

Extending the concept of the (socio)linguistic variable to slang*

Jannis K. Androutsopoulos (Heidelberg)

ioannis.androutsopoulos@urz.uni-heidelberg.de

Published in Hungarian language in: Kis, Tamás (ed.) (2000). *Mi a szleng?* ['What is slang?'], pp. 109-140. Debrecen: Kossuth Lajos University Press.

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Introduction

It is the aim of this paper to propose an analytic scheme for the description of slang based on the concept of the (socio)linguistic variable. Based on data from a recent empirical study, I will argue that many slang items can be described in terms of linguistic variables, more precisely: as variants of specific types of variables. I will specify a number of slang variables on various levels of description, thereby discussing linguistic constraints which hold for each type of variable. A further focus of this paper is slang renewal, i.e. the creation of new slang variants. Overall, I will argue that an analysis of the kind proposed here makes it easier describe mechanisms of slang variation and change.

On a theoretic level, this paper is an attempt at bridging the gap between slang studies and variationist sociolinguistics methods. It is no secret that slang has had no serious place in the agenda of sociolinguistic research, at best treated as a superficial vocabulary. Despite numerous dictionaries, slang still remains «an undersudied part of language» from a scholarly point of view (Eble 1998: 42). This fact is evident in the almost complete absence of slang treatments in major introductions to sociolinguistics. Hudson's statement, that slang «merits serious research by sociolinguists» (Hudson 1980: 53), is to a large extent still a desideratum. In fact, I would suggest that this neglect is also due to the way students of slang have

* This is a considerably revised version of a paper entitled «Extending the concept of 'sociolinguistic variable' to German youth slang» which was first presented at the 1st Language Variation Workshop, held in April 1997 at the University of Reading, England. I am indebted to Janet Spreckels for improving my English.

themselves approached their object of study. To be sure, recent literature includes both correlational approaches to slang (e.g. T. Labov 1982) and sociological ones (e.g. Donahue 1995), as well as papers which emphasize the need for an ethnographic approach to slang, in order to describe slang items in their discourse context (Szabó 1998). But as whole, traditional slang studies are mainly restricted to the lexicographic documentation, semantic classification, and etymological description of slang items, thereby almost completely ignoring the main methods and analytical tools of sociolinguistics.

One neglected connection between slang studies and sociolinguistics seems to be the description of slang from a variationist point of view. Wolfram (1991: 22) points out that «all studies of linguistic variation operate on some notion of the linguistic variable». Indeed, many findings of slang studies are hard to conceive of without an implicit variable concept. It is my intention to do some explicit work with this concept, suggesting some ways it can be used for the description of slang.

This paper's empirical base is data from contemporary German youth slang (Androutsopoulos 1998a). Young people's language, whatever its label may be, certainly is one of the most fruitful fields for slang studies today. Sornig (1990) considers young people in urban environments as one of the most important social carriers of slang today. Young people's speech is the data source for *Slang and sociability* (Eble 1996), one of the most important recent research monographs on slang. Furthermore, the only two mentions of «slang» in *Sociolinguistic theory* (Chambers 1995) deal with young people's speech. However, slang analysis is but one focus of contemporary research on youth language, other major foci being correlative approaches on the other hand, conversation-analytic and interactional sociolinguistic approaches on the other.¹ The coordination among these research foci is still far from perfect. Correlative approaches on age-related linguistic variation have largely ignored youth slang (cf Chambers 1995:170-2), while qualitative approaches have equally ignored the discourse functions of slang items.

This paper is not directly concerned with the question of «what slang is». My view is that «slang» is what linguists take it to be, and this does not always coincide with what lay speakers call «slang». Three aspects included in many definitions of slang² are the restriction of slang on words and expressions, the restricted sociolinguistic distribution of slang, and its social function as a sign of in-groupness. While I will not deal with the latter two points, it is one aim of this paper to show the necessity to extend the descriptive range of slang analysis. That is, I will focus on the linguistic side of the issue, which explains my putting the 'socio' part of the (socio)linguistic variable in brackets.

¹ See Androutsopoulos 1998b for a detailed review of international youth language research.

² E.g. «informal, nonstandard vocabulary, usually intelligible only to people from a particular region or social group». (Crystal 1993, s.v. *Slang*); see also Andersson & Trudgill (1990: 69ff.); Eble (1996: 11); Eble (1998); Stenström (this volume).

The (Socio)linguistic Variable Revisited

It is not an overstatement to call the sociolinguistic variable one of the milestones of sociolinguistics. Using the linguistic variable as a structural unit and correlating it with social parameters is the core of the Labovian approach, which defined the discipline's first steps (Chambers 1995: 12-25).

In general terms, a linguistic variable is a set of alternative ways of saying the same thing, to repeat Labov's famous statement (Labov 1972, 94.). A sociolinguistic variable simply is a socially significant linguistic variable, in other words: a set of alternative linguistic realizations (variants) with social significance (Dittmar 1997: 57). A set of two or more realizations of an abstract linguistic unit, such as a phoneme, a grammatical function or a semantic unit, make up a linguistic variable. If these alternative realizations also carry different social meanings, each of them evoking a certain social or situational prototype, we are dealing with a sociolinguistic variable.

Since the (socio)linguistic variable is not a frequently evoked concept in slang studies, it seems necessary to be a bit more specific about the criteria which must hold for a set of linguistic items to be a valid linguistic variable. I will do this by grouping the major points made in the literature³ under six headings, thereby keeping in mind that the linguistic features which form the bulk of slang, i.e. lexical units, are no prototypical sociolinguistic variables. Now a short discussion of these six properties in turn.

