



An Investigation into the Requirement of Communicative Competence in the Usage of Slang

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Abstract

Communicative competence is the ability of a speaker of a language to be able to use a language like a native speaker would use. It encompasses a language user's knowledge of grammar, syntax, morphology, phonology etc and the usage of language in a social context. It includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic aptitude on the part of a learner. A language user should understand the sociolinguistic context and be able to fix whenever there occurs a communication break. This is commonly related to the standard language. What about the informal aspect of any language? Can a learner be called truly competent in a language if he/she does not know the peculiarities of its informal side? This paper therefore looks at the need for communicative competence in the usage of slang, which is an informal variety of a language. Many notions related to both the concepts have been discussed in the paper.

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication between the living beings is a basic need of the mankind. The medium for any kind of communication is language. A language has many purposes- thinking, expressing, informing, writing etc. However, speakers of any language need to have certain capability to use the language they know according to various contexts. Henceforth, Communicative competence, a term coined by Dell Hymes, is the ability of humans to use the standard language appropriately and competently for the purpose of communication. Slang is considered to be a variety of a language, sometimes referred to as sub standard language. Nonetheless, the usage of slang also needs to be appropriate according to the context in which it is being used. It cannot occur in isolation. Therefore communicative competence in the context of slang becomes an interesting area to explore.

Saleh and Salam opine, “Communicating effectively in a language requires the speaker’s good understanding of linguistic, sociolinguistic and socio-cultural aspects of that language. This understanding will enable him to use the right language in the right context for the right purpose and then he can be referred to as communicatively competent.”

The concept took birth after the resistance to the concept of linguistic competence introduced by Noam Chomsky. Linguistics competence is been considered as a part of communicative competence by many scholars.

Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) have defined communicative competence as a blend of four areas: word rules – grammatical competence; appropriateness- sociolinguistic competence; cohesion and coherence- discourse competence and use of communication strategies - strategic competence.

Slang is one of the most interesting varieties of a language which emerges by historical, social and cultural tendencies of life. However defining slang is a complex task. No linguist or slang researchers have been able to come to a definition of slang, though many of the have given varied criteria to understand the demarcation between slang and other language variety.

Ellis (2002) takes slang as the language which expresses a sense of belongingness in members of a group. Slang expressions are generation-specific and that while some are ephemeral; others have long life span and may end up as standard lexemes. Michael Adams (2009:16) in his known work ‘Slang: The People’s Poetry’, says that

“slang serves to meet the following purposes: to identify members of a group, to change the level of discourse in the direction of informality, and to oppose established authority”. Spolsky mentions “Slang is a kind of jargon marked by its rejection of formal rules, its comparative freshness and its common ephemerality, and its marked use to claim solidarity”. Zoltan and Ildiko have claimed, “Slang is a particular way of speaking, a variant of language usage, a situation-dependent communication code which is defined first of all by the attitude of the speaker – or rather, the use of which is the expression of an attitude.”

It is a fact that slang fulfills a communication need just as standard language would. Slang is a form of communicating the necessary feelings and ideas of its users through the choice of words and vocabulary that fit their situations better than words of the standard language. It is the best, quick and the most viable way for its users to express themselves. It is a special language, which, may or may not satisfy the standard rules of the language, but surely provides more freedom for better communication than the standard language does.

Hence the question remains debatable – whether slang usage requires communicative competence or not. If we agree with the contention that the basic function of the language is to communicate –spoken or written – then slang is certainly the mode of communication that satisfies the basic parameters of competence and further if it serves the purpose of interpersonal understanding and following what the speaker or user of slang intends to say, then it certainly makes the speaker proficient also. While using slang, the speaker or the user may or may not be following the standard rules of the grammar, but s/he is able to communicate and make the other person follow what s/he intends to say and transmit.

II. COMPONENTS OF COMPETENCE AND SLANG

Even if we consider the main parameters and characteristics of the ‘Communicative Competence’ as enumerated by Canale and Swain (1980), slang may not be fully and exhaustively justifying the all four components of competence as analyzed below but somehow covers each of the notions:

2.1 Words and Rules: The users of slang do not use the standard vocabulary and rules of the language. But slang certainly consists of some words, phrases, terms and vocabulary that is invented, created, developed, used and accepted as a special language in communication in intra and intergroup communication. Unlike the rules of grammar followed

in the standard language, the slang terminology also follows the rules of slang word formation such as alphbetism, blending, clipping and reduplication. Moreover, as slang is largely the spoken content, it depends upon the choice of the user to use the words and terms as per the context and the need of the situation.

