TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN SLANG 
AND ITS SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT. PART TWO

This paper presents an outline of twentieth-century lexical developments in American slang, viewed in its sociocultural context. It is designed as a compact, decade-by-decade overview of the most important events from American sociocultural history, mirrored by new lexical creations in slang. The paper is divided into two parts: the first part covers the 1900s through 1940s, while the second covers the 1950s through 1990s. The presentation is based on lexical material from a sizable database of citations from contemporary American sources collected since the early 1990s through extensive fieldwork and research at such academic centers as Yale University, Columbia University, the University of Tennessee and the University of Toronto, including most recent material. The dating is based on Oxford English Dictionary, Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang, and Dictionary of Modern American Slang and Unconventional English.

1950S

The 1950s brought the Korean War, the Cold War and McCarthy-ism paranoia. However, the decade is known as the ‘Affluent Fifties’ and was dominated by an industrial boom and material prosperity, evident in the creation of the Interstate Highway System, business expansion, advancement in technology, as well as increased materialism. Many new products such as credit cards and dishwashers were introduced; shopping malls and drive-ins made their debuts. This was also the time of the baby boom: the U.S. population skyrocketed by 15.6 million between 1950 and 1955 (Epstein, 1991: 54). In music, popular performers included Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett, Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra. Rock ‘n’ roll debuted with Bill Halley, Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins, while in jazz, Miles Davis and John Coltrane were the stars. The Beat culture marked the popularization of alternative lifestyles, exemplified by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. The decade saw an expansion of television within the culture with You Bet Your Life, The Bob Hope Show, The Jack Benny Show, Captain Kangaroo, The $64,000 Question and I Love Lucy; in 1951 alone, 7 million Americans had their own television sets (Epstein, 1991: 38).
Slang lexicon of the decade reflects these pronounced developments in business and entertainment (Widawski 2003: 323-324). Numerous slang expressions from the period refer to new products and lifestyles, and television was the greatest promulgator of slang. Moreover, many slang expressions are connected with the Cold War, or come from military slang and Japanese, Korean, and Chinese languages, introduced through contact during the Korean War (Lighter 1994: xxix). Here are a few examples of slang expressions which originated in the period:

**ax** n. [1955] any musical instrument, especially an electric guitar: *No one can play the ax like Eddie!* – Facebook, 2012

**baby boom** n. [1951] a marked increase in the birth rate: *There’s going to be a baby boom next year* – Entertainmentwise, 2012

**beatnik** n. [1958] an alienated youth with unorthodox values: *This was before the hippies, when the beatniks were still there* – L.A. Magazine, 2012

**blockbuster** n. [1950] a best-selling book or film: *How do you find time to make all those blockbusters?* – Jersey Girl, film, 2004

**brainwash** v. [1950] to influence by psychological conditioning: *They never realized until later in life they were brainwashed* – Washington Post, 2012

**chopper** n. [1951] a helicopter: *I need you to get on that chopper right now, no questions asked* – Armageddon, film, 1998

**decaf** n. [1955] decaffeinated coffee: *She brews cup of decaf and sinks into a comfy couch* – Peninsula Press, 2012

**deejay** n. [1955] a disc jockey: *She’s trying her hand at being a deejay* – Wall Street Journal, 2012


**far-out** adj. [1954] excellent: *I love it very much and it’s very far-out* – Huffington Post, 2012

**fast food** n. [1951] food prepared and served rapidly and uniformly: *A favorite topic for busy dads is fast food* – Republic, 2012

**glitterati** n. [1956] celebrities: *All eyes were on what the glitterati were wearing tonight* – Examiner, 2012

**hash** n. [1959] hashish: *Okay, so tell me again about the hash bars. Hash is legal there, right?* – Pulp Fiction, film, 1994

**hotrod** n. [1950] a car modified to have extra power: *He’s got the fastest hotrod in Fresno* – Deuce of Spades, film, 2010

**negatory** excl. [1955] no: ‘*We’re working the same case?’ ‘Negatory, he hired me a month ago*’ – Veronica Mars, UPN-TV series, 2004

**nerd** n. [1951] a socially inept person, esp. if too conventional or studious: *Bow ties are not just for nerds anymore* – Statesman Journal, 2012

