

Mini-Lessons on Slang and Coronavirus Slang

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Introduction

For the first 25 years of my teaching career I was involved in the preparation and implementation of linguistics courses for students in a Department of English Language and Literature, including a two-year seminar on Sociolinguistics where we explored such topics as dialect, slang, language and gender, and world Englishes. In 2013 my situation changed. Trading my two-hour commute for a 10-minute drive also meant giving up my linguistics seminars for oral communication classes for students majoring in such fields as History, Archeology, and Japanese Literature. I set aside the materials I had prepared for my linguistics majors for a few years, but recently pulled them out again, modifying the language and content to create materials appropriate for students with limited English ability. I first tried them out with the students in our English Circle and then in the advanced level oral communication classes. I came to realize that our Japanese students have invested a lot of time and effort into learning English but have a shallow awareness of what language is all about-- even such basic things as language diversity. What resulted was a set of worksheet-based “mini-lessons” on various topics related to diversity in the English language, and encouraging reflection on their first language, Japanese. The

worksheet tasks, carried out in groups, are intended as 30-40 minute exercises to encourage the students to think more deeply about language.

Thinking about Slang

My original mini-lesson on Slang started with some basic questions that students were to discuss in groups:

- 1) What is slang? Do you ever use it? If so, when are you likely to use it? When would you avoid using it?
- 2) Below are five slang expressions from American English. Without using a dictionary, can you figure out or guess their meaning?
to pig out to chill wheels BFF hangry
- 3) In a group, brainstorm a list of at least 10 slang words in Japanese. Be prepared to explain the meaning.

The students were able to identify some basic characteristics of slang as an informal variety of language, often associated with teens or young people. With some prodding they were able to confirm that it involves vocabulary (rather than variations in grammar or phonology, as we had found to be the case with dialects) and is tightly bound to the notion of group. Many said that they would use slang with their friends or co-workers at their part time jobs, but would be unlikely to use it with their teachers or with people that they don't know well. So far, so good.

Identifying the meaning of American slang was challenging, but they made some good guesses. *To pig out* does not mean “to gain weight”, but that was a logical guess. Choosing dated (but still “slangy”) items for the first three entries ensured that they would be able to find them in their dictionaries when we returned to the full group discussion. Surprisingly to me, *BFF* was familiar to a few of the female students from American television and films. *Hangry*, (from *hungry* + *angry*), in fact quite new, was a puzzle to all. Once the meanings were ascertained, we briefly discussed the processes involved in the creation of these terms, focusing on the relationship between the source and target terms.

While the students were able to share some ideas for the first two questions, they had considerable difficulty brainstorming any slang in Japanese. Surprising as that may seem, two linguists on the forefront of slang research in the U.S. and Canada, Connie Eble and Sali Tagliamonte, claim that their own students initially have great difficulty generating English slang. Yet in most cultures, young people try to set themselves apart from the older generation through their fashion, the music they listen to and certainly the words they use. That they are to a certain extent unconscious of this important marker of social solidarity is not unique to Japan. Providing them with a few examples helped get them started: *KY* “spacey” (*kuuki yomenai*), *maji* “really” (*majime*), *makudo* “McDonalds”, *sutaba* “Starbucks”, *bibiru* “to be nervous” (*bikubiku suru*) triggered an “Oh, yeah!” reaction from the students, prompting a nice list of additional

slang items. At the following week's class, students brought more examples to share, including some from English. This reinforces the instructor's belief that language is intrinsically fascinating—and that with carefully prepared tasks, it is possible to help our students attain that realization.

Coronavirus Slang

Spring 2020 brought a new level of chaos to the world, greatly impacting education at all levels. The semester began later than usual as stressed-out teachers sought the best ways to move their classes online. Many students were distraught at being away from their friends and in some cases, unable to continue their part-time work. Throughout the early spring feelings of isolation and dread were rampant, with no one knowing what to expect. Instructors faced the dual challenges of keeping students interested in their coursework and providing some sense of connection.

I chose a hybrid approach for my classes, using our university's online Portal system along with weekly Zoom sessions. I began the first few lessons with inspiring YouTube clips focusing on how people were helping each other out during the pandemic. When the rainy season started I switched to rain-themed activities to lighten the mood and provide novel topics for discussion. By early May I had collected a number of coronavirus slang terms and decided to put together a follow-up mini-lesson on Coronavirus Slang, building on the work the students had done earlier.

The students were first provided with some examples of current coronavirus slang, collected from the online sources listed in the References. The first task involved trying to figure out the meaning of the terms. Groups of four to five students were put into breakout rooms and given time to work together to see how many they could decipher. They had the most success with #3, 5 and 6 and the *quaran~* blends. How many can you work out? The answers are in the Appendix at the end of this article.

Examples of Coronavirus Slang

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| 1. rona | 7. quarantunes |
| 2. covidiot | 8. quarancut |
| 3. WFH | 9. zoom mom |
| 4. sanny | 10. BCV |
| 5. drivecation | 11. ACV |
| 6. elbump | 12. smizing |

Once the meanings were secured, we spent a few minutes discussing the formative processes. Three of the examples above, WFH, BCV and ACV are acronyms, like *KY* and a host of other Japanese slang terms. *Rona* and *sanny* are the result of a process known as truncation (with an additional suffix in the latter case), also a rich source of Japanese slang, including two of the examples cited above. *Zoom mom* is a compound, involving the juxtaposition of two nouns. By far the most productive process is blending, similar to

compounding but involving the deletion of one or more syllables. *Covidiot* (covid + idiot) and *elbump* (elbow + bump) are two examples. That process is also highly productive in Japanese, and the students easily were able to generate several examples. This hands-on, comparative approach to analyzing the creative forces behind slang was both fun and empowering for the students.

Concluding Comments

Language is a living thing and as such, is always changing. Coronavirus slang sprang up rapidly in the midst of a global pandemic crisis and continues to evolve day by day. Although the number of examples and depth of linguistic discussion remained shallow due to time constraints and the students' English ability, this short lesson on what is probably the world's newest slang provides students with the opportunity to work with classmates to do some simple analysis, and is a pleasant break from the textbook. More importantly, it helps them develop insights into how language works. Even presenting three or four examples can open our students' eyes to the rich possibilities of language variety. Why not try it out in your classes?

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Appendix:

Examples of American English Slang

| | |
|------------|---|
| to pig out | “to eat a large amount of food!” |
| to chill | “to relax; to calm down” |
| wheels | “car” |
| BFF | “best friend (forever)” |
| hangry | “irritable as a result of being hungry” |

Examples of Coronavirus Slang

| | |
|----------------|---|
| 1. rona | “corona virus” |
| 2. covidiot | “a person who behaves irresponsibility (i.e. no face mask or social distancing)” |
| 3. WFH | “work from home” |
| 4. sanny | “hand sanitizer” |
| 5. drivecation | “a short vacation to a nearby location using the family car or trailer rather than public transportation” |
| 6. elbump | “elbow bump greeting” |
| 7. quarantunes | “music popular during the quarantine” |
| 8. quarancut | “haircut done at home—usually not very successfully” |

9. zoom mom “moms who frequently use zoom for work, their children’s school, etc.”
10. BCV “before corona virus”
11. ACV “after corona virus”
12. smizing “smiling with the eyes, as when wearing a facemask”