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ENGLISH SLANG: A WORD-FORMATION PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: This paper examines the word-formation processes which are used in English slang. It does so by presenting the word-formation analysis of a sample of words selected from the online Urban Dictionary (UD). The words under investigation come from three semantic groups from the UD, specifically COLLEGE, DRUGS and FOOD. The focus is also on the comparison of the use of word-formation processes in this sample of slang words and in Standard English. The results propose an overview of the individual word-formation processes occurring in the sample. They also suggest that, to some extent, in this sample, slang uses word-formation processes in the same way as Standard English, however, in certain cases it diverges from the language's traditional use.

Key words: slang, word-formation processes, Standard English, comparison

Introduction

“All countries and periods of history had slang” (Saliyeva, 2018: 22) and, more importantly, it is undoubtedly used by everyone; from teenagers to scholars. Slang most definitely “reflects the peculiarities of contemporary daily life in a unique way” (ibid.). However, it happens very often that there is little agreement on its status; on the one side there are the supporters of the use of slang, highlighting that it is creative, fashionable and revolutionary, while on the other side there are the champions of Standard English who judge slang as vulgar, ugly and trivial (Coleman, 2012: 1). Additionally, the majority of authors focus primarily on the sociological properties of slang and on its history, while its word-formation remains discussed only marginally. Therefore, apart from analysing the available data on slang and aiming at a balanced description of it, much more attention should be paid to its word-formation aspects.

Accordingly, the following work will focus on a word-formation analysis of a sample of slang words. First of all, the compilation of the sample will be outlined which will be followed by its subsequent analysis.

Compilation of the sample

The sampling technique was based on three steps. The first step focused on the selection of slang words from the online Urban Dictionary (UD). In this case, words were chosen from the first three semantic groups occurring in UD, namely COLLEGE, DRUGS and FOOD. The number of words that appear in UD per group is 140, which means that in the first stage, the total number of words from the three selected groups was 420.

The second step was based on sorting the 420 words. This was necessary because UD is freely editable by laypeople and there was a high probability of finding words that were not relevant for further analysis within the framework of slang word-formation. Therefore, the 420 words were filtered with the aim of eliminating irrelevant cases, such as words which were not morphologically complex. After putting together all the unsuitable cases, the number of words decreased considerably from 420 to 78.

The third step was to analyse the remaining 78 suitable words, which consisted of examining the word-formation processes used in their coining. This will be represented in the following section.

Analysis of the sample

Table 1 lists all the word-formation processes used in the coining of the words from the sample.

Table 1: Word-formation processes

Word-formation process	Number of words	Percentages
Compounding	31	40%
Shortening	23	29%
Suffixation	11	14%
Blending	7	9%
Conversion	6	8%

The concrete examples representing each word-formation process occurring in the sample will be provided in the following sub-sections. The words occurring in the tables below are listed in alphabetic order, in orthographic form, and with the definition provided in UD. It is also necessary to mention here that in the upcoming examination, the use of word-formation processes in slang will be compared with their use in Standard English and it will be focused on possible similarities or differences between the two.

Compounding

Compounding coined the largest group of 31 slang formations. Likewise, compounds represented one of most puzzling points in the process of the creation of the final sample because “there is no overall agreement on such basic issues as the definition of a compound” (Bauer, 2017: 1). Nevertheless, it was necessary to choose some criteria for compound delimitation in order to sort out the sample of words. The main three criteria which were used in this case are syntactic, as described in Lieber and Štekauer (2009: 13): “[...] inseparability, the inability to modify the first element of the compound, and the inability to replace the second noun of a nominal compound with a pro-form such as *one*”. Table 2 is a list of all compounds occurring in the sample of 78 slang formations.

