

slang & sociability

Introduction

This book is about words and phrases—the words and phrases that American college students use to conduct their lives while they are about the business of earning a bachelor's degree. The vocabulary under examination here is not the vocabulary of knowledge and erudition that students learn through lectures, reading, and discussion but rather the ever changing and fashionable vocabulary of sociability that students use casually with one another, their slang.

The examples of college slang that form the foundation of this book are drawn from a collection of more than ten thousand items submitted as instances of "good, current campus slang" by undergraduates at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from fall 1972 through spring 1993. The data vividly depict the linguistic behavior of this one group. These students share a cultural experience that differs in particulars from that of college students on other campuses. Moreover, as a group, college students differ in important ways from other slang-producing groups (see the end of Chapter 6). However, there is no reason to believe that in fundamental characteristics of form and effects the slang of students at the University of North Carolina is appreciably different from the slang of other American college students—or of truck drivers, hospital workers, lacrosse players, street gangs, or any other group that chooses to use a distinctive vocabulary as a means of social solidarity. Thus this book is at once a description of the nature of slang vocabulary in general and an analysis of the slang of one particular group.

Slang and Sociability selects examples from this collection of slang to describe language at work meeting the needs of a community of speakers who share the status of students at the same uni-

versity. No other book-length treatment systematically examines the formal and social features of a slang corpus in this way. The underlying premise of the study is that slang is ordinary language, not a peripheral embellishment either for good or for ill. The explanation of slang offered here keeps returning to two points. First, slang is within the ordinary competence of language users. Second, the social potential inherent in language is actuated and intensified in the use of slang. The insistence that slang is part of the common core of language rather than an anomaly distinguishes this study from most other treatments of slang.

Because slang is customarily reported as the idiosyncratic and deviant vocabulary of marginalized groups, slang has never been taken seriously as a scholarly subject, one that can contribute to the understanding of language in general. Most introductions to the scientific study of language mention slang only in passing, if at all. Bloomfield (1933), Hockett (1958), Gleason (1961), and Lehmann (1976) all together devote fewer than five pages to slang. The most recent large reference grammar of contemporary English (Quirk et al. 1985) relegates slang to a footnote. Histories of the English language give slang a bit more attention, for the lexicon has long been an important part of diachronic studies. Yet some convey value judgments based on cultural attitudes rather than on linguistic evidence. Schlauch, for example, calls slang expressions “aberrations from standard English” (1959, 52). Baugh and Cable concede that “some use of slang is tolerated in the light conversation of most educated speakers” (1978, 314).

Two of America’s great descriptive linguists, however, caution against discounting the importance of vernacular forms such as slang.¹ Charles Hockett writes, “We must not think of such uses of language as in any way inferior to its use in writing treatises on bacteriology or delivering lectures on civil law” (1958, 294). H. A. Gleason addresses even more specifically the issue at hand.

We have taken as normative what is really the anomalous kind of language—legal contracts, examples out of logic texts, and modern descendants from the old classical examples in grammar books. To this core we have added so much of ordinary language as is not distinct from it—or rather, so much of ordinary language as we have not yet noticed to be distinct from it. The malapropisms, poetic figures, popular language play, and

ordinary double-talk we hear all around us may after all be the really typifying human language, extreme cases only of the ordinary sort of language. (1973, 32)

The two traditional and time-honored discussions of English slang are Eric Partridge’s *Slang To-day and Yesterday*, which was issued in four editions from 1933 to 1970, and H. L. Mencken’s chapter entitled “American Slang” in *The American Language*, most recently revised by Raven I. McDavid and David Maurer in 1963. Neither Partridge nor Mencken was an academician. Both were practical geniuses at collecting, documenting, and preserving words, and their pleasure in the oddities of vocabulary is apparent on every page. The words themselves are their central concern; the two men were not professional linguists seeking to fit the words into an overall explanation of language. They made their living by their writing, and they wrote to be read by a general audience. Partridge was a prolific maker of wordbooks—books of slang, unconventional English, catchphrases, usage, etymology, puns, and proverbs. However, his critical writing on these topics is not extensive. Mencken was a journalist, essayist, editor, and political and literary critic—possibly the most influential figure in American literary circles in the 1920s. His chapter on American slang is still commendable for its attention to history and bibliography as well as for its clear explanation of the salient characteristics of slang.

More rigorous and less discursive essays on American slang are the introductions to two important dictionaries. Stuart Berg Flexner’s preface to the *Dictionary of American Slang*, edited with Harold Wentworth and first published in 1960, has become a standard and has been reprinted in subsequent editions of the dictionary as well as in anthologies for students of linguistics. The best general discussion of American slang to date, however, is Jonathan Lighter’s twenty-seven-page introduction to volume 1 of his *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, published in 1994. A work of exemplary scholarship, Lighter’s essay is particularly strong in discussing the history of slang and its documentation.

I hope that the present volume is as analytically sound as the work of Flexner and Lighter and yet follows in the tradition of Partridge and Mencken in making slang interesting to a general readership. With the latter aim in mind, it incorporates little sec-

ondary material and avoids technical terminology as much as possible. Although slang is valuable to the scientific study of language, *Slang and Sociability* is written more for people who are curious about language than for those who earn their living by studying and teaching about it.

The approach is fundamentally that of traditional American descriptive linguistics, analyzing a corpus of several thousand items for patterns of form and function. Although the data have implications for issues of theoretical debate, my emphasis is descriptive rather than theoretical, and I try not to use the vocabulary of any particular theory. Furthermore, because this book is a lexical study and not a phonology or syntax of slang, I discuss sounds and grammatical structure only as needed to explain the lexical items that are the heart of the study.

Still, the book does have theoretical biases. The view of language that it presents is not one that abstracts language from its users or that views language as an autonomous system. The "ideal speaker-hearer" has no place here. Meaning is not composed from semantic primes by rules, and the lexicon is seen as a complex realization fed by many sources including social and pragmatic ones. The treatment of slang offered here is consistent with lexical theories that see words and groups of words as cognitively structured and linked in webs or networks. It is likewise consistent with syntactic analysis that recognizes prefabricated units that are not generated anew with every use. Fundamental to all of these notions, of course, is the importance of social context.

The slang lexicon analyzed in this study comes from undergraduate students enrolled in introductory English linguistics courses at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill over a period of two decades, from fall 1972 through spring 1993. Most of the students in these classes were residents of North Carolina, between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three, white, female, and seeking certification as teachers.

The collection and the method of obtaining it began simply as a teaching device, a way to get students in an introductory English linguistics class interested in word-forming processes by having them examine the words and phrases that were currently in vogue on campus. As the starting point for discussion, students were asked to bring to class ten words or phrases that they considered examples of "good, current, campus slang." The assignment

fulfilled its purpose and was repeated in subsequent semesters. By 1979 the richness of the amassed data convinced me of the potential of slang for showing how speakers readily and creatively use language for social purposes, and at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States I presented my first paper on the topic, "Slang, Productivity, and Semantic Theory."

