

Episode 152: Slangology: how slang words are formed

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With insights from linguistics experts and examples ranging from French borrowings in English to modern-day Gen Alpha and Gen Z slang innovations, Alex Lassiter traces slang terms back to their origins and dissects how they change over time.

ALEX LASSITER: Hello, lovely people! It's Alex Lassiter with The Minnesota Daily, and you're listening to In The Know, a podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota.

I'll keep it a hunnit, I think it's lowkey so rad how slang words can change up over time, that's so totally my bag. You can drop some heat in the middle of a sentence and depending on the crowd you're rockin' with, folks can dig it. It's pretty nifty. But it's got me thinking, yo, where did some of these words come from? How did they change up over time?

So I did some digging on old words; way older than the 60's, 70's and 80's terms I just used, and I learned a heap about words that are used semi-regularly in American culture, and where they came from way back when.

Amanda Dalola, a professor of linguistics at the University of Minnesota, is here to help me break it down. Dalola specializes in sociophonetics, i.e. how languages are used in communities, applied linguistics, which studies how people learn languages, and phonetics, the pronunciation of different words.

This episode will focus a lot on phonetics and phonology of slang, so I'll leave it up to Dalola to give us a brief rundown on the difference between the two.

AMANDA DALOLA: Can you do phonetics without doing phonology? Can you do phonology without doing phonetics? So phonology has to do with sounds that are meaningful in language. And so what that means is when you swap one sound for another it will change the meaning.

So it's something like pat. And then when you swap the P for another sound, like a B, when you say bat, you actually have a different meaning attached to it. So phonology is really focused on the segments that are different, but that also bring with them changes in meaning.

It also looks at how sounds pattern across families of language. Like how sounds change over time. Different sounds will evolve into other sounds, things like vowel shifts and consonant hierarchies, but it has to do with like how sounds are organized in the brain.

LASSITER: Phonetics, on the other hand, focuses on how sounds are made, and how they are perceived by others.

DALOLA: Phonetics is really a detail game. There's basically two main branches: there's acoustics and articulatory phonetics.

Articulatory is the production of sound and acoustic is the perception and that has to do with how people hear it and how people mishear sounds and how a lot of those misperceptions can then lead to sound change in the long term.

Phonetics is really focused on the teeny tiny changes in sound as it has to do with production and perception. And there's absolutely no attention paid to meaning, in the sense that phonology is only focused on segments that are different. When meaning is attached, phonetics pays attention to all of it.

LASSITER: As you may have recognized from the start of the episode, tons of American slang comes from within American culture. Drip, bussin', fly, clutch, chill, groovy, hip, and outta sight. But some words we often use didn't even originate in English. Stemming from 17th century France, the term bourgeois refers to a member of the French middle class, between peasantry and aristocracy. Nowadays, however, the term "boujee" just refers to someone who puts on a show of material wealth. But how did we bridge the gap between these two very different-looking words?

DALOLA: The word starts off being a French word made of French parts, and so in a lot of ways, you have first a case of borrowing. You've got this French word, regardless of what it means or how it's said, you've got a French word made of French parts that then gets borrowed into English, another language. And so what usually happens in that context is, regardless of what the languages are, you get this kind of phonological adaptation that happens.

This isn't like an individual goes to a French speaking place and then adopts it back for the whole community of Anglophones, but it's more of a situation of when Anglophone society is collectively having a lot of contact with Francophone society and we start borrowing.

LASSITER: After borrowing parts from the French sounding of the word, the next step would be to change them to the language the word is being adapted to; in this case, English. This step of the process sees the parts of the word that don't have similar sounds in English start to fall away, while the sounds that are shared become more emphasized.

DALOLA: So like bourgeois is probably one of the most French sounding words you could borrow because you've got the "ooh", you've got the "r", you've got the "je", and you've got the "wah".

There are a lot of sounds in bourgeoisie that we just don't have in English identically to French. So like we do have an "ooh" sound, but it's a much frontier "ooh" sound than you have in, like, French bourg. The French R is back in the throat. It makes a scratchy sound, almost like a cat hissing.

We don't have that sound in English, so there's no world in which we would adapt that R; so we're just going to give it like a, either a "ruh" sound like we have in English, or we're going to ignore it altogether, which it looks like we did in the case of boujee.

LASSITER: And, as a finishing touch in the English language especially, the word would be adding in English sounds to round it out and make it more pleasing to the English tongue to speak, so it feels more natural.

DALOLA: I think one of the things that marks it as English is the fact that we put "-ee" on the end of it. I'm sure you've noticed that adjectives in English often end in "-ee". Happy, silly, and it's not exceptionalist, there are tons of words that are adjectives that don't follow that model, but that's a really common pattern in English words.

And so the idea that we would take this hellla French word, we'd cut off part of the French morphology, we'd ignore the R altogether because we don't have it and we're not going to try to translate it, and then we would just smack on the equivalent of an American adjective ending is pretty hilarious.

