

# **YOUTH SLANG: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF ITS FUNCTIONS, FOCUS AND FORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF HONG KONG**

**Abstract :** This paper examines critically the differences in terms of the social functions of slang served in the speech of both male and female adolescents in Hong Kong. In addition, it investigates the topics of interest that youth slang focuses on which can be categorized into four major areas. Morphological issues about slang such as slang formation processes, constraints in the coinage of new slang expressions and some taboo in their usage will be raised and discussed.

**Keywords :** Youth Slang, Slanguage, Sociolinguistics, Functions, Focus, Formation, Hong Kong, Adolescents.

## **Youth Slang: A Sociolinguistic Study of its Functions, Focus and Formation in the context of Hong Kong**

Slang is traditionally considered as a vulgar, offensive, and profane form of language with a strong color of irreverence and yet vitality in a society. It is generally labeled as a linguistic taboo which should not be appearing in most formal social occasions. Since it is “*customarily reported as the idiosyncratic and deviant vocabulary of quirky or suspicious groups*” (Eble, 1998: 42), slang has always been neglected, if not ignored, in sociolinguistics. Therefore, formal and theoretical discussions of slang in sociolinguistic perspectives are largely absent. Very often, lexicographical documentation, semantic classification, and etymological description of slang items are the primary, if not the only, focus in traditional studies of slang (Drake, 1979, Szabó, 1998, Androutsopoulos, 1999).

Contrary to the situation in the US and many European countries where research and projects on slang such as The UCLA Slang Project (Munro, 1989, 1993, 1997) are popular and studies of slang are even incorporated as a component of the educational curriculum (Eble, 1989, Munro, 1989, Adams, 2002), Asian societies like Hong Kong are largely devoid of systematic records and critical analysis of the phenomenon of slang, especially the Cantonese slang (Hutton and Bolton, 2005) which can be attributable to the cultural and linguistic conservatism in the academic atmosphere in comparing to the Western societies. Bolton and Hutton (1997: 300) remarked that “*what seems to distinguish the situation in Hong Kong from the situation in Western Societies is that there is much less official tolerance of bad language [slang] in the territory than is the case, for example, in Britain*”.

This paper examines critically the differences in terms of the social functions of slang served in the speech of both male and female adolescents in Hong Kong. It was found out that male and female adolescents are under very different motives to use slang, and it is nearly impossible to make judgment on the sexes of the speakers simply from the slanguage s/he uses. In addition, it investigates the topics of interest that youth slang focuses on. It was found out that youth slang in Hong Kong mainly centers on four primary topics which are 1.

Evaluations (usually negative) of people, things or events; 2. Appearance and style; 3. Sex (including sex organs, activities, dating, etc.); and 4. Leisure and fun. Focus will be particularly on the third category, sex, since such area is always under the youth's interest across different cultures and societies. A prominent example is 食蟻獸 *sik6 ngai5 sau3*<sup>1</sup> “ant-eater” (ant-eater). The long and tube-like head of an ant-eater is metaphorically compared to a long, rough and thick uncircumcised penis. Male adolescents found such label extremely repugnant and insulting. The major reason is due to the implications about the malfunctionality of the penis and disagreeable experience during sexual intercourse embedded in this term. Morphological issues about slang such as slang formation processes will also be covered. Constraints in the coinage of new slang expressions and some taboo in their usage will be raised and discussed.

As for the methodology of this slanguage study, it covered both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In this study, data were collected through three major sources i.e. questionnaire survey, face-to-face interviews (both group and individual ones), and direct observations. Additional written data were collected through youth magazines and related materials; teenage chat rooms, newsgroups, and Bulletin Board System (BBS); movies; lyrics of popular songs; sport and cultural centers; game centers and Internet café bars; etc. These research methods and the written data are complementary to one another. A balanced and strategic employment of these research methods is expected to generate findings with high reliability and validity.

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<sup>1</sup> The italicized parts represent Cantonese romanizations which are based on the *Cantonese Romanization Scheme* developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (LSHK). URL: <http://cpct92.cityu.edu.hk/lshk/Jyutping/Jyutping.htm>

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