

THE ACQUISITION OF COLLOQUIAL SPEECH AND SLANG IN SECOND
LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN EL PASO, TEXAS

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by

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1: Introduction

Colloquial speech seems to be one of the more difficult areas for achieving native-like language competence in the acquisition of a second language (L2), though very few studies have been conducted on this topic. Acquiring the colloquial speech of a discourse community is crucial for second language learners who wish to achieve native-like proficiency in the target language of such community. However, research on L2 colloquial speech acquisition is extremely limited. The majority of materials available in this area are dictionaries or thesauruses that list colloquial speech and slang examples in a given language but often do not define the specific terms of *colloquial speech* and *slang*, much less comment on the acquisition of this type of speech. Other studies have focused on attitudes towards the teaching of colloquialisms in a language classroom setting, or the attitudes that native speakers have towards non-native speakers' use of colloquial speech and slang. Typically, L2 researchers' explain the lack of acquisition of L2 colloquial speech because of the difficulty that the learner faces as an outsider to achieve group membership. Fishman (1965) reported that physiological and sociological factors such as race, sex, age, and religion contribute to the type of language people use and with whom. According to this theory, typically a speaker who is not part of a particular group will not use language specifically associated with that group. Researchers have often theorized that L2 learners tend to stay away from colloquial speech and slang because they may not feel that they are authentically part of the language group or culture that uses a culturally specific vocabulary (McAlpine and Xu, 2008). Though group membership may be important for an L2 learner's production of colloquial speech and slang, this study aims to examine to what degree L2 learners comprehend and acquire this type of speech. I want to explore if there are linguistic

aspects that could also be responsible for hindering or helping the acquisition of English L2 slang.

The study focuses on second language acquisition in the city of El Paso, Texas. This is a particularly interesting area to study because El Paso is a city where two cultures are merged. The downtown of El Paso and the downtown of its sister city Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico are separated by a short bridge that allows thousands of residents of both cities to travel back and forth. Before the drug war in Mexico began in 2008, students from both U.S. and Mexican universities would often participate in exchange programs at local universities such as the University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso Community College, Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, and Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua. This was a great environment for linguists to study second language acquisition amongst teenagers and young adults studying either English or Spanish. Sadly, as the drug war has worsened, we see less and less U.S. students going to study in Ciudad Juárez, but many more young students from Ciudad Juárez are coming to study in El Paso. Thus, the integration of the two languages and cultures amongst language learners of this age in El Paso provides a great resource for linguists to examine the scarcely studied subject of colloquial speech and slang acquisition in Second Language Learners. This study originally hoped to note and compare the acquisition of Spanish colloquial speech and slang by L2 learners as well as the acquisition of English colloquial speech and slang by L2 learners, based on the linguistic differences between the colloquial speech of both English and Spanish. However, a lack of previous research and resources on these issues has forced the study to become more limited¹. The current study will only focus on colloquial speech and slang of the English

¹ The research presented in this study depended partly on the availability of a spoken language corpus to check the frequencies of the test items. Though I initially hoped to test colloquial speech and slang in Spanish as well as English, there was no spoken Spanish language corpus available for the dialect of Spanish I was interested in, i.e., Border area Mexican Spanish. Our research in Spanish colloquialisms and slang was also further hindered by a university order that prohibited all university-related research in Ciudad Juárez due to the violence of the drug war.

language spoken in El Paso. Even though the frequency of the terms that I selected were checked against a corpus that included several dialects, the selection of the terms was based on my experience with the dialect of this area and a test with monolingual speakers in this area confirmed that these monolingual speakers knew the selected terms.

Colloquial speech and slang are a rich part of every languages vocabulary. Though it is often not studied in a language classroom setting, its acquisition could be useful to second languages learners for social integration into a community and comprehension of organic media.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the acquisition of colloquial terms by Spanish-speakers learning English as a second language at the University of Texas at El Paso. As stated above, the acquisition of colloquial terms is important if the goal of the second language learner is native like fluency and competence. Colloquial speech is a very important aspect of a language. Even though this type of speech may not be taught in a classroom setting, its acquisition is important, especially for social interactions. . Even if the L2 learner does not produce some of the colloquial or slang language himself, the knowledge of these linguistic items is still valuable for comprehension in media where this type of language is often used, such as in movies, television, other forms of media, and basic conversation with peers. In order to understand how this type of language is acquired, we must first define it and understand it linguistically before we can go about implementing ways of teaching it. Research in the area of

second language acquisition of colloquial speech and slang is extremely limited, though its acquisition could be very beneficial to second language learners.

Colloquial speech in English consists of both lexical and phrasal items. Items are considered lexical if they have only one word, such as *cool*, and they are considered phrasal if they contain more than one word, such as *take it easy*. All phrasal items tested in this study consisted of either two or three words. It is hypothesized that phrasal colloquial speech will be harder for L2 learners to acquire than lexical colloquial speech. We expect that even low frequency lexical items will be more familiar to the L2 learners than high frequency phrasal colloquial speech and/or slang.

The study examines whether or not L2 learners of English are acquiring its colloquial speech. As mentioned above, and discussed further below, English colloquial speech is often phrasal in nature. The main claim of the study is that in the borderland of El Paso, Texas, speakers of Spanish attempting to acquire English will know more colloquial speech that is lexical as opposed to colloquial speech that is phrasal, when frequency is controlled. Frequency is also a proposed factor; students are expected to know more high frequency items than low frequency items. Also, two different levels of students are tested; intermediate and advanced. Thus, it is also expected that the advanced students will know more colloquial speech than the intermediate students. Four types of stimuli are tested: high-frequency lexical items, high-frequency phrasal expressions, low-frequency lexical items, and low-frequency phrasal expressions.

