

Slang in English literature

Marilie Spooren, S5916356

Length: 3 pages

Abstract

This project investigates how the use of slang in the English literature has changed in the years 1886 and 1911, using Project Gutenberg. Through text analysis, this research aims to discover patterns and trends in the way slang has been incorporated into books. The purpose of this research is to provide a detailed account of the evolution of slang in literature and to find out if there is a connection between linguistic changes and cultural changes.

1 Introduction

In Merriam-Webster Dictionary, slang is described as an informal non-standard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech. Slang changes all the time, your parents used completely different slang words than you use now, an older or younger sibling may even have a different slang vocabulary. The same goes for literature.

In this research, we will look for differences in the works of Frances Hodgson Burnett, who has written in two different centuries, with books written 25 years apart, 'Little Lord Fauntleroy (1886)' and 'The Secret Garden (1911)'. Since these books are written so far apart from each other, a difference in language use is expected. This could be due to a natural change of language, but cultural change could also have an effect here.

Therefore, the main question for this research is: How has the use of slang in the English literature changed between 1886 and 1911? In this we include the variety of slang either increasing or decreasing. The hypothesis corresponding to the research question is that the variety of slang terms increases in English literature in 1911.

2 Related Work

The papers we will be including are 'Interrelationships between language and literature from Old English to the Modern Period' by Esmail Zare Behtash and 'Slang in literature? Freddy Macha's short story "Check Bob"' by Elena Bertoncini-Zubkova. These papers will make aspects of this research more clear. While both do not contain the same subject as I am researching, they provide some points that are relevant to this research.

Bertoncini-Zubkova gives some insights on how slang can evolve and change without losing its meaning, just having another name. This is part of the research we are conducting. Slang could be formed out of a group's need to form their own style, to mark solidarity. If they do not exist already, they have to be created. Old words are often used or meanings of old slang words, revived and reused, to create an own style Bertoncini-Zubkova (1992). Even though the rest of the article is not relevant for this research, it does have some parts that do.

Zare Behtash on the other hand talks about the cultural changes that go hand in hand with the change in literature. This gives us some insight into how writers changed their style to match with what was going on in the world, and with this evolving along with the world. For example, how the Industrial Revolution made writers wary of the quick changes, which in turn made them write about the past, among other things Behtash (2012). While they speak of more than just the years we are researching, this part of their research will be very good to have.

3 Data

For this research we used a dictionary site that has all American slang words in different periods of times, a site called Alpha Dictionary. With these

	1886	1911
Variety		

Figure 1: A table of the variables.

words given by the site we can look them up in the books, using Word. We downloaded the books from Project Gutenberg. Since we could not find a dataset which contains slang words of the 1880's and the 1910's, this was the substitution, it did take longer.

We found our independent variable by choosing an author that has books published on Project Gutenberg and that has written books that were published at least twenty years apart. Online we found a few authors that had the latter, and after looking some up to see if their works were published on Project Gutenberg, we ended up with Frances Hodgson Burnett. The two books that were furthest apart were *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *The Secret Garden*, which was twenty-five years. Our independent variables are 1886 and 1911, the years in which the books were published.

Now for the dependent variable, our goal was to research the evolution of slang. To research this, we need to see which slang words change but still have the same meaning as the 'older' slang word, and which slang words completely disappear and do not get a new word. For this reason we picked variety as a dependent variable.

Since we used a dictionary website, it is possible some slang words are not included in it. This means the results may not be a hundred percent accurate. It also gives American slang words, and while the author herself has lived in the United States most of her life, she was born and had lived in the United Kingdom until she was seven, which are almost all of her formative years. This could result in a mixed vocabulary in her writing, both British and American. For this research, we have assumed that the author had only used American English, and, with this American slang.

Also since we could not find a dataset, user errors can occur. We had to look up each word, word for word. This could mean that a word was skipped, or words were not found, etc. This could result in a not completely accurate result. On the other hand, it could also give a more accurate result, since the books were completely checked by us.

Pre-processing Since we will not be using a dataset, pre-processing of the slang words is not really necessary. We removed some given by the dictionary, purely based them being sentences. This would be harder to look up, with the manner we would be using. Other than that, the words are already pre-processed by Alfa Dictionary itself.

4 Predicted Results

The results we are expecting is that slang words will be used more in later years, than they were used in earlier years. Especially based on the research by Zare Behtash, this could be concluded. "Modernism was the dominant aesthetic movement of the earlier twentieth century which is often considered to be a strong critique and repudiation of Romanticism in general..." Behtash (2012) This gives reason to see that Modernism, which is a movement from 1910 to 1940, is a critique on Romanticism. Now the first book we are researching, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, was written in the 1880's, which was the time of Romanticism. This could result in the fact that the author, Frances Hodgson Burnett, was also writing to oppose Romanticism with *The Secret Garden*, while she was writing exactly in that style twenty-five years earlier. This could result in using slang more often and also using a greater variety of words, which would make our hypothesis correct.

Discussion If these were the results that would be found, it would point to a definite connection between linguistic changes and cultural changes. In the research of Zare Behtash, they mentioned writers giving reactions to developments in the world like, the Industrial Revolution for example. Writers did not want the world to move too quickly, so they went back in time with Romanticism, and started writing about the past. And again, when the English speaking language was going through changes, the literary borders were also broadened Behtash (2012). It would mean that with each cultural change, a literary change may follow. With this we could eventually predict literary changes, and predict when a switch in language, for example, slang words, can happen.

5 Conclusion

This study aimed at discovering how the use of slang in the English literature has changed between 1886 and 1911, and with this discovering

if there is a connection between linguistic changes and cultural changes.

We did this using Project Gutenberg, Word and Alpha Dictionary. By using this, we set an immediate limitation, but since no datasets were available about old slang words, there was no other choice. In future research, creating a data set could be a plus, to further the process, hopefully without user error.

To conclude, we did find out that the use of slang has changed, and there is indeed a connection between linguistic and cultural change. Writers change their writing style and react to important events going on the world, which may have even evolved in the last decade, with news traveling faster and faster online.

References

- Behtash, E. Z. (2012). Interrelationships between language and literature from old english to the modern period. *Iranian Journal of Applied Language Studies*.
- Bertoncini-Zubkova, E. (1992). Slang in literature? freddy macha's short story "check bob". *Swahili Forum*.
- GitHub: <https://github.com/MSpoooren/final-report>