Range of Application: Wolfram (1991) points out that the construct of the linguistic variable may apply on virtually all levels of linguistic analysis. He also explicitly acknowledges lexical choice as a type of linguistic variable. The prototypical sociolinguistic variables discussed in the literature are phonetic-phonological and to a certain extent also morphological ones. The respective status of syntactic structures, lexical items, and discourse markers is not always clear. The only kind of linguistic item Dittmar (1997:60) explicitly excludes from the sociolinguistic variable playground is the realisation of speech acts. As far as the lexicon is concerned, slang items are treated as variants by a number of authors. For instance, Halliday (1979) explicitly invokes variation theory for the description of «anti-language» (underworld argot) lexical items, while Armstrong (1998) works with traditional lexical pairs with a standard and a nonstandard variant.⁴

³ Discussion in this section is based on the following works: Albrecht (1986), Chambers (1995), Cheshire (1987), Dittmar (1997: 57-61), Fasold (1991), Fasold (1994: 223-4), Labov (1972), Lavandera (1978), Sankoff (1988), Schiffrin (1994: 341), Wolfram (1991).

⁴ Note also that in the classic version of implicational scale analysis as developed in creole studies, lexical variables (e.g. 'child' with one standard and one creole variant) are used next to phonological and morphological variables.

Equivalence of Variants: Linguistic variants are «different ways to say the same thing», i.e. the variants which make out a variable are formally different, but their alternance should not in any way alter the «meaning» of the utterance. However, this condition seems more and more endangered the higher we go up the levels of linguistic description. Therefore, it is crucial to be precise about the two kinds of equivalence condition that are needed when working with slang data: (i) *referential equivalence*, i.e. two lexical items are variants if they have the same referential meaning, but a different expressive and/or social meaning. To use an English example, the items *officer* and *cop* are referentially equivalent in most contexts; (ii) *functional equivalence*, a notion introduced in correlational sociolinguistics by Lavandera (1978). Two items are functionally equivalent, if they have the same communicative function in a specific context, all by having a different expressive or social meaning. For instance, the items «hallo» and «hi» in German can be regarded as variants of the variable «greeting-word», since they are functionally equivalent and hence interchangeable in the context of greeting.⁵

Structural Homogeneity: This condition is of importance for the operational definition of a linguistic variable and for the relation of its variants to each other (Wolfram 1991: 23). A linguistic variable is structurally homogeneous when its variants belong to the same structural category and have the same distribution. For instance, a lexical variable should consist of items belonging to the same word-class. To use an example from my data, bound intensifiers (prefixes such as *mega-*) and free intensifiers (e.g. *total*) should not be treated as variants of one variable, although their semantic function is the same and their distribution is closely related, because they belong to different morpheme classes.

Unconscious Use: Some researchers (e.g. Dittmar 1997: 58) claim the choice among sociolinguistic variants to be unconscious, as opposed to a conscious, «stylistic» choice. Although a completely unconscious use of slang is hard to imagine, it seems equally difficult (and empirically unevidenced) to assume that slang users *permanently* make *conscious* linguistic choices. In need for a working condition, I suggest that slang items form part of *habitual language use in in-group communication*. In other words, we have to view slang variants as expected or unmarked⁶ choices in peer-group interaction, unless contextual factors (as regards discourse or situational context) speak for the opposite.

Quantification: Sociolinguistic variables must occur in a certain frequency in order to be quantifiable. The background of this condition is both practical (researchers choose frequent variables in order to obtain more reliable statistical data), and theoretic (sociolinguistic variation is conceived of not as a yes-no relation, but as a more-less relation, and is therefore essentially quantitative in nature. Obviously, this

⁵ Especially as far as the concept of functional equivalence is at stake, sociolinguists have a lot to learn from translation studies.

⁶ The term «unmarked» is used here in the sense of Myers-Scotton (e.g. 1993).

condition will not hold for most lexical items usually classified as slang. Although a few slang items may appear frequently enough to be good candidates for quantification (intensifiers being a case in point), we need to separate the analytical distinction of variables and variants (which is what this paper is about) from their statistical treatment.

Social Distribution of Variants: The above points do not tell us anything about *the* essential feature of a sociolinguistic variable, i.e. the fact that its variants have a different social distribution and significance. It is well-known that one of the major tasks of sociolinguistics is to work out co-variation patterns of language use with different social categories such as age, gender, ethnicity, social class, network membership, or combinations of these. As far as slang is concerned, the fact that its quantification is difficult or even impossible, has already been pointed out above. Moreover, it is not surprising that the social distribution of slang items is not always empirically worked out. One reason for this is that many slang descriptions (e.g. Sornig 1981) concentrate on the mechanisms of linguistic innovation which bring about slang items, at the expense of the exact social distribution of these items and their use in discourse. There certainly have been descriptions of the slang of particular social groups, be it students of a specific college (Eble 1996), Longon teenagers (Stenström, this volume) or underworld clans (Maurer 1981). However, such groups are complex configurations of age, sex, social class and other social features, and it is not always clear which social variable is the dominant one in motivating this group's slang usage. Moreover, little attempt has been made to empirically address an item's distribution in other parts of the country or society as a whole (cf. T. Labov 1982). That is to say, even if we isolate a set of lexical items and call it the slang of a particular group, chances are that this set will not be completely homogeneous regarding its overall social distribution, but rather overlap with the slang resources of other social groups.⁷ In any case, this point is only of secondary importance in this paper. Since my research dealt with linguistic regularities of German youth slang, I will hardly refer to the 'socio-' side of the linguistic variables I will be talking about.

