passive position and even worse, the business would fail. Hence, the features and application of slang in business English is a subject worthy of discussion. The research of slang is conducive to deepen the understanding of western culture and avoid cross-cultural obstacles effectively, which is the prerequisite to promote business activities.

The definition and history of slang

i. The definition of slang

According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1987), the earliest time, slang were some special words or idioms used by prisoners and tramps as that attempted to cover up their identity. With the ever-changing and development of language, slang has been accepted by more and more people, and not confined to the lower-middle class as it originally was. Nowadays, slang generally refers to the very informal language and expressions that are common in spoken language, especially used by particular group of folks, for example, children, criminals, soldiers, etc. The authoritative Encyclopedia Britannica defines it as informal language and expression of 12-language that compensates for the standard language. And slang can be embodied in speech, reread and intonation, but it is often reflected in vocabulary and semantics. In most cases, it is not applied in serious speeches and articles. Besides, Bernard Spolsky (1998) has written, 'Slang is a kind of jargon marked by its rejection of formal rules, its comparative freshness and its common ephemerality, and its marked use to claim solidarity.'

ii. The history of slang

Early in the Roman era someone has begun to use slang. For instance, in Latin, CAPUT means 'head' while it is LA TESTE in Italian, which originates from TESTA, meaning 'earthen pot'.

And in Italian, LAGAMBA comes from GAMOBA, meaning 'hoof'. The Romans used the official language to express 'head' and 'leg' while in the spoken language, they just used the 'pot' and the 'hoof' to convey the same meaning.

In 1603, during King James I's coronation, he was interrupted by a group of middle-class protestant petitioners. Under the circumstances, King James I issued a decree in 1623 to impose a fine of 12 pence on any vulgar language. This event marked the beginning of the formation of the middle class. By the 19th century, the influence of the middle classes and the underclass had enlarged and the vocabulary and composition of slang had been enriched. The underclass was a striking fountain of ingenious language model. What's more, their rhyming slang was sourced from common experience and wary observation. More often than not, slang showed the speaker's adroitness and wisdom. In order to get rid of the baneful impact of the industrial revolution, the lower-middle class speakers and writers learned to use hundreds of words to help them avoid all kinds of sensitive topics. The 60s is an anti-traditional era and also the era for slang's great development. Obviously, after the two world wars, the anti-traditional era emerged as a reaction to the war, and it was visible that language changed with the change of culture. The richest themes of slang in the 20th century were money, disease, politics and war.

The generation of any matter has its own internal and material basis, and the slang has no exception. The word itself can be regarded as a reaction to external objects and it carries some characteristics of stimulus. Later, when content of the reaction is not appropriate for the situation applied, people tend to use another proper method which can fully express its meaning to replace it. Ultimately, these new words come to be widely known. Human beings consciously or unconsciously have created and are creating new expressions. Likewise, the vocabularies of slang keep changing, and developing and enlarging constantly.

Moreover, slang is used not only in daily life but also in more and more frequent business activities. Business English as a branch of special English, has its unique background and culture. The presence of slang in business causes some difficulty for comprehension and its translation cannot fully convey the original meaning, so the communication between businessmen from different cultures is liable to be affected or may even result in offensiveness. In business practices especially in important trade symposiums, if a business man cannot understand slang well enough, he is going to be at a passive position and even worse, the business would fail. Hence, the features and application of slang in business English is a subject worthy of discussion.

The formation of slang

In essence, slang does not have its independent formation of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Most of the slang is the old words or the shortening of the old words or recombination. There is only a few belonging to the coinage in a real sense, such as 'bazoo', 'pizazz', 'flub'. A. C. Baugh (1998: 312) once analyzed, 'In most cases, it's the meaning that word conveys makes it become slang, rather than the word itself.' There are plentiful examples of neology in slang, like 'semi-detached', its original meaning is 'the house joined that shares a common wall with another house'. As slang, it conveys 'the man separated from his wife but not divorced'. Neology is the explanation or transfer of a common word or a colloquialism, and sometimes it connotes a brand new meaning triggered by some social phenomenon (Chen Fang & Yang Yanjun, 2012: 302).