Over the years I have continued to collect slang from students enrolled in introductory English linguistics courses in the same way, just asking them to bring to class on separate three-by-five-inch cards ten words or expressions that they consider "good, current, campus slang." Some students cannot think of ten, and others submit eighteen or twenty. Class size has fluctuated from fifteen to forty, and the number of items collected from semester to semester has varied accordingly. By the end of the spring semester of 1993, the corpus of North Carolina slang begun in the fall of 1972 mounted to over ten thousand instances of more than forty-five hundred different words and expressions. Most of these occur only once or twice. In the entire corpus, only forty lexical items were submitted by thirty or more students. These top forty, listed in Appendix 1, constitute less than 1 percent of the lexical types but 17 percent of the total submissions; that is, one of every six items in the corpus is one of these forty. Most of them are widely used and recognized in informal varieties of American English today; half are recorded as slang in the 1992 edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

Although offered as examples of campus slang, most items are neither original nor unique to the University of North Carolina. Furthermore, not every student in class is familiar with every item, and in discussion class members sometimes disagree on shades of meaning or on whether an item is still fresh or already passé. They often have different and conflicting notions about the origin of lexical items too. For example, *G* in the greeting *What's up, G?* is thought to be a shortening from a range of words from *guy* to *God*.

Sometimes students report terms that are used by their set of friends only. For instance, in the spring of 1984 one student reported that she and her friends called their suite in the residence hall *WAH*, an acronym of *We Are Happy*. Certainly not every such expression used by subgroups of students for social solidarity is known by or gets reported by the students in my courses. It is also

chapters veer from focusing on slang itself to focusing on the users of slang. Chapters entitled “Use,” “Effects,” and “Culture” discuss the human side of slang—where, when, and why people use it and what its use accomplishes. Throughout the book, my aim is to show that slang is vocabulary that embodies the social functions of language.

1: Definition

① Slang is 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. The existence of vocabulary of this sort within a language is possibly as old as language itself, for slang seems to be part of any language used in ordinary interaction by a community large enough and diverse enough to have identifiable subgroups.¹

The origin of the word *slang* is unknown. Its resemblance in sound and figurative meaning to the noun and verb *sling* and the occurrence of apparently the same root in Scandinavian expressions referring to language suggest that the term *slang* is a development of a Germanic root from which the current English *sling* is derived (Partridge 1970, 2). Another conjecture is that *slang* has been formed by shortening from genitive phrases like *beggars' language* or *rogues' language*, in which the genitive suffix of the first noun attaches to the initial syllable of *language* and then the final syllable is lost (Klaeber 1926, 368). In its earliest occurrences in the eighteenth century, the word *slang* referred to the specialized vocabulary of underworld groups and was used fairly interchangeably with the terms *cant*, *flash*, and *argot* (McKnight 1923, 37–38).

The social and psychological complexities captured in slang vocabulary make the term difficult to define, leading Bethany Dumas and Jonathan Lighter to question whether the term is even usable for linguists. Dumas and Lighter (1978, 14–16) reject the classical formula for definition and instead propose four identifying criteria for slang.

1. Its presence will markedly lower, at least for the moment, the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing.

cisely the dimensions that are salient in slang. He suggests that a pragmatic approach to context can provide a unified way to classify the covariance of linguistic form with style, register, regional dialect, sociolect, and the like (1983, 118). Regardless of the exact shape that such a pragmatic approach would take, or the methodology that it would entail, it could then accommodate slang as akin to other linguistic phenomena.

If grammars and dictionaries are to explain language accurately, they must find ways to describe slang. Thus, the definition of slang used by both linguists and lexicographers must incorporate the social, contextual, and rhetorical dimensions inherent in this type of vocabulary.

2: Form

Language, in essence, is the coming together of form and meaning. In other words, sounds intentionally produced using the human vocal organs (form) somehow evoke an interpretation (meaning). Of form and meaning, only form is directly observable, and scientific descriptions of language must take form into account.

The forms, or shapes, of words and expressions in a language usually reveal recurring patterns of organization. Such patterns give speakers the resources to create new forms based on forms already in the language rather than having to coin new words directly from sounds. An example of a productive formal process in English is the addition of the suffix *-er* to a verb to give a noun that means ‘one who or that which performs the action of the verb’. Thus, a *programmer* is ‘one who programs’; a *surfer* is ‘one who surfs’; a *recorder* is ‘that which records’; and so forth.

In any language, most new words are formed productively, that is, in conformity with patterns already established in the language rather than by coinage — the invention of a word merely by putting sounds together. Coinage accounts for almost no new words in English. One standard English word often cited as an example of coinage is *blurb* ‘a brief publicity notice, as on a book jacket’. American humorist Gelett Burgess is credited with coining *blurb*, which was first attested in 1914. Almost all new words recycle words or parts of words that are already in the language. Words that have recently come into common parlance with the widespread use of computers can illustrate this. *Computer* is a noun formed from the English verb *compute* (which was originally borrowed from Latin) by the addition of the suffix *-er* ‘that which’. *Computerize* adds another suffix that changes the derived noun into a different verb. The shortened form *compu-* has become the first part of such words as

compucenter and *compupaper*. The form *computer* has been shortened to merely the letter *c* in *PC*, for *personal computer*. All of these new words entered English in regular and predictable ways, making use of productive processes. Moreover, a new word enters as part of a grammatically related set, or paradigm. Speakers automatically add the correct inflectional suffix required by the context; thus *computerize* becomes *computerizes* ‘third person singular present tense’, *computerized* ‘past tense and passive participle’, and *computerizing* ‘progressive participle’. In addition, *computerize* joins the set of verbs that become nouns by the addition of the suffix *-ation*, like *organize/organization*.

The slang portion of vocabulary acts no differently. New slang words and expressions usually arise productively too. Slang exploits existing forms and their current meanings in various ways, drawing on and often mixing resources from the sound system, the word-building processes, paradigms, and the speakers’ knowledge of the culture. Thus the general vocabulary item *fraternity* ‘brotherhood’, for example, yields in slang *frat*, *fratty*, *fratty-bagger*, *fratrat*, *fratdom*, and *frat out*—all referring in some way to the stereotypical behavior of members of a particular kind of male social organization.

ORDINARY WORD-BUILDING PROCESSES

Some processes mainly entail altering the shape of a word, with predictable effects on meaning. For English the most important of these ordinary word-building processes, in descending order of frequency, are compounding, affixation, functional shift, shortening, and blending (Algeo and Algeo 1991).¹

Compounding

Compounds are words consisting of parts that are themselves words, for example, *overdose*, *piggy bank*, and *night-blooming*. Speakers generally signal that the two separate words are to be interpreted as a unit by a characteristic pattern of stress in which the first element is uttered with greater intensity and with no pause or change in pitch before the second element: *greenhouse* is a compound in “We grew orchids in the *greenhouse*,” but *green* and *house* are separate words in “We live in the *green house*, not the white one.” The standard written language has no clear-cut rules

for the writing of compound words; they can be written as one word (*overdose*), as two separate words (*piggy bank*), or hyphenated (*night-blooming*). Compound words that modify a following noun are the most likely to be hyphenated: *open-heart surgery*, *nit-picking regulations*, *close-captioned programming*. However, reliable dictionaries often differ on the written forms of compounds, for example, *double talk* or *double-talk*.