Doing Slang Analysis

This study is based on both written and spoken data which has been collected between 1992 - 1995.⁸ The written data consists of about 50 fanzines (i.e. cheaply made, non-professional and non-commercial magazines made by young music fans) from all over Germany. The spoken data was collected through participant observation of young people's peer groups in Heidelberg. Written sources made up the bulk of the data, the spoken data acting as a «filter» for the validation of the written data. In analyzing this

⁷ As far as German youth language is concerned, some slang items are particular to the speech of a specific peer-group, some others occur in youth talk throughout a region or even Germany, while still others also occur in adult slang, albeit with frequency differences.

⁸ Data collection is described in more detail in Androutsopoulos (1998a: 53ff).

material, the linguistic variable concept has been helpful in ways which will become clear in the course of this paper. At the same time, my usage of the linguistic variable as a working tool led to a revision of certain traditional delimitations of what slang analysis includes.

A basic distinction in the slang analysis proposed here, is the one between the «form» and the «content» of linguistic variables. Roughly speaking, by «form» I mean the level of linguistic description these variables belong to. By «content» I mean the relations among the variants which make out a variable. In this section I will discuss these two distinctions in turn, focusing on description problems and their implications for slang studies.

As for the «form» of a linguistic variable, slang variables basically belong to the lexicon, including multi-word idioms (*Phraseolexeme*) as well as items with low semantic content, e.g. intensifiers. Within a particular lexical category, a finer delimitation of variables can be achieved by using traditional grammar and lexicology tools.

In a discussion of lexical variation in Bengali underworld argot, Halliday (1979) introduces a distinction between *form variants* and *lexical variants*. Form variants are «alternative phonological realizations» of the same lexical item, created through processes of formal modification such as clipping and metathesis. To give two examples from youth slang, in German the clipping *Para* is a form variant of *Paranoia*, while in French the verlan form *keum* is a form variant of *mec* ('guy'). On the other hand, lexical variants are alternative lexicogrammatical realizations of the same meaning. Here the variable is modelled as a semantic unit (or a bundle of semantic features), variants being the lexical items that realize this unit (or contain this bundle), having the same referential meaning, but a different connotative (expressive and/or social) meaning. For instance, the German items *Zigarette*, *Kippe* and *Fluppe* are all lexical variants of the variable 'cigarette'. Halliday (1979: 173) goes on to stress that «all sets of variants have the property of being identical semantically; some have the property of being identical lexicogrammatically as well.» An important problem for the description of lexical variables is the fact that semantically complex slang words have to be excluded from the analysis, because they may not have a precise equivalent in standard language (cf. Halliday 1979: 173). However, the solution is not to abandon the linguistic variable as an analytic tool, but to restrict its operational range to particular areas of slang lexicon, i.e. low content items such as evaluative adjectives and intensifiers. In general, the higher the semantic content, the more difficult to specify the variable; the lower the semantic content, the easier the localization of the variable, and the more variants we find.

Note that the referential / functional equivalence of variants should be conceived of as a *context-sensitive* relation; for instance, there are contexts in which *officer* cannot be substituted by *cop*. It is the researcher's task to specify (and exclude) the contexts in which the equivalence condition (and therefore also linguistic interchangeability) does not hold. An important phenomenon as regards the

specification of lexical variables and variants, is what Sankoff (1988) calls the neutralization of semantic oppositions in discourse. This basically means that certain items can be shown to function as variants in concrete discourse instances, even if they have certain semantic differences as abstract units. To use an example from German slang, borrowed adjectives such as *cool* and *easy* have a specific evaluative meaning in certain constructions, cf. utterances such as *cooles Verhalten* «cool behaviour» or *ganz easy zu machen* «easy to do». In certain contexts, however, their content is reduced to non-specific «good», e.g. when used as one-word expressive utterances. Similarly, intensifiers such as *absolut* (absolutely) and *total* (totally) are said to differ semantically from metaphorical intensifiers like *tödlich* (deadly) and *tierisch*, but in the corpus data this difference is practically eliminated, in the sense that both groups are found to intensify the same adjectives and speakers accept them as interchangeable.

However, the lexicon is not the only linguistic level dealt with in this paper. A first point in which my analysis departs from many slang treatments is the explicit inclusion of word formation patterns. Relevant for slang are not all patterns slang words are built on, but only patterns which are exclusively productive in nonstandard speech styles or which acquire a special distribution in nonstandard usage.⁹ Slang and argot studies offer evidence for both of these types of patterns.¹⁰ A further transgression of traditional slang treatments is the inclusion of certain syntactic patterns and discourse markers (Schiffrin 1994). Some discourse items have probably always been considered as a part of slang, e.g. greeting-forms and terms of address which are particular to a social group. In addition, I also consider purely interactional items such as listener's signals and markers of direct speech, which are unlikely to be covered when not working with conversational material.

It is worth pointing out that similar (but not identical) proposals are independently made by Eble (1996, 1998) and Stenström (this volume). Eble discusses some cases of non-lexical items which could be counted as slang, including a particular pattern of word order and intonation, as well as the item *whatever* in a particular distribution, i.e. used as a one-word response. «Marked patterns of phonology and syntax are sometimes crucial to a lexical item's classification as slang» (Eble 1998: 36). Stenström (this volume) joins under the heading of «slanguage» traditional lexical slang with pragmatic markers.