Except coinage and neology, there are other several main methods to create slang: contraction, abbreviation, conversion and affix. To be more specific, contraction is to contract some unimportant syllables or conflate other syllables to form new slang, such as 'I don't know' becomes 'I dunno' through contraction, whereby the slang 'dunno' comes out; 'going to' turns into 'gonna' and 'because' turns into 'cos'. Among them, 'gonna' and 'cos' as their frequent usage in daily life are widely accepted as spoken language rather than slang.

The abbreviation is similar to contraction to some extent. It abbreviates tedious and complicated words into short spoken ones, like 'dormitory' is abbreviated into 'dorm', 'laboratory' is cut into 'lab' and 'influenza' is turned into 'flu'.

Conversion is to converse part of speech to form a new meaning. There is a typical example of 'in': its original characteristic is preposition, but it transforms into adjective when it is applied in the expression as 'it's in'.

Sometimes, we use affix to change the morphology of a word to deliver different emotional significance. For instance, add prefix 'de-' to 'bunk' to constitute the slang 'debunk', meaning 'to show something is wrong or false', which has been accepted as a standard vocabulary. And suffix '-o' can strengthen the tone. Place it after the word 'neat' to form 'neato', which means 'extremely excellent and very successful'. There are other affixes like 'mega-', '-nik', '-ize', etc.

The features of slang

Slang is an extremely rich and energetic component in English. Its content is characterized by multi variant, broadness, capriciousness and innovation. Its peculiarities can be seen in three categories: humorousness, informality and novelty. The role each peculiarity plays in business activities will be introduced and elaborated.

i. Humorousness — agent of mitigating tension

The vivid and humor of slang can enhance the expressive ability of language in a large part. Moreover, it also will activate serious business atmosphere and easily mitigate tension between stakeholders. As the famous lexicographer Bradley(1975: 174-175) pointed out, ‘almost nobody is satisfied with always stating clearly; the quotidian words often lose its strength due to the familiarity. But if you put on a vivid and lifelike metaphor, the straightforward and boring language will be fun-filled.’ Indeed, some slang conveys their meanings through metaphor and other rhetoric devices, leading us to endless aftertastes. The specific objects include colors, names, everyday items, animals, food, time, body parts, etc. For instance, put ‘cash’ and ‘cow’ together: ‘cash cow’ means ‘something that a company sells very successfully and that brings in a lot of money’ and ‘greenmail’ conveys ‘a measure to gain profits by blackmailing other companies’, e. g. ‘But Wall Street analysts agreed that CBS was unlikely to consider such action, since it amounts to greenmail’. ‘Hancock’ refers to ‘autography’, as John Hancock, from Massachusetts, who was the first person to sign the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and his signature was the biggest and most conspicuous one.

More examples like ‘lemon’ and ‘the army game’, ‘lemon’ indicates ‘inferior-quality product’, e. g. ‘The radio I bought turned out to be a lemon.’ And ‘the army game’ conveys the meaning of ‘swindle’, probably because the forces involved many tactics at war and these tactics contained a variety of tricks to a large extent, e. g. ‘I wanted her to know that many managers nowadays play the army game with their business counterparts.’ These metaphorical images all are humorous and have their own charm, achieving a witty effect to make the strained atmosphere of business activities easy.