Compounding is an ancient word-building process in English, evidently already well established when the language was first brought to England by Germanic settlers in the mid-fifth century. Throughout the period of recorded Old English—from roughly the eighth through the eleventh century—compounds were frequent in both poetry and prose. Some English compounds of that era were *daegraed* (day + red) = ‘dawn’; *mildheortness* (mild + heartness) = ‘mercy’; and *modcraeft* (mind + skill) = ‘intelligence’. Many words that were compounds in Old English have remained in the language but are no longer obviously compounds. Normal changes in the sounds over the years have hidden their separate components. Thus, current English *lord* no longer functions as a compound word, though it is the development of the compound *hlafweard* ‘bread keeper’ from Old English. Other compounds in which the identity of the individual elements has been lost are *gospel*, from *god + spel* ‘good + tale’; *sheriff*, from *scir + gerefa* ‘shire + reeve’; and *steward*, from *sti + weard* ‘sty + keeper’. In some instances the second elements of compounds have acquired the characteristics of a productive suffix rather than a freestanding form. *Full* and *less* are independent words in current English but with more generalized meanings are also productive suffixes. For example, *-ful* occurs as an adjective-forming suffix in *careful*, *mindful*, *mournful*, and *skillful*. *-Less* is a suffix indicating ‘lacking in’ in *careless*, *childless*, *fearless*, and *speechless*.

Compounds can be created from individual words of various parts of speech. Probably the most common type is the NOUN + NOUN pattern: *girlfriend*, *homeroom*, *music box*, *tennis court*, *wind sock*. Other ordinary patterns are ADJECTIVE + NOUN: *big toe*, *blacktop*, *heavy water*, *short story*; and NOUN + VERB: *baby-sit*, *clockwork*, *heart attack*, *headache*, *home run*, *placekick*.

Although they are usually classified as phrases rather than as compound words, many vocabulary items in current English are made from a word of any part of speech plus a short, invariant

word like *down*, *up*, *in*, *out*. The same words serve as prepositions or adverbs in other contexts but are usually called particles in this construction. Everyday examples of one of these words functioning as a unit with another word are *slowdown* ("The entire staff participated in the work *slowdown* yesterday"); *look up* ("We *looked up* his phone number"); *pencil in* ("He asked me to *pencil in* the date for the play"); and *printout* ("The *printout* has the wrong information"). In informal spoken English today the word *out* is added to almost any noun or a verb in its passive participle form, or in a mock passive participle form, to mean 'sated with': "After three hours trying to call up that lost file, I'm *computered out*." "One late flight, a missed connection, and lost luggage—I'm *Eastern Airlined out*" (Canine 1986).

Even though compounds are straightforward in form (WORD + WORD = COMPOUND), that very simplicity gives rise to complexity in meaning. Compounds are underspecified: the elements are merely juxtaposed with few or no clues about the grammatical or semantic relationship between the parts. They are like shrunken sentences with nonessential words omitted; information that can be readily inferred is not specified. In a compound made of a NOUN + VERB, for example, the noun could be in a subject relation to the verb, as in *headache* (from someone's *head* [subject] *aches* [verb]); in an object relation to the verb, as in *nitpick* (from someone *picks* [verb] *nits* [object]); or in a locational relation to the verb, as in *waterski* (from someone *skis* [verb] on the *water* [object of locative preposition]). Similarly, the reverse order of grammatical elements, VERB + NOUN, yields, for example, the adjective meaning 'rapid, dangerous' in *breakneck* (from someone *breaks* [verb] *neck* [object]) and the noun *floatplane* (from the *plane* [subject] *floats* [verb]). Compounds of a NOUN + NOUN have an even greater range of relational possibilities, particularly because noun and verb forms can be identical. Thus compounds made of nouns can have unspecified subject-verb and object-verb relationships, as in *raindrop* (the *rain* [subject] *drops* [verb]) and *beartrap* (something *traps* [verb] *bears* [object]). In a compound like *speed bump*, the *bump* [subject] hinders *speed* [object]. Sometimes the unspecified information for a compound is more complicated: a *box score* is a statistical record, or *score*, of a sporting event presented in tabular form in a rectangle, or *box*, in a newspaper; that is, the *box* [subject] contains the *scores* [object].

In a series of compounds with the same last element, the relationship with the first element can differ. An *iceman* is someone who brings ice, but a *trashman* is someone who takes trash away; movement is not specified in either compound, and the formally similar *chairman* implies no movement at all. A *steamboat* is a boat powered by steam and a *sailboat* is a boat powered by wind caught in a sail, but a *shrimpboat* is a boat for catching shrimp, and a *gravy boat* is not a boat at all but a dish shaped like a boat that holds gravy.

In addition, compounds in English are often figurative, like *lame duck* 'an official in office between the election and the inauguration of a successor'; *hot-blooded* 'passionate'; *red herring* 'distraction from the real issue'; *soap opera* 'a kind of radio or television drama'; *turncoat* 'traitor'; and several already cited above. For many compounds, the meaning depends on specific cultural knowledge. A *no-hitter* in baseball is not simply a game in which batting players have failed to hit the pitched ball; it is a game in which no base hits have been charged against the pitcher.

The ordinary, everyday processes of compounding—with all of their attendant complexities—are a major source of new words in college slang. For many slang items, the WORD + WORD structure is obvious, and in context the meaning can be fairly easily derived from the parts: *all-nighter* 'a session of studying or writing that lasts all night'; *court party* 'a party at Big or Little Fraternity Court on the UNC-CH campus'; *do-right* 'a helpful deed'; *dough-brain* 'someone who acts stupidly or as if not thinking'.

Because college students like to use slang to give freshness to old or predictable information, they will often take a word that can stand by itself and arbitrarily attach it to other words. In its widespread and spontaneous use, the free form tends to lose its specific referent in favor of a more general meaning that can be attached to a wide range of words. In its meaning and its propensity for combining with other forms, the second member of the compound becomes more like a suffix than a free form. For example, the element *-city* indicates merely 'a presence or abundance of', not 'a metropolis', and can be added to almost any kind of word: *cram city* ("Mid-terms next week—*cram city!*"); *dweeb city* ("It's *dweeb city* around here"); *jewelry city* ("Even when she plays tennis, Janis is *jewelry city*"); *tan city* ("The day after spring break it was *tan city*").

