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Host Andy Davis: Today our topic is communication and in particular slang. An underperforming school in Chicago recently announced plans to ban slang in school. This, in an effort to improve students' chances of getting jobs and gaining admission to university. And it's provoked a strong reaction, with many people saying the plan is unreasonable and unenforceable. On the line, in our Chicago studio, is Dr. Anna Teesdale, an expert on language change and slang in particular. Dr. Teesdale, it is unreasonable and unenforceable, isn't it?

Guest Dr. Anna Teesdale: I think it is, yes. Both unreasonable and unenforceable. While I can understand why a school might want to increase student opportunity—that's good, of course—but to do it by banning slang seems to me misguided. Language changes—fact! And slang is a part of language and always will be, particularly among young people. So to try and restrict its natural evolution is, frankly, ridiculous.

Host: So, why, in your opinion, has this school targeted slang?

Guest: The fact is, Andy, it's not just a target in this school; slang generally gets pretty bad press.

Host: Bad press?

Guest: Yes, use of slang is seen by many people as being decadent, as signaling a poor education, bad behavior. Basically, it's regarded as inappropriate especially in educational and professional environments. But, as I say, that's nonsense; we all use it regularly. It's a wonderful, creative, and expressive part of language, so why stifle it?

Host: But isn't the school correct in saying that slang can undermine students' educational and work opportunities?

Guest: I'm glad you've raised that point. Research suggests that, actually, young people—and especially students—don't use slang as indiscriminately as we might think; they're very good at knowing when and when not to use slang, when it is and isn't appropriate. So this school's actually worrying about a problem research indicates doesn't really exist.

Host: Dr. Teesdale, thank you for your time today ...

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Speaker: So, we know that people adjust the way they speak for a number of different reasons. First, they simply want to say something about themselves. They want to create a certain impression on whomever it is they're talking to, or perhaps influence them.

Then, there's the context. We all change our language according to the situation we're in—where we are and who our audience is. For instance, if we're in an interview, we're going to sound different than if we're chatting with a friend, say. Next, people change their language in order to fit in. When we want to feel accepted by a certain group, we try to speak like the members of that group. And last, there's the entertainment factor: We sometimes adjust the way we speak simply because we can. We are free to play with language and be creative with it—and we enjoy that!

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Professor Robert Myers: E1 The first thing to say about language change is it's inevitable. Language is a living thing, constantly expanding, evolving, and adapting to the humans who use it. We see language change in all areas of language—syntax, phonology, orthography, and semantics. For now, let's just focus on semantics, and on one particular area of semantic change which always grabs people's attention: slang. **(COACHING TIP 1)** We all recognize slang, we all use slang. And we use it for a reason. It gives our language a special feel and says something about us. So I'm going to talk a bit about what slang is, who uses it and why, where it comes from, and how it is received. **E2** So what is slang? Here's a definition you might want to jot down: Slang is informal language which tends to be associated with particular groups of people and therefore helps define their identity. Slang often breeds among deprived groups or groups we think of as secretive or underground or nonconforming. Today, though, these associations are becoming much weaker and now everyone uses slang. **E3** So let me home in on this idea of identity as it leads us into the question of why people use slang. A lot of slang comes from people not wanting to be understood by those outside their group. We typically think of using language in order to be understood, but another use of language is to prevent understanding. People use exclusive or private language to give their group a distinct identity. With slang, people can tease one another, enjoy shared experiences—and keep everyone else at a distance. All cultures have groups or “subcultures” who want to be separate. And yet they want people to know who they are, and what they stand for—and slang helps to construct that identity. **E4** We can say, then, that slang reflects the experiences, beliefs, and values of its speakers. By using the slang associated with a particular social group, you're staking a claim to membership of that group. Being in-group denotes inclusion or acceptance because you play by the

group's "rules." Being out-group is the opposite. It's being excluded. Ever notice how non-native speakers are so eager to learn slang even before they have a basic grasp of the language? Well, that's because it's a signal of integration—of membership. "I speak this language, I belong." In a word, slang is cohesive.