The main empirical argument for dealing with such items in slang studies is their frequent co-occurrence together with conventional slang words and phrases, especially

⁹ This implies, of course, that slang *is* (at least partly) distinct in form, contrary to Eble's statement (1996:12). To which extent this difference depends on the language type one is studying, is a different story.

¹⁰ Cf. the suffix *-age* as discussed in Eble (1996: 33), Sornig (1981), the French argot research reviewed in Guiraud (1985) and Francois-Geiger (1973), and the word-formation chapter in Androutsopoulos (1998a).

when this co-occurrence pattern is characteristic of the speech of groups which are generally regarded as slang's main social carriers, such as adolescent peer groups. Since slang analysis has traditionally detached lexical items from their textual/conversational environment, these co-occurrence relations have largely passed unnoticed. Put in a different way, I suggest to regard certain discourse markers and syntactic patterns as belonging to (or being salient parts of) the discourse frame in which slang items are embedded.

Thus, although a theoretic extension of the slang notion does not seem a realistic task, what is realistically possible is to include the fuzzy boundaries between lexicon, discourse items and syntactic constructions into slang research. In this I agree with Eble's programmatic statement that «a description of the phenomenon [i.e. slang] must take into account both its relationship to other kinds of vocabulary and its place in the overall linguistic system.» (Eble 1998: 36)

So far for the levels of linguistic description. As far as the «content» of slang variables is concerned, my starting point is a distinction between two types of variables: The classic case is an *item-specific variable* with one standard and one nonstandard variant(s), including lexical pairs such as *officer* vs. *cop*. Following Halliday's (1979) distinctions, the variable is a lexical or a semantic unit, and is actualized by a content word, a multi-word idiom or a function word. Since the slang items in question are often deformations or synonyms of a pre-existing standard item, the variable typically has the same surface as the standard variant, i.e. the standard variant is used as a label for the whole variable.

Beside this conventional variable type, there are also variables with *sets of variants*. A set of variants is a group of linguistic items with the same semantic value and distribution. This kind of variable is a more abstract semantic and distributional configuration or a structural category in Wolfram's terms (1991) which can be alternatively realized by a whole group of variants. Taken together, the following sets are large enough in my data to show internal structures (more examples are given in the next section):

- **intensifying prefixes**, e.g. *super-*, *ober-*, *mega*, *ultra-*, *sau-*, *scheiss-* etc.
- **lexical intensifiers**, e.g. *absolut*, *voll*, *total*, *echt*, *tierisch* etc.
- **non-specific evaluative adjectives** (with the general meaning *good/bad*), such as *geil*, *klasse*, *kult* (positive evaluators) or *scheisse*, *beschissen* (negative evaluators)
- certain **synonyme series**, e.g. synonyms for «stupid»,¹¹ for the verb «to go away», for the collocation «to talk nonsense» etc.
- **lexical fillers** for a specific slot of an idiomatic construction
- particular **sets of suffixoids**, e.g. heads of so-called exocentric compounds, such as *-fan*, *-freak*, *-junkie* which all bear the general meaning «fan of».
- **greeting-words**, e.g. *hallo*, *hi* vs. *tschüss*, *ciao*

¹¹ Of course this is no novelty: Kotsinas (1997) reports to have collected 425 synonyms for «stupid», while Andersson/Trudgill (1990) report some 50 items for the same meaning.

Using both distributional and semantic/functional criteria, most of these sets can be split into sub-sets (or sub-variables). In the case of intensifiers, for instance, sub-variables are distinguished according to their distribution to word classes of heads. As a result, the exact variable is not just «intensifier», but «adnominal intensifier» (e.g. *der volle Hammer*) or «ad-adjectival intensifier» (e.g. *total gut*). A fine-tuned analysis of this kind allows for maximum comparability and equivalence of variants, but inevitably it also reduces their number, and thus the frequency of the variable as a whole.

In practice, a variant set is a way of conceptualizing the relation among closely related slang items. Working with sets bears a number of differences to item-specific variables. First, the fact is acknowledged that speakers have more than one lexical variant to choose from, in order to fulfill certain communicative tasks. These resources are not only slang (or nonstandard) ones, i.e. a set includes standard variants as well. However, in some sets there is not a single standard item which all other variants are juxtaposed to, but rather a continuum of more and less sociolinguistically marked items. As a whole, sets of variants are particularly suited to provide an organization frame for slang analysis. This is because they capture groups of items with central communicative functions in slang-colored talk. At the same time, they can be extended particularly easy. As the above list indicates, most sets include expressive language, and are subject to frequent bleaching and renewal. After presenting the variables and variants, I will come back to the concept of sets and attempt to show how it can be used in describing slang change.

Slang Variables: from Word (De-)formation to Discourse

Table 1 summarizes the slang variables which will be presented in turn in this section. The variables are listed in the left column. The middle column indicates the internal organization of the variables – or the other way round: the nature of the variants. Finally, the right column gives an example for each variable. The examples have either the form standard:slang (in the case of item specific variables) or they juxtapose a neutral/standard variant to a markedly slang (in the case of variant sets).

Word form

This category corresponds to Halliday's (1979) alternative phonological realizations of the same word. The linguistic variable involves the formal modification (or rather deformation) of an existing lexical item, whereby the modified form is the (nonstandard) variant.