Table 2: Compounds

Drugs	<i>bongload, booze jockey, cannabis club, Cocoa Puffin, coke fiend, Coke Nails, Generation Blunt, Giggle Smoke, Green day, hobo hash, Jungle Joint, Nosebag, rolling stoned, Stoner Steve, trip out, weed snob, Weed Whacker</i>
Food	<i>death burger, food box, Gay bacon, pizza daddy, Pizza Pillows, pizza slap, Pizza Time, See food diet, stoner pizza, Texas Breakfast</i>
College	<i>College night, dorm storm, hallway hobo, prep school</i>

Compounds in the above table may be classified according to the syntactic category membership. Taking this into consideration, the majority of compounds are compound nouns. There is one case of compound adjective: *rolling stoned* ‘on ecstasy and weed’ (UD) and one case of a compound verb: *trip out* ‘to lose your mind on drugs’.

As for the word classes of the individual constituents of compounds, the majority of them are N + N constructions. There is one case of V + N (*Giggle smoke* ‘another word for marijuana’), two examples of A + N (*Green day* ‘a day spent smoking marijuana’, *prep school* ‘a school to prepare teens for college in a slightly college like environment’), and one example of V + Particle compound (above-mentioned *trip out*). Finally, there is also one example of three-member compound *See food diet* ‘a see food diet is where you see food and then eat it’, which is a combination of V + N + N.

Bases of compounds may also differ in terms of their origin, whether they come from Standard English or from slang. There are three possible combinations occurring in the sample. The first is when all constituents are Standard English

words, as in *College night* ‘Thursday night partying because most college students don't have class on Friday’. The second possible combination is slang word + Standard English word, as in *booze jockey* ‘a bartender’. The third possible combination is slang word + slang word, as in *hobo hash* ‘slang for marijuana resin’.

To conclude, it was exemplified that in this sample slang uses the same mechanism of compounding as Standard English. In terms of the word classes, most of the compounds occurring in the sample are compound nouns which also prevail in Standard English, as mentioned by Bauer (1983: 202), Plag (2016: 2412) or Lieber (2005: 378). The same may be said about the word-classes of the individual constituents of compounds, which are mostly nouns. However, it was exemplified that there are also some differences between Standard English compounding and slang compounding in this sample, mostly in terms of the origin of bases which are used. In some cases, slang uses chiefly slang bases to coin compounds.

Shortening

Next word-formation process which was found to be used in the coining of slang words is shortening. Shortenings represent the second largest group, comprising 23 words. Various types of shortening appear in the sample, and a list of them is provided in Table 3, followed by their examination.

Table 3: Shortenings

College	CKA, dorm, Furman, gml, HYPSM, NCSU, SNHU, U, UCB, UCLA, UCSC, uni, UNLV, USC, UT, UTM, YOCO
Drugs	acid, cap, meth, mid, scrip
Food	bae

The shortenings in the group COLLEGE are of various types. The majority of them are instances of initialisms, such as *CKA* (1) ‘commonly known as’, (2) ‘Cool Kid Alley’ (UD). Notice here that in the first definition, ‘commonly known as’, a letter from a function word (*as*) is used to form an initialism. The next initialism is *gml* (1) ‘got much love’ and (2) ‘get on my level’. In this case, the second definition, ‘get on my level’ is an interesting example, as the initial letters of all words except *on* are used in the initialism. Subsequently, in the group COLLEGE there is a family of initialisms which represent shortened names of various universities, such as *HYPSM* ‘the 5 most prestigious universities in the United States: Harvard University, Yale University, Princeton University, Stanford University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology’, *NCSU* ‘North Carolina

State University’, *SNHU* ‘South New Hampshire University’, and this pattern is repeated in all the following initialisms: *UCB*, *UCLA*, *UCSC*, *UNLV*, *USC*, *UT*, and *UTM*.

In the group COLLEGE, there are also examples of clippings, such as *dorm* ‘a bedroom, living room, and kitchen in a space about the size of most walk-in closets. Roommate included free of charge’, *Furman* ‘Furman University – a private, liberal arts college in Greenville, South Carolina’, and *uni* ‘university’, which are all examples of back clipping.