**nuke** n. [1958] a nuclear bomb: *We’re flying the B-3 with two live nukes* – Broken Arrow, film, 1996
prefab adj. [1955] prefabricated: Stillwater prefab homes are designed with intelligent floor plans – Seattle Post Intelligencer, 2012


shitload n. [1954] a large number or amount: He made a shitload of money destroying other people – Huffington Post, 2012

showboat v. [1951] to show off: He just went out there and did his job. No showboating or fooling around – Newark Star-Ledger, 2012

skosh adv. [1959] a little or somewhat: This is where I slightly disagree with you a skosh – Examiner, 2012

sleeper n. [1955] a spy who long remains inactive: They put a sleeper in the White House – Manchurian Candidate, film, 2004

trip n. [1959] hallucination from drugs: He was having a bad trip after talking synthetic marijuana – Bradenton Herald, 2012

user n. [1953] a drug user: In one case a user was reported to have resorted to self-mutilation – Utica Observer Dispatch, 2012

whirlybird n. [1951] a helicopter: Let’s get to the rally point. Take that whirlybird home! – Dead Presidents, film, 1995

1960s

The 1960s are commonly known as the ‘Turbulent Sixties’. The period brought international crisis, the Kennedy administration, and the end of racial segregation. One of the most defining events of the decade was the Vietnam War, which had profound political, social, cultural and linguistic effects. The decade saw protest and rebellion against existing values, embodied by the hippie movement. Their alternative lifestyle emphasized freedom and peace, and encouraged experimentation with narcotics. Upon the introduction of ‘The Pill,’ the sexual revolution started. The decade saw increased interest in popular music including The Beach Boys, Roy Orbison, Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. R&B music from Motown became popular with acts such as The Supremes and James Brown. The period also featured the development of pop art with Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Television continued its climb to the top media position with Candid Camera, The Flintstones, The Jetsons, The Untouchables, Dr. Kildare, Bonanza, The Addams Family, Star Trek, Batman, and Planet of the Apes.

Slang vocabulary of the time mirrors the profound social changes, referring to the new lifestyle’s preoccupations and pursuits such as free love and narcotics. A sizable portion of the vocabulary is associated with the Vietnam War (Steinmetz 2010: 125), characterized by violence and vulgarity, and is also connected with
the Cold War. Another portion of the slang lexicon involves cross-over terms from African American slang (Widawski & Kowalczyk 2012: 7), linked with growing interest in African American culture (Lighter 1994: xxxi) and following the end of racial segregation. Here is a sample of slang expressions which originated in the period:

**acid n.** [1965] LSD: *She definitely took acid or shrooms, and not ecstasy* – L.A. Weekly, 2012

**Afro n.** [1966] an African American hairstyle of bouffant curled hair: *Diggs had brown hair styled in Afro* – Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, 2012


**bareback adv.** [1960] without a condom: *No condoms! Real men do it bareback!* – Curbed, 2012

**bird n.** [1966] a helicopter: *Come on, the bird’s on the way, man! Hang in there. You’re gonna make it!* – Platoon, film, 1986

**boner n.** [1966] an erect penis: *For some inexplicable reason, that fifty-year old woman gave me a boner* – Columbia University Student, 2012


**chopper n.** [1966] a Harley Davidson motorcycle with long handlebars: *I’m a motorcycle guy, I ride a chopper* – ESPN, 2012

**doobie n.** [1967] a marijuana cigarette: *He went home and smoked a doobie* – Huffington Post, 2012

**druggie n.** [1966] a drug addict: *If you are a druggie, the last thing on your mind is someone else’s feelings* – Augusta Chronicle, 2012

**flower power n.** [1967] influence of the pacifistic hippie movement: *Flowers and guns conjure up images of flower power* – New Scientist, 2012

**fruitcake n.** [1960] a blatantly gay man: *Don’t look at me like I’m some fucking fruitcake!* – Nightmare on Elm Street, film, 1984

**ho n.** [1964] a sexually promiscuous woman: *You’re a no-good liar, I know you was with that ho* – Minority Report, film, 2002

**love-in n.** [1960] a gathering devoted to mutual love: *They made it clear the next two hours would be nothing short of a love-in* – Toronto Online, 2012


