

## *Is slang for males?*

*Dr Vivian de Klerk*

*Department of Linguistics and English Language  
Rhodes University*

It is with frustration and a nice sense of humour that William Labov advises that all articles on slang should be consigned to ‘an outer, extra-linguistic darkness’ (1972:97). Definitions of slang are frustratingly few and far between, because most are impressionistic or subjective: writers either wax lyrical about its wit, daring and creativity, or defensively criticise and condemn it as vulgar non-standard speech, which threatens to contaminate ‘pure’ or ‘good’ language. Examples of the positive approach are to be found in the writing of Walt Whitman, who said ‘slang is an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism and express itself illimitably’ (1885:573). Following suit, Hayakawa calls slang ‘the poetry of everyday life’ saying that it ‘vividly expresses people’s feelings about life and about the things they encounter in life’ (1941:195).

Genung’s opinions are a good example of the negative view: ‘slang is to a people’s language what an epidemic disease is to their bodily constitution: just as catching and inevitable in its run ... severest where sanitary conditions are most neglected’ (1893:32). His ‘shocking’ example might make one snigger: ‘He was badly cut up by the news.’ Fernald was equally unflattering: ‘slang ... saves the trouble - and the glory - of thinking. The same cheap word may be used for any one of a hundred ideas ... . Slang is the advertisement of mental poverty ... . The stir of the lower life is constantly bringing to the surface mud [and] slime’ (1918:253).

Many see slang as a sign and a cause of mental atrophy: Foerster and Steadman (1941:290) call slang a 'cheap substitute for good diction', indicative of laziness, limited vocabulary, and lack of critical ability, and Millhauser (1952:309) and Hodges also harshly criticize slang, 'the sluggard's way of avoiding the search for the exact, meaningful word' (Hodges 1967:197). A similar attitude can be detected in Rapoport, who seems to be equally biased and ill-informed when he says 'slang is essentially a collection of vivid metaphors in the speech of the less educated, who, as a rule, do not write' (1975:44).

As Dumas and Lighter say 'We are all sure it [slang] exists, most of us are sure we know what it is, and many of us are sure that everyone else agrees with us' (1978:9), but a tighter definition is required. Milward's (1937) Masters thesis on slang has only the following (somewhat unsatisfactory) definition: 'the slang expressions are those which in my opinion would not be used in good literature, except of course in conversation, and the colloquial ones are those which could be so used' (1937:3).

Flexner's definition is equally broad: 'American slang ... is the body of words and expressions frequently used by or intelligible to a rather large portion of the general American public, but not accepted as good, formal usage by the majority' (1975:vi). The definition by Gleason, which regards slang as 'that portion of the vocabulary which changes most freely' (1961:6) is also not entirely satisfactory, as many of the words which we mistakenly regard as fresh slang items are in fact centuries old - many expletives being cases in point.

Problems with most definitions reside in the use of terms such as 'colloquial' and 'standard educated speech' (see Crystal (1987:53), Branford (1987:xx), Oxford English Dictionary), and attributions of such features as rapid decline, which are not self-evident (See Webster's Third International Dictionary). Although connotation and rapid change are primary determinants of slang, causing many acceptable words to sink into the linguistic slums (e.g. 'cock'), the importance of user's intention is frequently neglected in definitions. Bailey (1985) points out the need for first-hand experience in slang

studies, because of the connotations involved, and Sornig reaffirms this by saying 'It is extremely difficult ... to explain their real and complete meaning to an outsider ... the reason for their very existence lies in the connotative part of the meaning of slang terms and colloquialisms' (1981:1).

The American Heritage Dictionary focusses on speaker's intent, defining slang as 'a style of language rather than a level of formality ... the distinguishing feature ... is the intention - however often unsuccessful - to produce rhetorical effect, such as incongruity, irreverence or exaggeration' (1969:xlvi). Slang can often be recognised by the user's intention to break norms, but this is not an infallible test, as, among certain linguistic subcultures (e.g. teenagers, or some less privileged social groups), *not* using slang may in fact be breaking norms in some registers. Context alone can help one to decide what the speaker's intentions are: to show disrespect for authority, be witty or humorous, show solidarity by the use of a shared code, or exclude others who do not use the code - as Crystal puts it, 'the chief use of slang is to show that you're one of the gang' (1987:53). Bailey (1985) suggests that countrywide one can regard all users as belonging to one speech community - the youth, peers with a high degree of shared knowledge and interests.

