



The Distinction between slang and formal English: defining the boundaries

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ABSTRACT

The linguistic system is dynamic, ever-changing, and responsive to the demands of its users. Slang and formal English are the two dialects of the English language. Formal English adheres to set conventions and is frequently used in official, professional, and academic contexts, whereas slang is casual, inventive, and frequently reserved for specific social groups. Understanding the differences between these two forms of English is crucial for effective communication because it allows speakers and writers to choose the most appropriate language style for different contexts. This article explores the differences between slang and formal English by looking at their traits, usage, and communication-related impacts.

Keywords: Slang, Formal English, Informal English, Contextual English

The language style known as slang, which is more common in conversation than in writing, is composed of idioms and terms that are regarded as extremely casual and non-standard. It is described as “an ever-changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large” (Eble, 1996, p. 11). Slang is more common among teenagers and college students in general, according to Finegan (2008). It frequently changes and is typically restricted to a particular group or environment. In casual encounters, social media, and pop culture, slang is often utilized to express uniqueness, individuality, and a sense of community. Being neither “normal” speech nor an indication of high rank, it is therefore something that everyone can recognize but no one can define.



Slang can have both positive and negative connotations. While the colloquial language that a speaker uses to indicate that they identify with the listener is known as positive slang, informal language that could be seen as offensive by the listener is known as negative slang. For instance, when it comes to using slang in the classroom, positive slang is a way for students to feel validated. When a student correctly answers a class question, the teacher may remark something like "sweet" or "awesome" instead of the usual "correct." Words like "jerk," "waste," or "shit" are examples of negative slang (Mazer & Hunt, 2008).

Some slang words with their meanings:

Slang words	Meaning
GOAT	Greatest of all time
Cap	A lie or exaggeration
No cap	Honestly, seriously
Broke	Having no money
Geek	Someone who is generally not athletic and enjoys video games and comic books; being on the internet, etc.

Slang is an essential and unavoidable cultural outcome of today's complex, diversified, and globally interconnected society. Slang developed at the old market city's cultural crossroads, when many peoples came together, and it thrived in the more diversified and occupationally interdependent medieval metropolis. Slang is used in modern cities, or more accurately, in modern civilization (Irving, 1995: 19), for the same, but now vastly more complicated, reasons. Social media is the source of most of today's slang. Certain expressions have a rapid emergence, dissemination, and eventual extinction. Within months of its initial popularity, the overuse of the phrase "You only live once" (YOLO) led to widespread ignorance. As the historical pattern continues, other idioms change to include broader or distinct meanings. Previously referring to an automobile, the term "ride" today encompasses anything that transports a person from one place to another, such as a bike,



motorcycle, or even a high-end pair of shoes. Other terms might endure for a very long time. (Pilipei Yu., Pylypenko I. Slang versus “Proper English” in the modern world).

In contrast, according to Muslimawati (2022), formal language is constructed consisting of a combination of symbols that are grouped based on construction rules. The rules were created to provide formal language structure by organizing grammatical language. Formal language is employed in circumstances where clarity, precision, and professionalism are necessary. It makes sure that everyone involved can understand and understand the communication. The characteristics of formal language, according to Nasucha et al. (2009) in Rabiah (2016), are as follows: (1) using grammatical elements explicitly and consistently; (2) using affixes completely; (3) using official pronouns; (4) using standard words; (5) using refined spelling; and (6) avoiding regional elements. These qualities serve as the foundation of formal language, setting it as opposed to informal language, which sometimes lacks accuracy and rigor. Using formal language guarantees that communications are professional, respectful, and clear. For instance, instead of saying, “That idea is ridiculous,” a formal alternative would be, “That idea lacks feasibility.”

When writing essays, research papers, and presentations, formal language is crucial. Scholars are supposed to make professional and logical arguments. An academic paper might say, for example, “This paper explores the impact of climate change on global agriculture, analyzing statistical data from various international studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue,” rather than, “This paper looks at how climate change is messing with farming worldwide, using different studies to explain what’s going on.”