LASSITER: Interestingly enough, this phenomenon of borrowing from other languages isn't just limited to English. Claire Halpert, the director of the Linguistics Department at the University, specializes in the Zulu language, spoken in South Africa.

CLAIRE HALPERT: The variety of Zulu that I have worked on the most is an urban variety. It's spoken in the city of Durban and around the city of Durban. So there are lots and lots of slang innovations and really interesting things happening with specific terms that come and go, but also with sort-of innovative ways that people are using the grammar. And so those kinds of things always catch my attention.

LASSITER: As we just discussed with Dalola, the anglicized version of bourgeois, which is boujee, had English speakers borrow a French word and add a very English-sounding "-ee" suffix to make it sound more natural within the language. In her research, Halpert said she noticed a similar trend of Zulu speakers adding suffixes to borrowed English words to make them fit the language.

HALPERT: One of the things that I'm working on right now with a student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa is this phenomenon where people—where speakers of Zulu will borrow words from English, and then they'll put a fake suffix on the end of it to make them sound more Zulu. But then it kind of sounds like a Zulu suffix, but it's not a suffix that exists in any other environment.

LASSITER: As fascinating as hearing about Zulu is, I unfortunately don't speak it, so we'll have to return to English as an example, which still proves to be very interesting in terms of the languages it borrows for slang. French isn't the only language that gave us English slang

words with heavily borrowed parts. During my research for this episode, I found out that booze came from the middle Dutch verb *būsen*, which means “to drink to excess”. *Būsen* turned into *bouse*, spelled B-O-U-S-E in middle English.

When looking at this word, it seemed really strange to me that it was pronounced like “booss” and not like house or mouse would be pronounced. So naturally, I went totally off-topic and looked up what house and mouse sounded like in middle English, and what I found confused me even more.

It turns out house and mouse came from the middle English *hous* and *mous*, but they’re written as H-O-U-S and M-O-U-S; the same as their modern spellings without the “E” at the end, but a totally different sound, much more similar to the modern day booze. As glad as I am that we don’t say, “you shouldn’t come over right now, I just found a moose in my hoose,” I wanted to know what caused this drastic difference in pronunciation between three very similar-looking words.

DALOLA: So if you speak any other Germanic languages, I’m thinking of like Swedish in particular, house, the cognate is *hous*. Mouse, you have *mous*. And so you have these forms still in their previous forms. The reason why *hous* and *mous* came to mouse and house is because we had this thing called the great vowel shift, which happened between like 1450 and like 1700-ish. It was a much earlier sound change that took place in pieces over like 300 years.

So these vowels, one moved out of space, well one moved out of place, and then the other one moved up in it. It’s the same reason why we now have spellings in English, like M-E-E-T is pronounced the same way as N-E-A-T. Those didn’t used to be homophonous. They used to be pronounced differently. But the great vowel shift caused them to sort of incur on each other’s spaces.

LASSITER: So if that’s the case, I still wondered why *bouse* and house-slash-mouse had different pronunciations. After all, if the great vowel shift changed the way certain words sounded, shouldn’t *bouse* have been included with that?

DALOLA: In terms of the *būsen* thing, this actually was a later borrowing. So it happened well after the great vowel shift. And so this is a really cool situation of this could, if this borrowing had happened earlier between Dutch and English, it would have then already been part of the English lexicon. And by the time we had the great vowel shift happening, it would have just been assimilated into the vocabulary, like all the other words that had come from English earlier. And we probably would say something like *bouse* (pronounced like house). But because this happened later, the change was already effectuated, and so then it just came in as it was.

LASSITER: So when it comes to booze not being pronounced like house, it was just in the right place at the right time, and its spelling was later updated to match modern English so it looks the way it sounds.

The phenomenon also saw booze change primarily from a verb to a noun. And though it's still sometimes used as a verb in English-speaking cultures, it's mostly used to refer to hard liquor. With the instance of booze turning from a verb to a noun, I was intrigued to hear Halpert's experience with learning about a noun turning into a verb, though not the noun she first thought.

HALPERT: People always come to me with their weird verb findings and often it's really innovative slang terms. I think maybe the last time I taught it, we went down a really deep rabbit hole with "sauce". The verb not to, like, sauce your food.

I wasn't familiar with it, but about half the class knew what it meant, and it means to toss something to somebody. So the people who knew the verb had very clear intuitions about how exactly one "sauces" something. It's not like an overhand throw, it's more either, it's like a gentle toss, I think.

So at first I think people thought it was, sauce the noun turning into a verb, and we were trying to figure out why that would be. But when we dug around and we looked for uses of it, and, you know, places where it could come from, we found that it's not just a noun use turning into a verb use, it's what they call a clipping. So there's a bigger phrase that gets clipped down and then it gets transformed, and it comes from saucer pass.

And so I think it was originally hockey slang, so it's a certain kind of pass that you do. So it's a noun, that whole thing has a verb-type use; "pass", the noun, "pass", the verb. But then it got clipped all the way down to that first syllable, and that first syllable is what sort-of lives on in the slang term.