Other nouns that operate productively as the second member

of compounds are *-action* ‘activity’ (“I’m ready for some Chinese food action”); *-animal* ‘one who does something excessively’ (“The study animals are complaining about the noise”); *-dude* ‘person’ (“Somebody pay the pizza dude”); *-dweller* ‘someone who frequents a particular place’ (“I could hardly get into Lenoir Hall because of the step dwellers”); *-head* ‘person’ (“The potheads were in the corner mellowing out”); *-machine* ‘enthusiast, devotee’ (“That sex-machine keeps phoning Karen even though I told him she went home this weekend”); *-queen* ‘an enthusiast who is female’ (“The datequeen slept through class this morning and then wanted to copy my notes”); *-wad* ‘dense, foolish person (usually attached to a proper noun)’ (“Mikewad here locked himself out of his room”).

A very large number of verbs in slang are formed by the addition of a short, invariant word like *out* or *off* to a word of any part of speech. Although English has dozens of particles available for word building, almost all of the examples in college slang use *out*, *on*, *off*, and *up*: *sue out* ‘act like a sorority member, or Sue’; *harsh on* ‘criticize, belittle’; *blow off* ‘miss class, ignore responsibility’; *mommy up* ‘love, hug, comfort’. In college slang *out* is the most productive particle: *beam out* ‘daydream’; *blow out* ‘shock, embarrass’; *bomb out* ‘fail, perform poorly’; *bum out* ‘cause or experience unpleasant feelings or bad reactions’; *burn out* ‘become mentally or physically exhausted’; *check out* ‘look at, scrutinize’; *chill out* ‘relax, calm down’; *crank out* ‘produce large amounts of work, energy, volume’; *geek out* ‘study hard’; *goob out* ‘cause repulsion or disgust’; *jell out* ‘relax by doing nothing’; *lay out* ‘sunbathe’; *lude out* ‘become unable to function or physically incapacitated, sometimes because of drugs’; *phase out* ‘become unaware, as if asleep’; *pie out* ‘become drunk’; *plastic out* ‘assume temporarily an artificial behavior or personality’; *rag out* ‘become tired’; *raunch out* ‘offend by making sexual remarks or using offensive language’; *rock out* ‘play music loudly’; *schiz out* ‘lose emotional control, act crazed’; *snort out* ‘overeat’; *spaz out* ‘lose mental control’; *sue out* ‘dress and look like a typical sorority member’; *tang out* ‘abandon, put an end to’; *trip out* ‘strike as funny, crazy, or extraordinary’; *weird out* ‘feel confused and at a loss because of someone’s or something’s strangeness’; *wig out* ‘become astonished’; *wimp out* ‘let someone down, fail to live up to a commitment’; *z-out* ‘go to sleep’.

Sometimes the WORD + PARTICLE construction is typical of and

strengthens the synonymy of a group of related verbs: *blimp out*, *chow down*, *grease down*, *hone out*, *mow on*, *munch out*, *pig out*, *pork out*, *snort out*, *throw down*, and *trough out* all mean ‘to eat, usually quickly or in great quantity’.

As in the general vocabulary of English, slang permits the compounding of words of various grammatical classes, with the exact relationship between the parts unspecified. NOUN + NOUN is the dominant pattern: the verb *batcave* ‘sleep’ (*bat* [subject] lives in a *cave* [object of locative phrase]); *bouthead* ‘stereotypical sorority member’ (she wears a *bou* [object] on her *head* [object of locative phrase]); *cheeseman* ‘socially inept person’ (*man* [subject] is *cheezy* [adjective]); *earth daddy* ‘older-than-average college-age male with sixties values’ (*daddy* ‘male of older generation’ [subject] values the *earth* [object]); *legman* ‘ladies’ man’ (*man* [subject] admires females’ *legs* [object]). Often the second part of a NOUN + NOUN compound is derived from a verb by the suffix *-er*: *buzz crusher* ‘anything that destroys a feeling of euphoria’ (something crushes [verb] one’s *buzz* [object]); *ghetto blaster* ‘portable stereo tape deck’ (the music *blasts* [verb] throughout the *ghetto* [object of locative phrase]); *mountain climber* ‘high induced by drugs’ (someone *climbs* [verb] *mountain* [object]); *rice burner* ‘Japanese motorcycle’ (motorcycle *burns* [verb] *rice* [object]). *Redneck* ‘stereotypical rural southerner’ and *big time* ‘to a superlative degree’ show the ADJECTIVE + NOUN pattern. *Jambox* and *boogiebox*, both meaning ‘portable stereo tape deck’, combine VERB + NOUN. Some compounds are grammatically ambiguous. *Facerape* ‘kiss passionately’ can be analyzed NOUN + VERB OR NOUN + NOUN. *Lose move* ‘stupid action’ can be VERB + VERB OR VERB + NOUN.

The underspecified relationship between the words that constitute a compound makes the compound a likely form for figurative interpretation, and compounds in slang often rely on metaphor, metonymy, allusion, cultural knowledge, and other kinds of indirect reference. *Dead soldier* is a metaphor for ‘empty beer container’ and *wounded soldier* for ‘a partially emptied’ one. *Plastic cow* ‘nondairy creamer’ is built on the metonymic connection between *cow* and *cream*. *Sofa spud* ‘person who lies around doing nothing’ alludes to the well-established *couch potato*, whereas *lunchbox* ‘someone who is out of touch with reality’ is a development from the synonymous *out to lunch*. *Ozone ranger*, a synonym

of *lunchbox*, alludes to the radio and television character the Lone Ranger. Figurative meaning in slang is discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

Affixation

Affixation by prefixes and suffixes allows the English language limitless opportunities for the development of open-ended sets such as *reassemble*, *reconvene*, *reissue*, *resubmit*, based on the prefix *re-*, or *cautiously*, *deeply*, *quickly*, *vacantly*, based on the suffix *-ly*. Slang uses many of the same prefixes and suffixes as general purpose English does but sometimes with greater freedom and slightly different meanings or grammatical consequences.

Prefixes in English tend to have easily paraphrased meanings, like *anti-* ‘against’ in *antiaircraft*; *inter-* ‘between’ in *interstate*; *pre-* ‘before’ in *predate*; and *un-* ‘not’ in *unconvincing*. Many English prefixes are the result of borrowing from Greek or Latin, like *bio-* ‘life’ in *biostatistics*; *geo-* ‘earth’ in *geophysics*; *semi-* ‘half’ in *semicircle*; and *trans-* ‘across’ in *transcontinental*. Often words built with such prefixes are part of the learned or technical vocabulary of the language.

Two productive prefixes in recent use in college slang are *mega-* ‘a great amount of’ and *perma-* ‘permanent’. *Mega-* (from Greek *megas* ‘great’) has long had a place in English in learned words like *megalith* and in scientific vocabulary like *megacycle* and *megahertz*. In college slang *mega-* combines freely with a large range of ordinary words to yield such results as *megabitch* (“That teacher is such a *megabitch*”), *megabooks*, *megabucks*, *meganap*, *megawash*, and *megawork*. *Perma-*, a shortening of *permanent*, is a combining form with the same meaning in *permafrost* and *permapress*. In college slang it inspires *permagrin* (“After just two beers she had *permagrin*”), *permagross*, *permanerve*, and *permaproblem*.