The next type of shortening occurring in the group COLLEGE is the acronymization, represented by only one example, *YOCO*, which has two definitions related to the semantic group COLLEGE: (1) ‘You’re Only Cute Online’, (2) ‘You Only College Once’.

The types of shortenings in the group DRUGS are more consistent: they are all instances of clippings, for example *acid* ‘Lysergic acid diethylamide’ which represents a type of clipping when the middle part is retained. Then there is *cap* ‘Aussie slang for mdma (ecstasy), often in Australia mdma is snorted and placed in capsules for distribution’, *meth* ‘abbreviation for methamphetamine’, and *mid* ‘mid-grade marijuana’ which are all examples of back clipping. Finally, *scrip* ‘prescription – a note from a doctor to obtain controlled medicines (usually narcotics) from a pharmacist’ is another example of middle clipping.

The last group, FOOD, includes only one shortening, *bae*, which is an example of an acronym. This word had many various definitions in UD, but the one related to food and appearing the most often was ‘bacon and eggs’.

In conclusion, it was exemplified that in this sample, slang makes use of various types of shortenings, such as initialisms, acronyms and clippings which are also used by Standard English, as described in Bauer (1983: 232–237). Moreover, the principles on which the coining of these types of shortenings is based appear to be the same as in Standard English.

Suffixation

Suffixation was used to coin 11 words, representing 14% of the 78 slang formations. Table 4 lists the words coined by suffixation.

Table 4: Suffixation

Drugs	<i>baggie, bottle-o, Cheefing, Flipping, reefer, toked Ziggy</i>
Food	<i>baconcy, brekky, Munchies</i>
College	<i>mutching</i>

The suffix which occurs in the sample most frequently is the diminutive *-ie/-y*. In Standard English, it is the most productive suffix from the group of diminutive suffixes, it attaches mostly to nouns, and it is usually used to express “[...] small size and a specific attitude of the speaker towards a referent” (Plag, 2016: 2419). This function of *-ie/-y* was also found in the sample, where it attached mostly to nominal bases, which were sometimes clipped. In the group DRUGS, there is the word *baggie* ‘a little plastic bag used to carry weed [...]’ where *bag* serves as a base for suffixation by *-ie*.

A similar case is demonstrated by *Ziggy* ‘Spliff, Zoot, Joint, Cannabis Cigarette’. One possible analysis of the word *Ziggy* is that it was coined from *cigarette* which, firstly, underwent the process of clipping and subsequently suffixation by *-y* to coin *ciggy*. The initial consonant in *ciggy* was voiced from /s/ to /z/ which probably influenced the orthography and changed into *ziggy*.

In the group FOOD, there is *brekky* ‘synonym for breakfast’. The base for the coining of *brekky* was *breakfast* which underwent clipping and subsequently suffixation by *-y*.

Another example of derivation by *-ie* is represented by *munchies* ‘when you get hungry after smoking weed. Usually, people will eat a lot of junk food’. The base for this word is the verb *munch* ‘to eat snack foods’. The diminutive suffix *-ie* is added to this to form the noun *munchie*, which is followed by adding the plural morpheme *-s* to form *munchies*. Interestingly, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) mentions that this noun usually occurs only in the form of plural.

Subsequently, the next most frequent suffix appearing in the sample is *-ing*, also a productive one. In Standard English, it is mostly listed within suffixes which derive event, state and result nouns (Bauer, Lieber, Plag, 2013: 195). In this sample, the suffix *-ing* was used to derive event nominalisations. To exemplify, in the group DRUGS, there is *cheefing* ‘the act of smoking marijuana with a group of two or more and holding on to the joint/blunt/bong/bowl etc for a longer time than the set rhythm of rotation’. This noun is an example of derivation by adding *-ing* to the slang verbal base *cheef* with identical meaning.