Dumas and Lighter (1978) report an experiment in which students showed a remarkable *lack* of consensus regarding which words from a given list were slang. It seems that everyone *cannot* recognise slang, nor can anyone define it easily. Not only individual ideas about slang lack consistency, but corporate ideas do as well. Dumas and Lighter provide an example of this in the term 'junkie' which is considered by *Collegiate* as slang, but not by the *Random House Dictionary*.

Dumas and Lighter (1978:14-15) suggest, as criteria, that slang markedly lowers the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing, its use implies the user's special familiarity with either the referent or the usual users of the term, it is normally tabooed by those with higher status or responsibility - not used by them or to them. (e.g. 'Professor Smith, would you repeat those last two fuckers?') and it can be used euphemistically (e.g. 'His uncle croaked').

Most serious writers on slang report males as slang-users, females as slang-eschewers. Jespersen (1922) and Milward (1937:1) supported this view and so do more recent exponents on the subject, notably Flexner, who says:

Most American slang is created and used by males ... the majority of entries in this dictionary could be labelled 'primarily masculine use'. Men belong to more sub-groups than do women; men create and use occupational cant and jargon; in business men have acquaintances who belong to many different sub-groups. Women, on the other hand, still tend to be restricted to family and neighbourhood friends. Women have very little of their own slang. The new words applied to women's clothing, kitchen utensils, and gadgets are usually created by men. (1975:xii)

The title of a recent article in *English Usage in SA* ('Some South African Schoolboyisms' (1989:14-18)) implies the same view: females do not use slang. Perhaps one needs to review the question: if the use of slang is to show a shared linguistic code, shared knowledge and interests - in other words to reinforce group membership, of paramount importance to the average 'insecure' teenager - then perhaps young females use slang more than one might expect; in Bailey's (1985) view slang is used 'more by younger people and more by men than by women' (1985:5).

Slang is marked by its undeniable lack of dignity, and its widespread use within a social group to defy linguistic or social convention, which obviously takes a certain amount of daring. For this reason one expects it to prevail among the young, and stereotypes point in the direction of male rather than female youth, but one needs to test this assumption. The use of slang implies a high level of confidence, which is a typically male attribute in Western society. Male peer groups (Romaine 1984) are very much larger, more hierarchial and competitive than female groups, which are smaller, more intimate, and do not value 'verbal posturing' as much, and this fact also leads one to expect greater overall usage by males.

It would be interesting to test the validity of this stereotypical view that slang is a male characteristic and, if the use of slang in the face of general social disapproval can be regarded as indicative of confidence, it would be useful to measure the effect of self-assurance on the use of slang by male or female adolescents respectively.

## THE EXPERIMENT

Practical considerations limited the sample in this study to a total of 160 informants, from schools in or nearby Grahamstown (which has a small largely English-speaking White population) made up in the proportions indicated in Table 1. An equal number of informants (evenly sexed) from government and private schools and from each standard was desired and expressly planned, for statistical purposes, but the actual informants who met these requirements were numerous, and all had an equal chance of being chosen.

**Table 1: Informant sample**

	<i>Single sex:</i>		<i>Coed</i>	
	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
	<b>Government schools:</b>			
Std 6	10	10	10	10
Std 9	10	10	10	10
<b>Private schools:</b>				
Std 6	10	10	10	10
Std 9	10	10	10	10
<b>Totals:</b>	40	40	40	40
<b>Grand total: 160 informants</b>				

After children who were *not* English mother-tongue speakers had been eliminated in advance, teachers at each school were requested to provide informants using the following procedure: if there were

30 pupils in the standard, every third pupil was selected from an alphabetical list, if 40 every fourth, if 50 every fifth, etc. Teachers were expressly warned against overloading the sample with highly 'verbal' pupils, or those who were good readers, etc. It was hoped that in this way, despite a deliberate focus on subjects from specific schools in Grahamstown, a reasonably random range of linguistic ability would appear in the sample.