Moreover, using formal language is essential for preserving efficiency and respect in professional contexts. Employees must use language that communicates professionalism while composing emails, reports, or negotiating commercial deals. A business email might say, for instance:

“Dear Mr. Johnson, I hope this email finds you well. I am reaching out to follow up on our previous discussion regarding the quarterly report. Please let me know if you require any further information.” A less formal or inappropriate version might read: “Hey Mr. Johnson,



hope you're doing well! Just checking in about the report—let me know if you need anything else."

Even though the distinction is obvious, formal English is sometimes influenced by slang. Some slang terms gain widespread acceptance and are incorporated into everyday speech over time. Words that were once casual but are now often used in professional contexts, such as "cool" (meaning impressive or fashionable) and "networking" (originally a technical term), have evolved from informal to formal usage. This occurrence demonstrates how flexible language is and how it may change in response to social changes.

Aspect	Slang	Formal English
Definition	Informal, non-standard words and phrases used within social groups	Standardized language used in academic, professional, and official contexts
Tone	Casual, playful, and sometimes exaggerated	Respectful, serious, and professional
Grammar&Structure	Often disregards grammatical rules; uses contractions and abbreviations	Follows strict grammatical rules with complete, well-structured sentences
Vocabulary	Uses trendy or culturally specific words (e.g., "lit", "GOAT", "vibe").	Uses precise, universally understood vocabulary (e.g., "excellent", "outstanding", "atmosphere").
Context of Use	Everyday conversations, social media, music, and informal chats	Academic writing, business communication, legal documents, and formal speeches
Longevity	Changes frequently; words may become outdated quickly	More stable and consistent over time



Audience	Understood mainly by certain age groups or social circles	Understood by a broad audience, including professionals and scholars
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It's not always clear where slang and formal English diverge. One difficulty is that slang might become commonplace in the future. Additionally, linguistic change has been expedited by globalization and digital communication, increasing the overlap between formal and informal terms. Therefore, rather than depending just on strict definitions, English language learners need to be conscious of contextual appropriateness.

Being able to communicate effectively in a variety of situations involves comprehending both formal and colloquial English. Effective language use requires speakers and writers to think about their audience, context, and purpose before determining their words. Slang allows individuals to connect and express their personalities in informal conversations, while formal English guarantees credibility and clarity in academic and professional settings.

Maintaining stability can be achieved by being situationally aware, or identifying when and when each language style is appropriate. Slang in a job interview, for instance, can come across as unprofessional, whereas being too formal in a personal conversation can cause social distance. By practicing code-switching, or the capacity to transition between informal and formal language when necessary, people can more easily adjust to various communication contexts.

By interacting with a variety of media, including professional documents, social media, and academic writings, language users can become fluent in both types. Ultimately, finding a balance between formal and informal English not only strengthens communication abilities but also increases social and professional flexibility in a changing linguistic landscape.



After examining the differences between slang and formal English, I suggest a new way of looking at language—Contextual English. This concept modifies the focus from strict categories to a more flexible approach, where language use depends on the situation rather than rigid distinctions between formal and informal speech. We frequently modify our language in daily life according to the context and the person we are speaking to; for example, we may use formal English in business contexts, a semi-formal tone in academic conversations, and informal language in informal interactions. However, rather than acknowledging how people naturally blend formal and informal English depending on the situation, traditional linguistic studies generally regard them as distinct categories. Contextual English's concept is straightforward:

1. We should concentrate on how people combine various styles in order to suit their audience and purpose rather than categorizing words or phrases as simply "formal" or "slang."
2. The distinction between formal and informal language has become less clear in modern communication, particularly in the digital age. Future studies should examine how individuals manage this mobility in social relationships.
3. Instead of applying strict formal writing standards, education should teach pupils how to effectively alter their words. This strategy would promote communication that is authentic and professional.

Since language is always changing, adaptability is equally as crucial as grammatical correctness. We might acquire a more precise and practical recognition of how language functions in the modern world by adopting Contextual English.

The distinction between slang and formal English is not just about vocabulary or grammar but about context, audience, and purpose. While formal English ensures clarity and professionalism in academic and professional settings, slang fosters social bonds and self-expression in informal interactions. Globalization and digital communication have diminished the distinctions between these two types of language, making flexibility an essential communication skill. By being proficient in both forms and engaging in code-switching, language users can effortlessly navigate a variety of social and professional



contexts. Ultimately, social flexibility and competence in languages enhance by understanding when and how to use each language style.

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