Similarly, there is *flipping* (1) ‘using LSD and Ecstasy together’, (2) ‘the act of selling drugs’ (3) ‘a mild curse word’. In the first two cases, the words are verbal present participles created by attaching the suffix *-ing* to the verbal base *flip*. In the third case it is an adjective which is derived by attaching *-ing* to the verbal base *flip* ‘an alternative to f**k’

Additionally, in the group COLLEGE, there is *mutching* ‘not attending school’. This word only had one definition in UD, and therefore, it was further investigated in The Free Dictionary (FD), where the following definition is found: ‘another word for mitch’. The mentioned word has the meaning ‘to play truant from school’, which comes ‘probably from Old French *muchier*, *mucier* ‘to hide, lurk’ (FD). Therefore, the verb *mitch* /mɪʃ/ firstly underwent vowel modification into *mutch* /mʌʃ/ and, subsequently, the suffix *-ing* was added to form the noun *mutching*.

The suffix *-er* only occurs in the sample once, which is quite surprising since it is highly productive in Standard English, mostly in deriving agentive and instrumental nominalisations from verbs (Szymanek, 1989: 176). Nevertheless, this pattern was preserved in the sample; in the group DRUGS, there is the noun *reefer* ‘slang for marijuana; refers to a joint, bowl, plant, or sac of marijuana’. After analysis, it was determined that it was probably derived from the verb *reef* ‘take in, roll up (as one would a section of a sail on a ship)’ (Online Etymological Dictionary [OETD]). What is interesting here is the analogy between a rolled sail and a rolled cigarette containing marijuana.

Another suffix that also occurs only once within the sample is the suffix *-ed*. In Standard English, it is productive in coining possessional adjectives from nouns and verbal past participles used as adjectives (Plag, 2016: 2419). In the group DRUGS, there is the word *toked* ‘being high, particularly from marijuana’ which represents the verbal past participle functioning as an adjective. The base for suffixation by *-ed* is the verb *toke* ‘to inhale marijuana smoke’, which probably comes from the Spanish *tocar* ‘touch, tap, hit’ or ‘get a share or part’ (OETD).

The next suffix occurring in the sample only once is the less productive and rather infrequent suffix *-cy*, which in Standard English usually attaches to adjectives in order to form nouns (Bauer, 1983: 222). OED also adds that *-cy* can be attached to nouns ending in *-n*, as in *chaplaincy*, *captaincy*, or *aldermancy*. The second base preference was found in this slang sample where the suffix *-cy* attached to the noun *bacon* in order to derive *baconcy* (1) ‘the availability and/or presence of bacon’ or (2) ‘that horrible feeling when you thought you had bacon but you just realized that you had already run out, you are now bacon-less’. In this case, the suffix *-cy* does not change the word class of the base *bacon* to which it is attached.

Finally, the suffix *-o* in the group DRUGS represents a special example of formative used only within slang. It occurs in the word *bottle-o* ‘Australian abbreviation of bottle shop – which is a shop that sells alcohol and is often attached to a pub’. As is shown, the author of this definition explains that the second constituent is an abbreviation from *shop*. However, further investigation of this word pointed to a slightly different interpretation. The second element of this construction rather represents the slang suffix *-o*, which is used in “forming familiar, informal equivalents of nouns and adjectives [...]” (OED). This word may also have a variant, *bottle-oh* (ibid.).

To summarize, the majority of suffixes used in this sample of slang words are suffixes that come from Standard English (*-ie/-y*, *-ing*, *-er*, *-ed*, *-cy*). Moreover, it was exemplified that the functions of these suffixes in this slang sample are, in the majority of cases, similar to how they function in Standard English. As for the differences between the use of suffixation in this slang sample and Standard English, slight irregularities were exemplified by bases that are of slang origin, such as *munch*, *cheef*, *mutch* or *toke* and which cannot be found in Standard English.

Also, there was an example in the sample of a suffix that is not used in Standard English and which can be considered as chiefly slang (-o/-oh).