Besides, on some friendly business occasion, when you are talking in a very formal way, it is easy to give others the feeling that you are talking with them in a commanding way. Such feeling are going to broaden the gap between you and your cooperation partners and make the atmosphere become serious. However, when you speak some proper slang with them, things could be different. You can ease the tense atmosphere and shorten the distance between the two sides of communication. For example, an employee is eager to get his boss’s agreement. If the boss is able to understand his eagerness and feeling, he may say: ‘I’ll drink that sentence.’ It means: ‘I totally agree with you.’ or ‘I’m willing to accept your suggestion.’ But the former expression is better than the latter one, for it cannot only relax the employee, but also shows the agreeable attitude of the boss. Such usage of slang in phatic function is very common (Zhang Jing, 2000: 66-67) in that slang is rather effective in both expressing the speaker’s feeling and mitigating tension .

ii. Informality – agent of boosting affinity

Contemporary American poet C. Sandburg(1954: 24) made the following vivid description of the slang, ‘ he takes off his coat and spits spittle to the hand, then gets down to working.’ This evocatively illustrates slang is an unceremonious informal language. It can bring a familiar and haphazard atmosphere to both sides of the communication, so as to facilitate affinity to each other and eliminate the rift. Furthermore, it will narrow the distance between two sides and result in great harmony, which is conducive to realize the purpose of contact.

Slang has plentiful salutations to convey the feeling of intimacy, such as ‘buddy’, ‘mate’, ‘my boy’, ‘fruit thing’, ‘bean’, ‘egg’, ‘top’ and so on. If a boss speaks to his subordinate with such a tone: ‘Come along, my boy, cheer up, there is absolutely nothing to worry about.’ Then the over caution between the upper and lower levels can be swept away. Another example, a teenage boy says to his little partner: ‘If I am not back at the pad in an hour, my old man will lose his cool.’ It is more entertaining and more amiable than the standard language ‘If I am not home in an hour, my father will get angry.’ And the use of slang can indicate that the user is a fully qualified member of a particular group, so that there is a cohesive force between the communicators to enhance feelings, which is favorable for those who are engaged in business. For example, in marketing, ‘Buddy, how long have you been in the biz?’; ‘Are you fit?’ Or some words such as ‘big blue’: the BM radio of the United States; ‘big board’: New York stock exchange; ‘front money’: advance payment or the goods on order; and blue ship originally represented a ‘large sum in poker games’, but in commercial lingo, it points to ‘a stock sold at a high price which belongs to a company that is considered to be well established, highly successful, and reliable’.

And the slang ‘on the ball’ can express the meaning that ‘someone is alert, smart and calculative’, e. g. ‘She must be on the ball, or a lady cannot usually lead a department.’

Then take a sentence in commercial negotiation for further discussion, we can experience the employment of slang in a specific context. ‘As I was about to say, I move that we table the discussion until our next meeting when everyone is present.’ In this sentence, we can speculate ‘move’ indicates ‘suggest’ and ‘table the discussion’ expresses the meaning of ‘postpone the discussion’. Actually, when it comes to the motion, the English and American semantics of the ‘table’ are almost the opposite. In the United Kingdom, ‘table’ shows the ‘start of the discussion’ on account that its relevant situation is to put things on the table and then start the study; in the United States, it means to ‘postpone consideration’ as the relevant situation is to put things on the table and ignore them. In this case, the exact meaning of ‘table’ is contingent on the objects of negotiation (Khubilai, 2015). In addition to the word ‘negotiate’ which presents ‘attempting to come to an agreement on something through discussion and compromise’, we can also apply ‘batter’, ‘hammer’, ‘out a deal’, ‘wheel’ and ‘deal’ to express the similar idea. When the two sides of negotiation talk about the subject of price, we can use ‘come down’ and ‘dicker’ as well as the general phrase ‘knock down the price’ that requires lower price, for example ‘Can you dicker the price a little?’