Table 1. Types of Variables in German Youth Slang

Type of Variable	Organization of Variants	Example
word form		
Clipping (plus suffixation etc.)	Item-specific	<i>Tourist</i> : <i>Touri</i>
Metathesis, substitution, etc.	Item-specific	<i>Taschentuch</i> : <i>Tuschentach</i>
formative		
derivational suffix	Item-specific	<i>Bass-ist</i> : <i>Bass-er</i>
intensifying prefix	set of variants	<i>super-gut</i> : <i>ober-gut</i>
suffixoid	set of variants	<i>Computer-fan</i> : <i>Computer-junkie</i>
idiomatic construction		
lexemes (slot fillers)	item specific	<i>da geht die Post ab</i> : <i>da geht der Punk ab</i>
	set of variants	<i>das geht mir auf den (Nerv / Geist / Keks / Wecker / ...)</i>
lexicosemantic units		
content words	item specific	<i>Kleingeld</i> : <i>Kleinkohle</i>
intensifiers	set of variants	<i>sehr schön</i> : <i>voll schön</i>
evaluative adjectives	set of variants	<i>es war gut</i> : <i>es war geil</i>
syntactic item / construction		
negative	item specific	<i>keine Chance</i> : <i>null Chance</i>
intensification of noun phrase	word order	<i>ein sehr geiler Typ</i> : <i>voll der geile Typ</i>
discourse marker		
greeting-words	set of variants	<i>tchüss</i> : <i>ciao</i>
terms of address	set of variants	<i>Mensch</i> : <i>Mann</i>
minimal responses		<i>sicher</i> : <i>sichi</i>

The most common process of such variant creation in German slang is clipping; some more special cases are illustrated by the examples below.

- **simple clipping**, e.g. *Tourist* > *Touri*, *Paranoia* > *Para*, *Konzert* > *Konz*
- **clipping + suffixation / suffix alteration**, e.g. the item *Asozialer* ('asocial person') yields the forms *Aso*, *Asi*, *Asinger*; the item *Proll* ('low class person'), originally a clipped form of *Prolet* (which is originally a clipped form of *Proletarier*) is also attested in the suffixed variants *Prolli* and *Proollo*
- **substitution** of suffixes or final segments, as in *Student* > *Studi*, *Anarchist* > *Anarcho*, *Flugblatt* > *Flugi*, *logisch* > *logo*, *depressiv* > *depri*

- addition of '**parasitic**' suffixes'¹² without an overt semantic value' e.g. *-o* attached to adjectives, giving *toll-o*, *geil-o*, *null-o*; and *-inger* attached to items such as *Pils* > *Pilsinger* or *null* > *nullinger*

The word form category, then, comprises several deformation / modification processes which are internationally typical for slang/argot lexical variants, and the structural details of which can be quite complex.¹³

Word-formation patterns

In this category the variable is a word formation pattern with a specified semantic value and distribution. The variants are alternative morphemes (formatives) which are used as surface realizations of a pattern. From the three sub-types indicated in the overview table, I will only comment on alternative derivations. For instance, a variable in my data is the marker for deverbal abstract nouns; its variants are the derivational suffixes *-ung* and *-e*, as in the items *Verarschung* (standard variant) and *Verarsche* (colloquial, slang variant). In such cases, a standard derivation (the first variant cited below) is concurred by a new nonstandard derivation that is mostly produced by a colloquially marked suffix which is less productive than the standard one.

- variable: **deverbal abstract noun marker**
variants: [-ung] *Verarschung* / [-e] *Verarsche*
- variable: **deverbal agentive noun marker**
variants: [-er] *Schwaller* / [-i] *Schwalli*
- variable: **denominal agentive noun marker**
variants: [-ist] *Bassist* / [-er] *Basser* / [-mann] *Bassmann*
- variable: **de-adjectival existential noun marker**
variants: [-er] *Normaler* / [-o] *Normalo*
[-er] *Alternativer* / [-i] *Alternativi*

Another interesting case in word formation variation is provided by the adjectival suffixes *-ig* (similar to English *-y*) and *-mässig* (similar to English *-like*). These highly productive formatives yield some derivations which compete with standard derivations bearing a less productive suffix, e.g. *chaosmässig* instead of *chaotisch*, *tourimässig* instead of *touristisch*, *faschomässig* instead of *faschistisch*,

¹² Supplementary or «parasitic» suffixes are formatives the distribution of which can only be described in relation to the (more regular) formative they substitute; cf. Androutsopoulos (1998: 124-127).

¹³ Note that the process which is known as *verlan* in French (i.e. phoneme or syllable reordering) would belong to this group, but since it is not productive in German, no examples are given.

strafmässig instead of *sträflich*, *klischeemässig* instead of *klischeehaft*.¹⁴ In all these cases, a highly productive formative acts as an occasional variant with regard to other (quasi-)equivalent but less productive formatives.

Phraseological variables

In phraseology, a variable can be conceived of as an idiomatic construction with stable meaning and a slot (or even two slots) which allow for the substitution of lexical items.¹⁵ An example is the phraseolexeme *jm. auf den X gehen* with the general meaning of «to nerve someone», whereby X is a slot for a nominal variant, which is filled by more than 10 variants in my data, including the items *Nerv*, *Geist*, *Wecker*, *Sack* etc.

