



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# IT-Related Jargon and Slang - Necessity or Gibberish?

Adrian-Florin Bușu<sup>1)</sup>

### Abstract:

Information Technology is not about just a bunch of high-tech words. Students in Automation unwittingly tend to use a series of non-specialized terms in order to facilitate communication and, at the same time, to keep conversation within the limits of their technical interests. Sometimes, the use of technical jargon is doubled by the use of slang words, which are somewhat different, but technical jargon and slang words have a common feature: both belong to the marginal area of lexicon. The reasons why students use technical jargon and slang words are multiple: jargon is used to convey meaningful information in a convenient way and to exchange information optimally, whereas slang plays a role in constructing identity, helps students reinforce connection with their peer group and excludes outsiders. If, for obvious reasons, for many people, IT – related jargon and slang words may sound awkward or even funny, in reality, these words, expressions, abbreviations or contractions make full sense, as they are intrinsically related to the topic of discussion.

**Key words:** *jargon; slang; identity; connection; efficiency.*

---

<sup>1)</sup> Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova, Faculty of Letters, Department of Applied Foreign Languages, Craiova, Romania, Phone: 0040744177449, Email: adibusu2002@yahoo.com. ORCID ID 0000-0003-1379-9918

## 1. Introduction

Most modern dictionaries offer a plethora of similar definitions of jargon and slang, widely defined as marginal areas of lexicon, which consist of words, phrases or linguistic usage in specific circumstances. This type of communication refers to the language generally exclusive to the members of particular groups in order to establish group identity or to optimize information exchange. Jargon and slang are two different notions, as jargon is formal language unique to a specific discipline or field, whereas slang is informal, colloquial language, sometimes used by a group or groups of people. However, one really important aspect is that both jargon and slang help individuals identify as members of a group and create the feeling of belonging to a specific social group. If jargon is unanimously defined as the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group, slang is actually more difficult to define than jargon, as it refers to a variety of informal language used in highly informal situations by people with similar background. The Oxford definition of slang is quite clear: "language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the standard of educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense". However, linguists Lars Andersson and Peter Trudgill claim that there is no viable definition of slang and quote poet Carl Sandburg, who gave a metaphorical definition: "Slang is a language that rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands and goes to work". (Andersson & Trudgill, 1992: 12) Slang is, after all, "a peculiar kind of vagabond language, always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech, but continually straying or forcing its way into the most respectable company". (Greenough & Kittredge, 2011: 4).

The etymology of slang is not clear enough, as this term was not used before the early nineteenth century. However, there is some evidence that the origin of slang might be the highly colloquial *sling off at*, meaning *to jeer* at a person or *to taunt*. Starting with 1850, slang has been accepted as describing the colloquial speech and, as it is used by virtually every social class, the stigma attached to the slang word has been removed.

As it is informal and spoken rather than formal and written, slang sometimes evokes negative attitudes, although it changes its identity according to who is speaking. The people's perception of slang differs from one person to another, depending on educational and economic background, social position and even geographical location or generation. Slang is generated from any number of specific language communities or subgroups: musicians, college students, immigrants, the military and the list might continue. One interesting feature of slang is that although it lacks the status of standard written language, due to the fact that it is informal and spoken, it somehow manages to make its way into culture, once the slang words have been indexed by dictionaries.

Jargon, on the other hand, is a set of words or phrases that make sense to the reader or collocutor, provided that they belong to a specific social or professional group. In a depth, technical jargon refers to the words or expressions that belong to a certain field of knowledge which can only be understood by the specialized people who study or work on those areas. The origin of jargon dates back in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when *jargoun*, a variant of *gargoun*, migrated from French, literally meaning *the twittering of birds*. According to University of Bergamo professor Maurizio Gotti, author of *The Language of Thieves and Vagabonds. 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Canting Lexicography in England*, the word showed up in English through Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. (Gotti, 1999:

## IT-Related Jargon and Slang - Necessity or Gibberish?

16) "Jargon can be a problem, but it also serves a purpose", claims Hillary Shulman, who adds that "As our ideas become more refined, it makes sense that our concepts do too". (Shulman, 2019: 847) Yule defines jargon as specialized vocabulary used among members of a social groups (Yule, 2006: 211). Finegan supports Yule's definition of jargon, claiming that jargon consists of specific terms used by a group of people with common typical interests and connects jargon to occupations in various fields of science and research such as finance or medicine and links it to activities involving sports, music and computing (Finegan, 2008: 322). As the society discovered the power of jargon in the last century, jargon has been given new definitions from new perspectives. Hudson defines jargon as "a word which can indicate intention and effect, as well as characteristic, and helps us to identify society's enemies more closely". (Hudson, 2010: 28)

Here are some characteristics of jargon and slang:

Features	Technical jargon	Slang
Typical linguistic features	Official name of things; Sometime spelt in capital letters; Commonly shortened to abbreviations, contractions or acronyms	Low colloquial vocabulary; Limited vocabulary resources; Use of words with general meaning specified by the situation
Common in writing?	Yes	No
Common in speaking?	Yes	Yes
Rate of change	Depends on the rate of change in professional areas	Only words and phrases, not structures
Indexed in dictionaries?	Only in specialized or technical dictionaries	No
Typical length of plain-English alternatives	Longer, except for abbreviations	Shorter

### 2. Problem statement

More deliberately than not, groups define themselves through the use of specific terminology. When this terminology becomes vague or is defined as gibberish by outsiders, we are dealing with technical jargon or slang. The use of technical jargon allows us to communicate efficiently using shared context around concepts for which there is no need to be explained in detail for each time they are used. Technical jargon and slang refer to specific domains of interest, such as Automation, Multimedia, Robotics, Electronics, Computers or Communication over the Internet. These terms and expressions can be grouped, according to the relationship with their referent, in subdomanins such as:

#### A. Pieces of data

- *Bit*: a single binary piece of data, either 0 or 1.
- *Byte*: eight bits strung together to represent a specific value such as a letter or a digit.
- *Dword*: a double word, or 32 bits.