Pupils in Std 6 fell in the 12-14 year age group, and those in Std 9 in the 15-17 age group. Speaker variables under scrutiny were thus sex, educational standard, and whether the informant attended a government or a private school, a single-sex or a coeducational school. Of these variables, sex was obviously the primary focus of this study, and Horvath's regrouping of some of Labov's data in terms of 'natural' linguistic groupings even suggests that sex should take precedence over class as the major speaker variable; she remarks that 'if social class is seen to take precedence, then these other social dimensions might remain hidden or only dimly perceived' (1985:64). Milroy (1987) remarks that one implication of these comments is that it is perhaps more reasonable to explain class differences in terms of sex, than sex differences in terms of class.<sup>1</sup>

Informants in this study were all requested to fill in a questionnaire on slang (See appendix 1) anonymously. 23 key semantic areas were provided (with examples of a corresponding slang term in each case to stimulate the memory) and informants were asked to fill in as many synonymous slang terms as they could in each case. The aim of this exercise was primarily to ascertain which groups had the largest slang vocabulary (whether this was an active or passive vocabulary could not be established). Terms focussed on the semantic areas of entertainment, eating, drinking, smoking, the opposite sex and school, all areas known for their abundance of slang.

In addition, an attempt was made to ascertain the views of informants regarding whether they considered the use of slang as appropriate or fitting for various subgroups (girls, women, men, etc.)

In this experiment the null hypothesis was that sex, age, and school type would have no effect on slang knowledge, and that males and females would have identical linguistic habits, regardless of school type or educational level. Greater use of slang by males would suggest tighter, more closely-knit male peer group structures (Labov (1966), Cheshire (1984)) and implicit societal approval of such behaviour for males; if such knowledge of and use of slang can be equated with (adolescent) social power generally, then it would be likely to increase with age, as linguistic behaviour of this kind would be used as an overt badge of identity and group membership, at a time when belonging is of vital importance to the individual. Such behaviour might also be associated with confidence generally, so one might expect higher scores at private schools. High scores for females would suggest similar causes.

## **SCORING SYSTEM**

A database was created, all responses recorded in detail and a tally of overall numbers of responses in each sub-section was made. The statistic chosen as a test for significant differences between two proportions, was the Z-score<sup>2</sup>, reliable when one is working with samples of size  $N > 30$ . A high score would reflect a knowledge of a fairly large number of slang words, a low score would indicate the opposite. At no stage was it assumed that knowledge of a slang word implies habitual use thereof, but it does imply understanding of its meaning, and association of some sort with its users.

## **RESULTS**

Comments, both written and verbal (later) reflected astounding enthusiasm for the questionnaire, delight at being able to let go of linguistic inhibitions, and at the fact that some people are interested in the language of youth.

Table 2 presents the mean scores of the groups under investigation (the average number of words given by each group), followed by the standard deviation and Z-scores. Figure 1 reflects the scores obtained in each section, labelled from A to W on the X-axis to correspond with the numbering in the questionnaire.

**Table 2: Means, standard deviation and Z-scores of selected groupings of informants**

<b>Group:</b>	<b>Mean:</b>	<b>Std dev:</b>	<b>Z-score:</b>
All boys	25.96	14.95	1.22
All girls	23.35	12.00	
Std 6 boys	19.37	13.43	0.22
Std 6 girls	18.80	9.59	
Std 9 boys	32.55	13.42	1.61
Std 9 girls	27.90	12.44	
All Std 6	19.09	13.43	5.3***
All Std 9	30.22	13.14	
Single-sex: boys	29.32	16.42	2.65
Single-sex: girls	21.68	8.03	
Coed: boys	22.60	12.45	0.79
Coed: girls	25.03	14.77	
All coeds	23.81	13.71	0.79
All single-sex	25.50	13.47	
Government: boys	20.65	14.19	0.49
Government: girls	19.34	9.32	
Private: boys	31.28	13.76	1.30
Private: girls	27.38	12.99	
All government	19.99	12.02	4.62***
All private	29.33	13.52	

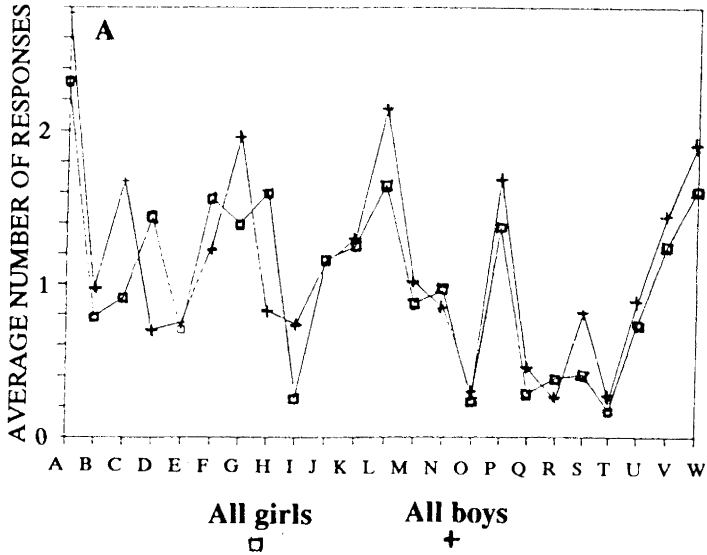
## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The stereotype would have us believe that girls know and use fewer slang items than boys. Results from this investigation do not confirm this hypothesis conclusively: despite a general trend in which male scores were only slightly higher than female scores, there is an exception to this trend in coeducational schools and there is a distinct