Blending

Blending was used to coin 7 words from the selected list, representing 9% of the 78 slang formations. Table 5 exemplifies the instances of blending that occurred in the sample.

Table 5: Blending

Food	<i>bizza, brenner, brinner, brunch, cakeage</i>
College	<i>journicle</i>
Drugs	<i>tokemon</i>

The first group FOOD is the largest. The majority of the blends occurring in this group are examples of the most frequent types of blends that also appear in Standard English, where the parts used in blending are the peripheral fragments of the original words (Szymanek, 1989: 100). For instance, *big/beer + pizza = bizza*, *breakfast + dinner = brenner/brinner*, *breakfast + lunch = brunch*. The last example in this group is a less frequent type of blend, where only one word appears in the shortened form while the other one is entirely present. To exemplify; *cake + corkage = cakeage* ‘corkage fee for cake’.

The second group COLLEGE includes only one example which is a frequent type of blend: *journal + article = journicle*. Finally, the third group DRUGS also has only one example: *toke* ‘to inhale marijuana smoke’ + *pokemon = tokemon* (1) ‘the act of smoking weed and playing the game Pokemon all in one’, (2) ‘the drug-smoking version of the popular kids’ program Pokemon’. This is again, that type of blend, where only one word is shortened while the other one is not.

To recapitulate, in this sample, slang makes use of the same patterns of blending as Standard English. The more frequent pattern was exemplified by the words *bizza*, *brenner*, *brinner*, *brunch* and *journicle*. But also, it enriches its vocabulary by less recurrent patterns of blending, exemplified by *corkage* and *tokemon*. Moreover, sometimes it may also use slang bases, such as *toke* in *tokemon*.

Conversion

Converted words represent the smallest group from the overall sample. Conversion was used to coin only 6 words, representing 9% of the 78 slang formations. The converted words are exemplified in Table 6.

Table 6: Conversion

Drugs	<i>chief, peezo, piff, primo, smoke, toke</i>
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The first word *chief* occurs in UD either as a verb or as a noun. As for the verb it has either the general meaning (1) ‘to smoke marijuana’ (UD) or the more specified meaning (2) ‘to take an additional hit of marijuana, against the rules of the group, if smoked in a circle’. In this case of the verb, it can be considered as a conversion from the Standard English noun *chief* ‘a leader or ruler of a people or clan’ (OED). Additionally, as mentioned above, the word *chief* also appears in UD as a noun with the meaning ‘someone who hogs the marijuana when passing a bowl, joint, or bong’. However, since there is no change in the word class of the base, it is an example of semantic change from the Standard English noun *chief* rather than an example of conversion. Within the numerous definitions of this word in UD there are some explanations of its possible origin. It is explained that if there was a group of Indians smoking a peace pipe, it was always their chief who got the first drag (UD). What is interesting is the word’s semantic derogation which occurs in the second meaning of the verb mentioned above. The positive implications of respect linked with an Indian chief are completely changed in the second meaning of the verb *chief*, which denotes an act evaluated rather negatively.

The next word is *peezo* ‘glass pipe used to smoke crystal meth’. It has the same meaning as the word *piezo* ‘a pipe used for smoking freebase crystal methamphetamine’ also occurring in UD. In Standard English, *piezo* represents a combining form with the meaning ‘pressure’ from Greek *piezein* ‘to press tight, squeeze’ (OETD). It usually occurs in words such as *piezoelectric*, *piezoceramic* or *piezomagnetic*. One possible interpretation of the slang word *piezo/peezo* is that it represents a conversion from the Standard English combining form *piezo*, which is usually attached to bases and cannot stand on its own, to a free nominal lexeme denoting a special type of pipe.

Another converted word is the noun *piff* ‘high quality marijuana’. This is an example of onomatopoeic word serving as basis for further derivation. It is necessary to note that derivations from onomatopoeia cannot be treated as onomatopoeic words anymore (Körtvélyessy, 2020: 11). Therefore, in this case, we are dealing with a conversion from the Standard English onomatopoeic *piff* ‘representing the sound of a short, abrupt displacement or passage of air as caused by the flight of a bullet, a small explosion, an expression of contempt’ (OED) to the slang noun *piff* denoting marijuana.