The use of these slang in business communication enhances the sense of intimacy because it makes it possible for the speaker to lower the keynote of the discourse and communicate with the companion in a equal and relaxed way. Moreover, slang frequently applies the expression method of euphemism in order to cover up and beautify the defect of language and avoid vulgarity. There is a language taboo in any kind of culture and any society in the world. It is generally believed that avoiding taboo in social situations is a measure method of the cultivation of communicative objects. Generally speaking, there is nothing more taboo than the topic of death, because death is a misfortune, a disaster. People evade the word ‘death’. Therefore, there surges up plentiful euphemism. There are more than eighty kinds of euphemism in slang, such as ‘to kick the bucket’, ‘to give him enough rope’, ‘to go without passport’, ‘to cash in one’s chip’, ‘to pay the debt of one’s nature’, ‘to go to one’s last home’ and ‘to go to heaven’, etc. British famous linguist Geoffrey. N. Leech(1983: 64) once said, euphemism was through some specific wordings to make unpleasant or kind of vulgar content more decent and elegant. Such as the word ‘fold’ means ‘failure’, ‘business closure’ or ‘insolvency’, e. g. ‘You must know that the market keeps changing. You have to think twice about that or you will fold.’ Or omit the latter two words of ‘stuff and nonsense’, we use ‘stuff’ separately to show the same meaning as that of the original phrase. This sort of consideration for exchanging objects can enhance and enrich the emotion, thereby to achieve potent effect of conveying our feelings and ideas. Meanwhile, it also reflects the speaker’s high cultural accomplishment in and good capability of language. In business cases, this excellent performance and language competence can definitely draw business objects’ appreciation and gain more commercial opportunities for corporations.

iii. Novelty – indicator of being well-in-formed

As the famous American poet Walt Whitman (1888) wrote in *Slang in the United States*, ‘if English is compared to the emperor of the world, then in the magnificent palace actually appeared a Shakespeare’s clown-like character who even edged himself into the most solemn celebration. This is slang, or argot. It comes out of the public, and gets rid of normative language frame, so that people can speak freely and say what they want to say.’ Exactly, in some programmatic and formative business activities, slang helps people bail out of the dull problems, plain words and commonplace language expression. Besides, the use of slang may garnish the user with novel, up-to-date and well-in-formed features, and a strong sense of contemporaneity.

We can cite saturation examples to illustrate slang’s peculiarity of the pursuit of novelty. Generally, staff address their manager or boss as chef of head, but for the sake of distinction, they create ‘mucky muck’, ‘big shot’, ‘big wheel’ or ‘big whig’, which means ‘a boss who sports a large salary and wears fancy clothing but does not actually do any work’. Sometimes, they call the male boss as ‘Mr. big’ while the female boss is ‘Queen Bee’ (Barnhart, 1961).

And also, to avoid obsolescence and pursue novelty, we express the idea of dismissal with ‘give someone the gate’ or ‘give someone an air’ and use ‘badmouth’ to convey the meaning of ‘harshly criticize someone’, which also makes the meaning softer and unembarrassed.

For the sake of innovation, some slang will truncate the original words to shrink a phrase into a word, as mentioned above in the formation of slang, like 'E-mail' (electronic mail), 'FedEx' (Federal Express), 'biz' (business), 'ad' (advertisement), 'fax' (facsimile transmission), 'advid' (advertisement and television video), 'informercial' (information and commercial): a commercial advertisement with 3-5 minutes on television that is made to appear like a full-length interview or documentary program. Besides, 'clutter' indicates 'advertising series repeatedly played on TV', and 'blurb' means 'recommended ad'. There is a more original approach: back slang. This type of slang is disguised by being pronounced as if spelled backward, which intends to put a specified word into another word through reading backward. Back slang is thought to have originated in Victorian England, being used mainly by market sellers, such as butchers and greengrocers, to have private conversations behind their customers' backs and pass off lower quality goods to less observant customers. Some back slang has entered standard English. For example, the term 'yob' was originally back slang for 'boy'. Other examples such as 'tekram' indicates 'market', and 'nam' means 'man'.