English tends to encode grammatical information at the ends of words. Thus suffixes are likely to give information about the grammatical class of a word. For example, the suffix *-ness* indicates that a noun has been made from an adjective, as in *kindness*, *thoroughness*, and *thoughtfulness*; *-ize* marks verbs, as in *computerize*, *evangelize*, and *legalize*; *-al* changes a noun into an adjective, as in *central*, *national*, and *remedial*.

The favorite productive suffix of college slang is a favorite in the general vocabulary as well, the noun-forming *-er* ‘one who or

that which’. Some of the slang items built by the addition of *-er* are *bummer* (‘that which *bums one out*’) ‘depressing experience’ (“Studying on Thursday nights is a *bummer*”); *crasher* ‘one who cannot tolerate alcohol’; *cruiser* ‘one who is seeking the company of a member of the opposite sex’; *doper* ‘that which is associated with marijuana smoking’ (“The *doper* music is loud tonight”); *killer* ‘excellent’ (“That guy has one *killer* jump shot”); and *wanker* ‘undesirable person, thing, or situation’ (“Don’t read that book—it’s a real *wanker*”). Another frequently used suffix is adjective-forming *-y*, equivalent to the *-y* that changes the noun *trend* into the adjective *trendy*. College slang has *dorky*, *fratty*, *freaky*, *geeky*, *groovy*, *lunchy*, *spacey*, *squirrely*, and others.

In the mid- and late 1980s the suffix *-age* in college slang gave rise to many spontaneous locutions, often preceded by the qualifiers *major* or *massive*: *foodage* (“I’m desperate for *foodage*”); *fundage* (“My parents didn’t come through with the *fundage*”); *scoopage* ‘potential date material’ (“Is Joe *scoopage*? ”); *studyage* (“I have to do some massive *studyage* tonight”); *rainage* (Q: “How’s the weather?” A: “*Rainage*”). It is difficult to extract a consistent meaning for *-age* in these uses, except for the effect of changing the word to which it is added into an abstract and mass noun. Two suffixes appear to be indicators of repetition or intensity: *-omatic*, as in *cramomatic* (“I have to *cramomatic* for Dr. O’Connor’s English test”), *dunkomatic*, *jamomatic*, *jogomatic*; and *-orama*, as in *barforama* (“She gave us a fourteen-page take-home test—*barforama!*”), *funorama*, *geekorama*, and *sexorama*.

Other productive suffixes used to form in-group vocabulary are *-aholic* ‘a person who indulges excessively in the noun to which the suffix is attached’, as in *bookaholic*, *caffeinaholic*, *foodaholic*, and *hoopaholic*; *-dom* ‘the domain of’, as in *fratdom*, *geekdom*, and *jockdom*; and *-fest* ‘an abundance of’, as in *beeffest*, *pizzafest*, and *sleepfest*.

Functional Shift

The vocabulary resources of the English language are made more flexible by the ability of English words to shift in grammatical function without undergoing an alteration in form. English is amenable to functional shift because current English has relatively few forms that identify a word as belonging to a particular grammatical category. For instance, a word like *step* gives no formal clues

about its grammar. Examined out of context simply as a form, *step* could be a verb, noun, adjective, or adverb. In context as a verb, “*Step to the right, please*,” or as a noun, “*Be careful of the broken step*,” the form is identical. For this reason, a word that enters English as a member of one grammatical class can quickly shift to another class. Historically, this is what happened with *instance*, *loot*, *stucco*, and *trash*, all of which entered English as nouns but have become verbs as well. *Export*, *shiver*, and *read*, by contrast, entered as verbs and took on an additional function as nouns. The shifting from one grammatical category to another without change in form is considered clumsy usage by some authorities, who object to the use of words such as *contact* and *impact* as verbs because they were established in the language as nouns and also because verbs meaning the same thing already exist.

Speakers of English often make use of functional shift in conversation when they shift the part of speech of a word with no lasting effects on the vocabulary. The most common spontaneous shift is from noun to verb: “I *aspirined* myself enough to make it through the rehearsals”; “He *saxophonied* his way across the South”; “I just *pigstied* my apartment all during exams.” In writing, such creative shifts are usually contrived for effect, but in the spoken language they are much less deliberate and not likely to be repeated.

Yet sometimes a shifted form does catch on, in slang just as in the language in general. Nouns shift to verbs in *flag* ‘make the grade F’ (“I’m afraid I *flagged* that test”); *scope* ‘look for members of the opposite sex’ (“Mack spent the afternoon sitting on Jock Wall *scoping*”); *potato* ‘lie around doing nothing’ (“I just want to *potato* all weekend”); and *x* ‘stop or eliminate’ (“My mom *x-ed* my idea about hitchhiking to Florida”). In *my bust* ‘my fault’; *raise* ‘parents’; and *skips* ‘tennis shoes’ verbs have shifted to nouns. An adjective shifts to a noun in *my bad* ‘my fault’ and to a verb in *harsh* ‘criticize, belittle’ (“I can’t stand the way that James keeps *harshing* on Carole”). A more complicated shift results in the adjective/adverb *later* becoming a verb meaning ‘put an end to a relationship’, as in “Jennifer’s boyfriend *latered* her the week before the pledge formal.” It most likely derives from the popular use of *later* for ‘good-bye’, a shortened form of the nonliteral farewell *see you later*. Another devious derivation that relies on functional shift is presented by the adjective *hulked* ‘angry’, as in “I was so

hulked at John for breaking the exercise bike.” It is formed on the passive participle of a verb in the same way that adjectives like *painted*, *locked*, and *closed* are. The verb must be *hulk*, functionally shifted from the noun *hulk*. The meaning ‘angry’ for *hulked* was inspired by a television character who was transformed by anger into a being of superhuman size and strength in *The Incredible Hulk*.

Shortening

By the process of shortening, sounds are eliminated from words without an immediate change in meaning. Everyday English is filled with such abbreviated forms: *phone* from *telephone*, *TV* from *television*, *radar* from *radio detecting and ranging*, and many others. Shortened forms are often less formal than the longer sources from which they are derived and thus can convey a casual and sometimes sardonic attitude toward the subject. An *anthro exam* does not seem so daunting as an *anthropology examination*; a *hyper child* does not seem so pathological as a *hyperactive one*. *Veep*, from *vice president*, and *CREEP*, from the *Committee to Re-Elect the President*, may be suitable for headlines but not for letterhead. Because of association with the less formal and less carefully crafted levels of language use, the process of shortening has been condemned as slovenly and imprecise by language guardians over the centuries. The noun *mob* was quite objectionable in the early eighteenth century when the literate were still aware that *mob* was a shortening of the Latin phrase *mobile vulgus* ‘moving crowd’. And even at present, some dictionaries and usage guides warn against use of the shortened *quote* as an acceptable substitute for *quotation*.

