

Small Group Lexical Innovation: Some Examples

Christopher Kupec

The slang of small groups is usually ignored or dismissed by writers of popular etymology books and slang dictionaries. Scientific linguistic journals as well do not often deal with this subject.¹ Yet it is a valid part of the linguistic competence of the individuals using this slang, and as such deserves some attention by linguists. For one thing, individuals, and not speech communities, are the creators of new words. And individuals create them within the setting of their own social groups. Moreover, if we study this locale of lexical innovation in more detail, we can discover a number of unusual processes of word-formation. We can also gain some insights into the social side of language change, and in particular, into the social mechanisms involved in the creation, acceptance, and usage of innovative words.

Some examples of small group lexical innovation are provided in this paper in order to undermine the notion that slang uses only typical processes of word-formation (e.g., compounding, prefixation, suffixation, semantic radiation, concatenation, etc.), and to investigate the social side of word-making.

The following examples were coined and are used by a circle of ten or so close friends. All members of this group are in their early twenties, although some of the words they've created originated during their high-school years. Where possible, the various creators are identified (by initials), in order to make it easier to see who creates most of the words.

1. Orthographic Origin

bitch [bIkʃ] n. 'a person' Used jocularly and derogatively. Created when M. attempted to write bitch backwards on the inside of a steamed-up car window, so it could be read from the outside. Note that the change affected the meaning melioratively. The [kʃ] cluster is nonexistent in standard English (Cohen 1952: p.74).

said-ass case [std əs keis] n. 'a confused, pathetic individual', from a spelling error in a letter that M. wrote to another member of the group.

music for monkey n. 'music' A spelling error of a songtitle, 'music for money', written by M. on a cassette case.

nelk neek [nɛlk nik] interj. A nonsense, identification word.² Originally neek-neek, an interjection used by Jack Nicholson's character in Easy Rider after taking a swig of whisky. M. had the word ironed onto a T-shirt in capital letters, NEEK NEEK, and after several washings the top two horizontal bars of second E wore off, leaving NELK NEEK. Created by V.

nice teds n. 'nice breasts' A misspelling of nice tits by a Palestinian friend of the group, written on a Valentine's Day card for little children. It's possibly his phonemic representation of a word he'd never seen in print.

2. Phonetic Fortition

jooj; joojeh [džudž]; [džu·džA] n. 'a person; a guy' Sometimes used as a nonsense, identification word. D.'s emphatic pronunciation of dude, an unpopular word in this group. Jooj or its variant form joojeh, however, is acceptable. Possibly this is because it isn't dated or common, and because it disparages the people who do actually say dude. The phonetic changes appear to be fortitive, since [d] is turned into an affricate [dž], which is very expressive (as evidenced in Jesus, jeez, jerk, and jism), and extremely forceful. The variant joojeh seems to have arisen from a reinterpretation of the vocalization after the release of the second affricate as a full vowel. Note that joojeh has its stress on the second syllable, underlining the fact that it is a fortition.

loozar [lu·zar] n. 'an imbecile; a moron' M.'s pronunciation of loser. The r-colored schwa in loser has been reinterpreted as [ar] when both syllables are given equal stress. From this, it would seem likely that /ar/ is M.'s phonemic representation of the agentive -er ending. A variant exists in a front-clipped form, zar.³

broach; heroach [hrouč]; [h rouč] interj. 'I got burned' or 'You got burned (by the speaker or someone else)' M. and G.'s pronunciations of roach, 'burnt' or 'ruined'. The origin of the initial [h] is uncertain.⁴ In the variant heroach, the transition from the word-initial [h] to [r] has been reanalyzed as a vowel, possibly because of the trouble in pronouncing [hr] as a word-initial consonant cluster in standard English.⁵

skrčh [skrč^v] interj. 'scratch; ouch' Created by V. Said by him to sound more onomatopoeitic than scratch.⁶

3. Front Clipping

splud [splɔd] n. 'a kidney punch' & interj. 'take that!' Created by M. by clipping 'Piss blood!' It's apparently unrelated to the British English curse, 'sblood for 'Christ's blood'. Notice how the removal of the verbal element brought on the treatment of splud as a noun.

medic [mɛ·dIk] interrogative. 'want my dick?' Created by K. for use in public by clipping 'Want my dick?'. Along with the pronunciation, the stress changed as well to coincide with medic meaning 'corpsman'.

zar [zar] n. 'a jerk' See loozar above.