There is another phenomenon that slang is bound to update frequently to catch fashion, which pushes a large number of synonyms to emerge. The more attention people pay to some certain things, the more synonyms of them are created in slang. For example, there is various slang about food, like 'bait', 'chow', 'chunk', 'grubber', 'tuck', etc. These novel and straightforward words can speed up information transmission and improve business efficiency. More importantly, in business negotiation, using slang and buzzwords can help gain more appreciation and trust from business partners since it demonstrates features of being well-informed and up-to-date. Furthermore, it also reflects a professional and sensitive awareness of business trend.

Proper use of slang in business

Before using slang, be bound to look out for the occasion, contents and the objects of the conversation. Do not abuse slang randomly. More importantly, the ability to translate and comprehend slang should be enhanced. Otherwise, the wrong translation and comprehension may induce jeer or embarrassment. Therefore, it is critical to figure out what the slang means and what occasion it can be used. Normally, slang is correlated to buzzwords. Making out buzzwords is the prerequisite to use slang well. The following conversation is the scenario of marketing:

A: We need to position the new line of this shampoo very carefully because it could turn out to be a real cash now. We need to come up with ideas for a new corporate image as well as effective ways to target this market.

B: What if we start by counter-marketing other products like it? After all, it's supposedly the best on the market and it's on the cutting edge of shampoo.

In this dialogue, speakers use marketing terms in several places. As mentioned above, the combination of 'cash' with 'cow' means 'a lucrative business', and 'position' here indicates 'open up an outlet for products' rather than 'determining location'. Additionally, the buzzword 'market' appears three times in this conversation. 'Market' can express the meaning of 'bazaar', it can also mean 'promotion': 'counter-marketing' is 'to resist other similar products or make customers have no faith in other products' and 'on the market' expresses that 'something is available for customers to purchase'. There are more relative phrases about market, such as 'gray market', 'market blitz', 'test-market' and 'preemptive marketing' (Chen Jie, 1999: 65-68). In marketing, mastery of professional terms, and specialized knowledge, guarantees the appropriate use of slang, and makes it play a role in business activities.

One more example is given to further elaborate it. Imagine we are working on business activities, there are two sentences, 'The new computer I just bought broke after one day. When I tried to return it, the store was closed! What a fly-by-night operation.' Here, if we are out of context, it is quite tough for us to figure out what 'fly-by-night operation' means. Actually, it refers to 'merchants who are unscrupulous or not creditworthy in business or commerce'. Another sentence here is 'His business is small time but at least he doesn't have many worries.' When it is compared with the former one, even we have the context, most of us cannot get to know its meaning exactly. In this case, it shows the necessity to master the knowledge about slang in particular. After browsing several examples of the above, we all have the same impression that slang happens everywhere, not only in business activities, but also around our daily life. Therefore, it is essential for us to probe into English slang and get more familiar with slang, and know how to employ it correctly and more frequently. Only after we have the ability to apply it expertly and masterly, can we unleash its ascendancy to a maximum extent.

Conclusion

In the evolution of language, slang is the most elusive composition which is relatively difficult to understand. Because of its wide range of sources, complicated and varied contents, English has become one of the most complicated and the most developed language in the world. The research of slang is conducive to better master of the expression methods of English and deeper understanding of the cultural connotation (Yan Wenpei, 2010: 3). The existence and development of slang is an objective language phenomenon. The correct use of it is beneficial to improve expression. It can mitigate the intense or even hostile atmosphere, and enhance the exchange of feelings between communicators or partners. Therefore, the knowledge about slang and its usage, the occasion of occurrence, the contents and the objects of the conversation is essential for avoiding the random use of slang. The capacity of speaking a fluent English including slang represents the internationalization of a business man, and it can also lay a firm foundation for further work. In large foreign enterprises, applying slang accurately and gracefully is a weapon, with which the business man can be competitive and eye-catching in business activities. Proper use of slang indicates the high cross-cultural communicative competence, which is not only a signal of successful communication, but also of great significance in the current background of economic globalization and cultural globalization.

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