

Ask about English

Jargon / Slang



BBC WORLD SERVICE LEARNING ENGLISH



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BBC Learning English – Ask about English

A question from Irina in Latvia :

Could you tell me, what is the main difference between "slang" and "jargon" and could you point out some examples that are used in BBC news? Thank you very much!

Amos Paran answers:

This is an interesting question because it's not really about English, is it – it's about language in general. I'll take as my starting point the observation that we don't speak the same all the time; we all have at our command different verbal repertoires. I don't speak to my partner at home in the same way in which I speak to head of department at work; and when I go into the classroom and teach, I speak in yet a different way. We change our speech according to who we are speaking to, where, under what circumstances, and so on.

Slang is actually quite difficult to define. It's a very colloquial variety of language; we use it in highly informal situations, in speech, and with people very much from a similar social background to us. Some experts describe it as 'below the level of neutral style'. Some slang words stay in the language for a long time – for example, the word 'chap' or 'chum', but many slang words disappear and new ones come into the language, either new words being invented, or old words taking on a totally new meaning – for example, on the way to the studio I saw the words 'wicked meal' in an advertisement – where the word 'wicked' means very good, excellent. It is important also to know that slang is very often characteristic of specific social groups – if I used the word 'wicked' in the sense of 'really good' it would be ridiculous, because this is the slang of young people, much much younger than me. So you're not going to hear a lot of slang on the news – unless someone is being interviewed and they use it in their speech.

Jargon, on the other hand, is the variety of language that belongs to a specific profession or activity. For example, linguists use special language to describe the way language works – words such as prefix, suffix, tense, - or the words I used just now - verbal repertoires, a language variety. Now to me, all this may seem normal technical language, but to an outsider this may seem jargon. So jargon is the word we use that refers to the language of a specific group as seen by an outsider.

One really important aspect of both slang and jargon is that they identify you as a member of a group. This is, indeed, one of the most important functions of slang – so I would advise against using slang unless you are absolutely sure that it's appropriate for you to use it. Jargon, too, identifies you - by using jargon I can identify myself as a linguist – but I do hope I haven't used too much jargon in this answer!

Amos Paran is the Course Leader of the MA in Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) by Distance Learning at the Institute of Education, University of London. His main teaching and research interests are reading in a foreign language and the use of literature in foreign language teaching and learning.

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