

Developing a Definition of Nonverbal Slang

Abstract

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Introduction

This paper explains an attempt to produce a definition of nonverbal slang which if established could clarify and provide additional understanding into interpersonal communication and nonverbal immediacy research within the classroom context. As the concept of immediacy has been further developed, literature has included nonverbal communication in a general sense. However, it would prove beneficial to further divide nonverbal communication into its separate categories to clarify what specific nonverbal displays may actually be contributing. When assessing nonverbal communicative displays it is important to recognize there are display types that lead to the development of immediacy and those that impede. Current literature does not provide us with terminology to use when describing these specific types of nonverbal displays. Therefore an accurate definition must be established. This paper develops the concept of nonverbal slang to assist in filling the current literature gap and provide terminology that will further promote research in this area.

Slang

There is research pertaining specifically to instructor perception within the classroom setting which identifies the impact of both positive and negative slang (Mazer & Hunt 2008). The concept of slang can be explained 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 research has not yet

included nonverbal communicative elements into its definition. The example of Eble's definition of slang specifically references verbal communication such as "words" and "phrases." The objective of this paper is to extend this definition into the study of nonverbal communication, and prove it applicable to nonverbal communicative displays so to produce a proper definition of nonverbal slang that can be applied to a better understanding nonverbal behavior's impact on interpersonal communication.

Nonverbal Communication

In order to effectively construct a definition of nonverbal slang there must be an understanding of what nonverbal communication consists of and what the separate categories are. For this reason it is useful to reference Ekman and Friesen's (1969) collection of terminology and categories that classifies different types of nonverbal behavior. They outline five broad categories of nonverbal behavior: emblems, illustrators, affect displays, regulators, and adaptors. In order to successfully extend the verbal slang definition to encompass nonverbal communication these categories outlined by Ekman and Friesen must be examined and researched further to discover what specific displays would classify as slang.

Criteria for Verbal Slang

In order to develop conditions from which we can accurately determine what classifies as slang it is helpful to reference Dumas and Lighter's (1978) criteria for verbal slang and adjust accordingly to account for nonverbal behavior. They recommend four criteria for establishing what true slang is.

1. Its presence will markedly lower, at least for the moment, the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing (p. 14).

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 (p. 14).
3. It is a tabooed term in ordinary discourse with persons of higher social status or greater responsibility (p. 15).
4. It is used in place of the well-known conventional synonym, especially in order (a) to protect the user from the discomfort caused by the conventional item or (b) to protect the user from the discomfort or annoyance of further elaboration (p. 15).

For slang to be identified as true slang it must meet at least two of the four criteria outlined by Dumas and Lighter. The one distinguishing aspect all four criteria have in common is "the consciousness of shared knowledge between the speaker and hearer" (Eble, 1996, p. 12). These criteria can be easily adapted in developing a definition of nonverbal slang that can be used in systematically identifying specific nonverbal displays that qualify as slang.

Criteria for Nonverbal Slang

By modelling Dumas and Lighter's criteria for verbal slang this paper formulates an attempt to provide four criteria relevant to clarifying what should be regarded as true nonverbal slang. First, the nonverbal display's presence will noticeably decrease the formality of the communicative interaction at least for the instant it is displayed. Second, the nonverbal display indicates the user has a certain acquaintance with the display or with an identifiable group who are familiar with the display. Third, the nonverbal display is a forbidden or offensive display in conventional communicative interaction with individuals who are considered to have greater responsibility or sophistication. Fourth, the nonverbal display is used in place of or in conjunction with a common word or phrase in an effort to shortcut conventional language use. As was illustrated in the verbal slang criteria, nonverbal behavior,

specifically communicative displays, would only need to fit two of the four criteria to be considered true nonverbal slang.

Working Definition of Nonverbal Slang

After examining relevant slang research and criteria for verbal slang, this paper has established similar criteria for determining what would classify as nonverbal slang. Now by taking that process a step further will establish a working definition for this new term. By referencing and adapting Eble's definition of verbal slang to acknowledge nonverbal communication this new definition can be created. Thus an appropriate definition would describe nonverbal slang as being a constantly changing informal nonverbal communicative display used to create or support social identity or cohesion within a group, with a trend, or custom within society. With a working definition of nonverbal slang established and by applying relevant research examining positive and negative verbal slang we can take the process further and clarify specifically what positive and negative nonverbal slang might look like.

Positive and Negative Nonverbal Slang Defined

According to Mazer and Hunt (2008) verbal slang may be either positive or negative, and they provide definitions of each. These definitions are also applicable to the concept of nonverbal communication with positive slang referring to "informal language that a speaker may utilize to signal identification with the listener" (p. 45). When applied to nonverbal behavior, positive nonverbal slang could be defined as any nonverbal display a sender uses to signal identification with a receiver. When examining negative slang, Mazer and Hunt (2008) describe it as "informal language—such as commonly used verbal obscenities—that listeners may perceive as offensive" (p. 45). Certainly there are nonverbal communicative displays

that are also perceived as offensive either culturally or universally. With these definitions as the foundation for understanding this new concept of “nonverbal slang” research can continue into how these types of nonverbal communicative displays influence interpersonal communication specifically the impact positive and negative nonverbal slang may have on developing immediacy within classroom contexts.

Conclusion

When examining interpersonal communication the degree to which nonverbal displays may influence or hinder the process needs to be further researched. This paper has established a definition of nonverbal slang as being a constantly changing informal nonverbal communicative display used to create or support social identity or cohesion within a group, with a trend, or custom within society. By first establishing a definition of nonverbal slang we are now able to then apply that definition as a lens through which to view nonverbal behavior and determine what displays might fit this definition.

References

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