LASSITER: We as college students are probably more likely to be using the words boujee or booze because we're grown, but what about the younger generation? As some of you with kids or young siblings are sure to know, they're already developing slang words of their own. Words like "sus" and "rizz" are just shortenings of existing words like "suspicious" and "charisma" that make them quicker and easier to say.

DALOLA: If you look at charisma, and then rizz, the reason why you take "ris" out of that instead of "cha", like why do we say rizz and not ma, or why do we say riz and not cha? It's because ris in charisma is the stress syllable, and so that's where all the emphasis is when we say the word.

It's the most salient, as we would say in linguistics, like noticeable. I think for the spelling for rizz, I think it's really just a question of the fact that when you, when you truncate the form, if you were to spell it like it's written, then rizz with an S would be "riss", and people probably

wouldn't know to make a "za" sound and it doesn't quite look the way it's spelled. So I think probably the fact that they put Z's on it was just to make it phonetic.

LASSITER: So that makes sense as an example from Gen Alpha, but that's a little out of my area of expertise, since I haven't used their slang unironically. What about Gen Z slang, something I'd be more familiar with?

I'm not sure how many people listening right now grew up playing in Call of Duty lobbies, but oftentimes if someone could tell it was your first time on the game, you'd be marked as a "noob" pretty quickly. Since noob is derived from newbie, I wondered if it shared any themes with rizz in how it was truncated.

DALOLA: The situation here is the same thing. So in newbie, "new" is the stress syllable, but the question is why is it "noob", and not "noo"? Well, new is already a word, so if we were going to truncate newbie to "noo", that would already overlap with the word new. English likes to have syllables that end in consonants, so "noob" on some level is more English like than "noo" would be, even though both words exist.

LASSITER: During my discussions with Dalola and Halpert, I noticed a lot of trends these words shared when being formed from a root to a slang word, like truncation and borrowing sounds. So I'd wondered if there was any way to actually predict through speech patterns a way to create a new slang word. While I was told there's not much linguists can do to predict what will become a slang term, they're actually quite reliably able to predict what might not.

HALPERT: So much about slang is, it's being rooted in particular cultural moments and particular social groups, right? And I think there's a huge amount of sort-of creativity and playfulness with language that yields these things. I think what linguists might be really good at is predicting what's not going to happen.

Plenty of linguists would be able to predict that if you're going to shorten charisma, you're going to get "rizz" and not "zmuh" or "ism" or, like, any of the other segments that you could potentially take out of that word. So linguists have lots of good models to sort of predict which parts of words you're going to take if you're going to take words and to sort-of predict what might turn into a productive process.

Another place where you see a lot of these shortenings is like "cas" from casual or "uge" from usual. There's certain sort-of phonological properties that make those words susceptible to those kinds of changes.

DALOLA: What's really exciting is the question mark phenomena, right? Like, we have no idea what language is going to look like in 200 years because, you know, tomorrow's influencer could have us all speaking in a completely different way.

So I like the idea that linguistics allows us to make these like very calculated, very precise predictions, but sociolinguistics makes it such that none of those ever have to be true. So in a lot of ways we're working, even though we're working sort-of bottom-up, we never really know what language change is going to look like. And I think that's really great.

LASSITER: I thought there was no slang word more fitting to close the episode with than "goodbye". Goodbye actually derives its origins as an abbreviation of "God be with ye", used to bid farewell to people in 15th century England. What most intrigued me about this bit of slang is that we can see similar shortenings in other languages, like "vaya con Dios" becoming "adiós" in Spanish, or "à Dieu" turning into "adieu" in French. Furthermore, goodbye in English is often shortened even further, to just "bye".

DALOLA: There was an expression that we learned once, which was that yesterday's syntax is today's morphology. And what that means is what yesterday was a bunch of words in sequence together, tomorrow will be a bunch of parts of words smashed together into a big word.

Over time, things kind of run together just because they become fixed phrases. So you can think about how we might previously have said like, "he is going to go to the store," and if you were talking casually be like, "he's gonna go to the store," and you get "gonna" out of "going to go", right? It's just a kind of like natural coarticulation that happens when you speed up the way you pronounce things because you don't necessarily need to clearly articulate each and every part given context and, you know, given we know the phrasing works.

You might think about how you might talk to your family, people really close to you versus how you might write something out for like a formal paper. That difference between how you would say things quickly and in a familiar way and then how you would pull all the things apart, that difference is also, is often this kind of change where you run things together and truncate things and swap familiar words out for less familiar ones.

LASSITER: Aside from just the words we talked about today, I'm sure many of us use slang on a daily, maybe even an hourly basis depending on the crowd we hang with. And that's not even getting into text slang like BRB, LOL, and TTYL. So the next time you tell your friends, "bet, it's finna be lit," hopefully you'll want to do hours of research on where these little words came from like me.

This episode was written by Alex Lassiter and produced by Kaylie Sirovy. As always, we appreciate you listening in and feel free to send a message to our email inbox at podcasting@mndaily.com with any questions, comments or concerns. I'm Alex, and this has been In The Know. God be with ye, adiós, adieu, goodbye and take care, y'all.