**Nam n.** [1969] Vietnam, especially during the Vietnam War: *I saw a lot of action in Nam* – Buffy the Vampire Slayer, UPN-TV series, 2001


**shrink** *n.* [1966] a psychiatrist: *Teresa and Joe decided going to a shrink wasn’t for them* – *New York Daily News, 2012*

**slope** *n.* [1969] an East Asian: *He’d be damned if any slopes put their greasy yellow hands on it* – *Pulp Fiction, film, 1994*


**swinger** *n.* [1964] someone who engages in partner swapping: *He told her they were attending a retreat for swingers* – *Concord Monitor, 2012*

**Victor Charlie** *n.* [1966] Viet Cong army: *This is the last Christmas I spend with Victor Charlie up my ass!* – *Tropic Thunder, film, 2008*

**waste** *v.* [1964] to kill: *He came here and they tried to waste him* – *Beverly Hills Cop II, film, 1987*

**workaholic** *n.* [1968] someone who is addicted to work: *Working for a workaholic isn’t easy, by any stretch* – *Forbes, 2012*

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**1970s**

The 1970s brought the end of the Vietnam War and Nixon’s impeachment after revelations surrounding the Watergate scandal. The climate of the time – known as the ‘Me Decade’ – was shaped by other events, too. The effort to pass the Equal Rights Amendment and the legalization of abortion marked the peak of the sexual revolution. Changes in lifestyle brought about feminism, led the gay movement to its ascendency, caused the proliferation of pornography, and led to an unprecedented spread of sexually transmitted diseases: almost 2.5 million cases in 1972 alone (Epstein, 1991: 137). Astrology and new age philosophy became popular, too. Musically, the country saw the disco craze come out of the underground New York City gay nightclub scene and enter the mainstream. Popular musicians of the time included The Village People, Roberta Flack, The Jackson Five, Stevie Wonder, Barry White, Marvin Gaye, Alice Cooper, Led Zeppelin, The Doors, KISS, The Velvet Underground, The Carpenters and Barbra Streisand. Television continued to be the most important medium with such series as *Columbo, M*A*S*H, Charlie’s Angels, Mork and Mindy, All in the Family* and *Saturday Night Live*. The decade also saw Atari video consoles and the first Apple personal computers.

Slang lexicon of the decade reflects sociocultural developments and lifestyle changes. Many expressions from the period are associated with uninhibited sex as well as with progressive and liberal lifestyles (Steinmetz 2010: 145-147), with gay and lesbian vocabulary entering the mainstream. Many other are connected with politics as the object of national attention. Other sizable portion of slang
comes from African American slang (Widawski & Kowalczyk 2012: 7-8). Here are a few examples of slang expressions which made their debut during that period:

bone v. [1971] to have sex: Are you telling me you boned the captain’s wife? – Dorm Daze 2, film, 2006
brewski n. [1978] beer: How much nicer would it be if you sat back in that reclining chair and were offered a brewski? – Houston Press, 2012
burb n. [1977] a suburb: My real identity was shaped by living in the burbs – Sacramento Bee, 2012
cheeba n. [1970] marijuana: ‘You’re smoking again!’ ‘No, this just is herbs, it’s just a little cheeba – Broken Flowers, film, 2005
ecofreak n. [1970] a diehard environmentalist: The place was full of ecofreaks – Yale University Student, 2011
hardcore n. [1970] pornography that openly depicts complete sex acts: She’s not a porn star and she doesn’t do hardcore – Yahoo Sports, 2012
libber n. [1970] a member of a liberation movement, esp. a feminist one: It’s those damn women’s libbers causing grief yet again – Forbes, 2012
psychobabble n. [1976] psychological or new-age jargon: He doesn’t hide behind psychobabble – Willamette Week, 2012
roids n. [1978] steroids: *Why is everyone suggesting that these guys are on roids?* – Yahoo Sports, 2012

sexaholic n. [1970] a person obsessed with sex: *He realizes he’s a sexaholic trying to fill an emotional void* – Belleville Intelligencer, 2012


veggie n. [1975] a vegetarian: *My ex girlfriend was a veggie* – New York University Student, 2010