Fig. 1. *jemanden vom Hocker reißen* (lit. *to sweep s.o. off the stool*, i.e. ‘to excite’)

	subject matter ¹⁶	verb	[mich]	modal/intensif.	negative	[vom] noun
(1)	[artwork]	reißt	x	zwar	nicht so	Stuhl
(2)	[stories]	reißen	x	echt	nicht mehr	Hocker
(3)	[music]	reißt	x	-	nicht	Hocker
(4)	[record]	reißt	x	-	nicht gerade	Hocker
(5)	[song]	reißt	x	-	auch nicht	Hocker
(6)	[tape]	reißt	x	ehrlich	-	Hocker
(7)	[music]	haut	einen	-	auch nicht	Hocker
(8)	[record]	haut	x	trotzdem	nicht gerade	Hocker
(9)	[music]	bläst	x	-	nicht gerade	Hocker
(10)	[music]	schmeißt	x	wahrlich	-	Hocker
(11)	[record]	fegt	x	ja nun	nicht gerade	Barhocker

¹⁴ In two of these cases the new derivations are formed by clipped forms of the base nouns (*Tourist* > *Touri* and *Faschist* > *Fascho*).

¹⁵ Note that phraseological variation is generally regarded as typical for the usage and renewal of phraseological units. Of all different processes of phraseological variation, lexical substitution is the one yielding variants with sociolinguistic significance (cf. Androutsopoulos 1998: 243-245).

¹⁶ For ease of reading the text has been replaced by an indication of the subject matter the phraseolexemes refer to.

Figure 1 shows a phraseological variable with one verbal and one nominal slot. My data includes five verbal variants (*reißen, blasen, hauen, fegen, schmeißen*) and three nominal variants (*Hocker, Barhocker, Stuhl*) which yield six different combinations in the data. Note that variants from two lexical sets have to be joined here in order for a phraseological variant to occur. From these, the combination *vom Hocker reißen* is both the most frequent one and the one which is cited in dictionaries; therefore it can be used to refer to the variable as a whole.

The example demonstrates that phraseological variants are created and renewed through a process I call «metaphorical attraction» or «synonymic attraction»: New slot fillers come from the same semantic field of the main/leading variant, as is the case here with *Stuhl* and *Barhocker* on the other hand, *schmeissen, hauen* und *fegen* on the other. Such sets of metonymically or metaphorically related variants are also described by Sornig (1981, 1990). Figure 1 also demonstrates that phraseological variation in real discourse involves not only different lexical variants, but also co-occurring modal particles, intensifiers, etc. This is even more clear in Figure 2 below, which displays variation of the idiomatic construction «X auf etwas haben». Four nominal variants are attested in the data: The variant *Lust* is the standard one, *Bock* is now general in colloquial speech, but originated in young people's speech, the variants *Böcke* (plural of the former) and *Trieb* are restricted to youth slang. In addition, two more variables come into play: an intensifier and a negative, both of which also have youth slang variants. Thus utterances are attested such as *Ich hab echt null Bock auf Schifahren* («I don't like skiing») in which the colloquial intensifier *echt*, the colloquial lexical variant *Bock* and the nonstandard negative *null* co-occur. The arrangement below shows some co-occurring realizations of these three variables. While the co-occurrences at the top of the scheme are perfectly acceptable in standard speech, the ones at the bottom are markedly slang ones.

Fig. 4. «X auf etwas haben» (literally 'to have X on something', i.e. 'to like sth.').

Variables	Co-occurrences		
	(i)	(ii)	(iii)
(i) Intensifier {wirklich / echt}	wirklich	keine	Lust
(ii) Negative {keinen / null}	echt	keine	Lust
(iii) Slot filler {Lust/Bock/Böcke/Trieb}	echt	keinen	Bock
	echt	keine	Böcke
	echt	null	Bock
	echt	null	Trieb

Lexical Variables

As in the case of word formation patterns, different subtypes of lexical variables can be distinguished. A first type which is relatively easy to handle, consists of lexical variables which include an invariant constituent, while the other constituent is substituted. This yields lexical pairs with one slang synonym, such as *Kleingeld* ~ *Kleinkohle* ('change', literally: 'small-money'), *Zigarettenautomat* ~ *Kippenautomat* ('cigarette machine'), *sich ausheulen* ~ *sich auskotzen* ('to have a good cry'), etc. In some cases, both constituents are substituted, each of them receiving an independent synonym; this yields lexical variants that may be more difficult to decipher, such as *Schlafsack* ~ *Poofdüte* ('sleeping bag'). There are also some larger groups of variants, e.g. up to 14 variants of the verb *abhauen* ('to go off'), all of them bearing the prefix *ab-* but with different metaphorical verbs, e.g. *abpfeifen*, *abfetzen*, *abdüsen*, *abdampfen* etc.

A second type of lexical variables are low content items, such as general nouns, evaluators and intensifiers. These areas of the lexicon allow for a systematic use of the linguistic variable, because they share three properties: they have a low semantic content, they occur very frequently in young people's speech (see also Stenström, this volume), and they involve large sets of variants. An example is the highly routinized noun + verb collocation with the meaning of 'talk nonsense'. It actually involves a combination of two lexical variables:

- negative evaluators, i.e. nouns meaning 'nonsense' or 'shit/bullshit', such as *Müll*, *Blödsinn*, *Dünnschiff*, *Bullshit*, *Scheiße*, *Kacke*.
- verbs with the general meaning 'to talk', such as *labern*, *reden*, *lallen*.

Combinations of these items yield a sum of 18 collocational variants, about half of which are indeed attested in my data, e.g. *Müll reden*, *Scheisse labern*, *Blödsinn labern*, *Dünnschiff lallen*, etc. Acceptability tests with young people showed that none of these 18 combinations can be definitely excluded, and that it is common for speakers to have two, three or even four such variants at their disposal. I will come back to evaluators and intensifiers in the next section on slang renewal.