When words are shortened, sounds can be eliminated from the beginning (*airplane* > *plane*) or end (*graduate* > *grad*) or both (*influenza* > *flu*). Sometimes, over the years, the newer shortened form and the original longer form diverge in meaning. For instance, *fan* and *fanatic* are no longer synonyms, even though many fans are fanatic; and in American English a *van* is a ‘large, one-compartment, covered vehicle for transporting people or equipment’, whereas a *caravan* is ‘a procession of vehicles or pack animals’.

In an extreme form of shortening, words are made from the initial letters of the words in a phrase. Words like *IRS* (*Internal Revenue Service*), *NBA* (*National Basketball Association*), and

SAT (*Scholastic Aptitude Test*) are pronounced by naming the individual letters. In others, like *AIDS* (*acquired immune deficiency syndrome*), *HUD* (*Housing and Urban Development*), and *zip code* (*zone improvement plan code*), the letters are pronounced together as a word.

All types of shortening are evident in college slang. The most frequent pattern of clipping is the loss of sounds from the ends of words: *bod*, from *body*; *boheme* and *boho*, from *bohemian*; *bourgie*, from *bourgeois* ‘someone who is bourgeois, superficial, pretending to be with it’; *bro* and *broth*, from *brother*; *cazh*, from *casual*; *coke*, from *cocaine*; *feeb*, from *feeble* ‘dull-witted or absent-minded person’; *friz*, from *Frisbee*; *ho*, from *whore* ‘promiscuous or seductively dressed female’; *home*, from *homeboy* or *homegirl* ‘person from the same hometown, good friend’; *hyper*, from *hyperactive*; *j*, from *joint* ‘marijuana cigarette’; *joe*, from *Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company* ‘beer’; *max*, from *maximum*; *mesc*, from *mescaline*; *narc*, from *narcotics agent*; *obno*, from *obnoxious*; *presh*, from *precious* ‘favorable, enjoyable’; *rad* ‘excellent’, from *radical*; *spaz*, from *spastic* ‘clumsy person, usually said jokingly’; *vibes*, from *vibrations* ‘inaudible signals that people and places emit’; *vid*, from *videotape*.

Slang words formed by clipping sounds from the beginning of the word are *brary*, from *library*; *do*, from *hairdo*; *file* ‘show off, dress up’, from *profile*; *rents*, from *parents*; *ted* ‘drunk’, from *wasted*; *tives*, from *relatives*; the verb *use*, from *abuse*; *za*, from *pizza*; *zoid* ‘fan of punk rock music and styles’, from *freakazoid*. *Preesh*, from *appreciate*; *twize*, which rhymes with *wise*, from the pronunciation of *-dweise-* in *Budweiser*; and *welk*, from *you're welcome*, show clipping from both directions. *A-box*, from *attitude box*, shows clipping from the first word in a compound; it refers to someone who is *throwing attitude*, or who is ‘in a bad mood’. *Rotic*, from *romantic*, has dropped *man* from the middle and means ‘romantic without the man’, as in “This sunset is very rotic.”

Two kinds of shortening reduce words to letters. The dominant type in college slang is initialism, which names the individual letters: *BFE* (*bum fucking Egypt*) ‘in the middle of nowhere, far away’; *DDFMG* (*drop dead fuck me gorgeous*) ‘very attractive member of the opposite sex’; *DHC* (*deep, heavy conversation*); *DTR* (*defining the relationship*); *GH* (*the soap opera General Hospital*); *GQ* (*Gentlemen's Quarterly*) ‘fashionably dressed’; *HD* (*military designation husband dependent*) ‘male who mooches off a female’; *KO*

(*kick off*) ‘die’; *MDG* (*mutual desire to grope*) ‘strong physical attraction’; *MLA* (*massive lip action*) ‘passionate kissing’; *MRA* (*massive reeb action*) ‘unsociable behavior’; *NBD* (*no big deal*); *NC* (*no class*) ‘a boorish person’; *NCAA* (*no class at all*), pronounced NC Double A, an allusion to the acronym for the National Collegiate Athletic Association; *NTO* (*not the one*) ‘date who does not come up to expectations’; *NTS* (*name tag shaker*) ‘an attractive male that makes a female’s heart beat so fast that her name tag shakes’; *OOC* (*out of control*) ‘drunk, high on drugs, or acting crazy’; *OTL* (*out to lunch*) ‘inattentive, unaware’; *OTR* (*on the rag*, allusion to menstruation) ‘snappish, in a bad mood’; *PDK* (*polyester double knit*) ‘someone who is out of date or out of touch’; *PIB* (*people in black*) ‘brooding, gloomy teenager who wears dark clothes and listens to alternative music about death’; *PMS* (*premenstrual syndrome or putting up with men's shit*) ‘feel annoyed’; *PQ* (*polyester queen*) ‘someone who is out of date’; *R&I* (*radical and intense*) ‘extremely exciting or enjoyable’; *SAB* (*social airhead bitch*); *SOL* (*shit out of luck*); *TSH* (*that shit happens*); *VPL* (*visible panty lines*).

Acronyms in which the letters are pronounced together as a word are much less frequent: *fubar* (*fucked up beyond all recognition*) ‘unattractive, suffering the ill effects of alcohol or drugs’; *moto* (*master of the obvious*); *nail* (*nice ass in Levi's*) ‘well-built male’; *Rotsi* (*Reserve Officers Training Corps*); *tan* (*tough as nails*); *tom* (*totally obedient moron*) ‘computer’; and *The Ugly* (*the undergraduate library*). *Phat*, which students always insist is spelled with *ph-* rather than *f-*, means ‘having a curvaceous figure’ and is said to be from either *pretty hips and thighs* or *pretty hips, ass, tits*. The acronym of *No shit, Sherlock* ‘too bad’ is cleverly *NS²*, pronounced N-S-Squared.

In a reverse process, an established acronym or letter name can be expanded. *ABC store* (from *Alcoholic Beverage Control Store*) becomes *Aunt Betsy's Cookie Store*, *MD* (from *Mogen David 20/20*) becomes *Mad Dog*, and *WG*'s for ‘clothes issued by *Wollen Gym*’ have become *Weegies*. *Ace* ‘the grade A’, *Dog* ‘the grade D’, and *Zoo* ‘the lowest grade possible, Z’ are straightforward expansions. *Flag* for ‘the grade F’ relies on the shape of the letter as well, but *Hook* for ‘the grade C’ refers only to the shape and is not an expanded acronym.