The hypothesized pattern of colloquial speech acquisition is: high-frequency lexical items, followed by low-frequency lexical items, then high-frequency phrasal expressions, and

finally low-frequency phrasal expressions, which the students are predicted to know the least. This pattern will be limiting for the L2 learners since English colloquial speech is often phrasal, varied, and low in frequency, as was shown by natural speech observations and surveys that lead me to believe that colloquial English contains a large number of phrasal expressions, as compared with colloquial Spanish for example, and often these phrasal expressions are neither fixed nor high in frequency

1.2 Organization of this thesis.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on colloquial speech and slang in second language acquisition. This section begins by discussing the terms *colloquial speech* and *slang* and the problems found in their definitions. Next an overview of the few studies on the topic of colloquial speech and slang is presented, in Second Language Acquisition; including some background data collected by the author to confirm her intuitions about the differences between English and Spanish colloquial speech. Finally, this ends with a brief discussion on the significance of the current study in view of the available research.

Chapter 3 continues by explaining the research questions and hypothesis of this study, as well as a detailed description of the data collection, methods, and procedures. The original observations that lead to study are also described. Information about the subjects such as age, gender, and English proficiency level are documented. Finally, the tests given and procedures followed are discussed.

Chapter 4 is the final chapter and it discusses the results of the study. This section the presents the results of the multilingualism questionnaire and the comprehension test. Finally, the conclusions of the study are explained, followed by some discussion.

PREVIEW

Chapter 2: Colloquial Speech and Slang in Second Language Acquisition.

Colloquial speech and slang have not been widely researched and studied. Material on these topics does exist, but often in the form of dictionaries or thesauruses with the goal of teaching an outsider the colloquial speech of a culture. There have also been studies focusing on where slang and colloquial speech comes from, who uses it, and whether or not it is proper to use. However, in terms of second language acquisition and usage of colloquial speech and slang, there have been very few studies. Some of the questions about L2 colloquial speech acquisition that have yet to be explored are: How is L2 colloquial speech and/or slang acquired, and to what extent do L2 learners feel that this type of speech is important?

2.1 Defining colloquial speech and slang.

One thing that linguists who have written about *colloquial speech* and *slang* seem to agree on is that there is no easy way to define either term. Often researchers decide not to devote much time to the definitions. For example, Karl Sornig (1981) begins his book on slang, colloquialisms, and casual speech by stating that the aim of the paper “cannot be to give an ultimate and exhaustive definition of slang and similar phenomenon” (1). Sornig groups the terms *colloquialisms*, *slang*, and *casual speech* together and describes them only as terms that are used “indiscriminately to denote a type of language usage somewhere between individual speech and standard language norms” (2). Much in the same manner as Sornig, Steel (1985) begins his book *A Textbook of Colloquial Speech in Spanish* by claiming that the book “does not set out to find theoretical solutions to the vexing question of terminology” (13). However, Steel provides a bit more specificity. First he points out that the book will use the term *colloquial Spanish* as

opposed to *spoken Spanish*, maintaining that the latter is “too ambiguous for our present purposes” (13). He defines the term *colloquial* as “informal, often racy or popular” spoken language that “differs in some way from formal language” (14). Steel writes that the term *colloquial* is “intuitively understood by all of us”, and is classified as so if it falls under category ‘a’ and/or categories ‘b’ or ‘c’.:

- a) Speech that lies outside the areas (and often categories) described by standard syntax;
- b) Speech that displays peculiarities of meaning not amenable to literal interpretation;

or

- c) Speech that fulfils particular dialogue functions and needs (14).

Steel’s definition offers some useful insights, although the categories proposed are rather vague and these do not make any distinctions between *colloquial speech* in general and more specific speech that could be considered *colloquial*, such as *slang*, *euphemisms*, *taboo words*, etc.

McAlpine and Xu (2008) defined the type of speech they explored in their study only as “culturally specific vocabulary”. This way they were able to avoid the arduous task of definitions. In their study *slang* and *colloquialisms* were limited to items specifically used in Canada and that generally described Canadian past times, food, or culture (14). They labeled this “culturally specific vocabulary” “Canadianisms”.

Dumas and Lighter (1978) focus particularly on slang, and immediately begin by relaying the daunting task of defining the terms; “the term *slang* has rarely been defined in a way that is useful to linguists. Annoyance and frustration await anyone who searches the professional literature for a definition or even conception of slang that can stand up to scrutiny” (5).

However, they do attempt to give us a concrete definition of slang. According to their definition

an expression should be considered "true slang" if it meets at least two of the following four criteria:

- 1) Its presence will markedly lower, at least for the moment, the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing. This does not mean that the term has actually been discovered in such contexts. It does mean, however, that an individual who has some familiarity with the expression will not expect to find it in the midst of a serious discourse in otherwise standard English except for one special rhetorical effect: to signal that the speaker or writer is deliberately being undignified or intimate with his audience. If there seems to be no reason to expect this effect, the expression will appear to a sensitive audience as a glaring misuse of register (or, as we prefer to call it, situational dialect).
- 2) Its use implies the user's special familiarity either with the referent or with that less statusful or less responsible class of people who have such special familiarity and use the term. This "special familiarity" usually implies disdain for what is conventionally accepted or esteemed, or an overfamiliarity with what the dominant society finds unseemly or unacceptable. We generally learn neutral terms first, disdainful or "in" terms later. Even if by chance we learn one of the latter sort first, we soon discover that the referent has another name that is more appropriate for formal use.
- 3) It is a tabooed term in ordinary discourse with persons of higher social status or greater responsibility. On occasion, of course, normal taboos do not apply, but once again we are speaking of the norm of verbal behavior. At the present time this category includes all of our nonliterate sexual and scatological terms with the exception of nursery euphemisms. In other