2.2 Appropriateness: Since slang is generally the spoken part of the communication and is considered informal, the degree of appropriateness of this lingo can again be not generalized and determined. The speaker or the user knows the level of formality and courtesy to be followed and required while communicating. Moreover the decision of appropriateness of slang usage depends upon the intentions of the speaker and the nature and degree of response which he/she receives from the recipient. For instance, if the purpose of using the term is satisfied then the slang is certainly appropriate, however, there may be some reservations about the degree of appropriateness – lesser or higher. Further, it depends upon the attitude and psychological mindset of the person who evaluates this feature of slang. Being votary of liberalism and innovation in language usage, then slang seems to be appropriate as a language of young speakers as it communicates what s/he intends to.

2.3 Cohesion and Coherence: The slang terms and vocabulary may not seemingly show any act or fact of forming a united whole which is referred to as cohesion. But when we use the slang vocabulary, the action or fact of conveying the information is justified as the basic purpose of the use of the language is fulfilled. The slang and its various variants may not be conforming to the fact or action of forming a united whole but the action or fact of using slang is certainly and unequivocally unites a whole set of people in a particular group giving them a special identity and place in the social group. . Further, coming to coherence, slang, when used in the proper context and purpose becomes logical and consistent because the user feels the need and the logic to use those terms in that particular situation. Moreover, the use of slang vocabulary makes ‘sense’ for the user as well as the listener. So it’s content and ideas are well received by the concerned speech community in intra and inter group conversations. To be more specific, the use of slang may not satisfy the rules of the standard language; it goes in its own way in the same direction and can be considered close to cohesion and coherence.

2.4 Use of Communication Strategies: It would be interesting to note here that slang itself is used as a communication strategy while communicating in the standard language. The slang provides the psychological, interactive and communicative strengths to the user in the social group. When the speakers are unable to communicate their messages to the listeners due to any of the several reasons, slang comes to their rescue. And slang, as a communication strategy is used for many purposes- secrecy, maintaining group identity, euphemism etc. while using slang, the speakers can use some strategies that are common to that of standard language.

III. EVALUATION OF SLANG

Referring to the Lyan David Tarvin's (2014) parameters for defining and explaining communicative competence, slang can also be evaluated on the basis of his five features as follows:

3.1 Speakers must have the ability to use language (Hymes,1972)

Since slang is mostly the specialized spoken language, it allows their users the desired ability and capacity to use the language to communicate in their own way .

3.2 Speakers must demonstrate the inclusion of the socio-cultural component of cultural appropriateness (Hymes,1972 , Canale & Swain,1980)

Slang is considered to be context, culture, group and situation specific and hence demonstrate the inclusion of socio-cultural component in addition to the psychological and socio-linguistic elements.

3.3 Speakers must be able to make meaning(Savignon,2002)

The slang terms, vocabulary and phrases when used in a conversation, certainly displays the desired and required meaning, well-understood by both the speaker/user and the listener. Both the user and the recipient understand the meaning and show the knowledge of the words and vocabulary of the slang.

3.4 Speakers must use language in ways that are effective in accomplishing their desired tasks in a facile , almost unconscious manner (Paloti, 2010)

The slang words and vocabulary used by the speakers are effective in accomplishing and satisfying the desired task and objectives of communication in a special, identifiable and desirable way. The innovative

and special words coined with a purpose, in a conscious or unconscious manner are effective accomplishments.

3.5 Speakers must be able to achieve these communicative tasks in social extended interactions wherein they have the skills and understanding to decode and encode messages with appropriate socio-cultural intent. (Hall & Pekarak Doehler,2011)

The speakers of slang, using the slang words formed through alphabetism, clipping, shortening, reduplication, blending etc. are able to achieve and satisfy their communicative tasks for intra and inter group interactions. They are able to understand, decode and understand the inherent messages in the terms, phrases and words used in the communication. The secretive and special slang used in some special groups conveys everything required in their socio-cultural contexts. The basic purpose of communication is to convey the things with appropriate socio-cultural intent and the use of slang in no way hampers this purpose rather it facilitates it in its own special way.

IV. DISCUSSION

Using slang, the speaker gets self-generated liberty to use the words and terms which he/she thinks are the most suitable and convey the things which he wants to. Slang is comprised of the innovative, unique and creatively coined terms and vocabulary for the particular situations; it certainly enriches the language, though sometimes in a non-standard and irregular way.

Slang, for its users, fulfills a communication need just as standard language would. Sometimes, slang words or terms are the only words to express something which may not be available in the standard language. So, it is there need based and not for fun only. Slang results in better communication if used in an effective way with a proper knowledge of the purpose, context and the audience. Slang actually becomes a part of communicative competence. In order to become truly fluent, the language learner must understand how to be current. As Gloria Kopp quotes Mary Walton in, '5 Reasons Slang is Important for Language Learning', "Learning slang in language allows to remain current in your spoken ability and makes it possibly to hold fluent conversations with people of all generations."

Slang gives the flavor of local language and dialects of any language. If a language learner needs to have communicative competence in the respective language, he

should include slang in his learning too. When we learn and use slang, it opens the entryway for learning about the local history which in turn helps in understanding the formation, evolution and coinage of the slang words in the local community or group. This further helps in understanding the socio-cultural and psychological factors behind the slang development and usage and ultimately enhances the communicative competence in the immediate social context.