Blending

A combination of shortening and compounding, the process of blending puts together pieces of words and their meanings. Thus *brunch* is formed from *breakfast* and *lunch* and means ‘a meal that combines breakfast and lunch’. Blends are currently popular in English in names created for food products, for example, *beanburger*, *charbroiled burgers*, *cranapple juice*, and *croissan’wich*. Although blends are fashionable in the marketplace, college slang makes little use of this process of word formation, with only about a dozen examples collected since 1972: *buel* (*body* + *fuel*) ‘food, to eat voraciously’; *droned* (*drunk* + *stoned*) ‘unaware because of alcohol or drugs’; *froyo* (*frozen yogurt*); *homechop* (*homeboy/homegirl* + *lambchop*) ‘endearing term for a close friend, usually of the opposite sex’; *polislide* (*political science* + *slide*) ‘easy political science course’; *scrumpt* (*screw* + *bump*) ‘have sex’; *spadet* (*space* + *cadet*) ‘student preoccupied with studies’; *slorch* (*slut* + *whore* + *bitch*); *spork* (*spoon* + *fork*) ‘eating implement’; *sweave* (*swerve* + *weave*); *trendinistas* (*trendy* + *Sandinistas*) ‘political or social activists who combine heightened political consciousness with stylish clothing’; *vomatose* (*vomit* + *comatose*) ‘disgusting’.

BORROWING

An important source of new words throughout the documented history of English has been borrowing. In standard dictionaries of English, only a minority of the words listed have developed from native sources. Most come instead—in whole or in part—from Latin, Greek, or French. In general, the more formal and technical vocabulary of English has been either borrowed directly or constructed by compounding or affixation from forms that were originally Greek or Latin—words like *aesthetics*, *aerodynamics*, *canine*, *ego*, *fluorocarbon*, *literature*, *pedestrian*, *permutation*, and *photography*. Such words tend to be used in writing and for the transmission of information rather than for phatic communication and are usually learned in the classroom or by reading. Most current English words from foreign sources are well established in the language, for acquisition of new words by borrowing has diminished in recent centuries. In the Algeo’s accounting of the sources of new words in American English, 1941–91, borrowing is responsible for only 2 percent (1991, 14).

Borrowing from foreign languages is not a feature of slang in general or of college slang. This is not surprising. By its very nature slang is not outreaching and cosmopolitan, for its primary function is to bind people of similar persuasions. Scholarly borrowings such as those from Greek and Latin that so increased the standard and technical vocabulary of English simply have no place in slang, not even in the slang of earnest university students. Foreign borrowings in college slang are, for the most part, confined to greetings and playful mispronunciations and are reminders of beginning classes in foreign language when students are trying desperately to make sense of and remember the strange jumble of sounds inundating them. Thus they take into their slang expressions like *osmosis amoebas* ‘good-bye’, formed on the Spanish farewell *adios amigos*.

Slang does borrow from a second language that is part of the culture, but for American English only Yiddish has been a noteworthy contributor. Dialect borrowing has been the most important type of borrowing in American slang, with the largest number and best-known items coming from African American speech communities. Borrowing in slang is discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

PROCESSES PARTICULARLY SUITED TO SLANG

Although the same ordinary word-building processes that give rise to the general vocabulary also shape slang expressions, the form of slang items can be additionally affected by other linguistic factors particularly suited to the aims of slang. This section discusses three kinds of pressure to which slang forms are susceptible—patterns of sounds, patterns of meanings, and multiple and mistaken etymology. The last two are semantic phenomena that can be important in determining the shape that a slang term will have.

Playing with Sounds

The role of phonology as a productive impetus in slang should not be underestimated. Manipulating sounds for fun is consistent with the flippant, venturesome spirit of much slang use. Hence the polite apology *Excuse me* is playfully pronounced *Screws me*, *Squeeze me*, or *Exsqueeze me*. The farewell *Later* expands by rhyme to the improbable *Later, tater!* (undoubtedly also motivated by the picturesque “See you later, alligator. After while, crocodile” made popular by a 1950s rock-n-roll song by Bill Haley and the Comets).

The dormitory named *Granville Towers* has two bynames, depending on which syllable is altered—*Grand Vile* and *Grossville*.

Onomatopoeia, or echoism or imitation of sound, accounts for many slang terms, including these for ‘vomit’—*barf*, *buick*, *earl*, *ralph*, and *yuke*. Other echoic forms from college slang are *jing* ‘money’ (from *jingle*) and *ssssss*—, a hissing sound to indicate that an *airhead* ‘someone who lacks common sense’ is emitting the contents of his or her brain, air. Linguist Roger Wescott (1977, 1978) has noticed that some sounds appear to give words a slangier flavor—most noticeably *z* in words like *zazzy* from *jazzy*, *scuz* from *scum*, and *zap* from *slap* or *whap*; and the sound of *oo* replacing a vowel in words such as *cigaroot* from *cigarette* and *bazooms* from *bosom* or added to the end of a word like *smasheroo* from *smasher*.

Wescott is an advocate of phonosemy, or sound symbolism—the notion that particular sounds may of themselves correlate with particular meanings.² He suggests that sounds made with the lips (labials) and sounds made at the back of the mouth (velars) often connote derogation. He shows that in sets of terms for tabooed objects and actions and in derogatory terms for ethnic, racial, and other stigmatized groups, the degree of labiality and velarity is greater than that occurring in most semantic domains (1971, 123–25). A word like *gook*, for example, which in general English can refer to ‘gooey or sticky stuff’ or can be an offensive term for ‘an Asian’, begins and ends with a velar consonant and has a back vowel pronounced with lip rounding. The phonology itself signals that the meaning of the form includes unpleasant or derogatory connotations. Wescott strengthens his claim by pointing out that a particular term may have more than one denotation, yet the connotations are consistently negative. For example, whether *bum* is a verb meaning ‘feel depressed’ or a noun referring to ‘an unemployed drifter’ or ‘the buttocks’, the connotations are still unfavorable (125).

Because slang tends to be negative, it is not surprising that many slang terms contain labial and velar sounds. A canonical example from college slang is *wanker* ‘an undesirable person, situation, or thing’ and the related retort *wank!*, supposedly formed in imitation of the buzzer on the television show *Truth or Consequences*. *Wank* begins with a consonant that is both labial and velar and ends with two velar consonants. In the hostile college slang expression *bunk you*, a euphemism for *fuck you*, *bunk* begins with a labial

and ends with two velars. The verb *bungo* ‘seriously mistreat or inflict injury on’ is similar in both sound and meaning to *bunk*. Many slang synonyms for ‘loser’ likewise contain labial and velar sounds: *goob*, a clipping of *goober*, begins with a velar consonant and ends with a labial with a back, lip-rounded vowel in between; *gweeb* begins with a velar *g* and a labio-velar *w* and ends with a labial *b*; *quad* begins with velar *k* and labio-velar *w*. In *wimp* ‘weak, indecisive person’ and *feeb* ‘dull-witted or absent-minded person’ all of the consonants are labials. *Punk* ‘someone or something worthless’ begins with a labial and ends with two velars, whereas *quimp* ‘socially inept person’ begins velar and ends labial. The adjective *bogus* ‘undesirable, unappealing’ has a labial and a velar consonant joined by a lip-rounded back vowel. *Dook* ‘something unpleasant or worthless’ and *dookie* ‘someone obnoxious’ omit the front glide pronounced before the vowel in *duke* (as in rival Duke University) to make the word sound more derogatory. Labio-velarity is prominent in college slang. Additional examples can be found in many subject areas, particularly in terms for members of the opposite sex (*babe*, *hunk*) and for sex (*boff*, *bong*, *bonk*, *bop*, *bump* *uglies*, *grub*, and *pork*). In matters pertaining to sex the prevailing contemptuous attitude appears to be aided by the prevalence of forms containing labial and velar sounds.