1980S

The 1980s brought the end of the Cold War, while the Reagan-Bush years were centered around economic issues. The growth of consumerism brought the rise of the yuppie class, and the decade is commonly known as the ‘Yuppie Generation’. The time also marked a boom in the music business with the debut of the Sony Walkman for cassettes and the introduction of CDs. Music Television (MTV) started in 1981; popular performers of the time included Blondie, the B-52s, Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, Prince, Frank Zappa, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Motley Crue, Bon Jovi, Metallica and Aerosmith. Television continued to be the most popular medium with series such as *Dallas, Dynasty, Cheers, The Cosby Show, Miami Vice, The Smurfs, Moonlighting, ALF, The Wonder Years, Married with Children* and *Roseanne*. The decade also saw increased sales of VCRs and the rise of video rental stores: in 1988 over 50% of all American households had VCRs and cable television (Epstein, 1991: 206). Computers and video games became increasingly popular, too.

Slang vocabulary from that time mirrors these social and economic developments. Numerous slang expressions involve names for a variety of new products, services and activities; corporate business and financial issues are also strongly featured. A trend to borrow expressions from African American slang is continued (Widawski & Kowalczyk 2012: 7-8). Moreover, a growing number of expressions is related to computers and their users (Steinmetz 2010: 168-170). Here is a sample of slang items which originated in the period:

**boom box** *n.* [1980] a portable music player: *His wife was holding a boom box*  
– *News, ABC-TV program, 2012*

**buppie** *n.* [1984] a black yuppie: *I see a buppie as someone who has lost black identity and self-identity* – *Lexington Herald, 1993*

**dis** *v.* [1980] to show disrespect: *This may be why Kidman dissed him after their well-timed breakup* – *Inquirer, 2012*

**Eurotrash** *n.* [1983] rich European foreigners living in the U.S.: *The streets are filled with drunken Eurotrash* – *Village Voice, 2012*

**fashion victim** *n.* [1984] someone who tries to dress fashionably but never succeeds: *The swooning of fashion victims is essential* – *Examiner, 2012*

**foodie** *n.* [1982] someone interested in gourmet cuisine: *I’m not an epicurean by any means, but I I’m sort of a foodie* – *Anchorage Press, 2012*

**fuckload** *n.* [1984] a large number or amount: *There are plenty of place online where you can buy a fuckload of condoms* – *Tech Crunch, 2012*

**gangsta** *n.* [1988] a gang member: *I shed no tears for the so-called gangstas, thugs and wannabes* – *Houston Press, 2012*

**ghetto blaster** *n.* [1981] a portable music player: *He had a beach party with a ghetto blaster* – *San Francisco Weekly, 2012*


**gridlock** *n.* [1983] an impasse or deadlock: *There are many more questions involving the gridlock in Washington* – *Salt Lake Tribune, 2012*

**hacker** *n.* [1981] someone who breaks into computer systems: *Hackers steal 450,000 names and passwords from Yahoo* – *Kansas City Star, 2012*

**mall rat** *n.* [1982] someone who spends much time in shopping centers: *My sister is a real mall rat* – *Yale University Student, 2011*

**McJob** *n.* [1986] an unstimulating, low-paid job with no prospects: *Many of the jobs we create are McJobs that don’t pay enough* – *National Post, 2012*

**plastic** *n.* [1980] a credit card or credit cards: *These are fees merchants pay every time a customer uses plastic* – *Boston Herald, 2009*

**rapper** *n.* [1980] a performer of rap songs: *The two rappers took their beef to Twitter* – *Vibe, 2012*

**rice burner** *n.* [1980] a Japanese or Korean car or motorcycle: *Is that like the rice burner Kia Sportage?* – *News, CNN-TV program, 2012*

**shopaholic** *n.* [1984] someone addicted to shopping: *The main character was a shopaholic who found nirvana with a PC and a modem* – *City Wire, 2012*

**spin doctor** *n.* [1985] a spokesperson who gives a favorable interpretation of events: *His spin doctors worked overtime* – *New York Newsday, 2012*

**tech** *n.* [1982] technology: *It’s high tech and a great way to avoid any confusion* – *Salem News, 2012*

**twenty-four seven** *adv.* [1985] non-stop: *Staff is available twenty-four-seven by toll free phone* – *San Francisco Chronicle, 2012*
veejay n. [1982] a video jockey: The problem is that people don’t take a veejay seriously – Daily News and Analysis, 2012


yuppie n. [1977] a young urban professional: If we were yuppies, they wouldn’t do this – Wall Street Journal, 2012