In a contradictory opinion, however, slang is not considered important as a feature and pre requisite for gaining the communicative competence. Slang is considered a barrier to communication when the slang terms or vocabulary used by the user or speaker becomes incomprehensible by the listener. It is simply a case of linguistic exclusion applied knowingly or unknowingly. Slang, being generally colloquial, belongs to a particular area. So it becomes a hindrance to understanding when used in a different area or people. Slang is functional for the speakers who already have some knowledge about the slang culture. For others, it creates a barrier to communication for the uninitiated. Since the words or new meanings perceived to be assigned may be unknown to some listeners, or the meanings may be understood as different, the scope and degree of efficacy of communication is limited. The purpose of language is enabling the speaker to communicate properly, but using a different dialect or language that is not known by all listeners can limit communicative competence.

Slang demonstrates the fluidity, flexibility, innovation and creativity of language and encompasses frequent attempts in changing, allowing additions / deletions and inventions to vocabulary. This may create the difficult situations of using and understanding both for the user as well as the receiver leading to limiting capacities to communicate effectively. Slang demands the users to know each and every element of the new terms and words developed in the social realm to keep them relevant and fit and competent to communicate. This results in the diversions of their energies and competence from academics to learning and unlearning the most fragile terms and vocabulary. Internet slang is the most frequently used variant of slang today. This growing trend makes slang globally more expanding, exhaustive and unmanageable. It has, to a certain extent, made the communication process difficult. Slang is considered as in-group language including some and excluding others. This process of inclusion and exclusion, though assigning unique identity to all in-group speakers, may exclude a large chunk of the population from the mainstream. Hence it results in creating some avoidable socio-linguistic divisions as well as emotional and cultural disintegration.

While using slang for communication, it is presumed that the speaker knows the context, situation, purpose as well as the degree of formality or informality. If the speaker/user misses or falters on any of the preconditions or nuances of the language, then the slang can be offensive and may jeopardize the very essence of effective communication thus seriously hampering communicative competence. As slang is dynamic and changes very quickly, it has some socio-psychological barriers to communication also. If you use yesterday's slang, you are labeled as outdated and find yourself in an embarrassing syndrome of being out of the mainstream. Slang, when used in communication, is considered as symbol of immaturity and insensitivity towards the basic cultural and technical ethos of the communicative competence. This may be treated as the basis for widening generational misunderstanding as well as degrading the seriousness of communication. The increasing use of slang and its various variants in future seems certain to prove that this is the 'real' language. This means that the generations to come will grow up believing that slang language, abbreviations and text language are the correct ways to communicate. It will affect the ability, commitment, competence and performance in proper communication. Slang vocabulary is generally considered vulgar and offensive, thus it becomes embarrassing and insensitive to some people specially when used in gender specific contexts and situations. In such cases, the original purpose of communication, which is to bring people together, is lost and in turn it abolishes the whole purpose of communication is negated resulting in clear failure and incompetence.

VI CONCLUSION

Summing up, it can be said, that, Slang is not good or bad in itself. It is just a part of the language which can be used effectively or ineffectively. Slang is neither good nor bad per se and the same goes for any other words. Slang can be considered as a particular level of meaning. The question of whether slang needs communicative competence too can thus be answered in two ways.

Firstly, the fact that slang is also a kind of language or a variety of language cannot be denied at any level. According to linguists, to be able to perform in any language, communicative competence is must. Therefore, if slang is considered to be a language and a variety of language, then communicative competence is a must for its use. That is to say, a slang user, to be competent enough for using it, needs to check the five boxes of the notion of competence; linguistic, grammatical, discourse, strategic and communicative. In other words, for slang usage one

must adhere to all the technicalities of each competence mentioned above.

Secondly, the question can be answered in a completely opposite manner. Slang is considered to be a form of language which is free. It gives freedom to the users of slang to coin, use, avoid the slang terms on their own. In fact many slang researchers have claimed that the beauty of this variety of language lies in the fact that there are no rules followed for its usage, no grammatical nuances and no linguistic discourse. Therefore, expecting slang to involve and require communicative competence will be completely curbing the freedom that slang provides. It may have some rules for its usage, but these rules are restricted to the in groups, the slang users have created for themselves. Hence, the whole idea and rationale behind the birth of slang terms will be lost if one starts expecting communicative competence from its users.

Thus the question posed in the beginning still remains unanswered, as both the sides have their own arguments. However, as a slang researcher, the opinion that can be presented here by me is that we should let slang be, whatever it wants to be. Putting too many curbs will only result in the loss of its true essence which is not healthy for the development of languages. Henceforth, slang users can or cannot require communicative competence. As long as the meaning and information is being conveyed, the technical competence can be forgone and the liberated version of language usage can be enjoyed by its users.

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