Rhyming is the favorite sound effect of slang. For example, from general American slang come *brain drain* ‘the loss of intellectual and educated people from a community because of a lack of opportunity’ and *boob tube* ‘television’. The rhymers par excellence have been the Cockneys from London, who have developed an elaborate and colorful repertoire of slang terms based on rhyme. Straightforward examples are *trouble and strife* for ‘wife’ and *mince pies* for ‘eyes’. But most Cockney rhyming slang involves a shortening process in which the rhyme word is not expressed: *elephant* means ‘drunk’, from *elephant’s trunk*; *plates* means ‘feet’, from *plates of meat*; and *Godfer* means ‘child’, from *God forbid*, which rhymes with ‘kid’ (Ashley 1977, 124–27). Examples of rhyme from college slang are *balls to the walls* ‘a tense if not frantic time or situation that requires the ability to fight back’; *beat the feet* ‘hurry up’; *cheesy, sleazy, greasy* ‘female of questionable reputation’; *dressed to impress* ‘well-dressed’; *fag hag* ‘heterosexual female who associates with gay males’; *fake and bake* ‘get a tan in a tanning booth’; *god squad* ‘people who evangelize on campus’; *groomed to zoom*

'well-dressed'; *hell dwell* 'have a good time drinking and partying at local pubs'; *jap scrap* 'motorcycle; appliance made in Japan'; *nutter butter* 'someone who is unaware or inattentive'; *pit sit* 'sit on the steps of the Pit between classes'; *pop tops* 'drink beer'; *rocks for jocks* 'an easy geology course'; *sight delight* 'good-looking male'; *slop shop* 'any campus snack bar'; *stylin' and profilin'* 'very well dressed and groomed'; *take a chill pill* 'calm down, relax'; *tighty whities* 'men's briefs'; *whatever floats your boat*, an expression of acceptance 'okay'.

Alliteration marks *bad bongos* 'situation in which things do not go well'; *Bible beater* 'evangelizing fundamentalist Christian'; *Birkenstock buddy* 'environmentalist'; *blimp boat* 'obese person'; *brain burp* 'random thought'; *Carolina Crunge* 'contagious flu-like illness that spreads throughout campus a couple of times a year'; *group gropes* 'encounter groups'; *peace person* 'someone who identifies with the antiwar movement of the 1960s'; *Polyester princess* 'female who dresses out of fashion'; *rip the rug* 'dance'; *romper room* 'place to get rowdy'; *thunder thighs* 'overweight person'; *virgin vault* 'residence hall for females'; and *Woodstock wannabe* 'someone with the sensibilities and style of the 1960s'. The repetition of vowel sounds can be heard in *lose move* 'stupid act', *scooby-doo* 'someone who eats a lot and never gains weight', *space case* 'someone who is out of touch with reality', and *waste case* 'drunkard'. Vowel alternation is heard in *schnicky-schnacky* 'public display of affection'. Indeed, a kind of ablaut (as in the alternating vowels of current English *sing, sang, sung*, and other irregular verbs) seems to characterize variant forms for the same notion. For example, the slightly different *ook, yuke, yuck*, and *yak* all mean 'vomit'; and *whipped* (from *pussy-whipped*) has inspired *whooped* and *whupped* too for 'unduly controlled by a female'.

Although most North Carolina students have a distinctly regional accent themselves, they enjoy mock dialect pronunciations and spellings like *wrought iron* for the exclamation *Right on!*; *Raw's* for *Roy Rogers Restaurant*; and *shoot the peel* for 'play basketball', in which *peel* is a dialect approximation of *pill*, a metaphor for the ball. They also enjoy creating mock learned words that sound like polysyllabic borrowings from Greek or Latin: *motivate* or *motorvate* 'move around socializing in a group, leave'; *matriculate* 'start a trip'; *emboosticated* 'embarrassed'. Superfluous combining forms like *-age* ("I'll have to ask my parents for more

fundage") and *-factor* 'the abundance of' ("What is the *book-factor* for English 36?") are modeled on and poke fun at overblown bureaucratic or learned usage.

The choice of pronunciation for a slang term can be conditioned by the sound of a form already in the language. There need be no semantic link. This seems the situation in the expression *Come in, Berlin*, which simply means 'pay attention', where *Berlin* is chosen not merely for its distance but mainly for its rhyme. *Brr rabbit* is a complaint about the cold. It expands the common *brr* that imitates shivering from the cold by means of matching it to one of the few set constructions in English that contains the sound /br/, the name of that clever inhabitant of the brier patch, *Br'er Rabbit*. *Rabbit* has no other significance in the complaint about the cold. *Ozone ranger* 'a person who is up in the ozone, out of touch with reality' undoubtedly acquired the element *ranger* by association via rhyme with the *Lone Ranger*. *Gril* 'an affectionate noun of address to another female' playfully reverses the internal sounds of *girl*, much like deliberately pronouncing *pervert* with the second and third sounds reversed as *prevert*. Sometimes the connection to the already existing sequence of sounds that triggers a slang term is not entirely arbitrary. *Stupid Health* and *Student Hell* for 'Student Health Services' are phonological deviations that convey students' frustrations with their medical care. *Out of state*, a synonym formed on *out of sight*, may be merely an already established, phonologically proximate sequence handy as a target form. However, on a campus at which the status *out-of-state* is likely to be expensive, the link with *out of sight* may not be purely arbitrary. In North Carolina, where there is no distinction between the pronunciation of *pin* and *pen*, it is probably inevitable that *Spencer Dormitory* for women would be called *Spinster Dormitory*. The pronunciation of the acronym for Reserve Officers Training Corps (*ROTC*) as /rotsi/ with the first syllable the same as *rot* can hardly escape pejorative connotations.

Semantic Fields

Just as associations between forms influence productivity, so do links in meaning.³ Vocabulary items that evoke some common element of meaning can be said to belong to the same semantic field; thus words as different as *raft*, *bicycle*, *bus*, *train*, *floatplane*, *moped*, and *747* are all realizations of the unifying abstraction, or semantic field, of transportation. Once a concept is expressed in the vocabu-