1990S

The 1990s brought the Gulf War, President Clinton’s social policies, as well as the increased threat of international terrorism. The decade saw unprecedented development in communication technology and computers, with the Internet and mobile telephony dominating the scene. This brought great benefits such as access to almost limitless worldwide information, but it also brought dangerous side-effects such as exposure to online pornography and virtual theft. Additionally, by the mid-1990s, there were over 200 million phone lines in service in the U.S. (Flexner and Soukhanov, 1997: 49), though mobile telephony quickly began to change people’s lifestyles. In music, hip-hop and rap dominated with such artists as Cypress Hill, Snoop Doggy Dog, Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur and Puff Daddy. Other popular musicians included: Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Ricky Martin, Jennifer Lopez, REM, Boyz II Men and Sheryl Crow. Television’s dominance was challenged for the first time by the Internet, but The Simpsons, Beavis and Butt-head, Seinfeld, Frasier, Baywatch, The X-Files, Friends, Third Rock from the Sun, Ally McBeal, Sex and the City and The Sopranos were quite influential both domestically and internationally.

Slang lexicon of the decade reflects these technological developments. Many expressions from the period are associated with computers, especially with the Internet and mobile telephony (Steinmetz 2010: 183-185). The new media, characterized by mobility and unlimited access to information, also greatly influenced slang (Lighter 1994: xxviii), and are now its greatest promulgators. Here are a few examples which made their debut at that time:


chocolate chips n. [1990] a desert camouflage uniform: All the men wore their chocolate chips – Blogger, 2012

cyberporn n. [1990] Internet pornography: He became interested in cyberporn – New York University Student, 2009

egosurfing n. [1990] searching the Internet for mentions of one’s name: Egosurfing is not time-consuming – Columbia University Student, 2012

emoticon n. [1990] a symbol made from punctuation marks, used to denote emotion: I can’t even get emoticons right – Hamilton Spectator, 2012

facial n. [1993] an ejaculation on someone’s face: I love doggy, missionary and a facial – Blogger, 2011

gangsta rap n. [1990] rap music marked by violence and misogyny: He grew up listening to gangsta rap – Philadelphia Inquirer, 2012

google v. [1999] to search in the Internet using the Google search engine: I know that because I googled it – News, NBC-TV program, 2012

humvee n. [1990] a military vehicle, especially a Hummer: He was riding in a Humvee in Baghdad – Twin Falls Times-News, 2012


net n. [1990] the Internet: Okay, so then people will just order it on the net – Saginaw News, 2012

netiquette n. [1990] protocol observed by Internet discussion groups: Our netiquette rules! – Peterborough Examiner, 2012

Sandbox n. [1990] Saudi Arabia, especially during the Gulf War: Our boys got back from the Sandbox – Blogger, 2005

slacker n. [1994] someone who avoids work or responsibility: The rest of you are slackers! – PC World, 2012

soccer mom n. [1996] a mother who spends much time taking her children to various activities: The shop caters to soccer moms – Oregon Live, 2012

spam n. [1994] unsolicited or fraudulent advertising messages sent by e-mail: I get a ton of spam sent to my personal site – Boing Boing, 2012

surf v. [1990] to search the Internet: Sixty-nine percent are surfing the Internet via their phones – Today, 2012

trailer trash n. [1993] a poor, lower-class white person: I can figure out a red neck trailer trash like you – Hurt Locker, film, 2008

Trojan n. [1990] an intentionally destructive computer program disguised in benevolent form: A Trojan can bypass it – Computer Weekly, 2012

wigger n. [1990] a white teenager who imitates the style of inner-city African Americans: You’re such a wigger! – Bring It On, film, 2006
CONCLUSIONS

American slang mirrors its sociocultural context. This necessarily brief overview of both the most important developments in American popular culture and American slang shows that the changes in the former are heavily influenced by the changes in the latter. It is my hope that in the future more and more scholars will investigate this interesting interrelationship, which can be very revealing, both socioculturally and linguistically.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