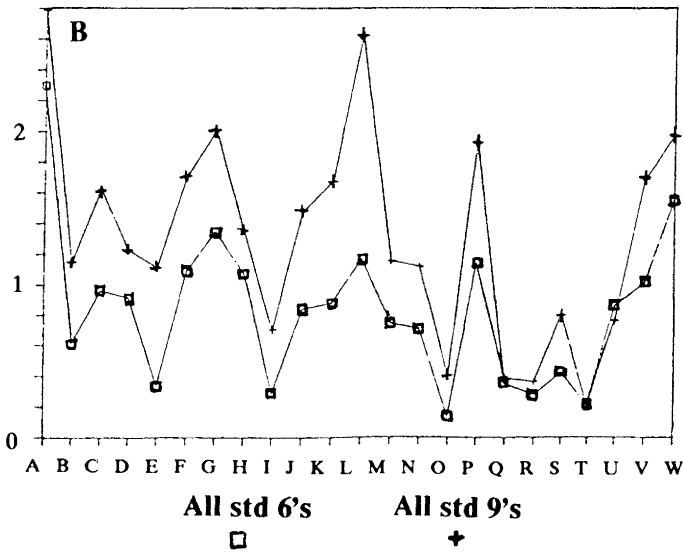


Figure 1

ALL GIRLS/ALL BOYS



ALL STD 6'S/ALL STD 9'S



lack of any respectable Z-scores accompanying any of the figures obtained. An assertion that males typically use more slang simply because they are male is a risky one, to say the least.

Age seems to have a far stronger impact: slang knowledge rises commensurately with increasing age. The very high Z-score confirms the hypothesis that age has far more to do with slang knowledge than sex. As regards school type, the coeducational/single sex subdivision did not yield any information of interest, but the very high score for informants from private schools (29.33) in comparison with the generally lower government school informant score is interesting (especially in its significance), and suggests greater linguistic confidence among males and the pupils of private schools - if slang knowledge and usage is indeed associated with cohesive linguistic subcultures, and with a certain amount of daring confidence and self-assurance in breaking adult norms.

So school type and age of informant have a more noticeable influence on slang knowledge than sex. Pupils at the government schools selected for analysis were not necessarily members of lower social groups than those at private schools<sup>1</sup>; but a potentially divisive feature in government schools, is the fact that their pupils come from fairly disparate backgrounds, some from very deprived others from very privileged homes indeed. All pupils at private schools would share at least one common bond: reasonably wealthy backgrounds. This might well play a role in peer group cohesion, a prerequisite for the dissemination and use of slang.

## **ACTUAL SLANG RESPONSES**

Many of the 'slang' terms actually given as responses by informants would be regarded as swearwords by many, an acknowledged problem in the definition of the term 'slang'.

The questionnaire covered areas presumed to be of interest to teenagers in general, and there were markedly consistent trends of lexical preference for most of the groupings of informants, with a

noticeable gender difference throughout. There was an overall abundance of slang terms to express *nice, drunk, unattractive girls, to cuddle, effeminate male, pretty girls*. School-related topics like *clothing, prefects, hard work, missing class and failing* elicited a low response.

Although space does not permit a thorough report on all responses, one area was noticeable: the high number of slang terms known by boys for ugly girls versus the comparably low number of equivalent terms known by girls to refer to boys (both handsome and unattractive). Studies and lexical analyses by Miller *et al.* (1978) and Schulz (1975) have shown that there are many more unfavourable terms in English for females, in conformity with the theory of semantic derogation or words which relate in any way to socially 'out of power' groups (obviously females belong in this category). Results in this study confirm this tendency. Table 3 shows the discrepancy between male and female responses, and is subdivided into standard, to reveal age-related trends.