E5 Now let's look at the personal benefits of using slang. First, when you use slang well, you show that you're in tune with the times—that you know what is culturally in fashion and you're part of it. Using slang makes you desirable. The second benefit of using slang is that you demonstrate your mastery of the situation—you become an expert. This is because slang is only used in certain settings. And knowing how and when to use it—or when not to use it—gives you a kind of status. **(COACHING TIP 2)**

E6 A third benefit of using slang is that it allows you to share social and emotional experiences. So it reinforces your relationships. For example, if you say to your friend, "My new sound system is really safe," you're saying more than just "It's very good." Your use of slang equates sharing an emotional experience. And a fourth benefit of using slang is, it's fun. It's often humorous and very creative, like poetry. The semanticist S.I. Hayakawa actually described slang as the "poetry of everyday life." In other words, slang is also a form of play, or entertainment.

E7 So, what are the major inspirations for slang? Well, there are a few that never seem to go out of fashion—I'm talking about love and romance. It's also used for emotional expressions of like and dislike—and you can probably think of dozens of them. **(COACHING TIP 3)** These particular slang terms seem to have a pretty short life. They're being replaced by newer words and phrases all the time. And, like I said, if you want to stay cool, you've got to keep up with the changes.

E8 But there's another category of slang term that's really taken off recently, and that's the slang of new technology. Things like personal computers, the Internet, email, and mobile technology. These things have become one of the richest sources of slang, and there are tons of websites designed to celebrate or decode that slang. Here we see certain, often youthful communities, using this to distance themselves from the technologically challenged older generations.

E9 So, we've seen what slang is, who uses it and why, and what inspires it. **(COACHING TIP 4)** But what about the present-day attitudes towards it? Well, slang may be widespread and no longer taboo in the way it once was. But that doesn't mean everybody likes it. Some see it as decadent and insist on associating it with groups they see as undesirable or uneducated. They see themselves as guardians of the language and view any kind of change as change for the worse. In my opinion this is absurd. I personally think slang is a sign of life, vibrancy, and beauty in language. As I said at the outset, language is a living thing and will always change. Yet, it seems like people are programmed to view any language change negatively.

E10 OK,

so I'd like to summarize now today's main points with a quotation from linguist Tony Thorne, who says: "Slang ... often performs an important social function which is to include into or exclude from the intimate circle." So, yes, it may still have negative connotations, but slang is here to stay. It even has taken on an aura of respectability by becoming the subject of serious academic study. And why not? As I've tried to show, it's a fascinating social and linguistic phenomenon.

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Hannah: It was an interesting lecture, but I have to say, I found a couple of parts confusing.

Manny: Really? Like what?

Hannah: Well, he said that language change is inevitable, right?

River: Yeah, it's like "a living thing." I guess that means all living things develop, change, you know.

Hannah: OK. And that we can't stop change from happening. Is that how everyone took it?

Mia: So far, we're with you.

Hannah: But later he seemed to say that groups choose to change language—that is, they use slang—because they want to make a statement or create their own identities.

Mia: Yeah, OK. So what's the confusion?

Hannah: Well, presumably, if they can choose to change language by using slang, that means they can also choose not to use it, right? And if they can choose not to use it ...

Manny: Ah. Then they're not changing. They're choosing not to change the language. It's a choice, you're saying. I see your point.

Hannah: Thank you. So, isn't that a contradiction?

River: No, I don't think so. What he meant was that language change will happen generally. That there'll always be events, groups, or someone out there playing with the language, creating "slang."

Mia: Right. Maybe it's because communication requires us to adapt to new conditions, so we change the language to adapt. That's the inevitable part. It's going to happen. History shows us that.

Hannah: Oh, OK.

Manny: But it isn't inevitable in any particular group, or in any particular case. You're right about that. Individuals have a choice about how they speak.

River: Make sense?

Hannah: Yeah, yeah. I think I get it now. Hey, thanks guys—that was a "sweet" explanation!