4. External Source

hojoba [θou·džə·bə] interj. An identification word. It comes from jojoba, an ingredient in certain shampoos. The pronunciation however is neither straight from the Spanish word jojoba nor a direct Anglicization ([ho·ho·ba] and [džow·džə·bə], respectively). Rather it is a merger of the two. Originated with K. and N..

neek neek [nik nik] interj. An identification word. Originated with M. See nelk neek above.

5. Word Manufacture Ex Nihilo

weep wa, weep waw [wip·wa]; [wip waʔ] interj. An identification word. Believed to have been created by N.'s brother-in-law.

woob [wub] vt. 'to deceive, toy with', vi. 'to wobble, waver', & interj. M. originated it, but he doesn't remember how. The verb is completely regular. The intransitive verb's meaning seems to have been influenced by the similarly spelled word wobble. WOOB was what M. had ironed onto the other side of his NEEK NEEK T-shirt.

schweibik [ʃwei·bIk] interj. An identification word. Created by N. (along with schwebel, scheben, and schlabonowitz) while daydreaming in his German class. He wanted German-sounding nonsense words, although he wasn't sure if they meant anything in German. But it seems that they're nonsense words in German as well.⁷ The four words are often used in a catch-all phrase, 'Schwebel, schweibik, schleben, schlabonowitz', which is spoken as if it were a verb conjugation.

schwebel [ʃwei·bɪ] interj. An identification word. See schweibik above.

schleben [ʃlei·bɪ] interj. An identification word. See schweibik above.

schlabonowitz [ʃlə·bən·wɪtʃ] interj. An identification word. See schweibik above.

6. Malapropism

dispose v. 'to suppose; to guess' A play on suppose, created by M.

reconcile v. 'to guess, to reckon' Created by M. from reckon.⁸

7. Semantic shift

Jack jizz pn. A nickname for M.'s father. Originally Jack jizz meant M. (the reasoning being that in common slang, jizz means 'semen', so Jack jizz meant 'Jack semen', i.e., M. whose father's name is Jack). But through time, the meaning shifted back to 'Jack', so the second half of the nickname is just added baggage.⁹ The reasons why this happened are unclear. Jizz was tried as a regular patronymic in this group, but only Jack jizz has survived, however, so perhaps it is because of its alliteration, and its being influenced by expressions like Jackshit and Jackdick.

Nelson pn. A nickname for K. Since another of K.'s nicknames is The legend, this nickname is a hidden pun. It is dependent on one's knowing the name of a park in northeastern Ohio called "Nelson's Ledges" or 'Nelson Ledges', which sounds similar to Nelson Legend.¹⁰

Wisner Road Resident n. 'a melonhead' Specifically it is a nickname for B. Where this group comes from, there is a local legend about melonheads: inbred, insane albinos with huge heads who come out at night to wreak havoc on anyone foolish enough to drive down Wisner Rd., where supposedly these creatures live. Calling someone a Wisner Road Resident is the same as calling him a melonhead.

The Nightmare pn. A nickname for M.'s old Plymouth. When Lee Iacocca started going on TV to advertise his company's cars, there was a joked-about phrase, 'a Lee Iacocca dream-car', for any car made by Chrysler. M. owned an old Plymouth Fury that was a piece of junk, so instead of calling it 'a Lee Iacocca dream-car', he called it a Lee Iacocca nightmare, or for short, The Nightmare.