**Table 3: Semantic preferences**

	Boys		Girls	
	Std 6	Std 9	Std 6	Std 9
Ugly girl	63	94	45	67
Pretty girl	48	86	29	44
Ugly boy	29	37	57	71
Handsome boy	21	35	52	63

## ATTITUDES

The attitudes of informants regarding slang were remarkably consistent in sex-based groups: boys were consistently more positive than girls, especially with regard to use by their own sex. The younger informants appear to be slightly more permissive regarding their *own* use than the older pupils are: in every case Std 9's came

down slightly harder on juniors than the juniors did themselves: social attitudes appear to harden with age, or perhaps this is evidence of the older ones trying to exert a little 'authority' over the younger. Also evident was a more permissive attitude at private schools generally, which confirms the general trend towards greater relaxation and verbosity at such institutions, possibly indicative of freer teaching methods, etc.

The consistency of opinion across all groupings of informants was remarkable: without exception, whether the basis of groups was standard, sex or school, there was a greater tolerance for slang from males than from females, with teenager's attracting the most support, sub-teens the second-most, and adults the least. Tolerance was also greater among private school informants than those from government schools. It is worth mentioning that the attitudes revealed in this questionnaire tally well with the actual responses by the different groups: those with a more disapproving attitude (e.g. girls, those at government schools) generally achieved lower scores for responses, so the degree of reliance one can place on these attitude ratings is probably fairly high.

## CONCLUSIONS

This investigation does *not* give significant support to the hypothesis that males are primary slang-users, but the rating results highlight the profound influence of stereotypes on attitudes: young adolescent males are seen as the most appropriate slang users by all informants, which is highly suggestive of what the 'popular myth' is. It would seem that girls are socialised into feeling that slang is more appropriately a male domain, despite the fact that they use it and, by doing so, reveal a need to do so. Society implicitly condones male use of slang, but females reveal a much more guilty, self-condemnatory, and narrow-minded perception of the issue.

The strong correlation in linguistic behaviour between females and all pupils in government schools, and between males and private school pupils is interesting and might be linked to social power and

status generally. The important point is that it is not speaker's sex alone which influences slang usage or knowledge, but equally importantly the age and scholastic environment of the speaker. Slang usage, a defiance of social convention, is a sign of linguistic confidence and daring.

As society changes, and perceptions of female roles in society, female usage of slang is likely to change concomitantly, indicative of subtle shifts in the social status of females generally.

*Note 1:* It would be incorrect to classify pupils of the government schools as being from a lower social class than others, as Grahamstown is a highly 'academic' environment, a small town with a disproportionately high number of academic institutions; most of the children of highly qualified academics from the local university and schools, people of education and social status (but not commensurate wealth) attend the government schools. In addition, in view of the size of the town, and the lack of the big industries to attract a 'working class', it would not be fair or accurate to label pupils in government schools as coming from a lower class.

*Note 2:* Z-scores corresponding to the conventionally acceptable levels of significance levels are listed below:

- > 1.96 indicates significance at the 0.05 level \*
- > 2.576 indicates significance at the 0.01 level \*\*
- > 2.805 indicates significance at the 0.005 level \*\*\*
- > 3.291 indicates significance at the 0.001 level \*\*\*\*

## REFERENCES

- Bailey, R. 1985. 'SAE slang: form, functions and origins': *SA Journal of Linguistics*, 3/1, 1-42.
- Branford, J. 1987. *A Dictionary of South African English*: Oxford University Press, Cape Town.

Cheshire, J. 1984). 'Indigenous non-standard varieties and education': in Trudgill, P., (ed.), *Applied Sociolinguistics*: Academic, London, 564-588.

Crystal, D. 1987. *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Dumas, B.K. and Lighter, J. 1978. 'Is slang a word for linguistics?' *American Speech*, 53, 5-17.

Fernald, J.C. 1918. *Expressive English*: Funk and Wagnalls, New York.

Flexner, S.B. 1971. 'Slang': in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago.

Flexner, S.B. and Wentworth, H. 1975. *Dictionary of American Slang*: Crowell, New York.

Foerster, N. and Steadman, J. 1941. *Writing and thinking: a handbook of composition and revision*: revised edition, Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Genung, J.F. 1893. *Outline of Rhetoric*: Ginn, Boston.

Gleason, H. 1961. *An introduction to descriptive linguistics*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.