Syntactic variables

Rather than discussing whether syntactic variables really do exist or not,¹⁷ I will just mention two syntactic features which are characteristic for young people's speech in German: the negative *null* (literally 'zero'), and the intensification of noun phrases.¹⁸

The negative *null*, which is widely known as a German youth language feature since the 80's, can occupy the negative slot in all 3 main environments: (i) noun

¹⁷ See Lavandera (1978), Cheshire (1987), Fasold (1991).

¹⁸ Both cases are discussed in greater detail in Androutsopoulos (in print).

phrase, e.g. *ich habe null Kohle* ('I have zero money'), (ii) verb phrase, e.g. *auf Ralf verlass' ich mich null!* ('I absolutely don't rely on Ralf'), (iii) adjective phrase, e.g. *null cool* ('no cool'). Its most regular occurrence is as an adnominal modifier, in which case it replaces the standard inflected negative *kein*. A closer look shows that *null* can be treated as a variant of *kein* when it modifies a noun phrase in object position, in sentences such as the one given above. Modified noun phrases found in the data include *Chance*, *Ahnung*, *Schwierigkeit*, *Demokratie*, *Kohle*, *Money*. Hence, a description of the nonstandard negative as a linguistic variant is possible just for some of the syntactic positions it is found to occur.

The second syntactic variable is the word order of noun phrase intensification. In particular, the standard structure is an indefinite noun phrase with an indefinite or zero determiner which is adjacent to the head, as in: *eine sehr schöne Frau* ('a very pretty woman'), *ein voller Erfolg* ('a full success'), *wirklich schöne Bilder* ('really nice pictures'). In youth language, this structure can be converted into a definite noun phrase with the intensifier in pre-determiner position, as in *voll die schöne Frau* (literally: 'fully the pretty woman'), *voll der Erfolg* ('fully the success'), *voll die schönen Bilder* ('fully the nice pictures'). At least when occurring in the predicate of the simple copula sentence, these two constructions are word order variants, and can be treated here based on the assumption that the «realization of items in different linear sequences may also be considered a type of variable» (Wolfram 1991:24).

Discourse Variables

In general terms, a discourse variable may be defined as a configuration of a speech act and the lexical items which are used to instantiate it. My focus here is not on the discourse act as such, but on their alternative «fillings». The findings show that it is the most routinized speech acts that are treated by the speakers as variables and are realized with new linguistic material.

Consider for instance the major types of greeting formulas in German: in the case of **greeting words**, items such as *tschüss* and *tschüssi* are spread in the whole speech community, whereas slang variants include items such as *ciao* and *tschüssikowski*; as for **wishing formulas**, slang options include *sieh zu*, *hau rein*, and *take care*; in the case of **temporal formulas**, variants such as *bis baldi* or *bis baldinowski* can be regarded as slang. The actual usage of these items in talk is, of course, subject to considerable variation and several combinations are possible. However, what is important in our context is the fact that speakers have several variants with different socio-stylistic connotations to choose from, and that they can also establish new variants.

Discourse signals which can be treated in terms of the (socio)linguistic variable include back channel signals as well as certain groups of minimal responses, i.e. affirmative signals (following a yes-no-question or a tag question), evaluative signals (following an opinion question), and negation signals. For instance, an appropriate agreement signal to a question such as «Are you coming tomorrow?» would be one of

the items *ja klar*, *logisch*, *sicher*, *logo*, *klaro*, *sichi* or *ja Mann*; from these, the four last ones can be treated as slang items. Again, these signals can be treated as variables in the sense that speakers have several functionally equivalent forms to choose from in a particular discourse environment.

Ways of Slang Renewal

Describing the etymology and formation mechanisms of slang items has always been one of the most prominent tasks in slang studies. As a result, several classifications of ways of slang formation exist. Andersson & Tridgill (1990) propose one of the most compact ones by distinguishing three main processes of slang creation: (i) new formations in lexicon and idiomatics, (ii) semantic or formal modification of existing items, and (iii) borrowing, including borrowing proper and loan translation. However, classifications of this kind do not systematically relate the relevant formation processes to specific (types of) variables. There is no doubt that variants of a certain variable can be generated by several processes. For instance, the lexicosemantic variable *Franzosen* ‘frenchmen’ has three slang variants in my data: One is created by suffix alteration (*Franzmänner*), one is an analogical compound (*Froschfresser*), and the third one is a loanword (*Frenchies*). On the other hand, not *all* formation processes equally apply to *all* variables. In contrary, the data suggests certain preference relations between formation processes and linguistic variables. For instance, greeting formulas and discourse signals are mainly renewed by formal modification (i.e. diminutive or supplementary suffixes, e.g. *sicher* > *sichi*); some more variants enter the set through borrowing (e.g. *hi*, *ciao*, *take care*), but very few variants are created through metaphorical processes (e.g. wishing formulas like *hau rein*). The point to be made with these examples is, that slang analysis should specify not only the renewal processes which are available in a particular language, but also relations between these processes and the linguistic variables which they affect. Understanding these relations is essential in order to understand how slang changes.

Based on the German data, I distinguish between 6 renewal processes relevant for slang, which will now be presented in turn and connected to the variables treated in this paper.

- **formal modification** was referred to for all word form variables as well as for some greeting-words.
- **substitution** is the main process for the renewal of phraseological units as well as for the creation of lexical variants (substitution of constituents); some of the word formation cases can be regarded as substitution processes as well (i.e. substitution of formatives).
- **metaphoric-metonymic processes** have not been dealt with systematically in this paper; however, recall the cases of «metaphorical attraction» discussed in phraseology: new «slot fillers» often come from the semantic field of the set's leading variant.