The next example is *primo*, which appears in UD either as an adjective (1) ‘of the best quality’ or as a noun (2) ‘a joint or blunt containing both marijuana and cocaine’. In the case of the adjective, it probably exemplifies suffixation by – *o* from the base *prime* ‘first, original, first in order of time’ (OETD). However, the majority of definitions in UD explain *primo* as a noun and, therefore, it can be considered as a conversion from the already-exemplified adjective *primo*.

The following word *smoke* appears in UD either as a verb or as a noun. In the case of the verb, it has the following definition: ‘to light up a rolled up cigarette or similar instrument, usually packed with drugs, then stick it in your mouth and inhale’. In this situation, the verb is not an example of conversion, because the word class of the slang word remains the same, as in Standard English word; it only represents a mere extension of the meaning. However, in the case of the noun, it occurs with the following definition: ‘drugs that are smoked, or something to smoke, generally weed’. In such a situation, it may be considered as a conversion from the verb *to smoke* to the noun *a smoke*.

The last example *toke* occurs in UD either as a noun or as a verb. In the case of the noun, its meaning is ‘an inhalation or draw of marijuana smoke’, and it represents a conversion from the earlier verb *toke* ‘to inhale marijuana smoke’. In the case of the verb, it can be considered as a borrowed moneme because the origin of the verb is probably from the Spanish word *tocar* (1) ‘touch, tap, hit’ or (2) ‘get a share or part’ (OETD). This analysis was already mentioned above, in the discussion about *toked*.

To summarize, the types of conversion exhibited by the above-mentioned words from the sample are various. First of all, there are some traditional patterns, which also recur in Standard English, exemplified by $N \rightarrow V$, $V \rightarrow N$, $A \rightarrow N$ conversion. But on the other hand, there are also less typical patterns, mentioned also in Mattiello (2008) such as onomatopoeia $\rightarrow N$ exemplified by *piff* and combining form $\rightarrow N$ exemplified by *piezo/peezo*. Additionally, even in this group of words occurs one example of an irregular base of slang origin, exemplified by *toke*.

Conclusions

This paper aimed at finding out which word-formation processes were used in coining of the 78 selected words. The following word-formation processes were found to be used within the sample: compounding, shortening, suffixation, blending and conversion.

Throughout the examination of complex slang words belonging to particular word-formation processes, it was found out that the majority of them represented rather typical examples of the individual word-formative processes which were used in the same way as they are used in Standard English. However, as a rule, within each word-formation process there appeared also some slang peculiarities mostly in the form of bases of slang origin.

As far as the individual semantic groups examined are concerned, the most fruitful was the semantic group DRUGS, which provided the largest number of slang formations for the word-formation analysis. The reason why this group included such a high number of slang formations may be interconnected with the sociological properties of slang, such as restriction to social sub-groups (Coleman,

2009: 2). It is presumable that the social sub-groups using slang terminology for drugs care about the secrecy and restrictiveness of their conversations much more than the users of slang terminology dedicated to food or college. This implies that it is important for these drug communities to show, as Partridge (1933: 7) notes, that they are “in the swim” while others are not.

In the case of the respective word-formation processes, compounding, derivation and conversion were the most highly represented in the semantic group DRUGS. The highest number of shortenings appeared in the semantic group COLLEGE, probably because young people tend to avoid long constructions and prefer economy of expression in their conversations. Finally, the largest proportion of blends occurred in the semantic group FOOD. This is presumably because blends are usually iconic in a way that they represent the “concept of [their] two base words, and [their] meaning is thus contingent on the semantic relation between the two base words” (Bat-El, 2006: 66). In the context of food, this is crucial since food ingredients are often combined together to create the contingent of taste.

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