8. Metathesis

kirsheds [kʁʂc] n. 'crushed red pepper' Created by K. Actually this was a speech error, but K. insists that he meant to say it, and this could be true, since crusheds has never been used by this group. If crusheds were pronounced [kʁʂc], it would seem easier to say kirsheds [kʁʂc], since [kr sc] is a more complicated articulatory sequence than [kʁʂc] (i.e., back to front to back to front vs. back to front).

The processes of word-formation illustrated here emphasize the variety of methods available and the prevalence of unusual paths in lexical innovation. Orthographic origin, fortition, and malapropism are given little or no status in most published works on word-formation. Sentential front-clipping is not a common process either. As for metathesis, semantic shift, external origin, and word manufacture *ex nihilo*: how often do we get to see how a word comes about, why it comes about, and who is responsible for it?

The examples shown also let us look in on the social aspect of lexical innovation. The prevalence of identification words (words that have no defined meaning but are used to strengthen group identity and cohesiveness) points out how important the social setting that these are created in is to the members of the group. Using such words, in a sense, affirms (both for the speaker and for the rest of the group) that the speaker is part of the group. This is the same reason that much technical jargon is used in various circles. Everybody wants to belong.

The humor of these words is also worth mentioning. New words seem to be accepted by the group based on their humorous content, as well on their productivity. If a word's not funny, it's not used. And once it loses its freshness, the word is dropped from use more often than not. This is because word-formation and usage are active, self-conscious processes. Quite often members of the group will comment on their irritation over a word: either that they use it too much or that somebody else does. This habit extends beyond the group. Parties and get-togethers are excellent locations to attack dated slang and "sloppy speech" used by strangers. If a word isn't liked, the attacker uses it on the person continually until he or she realizes what the problem word is. Sometimes this method will backfire and the word is instead considered to be well received. A number of words have been created that way in this group: kirsheds, skrch, and loozar for example. The group is constantly on the lookout for verbal deviance in themselves and in others outside of the group.

That all these mechanisms and methods need to be examined in greater detail is obvious. I'm not the first to notice a lack of literature and research on these topics. But, hopefully, this paper gives others some ideas and concrete examples concerning lexical innovation and its social setting.

Notes

1. Maledicta is a major exception to this trend.
2. Identification words are usually nonsense words that are used to fortify relationships within a group. They delineate who's who. Nonsense baby-talk used between lovers can also be included in this term, since it strengthens the bond between them and it affirms the loving nature of the relationship. Essentially, identification words identify the group that the speaker belongs to.
3. Zar works well in public, because the unknowing recipient of the insult can think he's being admired, cf. czar.
4. The #h- might have arisen from the heavy aspiration given to the [r]. The tongue is extremely retroflexed and often the pharyngeal fricative [h] is used or the uvular fricative [χ] instead of [h].
5. It might be worth noting that all the aspirated-r words that English took from Greek are unaspirated in English. But since the [h] of hroach was desired, a vowel insertion was made, so that the [h] wouldn't be lost.
6. As V. put it, 'Bees go "bzzz" not "buzz"' (from a conversation).
7. It is possible, however, that schweibik could be Schwäbig 'Swabian' (Swabia being a region in southwestern West Germany) in German. Schwebel is a surname, as in Schwebel's, which is a bread-baking company in the U.S. Schleben could have been influenced by secondary reduplication of the type, actor schmactor, i.e., leben schleben (since in German, leben means 'to live'). Schlabonowitz could be a surname also. All these words are probably influenced by the expressive, derogatory nature of sC- in Yiddish slang (e.g., stutp, schlang, and schlock).
8. Usually only used in the sentence, 'I reconcile...'. The same usage is used with dispose.
9. This type of semantic change is not infrequent. For example, rhubarb is derived from the Late Latin rha barbarum 'foreign rhubarb'. But when only one species was present, the 'foreign rhubarb', the classifying modifier lost its meaning. So maybe in the case of Jack jizz, the high number of nicknames for M. along with the lack of nicknames for his father influenced the change in meaning.
10. An example of the impression that the inexact pun is funnier than an exact one.

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