Hayakawa, S.I. 1941. *Language in action*: Harcourt Brace, New York.

Hodges, J. and Whitten, M. 1967. *Harbrace College Handbook*, 6th ed.: Harcourt-Brace and World, New York

Jespersen, O. 1922. *Language: its nature, development and origin*: Allen and Unwin, London.

Labov, W. 1966. *The social stratification of English in New York City*: Washington DC Centre for Applied Linguistics, Washington.

Labov, W. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*: University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Miller, C. and Swift, K. 1978. *Words and women: New language in new times*: Anchor/Doubleday, New York.

Millhauser, M. 1952. 'The case against slang': *English journal*, 41, 306-309.

Milroy, L. 1987. *Observing and Analysing Natural Language*: Blackwell, Oxford.

Milward, D. 1937 'The origin and derivation of the slang in use among the women students in the University of Cape Town in the year 1937': Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Cape Town.

Rapoport, A. 1975. *Semantics*: Thomas Crowell, New York.

Romaine, S. 1984. *The language of children and adolescents*: Blackwell, Oxford.

Schultz, M. 1975. 'The semantic derogation of women' in Thorne, B., and Henley, N., (eds.) (1975) *Language and sex: difference and dominance*: Rowley, Mass., Newbury House.

Sornig, K. 1981. *Lexical innovation: a study of slang, colloquialisms and casual speech*: John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

Whitman, W. 1885. 'Slang in America': in Stovall, F., (ed.), *The collected writings of Walt Whitman: prose works 1892*: New York University Press, New York.

## APPENDIX

### QUESTIONNAIRE ON SLANG AND EXPLETIVES:

Your code number is .....

This Questionnaire is designed to investigate the use of slang and swearwords. Slang is unconventional language, often fresh and creative, used characteristically by teenage groups, and often disapproved of by teachers and parents! Slang is a particularly interesting phenomenon to people who study language, yet it is very difficult to find out about the words used by teenagers because they generally only use them when they are with each other, not when they are with adults.

For this reason I would be grateful if you could fill in this form as completely and as honestly as you possibly can. As you are *not* asked to fill in your name at all, and as these results will be treated confidentially, you are at liberty to be completely frank. All I am interested in is the way teenagers use language. So relax and enjoy yourself!

#### SECTION A: GENERAL INFORMATION

1. What is your date of birth? ...../...../.....  
(Now please mark the appropriate space with a cross.)
2. What standard are you in? Std. 6 .....  
Std. 9 .....
3. What sex are you? Male .....  
Female.....



## SECTION B: SLANG

1. Please write down as *many* slang words as you can think of which mean more or less the same as each of the following words: (If you do not know any, simply leave the space blank). In brackets after each word I have written the words used when I was a teenager; some of them may sound really dated to you!
  - a) nice/enjoyable (fab, groovy)
  - b) a party (a jol, a session)
  - c) a pretty/attractive girl (chick/doll)
  - d) a good looking/attractive boy (hunk)
  - e) a romantic attachment (crush, pash)
  - f) to kiss and cuddle (to graunch, kafoefle)
  - g) an ugly/fat/unattractive girl (grot)
  - h) an ugly/fat/unattractive boy (blort)
  - i) alcoholic drinks (booze, dops)
  - j) to eat (graze, scoff)
  - k) cigarettes (fags)
  - l) drunk (smashed)
  - m) to vomit (hurl, puke)
  - n) pimples (chorbs)
  - o) clothing (gear, clobber)

- p) a pupil who tries hard to please the teacher (schloep)
- q) prefects (beaks, cops)
- r) hard work (graft, sweat)
- s) to fail a standard (plug)
- t) missing class (bunking)
- u) an unlikeable woman (bitch, cow)
- v) an unlikable man (pig)
- w) an effeminate/cowardly male (twerp, drip)

Now I want you to rate people who use a lot of slang, on a scale of 1 to 5, where a score of:

- 1 ..... means you disapprove quite strongly
- 2 ..... means you don't like it very much
- 3 ..... means you don't mind
- 4 ..... means you think it is fine
- 5 ..... means you think it is very attractive

Please write down a number (1 to 5) next to each of the following types of slang-users:

	<i>Score</i>
(i) Junior School boys	.....
(ii) Junior School girls	.....
(iii) Senior School boys	.....
(iv) Senior School girls	.....
(v) Adult males	.....
(vi) Adult females	.....