- **borrowing** is a source for new slang items in many different lexical areas, including the variant sets of bound intensifiers, free intensifiers, evaluators, greetings and terms of address.
- **distributional shift** of existing linguistic forms is a hardly mentioned resource for new slang items. In my data, it mainly applies to evaluators, intensifiers and discourse signals. For instance, some slang evaluators are eventually used as intensifiers as well, i.e. a new intensifier is created by distributional shift. In other cases, there is a distributional extension from standard language to slang. For instance, the intensifier *voll* only modifies verbs and nouns in standard German, but in young people's speech it can also modify adjectives. Hence this is not a slang item by itself, but it has a slang distribution.¹⁹ Note also that in some cases, slang variants come from a different functional class in comparison to the variants used in other speech styles. For instance, young people use interjections as agreement signals.
- **grammaticalization**, a hardly ever mentioned source of slang renewal, can be considered as a source of new word formation and syntactic patterns which are connected with slang (details in Androutsopoulos, 2000).

These mechanisms of lexical and structural innovation contribute to the renewal of both item-specific variables and sets of variants. Taken together, they affect the content of these sets over time. In fact, the composition of a set of variants seems to be a major factor in slang renewal. In order to understand how the content of a set changes, it is useful to conceptualize the relations among variants in terms of a core-periphery scheme.²⁰ Each set has core items (or prototypical variants) which can be specified by means of criteria such as distributional range, frequency of occurrence, and potential discourse usage. As for free intensifiers, for instance, core items such as *voll* and *total* have the broadest distribution in this set, they are the most frequent items of their group, and they are also used as discourse signals as well as in word formation. At the same time, these core intensifiers can modify virtually every evaluative adjective, while less frequent intensifiers are restricted to the most frequent adjectives.

Slang speakers (in our case: young people) make their own selection of existing variants, and they introduce new variants into the set. Each variant in a set has its specific profile, its own sociolinguistic history. For instance, the set of bound intensifiers includes the items *mega-* (a popular item also used in mass media), *ober-* (an older nonstandard variant which was frequent among young people though hardly used in media), as well as *turbo-* and *giga-* (youth-specific variants which are less

¹⁹ A similar distributional shift is documented by Stenström (this volume) for English, involving the item *well*.

²⁰ See detailed discussion in Androutsopoulos (1998: 366ff.).

common than *mega-* and *ober-* in my data). On the other hand, the variants within a set are related to one another by certain attraction and «mutation» mechanisms,²¹ such as the «metaphorical attraction» referred to earlier in this paper. The core items of a set serve as models for the renewal of the whole set by attracting new variants. For instance, the core variant *mega-* (which originally had a technical-scientific meaning) attracted the new variant *giga-* (which also has an original scientific meaning).

In sum, I suggest that the renewal of a set be conceived of as a process involving four steps (or «moves») which I will now illustrate using bound intensifiers as an example:

(i) stable core: Every set has a stable core (or common core) which maintains the set's identity. It may include slang items used by all social groups, although sociolinguistic differences in the frequency of these items can be expected (e.g. the core intensifier *scheiss-* is used by everybody, but is probably more frequent in young people's speech).

(ii) introduction of new variants: New variants are introduced into the set through set specific (or variable specific) processes, certain core items thereby serving as a model for the selection and distribution of new items.

(iii) dropping of older variants: For instance, German slang items which were fashionable in the 70s are today out of use or have changed their distribution.

(iv) distributional shift: Variants can change their distribution over time. For instance, a certain intensifier can be extended in slang to an ad-adjectival position which it does not occupy in standard speech. Variants may also jump from one subset of variants to another, as it were, thus acquiring a slang specific distribution, e.g. in recent youth slang, the prefix *sau-* has switched from its earlier adnominal distribution (as in *Sauwetter* 'bad weather') to an ad-adjectival one (as in *saucool* 'very cool').

This view on slang makes it possible to detect how two or more social groups differs with regard to a particular set. Especially as far as youth slang is concerned, this process of set renewal seems to be age-graded: Each new generation of teenagers receives a set and «updates» it, following these four steps and applying the renewal processes which are specific to each set.

Conclusion

Most linguistically informed students of slang would probably agree that slang studies deserve a more serious place in the agenda of sociolinguistic research and theory-

²¹ U.-B. Kotsinas (1997) speaks in this connection of a frame: «Apparently there exist certain rules or rather frames, within which substitutions, expansions and deletions can be made. The elements used consist of words and affixes which at the moment are current in young people's slang. When someone wants to create a new slang word, he thus may use his knowledge about these frames and elements. The listener, on the other hand, must have the same sort of competence to be able to interpret the new slang word.»

building. For this to happen, however, slang researchers should start themselves using the notions and tools of sociolinguistics. It is in this light that the present paper should be regarded. Looking at slang as a superficial vocabulary is in my view just delaying its systematic description and the potential insights to be gained for sociolinguistic theory. It is certainly true that slang items are short-lived, but this does not mean that their creation and renewal is random. On the contrary, their formation patterns can be described by means of the (socio)linguistic variable. In this connection, the (socio)linguistic variable is a descriptive tool that enables us to spot the sensitive parts of the linguistic system that are renewed again and again by slang speakers, independently from one another, but following the same guidelines. The limits of this tool in slang description are both its restricted range of application (e.g. regarding content words) and the problem of quantification. However, as far as the qualitative organization of the variables is concerned, the linguistic variable is a useful method in describing slang structure and change.

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