- *Nibble*: a half byte, or 4 bits.
- *Word*: 16 bits of data used to represent a discrete piece of data.

B. E-mail related terms

- *Black hole*: a place on the Internet where deleted messages go.
- *Bounce*: an e-mail message when it is returned to you as undeliverable.
- *Emoji*: also known as *emoticon*; little smiley faces, frowning faces etc. that are used to convey mood in written conversations, sometimes consisting of combinations of punctuation marks such as colon or semicolon and parenthesis or capital letters.
- *Martian*: an unexpected message as a result of faulty routing.
- *Spam*: irrelevant or unsolicited messages sent over the internet, typically to a large number of users, for the purposes of advertising, phishing or spreading malware.
- *Phishing*: message designed to trick a person into revealing sensitive information to the attacker or to deploy malicious software on the victim's infrastructure like ransomware.

C. Computers

- *Bluetooth*: a wireless networking technology which allows chordless connection between devices, named after Harald Gormsson, King of Scandinavia, who apparently had a pretty gnarly smile as a result of blueberry consumption, legend has it.
- *Blob*: Binary Large Object, large amount of data other than just simple text, usually stored in a database.
- *Bug*: first used by Thomas Edison, referring to a moth trapped in an early computer that blocked a relay from proper functioning; it refers to any error in software or hardware.
- *Crapplet*: pejoratively used, indicates an applet that is not worth anything;
- *Dead Tree*: a paper printout of an electronic file, frequently done single-sided and in color.
- *Easter Egg*: originates in the tradition of hiding colorful eggs for children to seek out; programmers may also embed Easter Eggs in their programs for motivated hackers to find. These hidden features can require a very unlikely series of keystrokes, mouse clicks or cheat codes to activate.
- *GUI*: abbreviation for Graphical User Interface.
- *Hash*: a fixed-length numerical value calculated from a variable length amount of data.
- *Kludge*: poorly programmed software, a piece of hardware cobbled together from spare parts, or a temporary fix of a problem.
- *Mouse*: a type of input device.
- *Thunking*: the process of calling a subroutine to complete a task.
- *TWAIN*: standard for hardware interoperability, whose acronym was inspired from Rudyard Kipling's *The Ballad of East and West*: ...never the twain shall meet.
- *Virus*: malware which causes damage, steals data and can provide attackers with remote access to computers.

## IT-Related Jargon and Slang - Necessity or Gibberish?

- *Wintel*: common combination of Windows running on computers which have Intel processors.
- *Worm*: another type of malware which crawls across systems, either seeking specific data or exploiting vulnerabilities which can in turn be used to exploit other systems.

### D. Social media

- *Hashtag*: The # character combined with a word or phrase concisely defines a conversation, post, tweet or image; it is intended to make it easier for people to find a topic by performing a search on the term associated with the hashtag.
- *Lurker*: a person who spies on discussions on forums or groups, without intervening.
- *Stories*: Short videos uploaded on various social platforms.
- *Troll*: a person who participates in discussion groups, public forums or on social media websites and posts inflammatory statements in order to ridicule and deride others.
- *Tweet*: the act of submitting a post on Tweeter.

### E. Web terms

- *404*: Hyper Text Transfer Protocol response code for *File Not Found*, 404 is being used to simply convey things like *not found* or users who are not present or cannot be found.
- *Cookies*: files used to store information from one visit on a webpage; cookies are also being used to track users and deliver advertising.
- *Newbie*: a new user on a platform or a subscriber without experience.
- *Spider*: search engine.
- *Web*: pages or sites on the Internet.
- *Wiki*: acronym for *What I Know Is...*

### F. Communication

- *AFK*: abbreviation for Away From Keyboard, to signify when you need to step away, so that people chatting with you don't think you are ignoring them;
- *AMA*: abbreviation for Ask Me Anything.
- *Interwebs*: slang for the Internet, as a way to make fun at non-technical people who confuse the Internet with the World Wide Web.
- *IRL*: abbreviation for *In Real Life*.
- *IMO*: abbreviation for *In my opinion*.
- *N00b*: spelled with zeroes, indicates a relative newcomer or someone who lacks experience.
- *Podcast*: any recorded media that can be consumed later and can cover virtually any topic.
- *TBH*: To be honest.
- *WYSWYG*: abbreviation for What You See Is What You Get.

Although some of the jargon words or slang provided in the list above can be found in dictionaries (*web*, *spider*, *cookie*, *bug* or *mouse*), these words are used in their connotative meaning for technical purposes. Other words, such as *newbie*, *interwebs*,

*lurker* or *sysop* are created by means of lexical contamination. Abbreviations or contractions are also present, as some structures are bulky or cumbersome, e.g. Yahoo for *Yet Another Hierarchically Organized Oracle*.

### 3. Research questions

Being the very essence of colloquial speech, slang is related to convenience rather than to grammar rules. The question that arises is rightful: why do people use slang words? Well, there are some obvious explanations: just for fun, to escape from clichés or to disperse the solemnity of conversation. Some of these explanations work for the students in Automation, as slang allows them to be understood only by their peers and to show that they belong to a certain social group.

When tackling a specific area of the lexicon, certain professionals or people with common interests tend to use specific terms, known as technical jargon, which can be recognized and understood by their peers. But why do people need to use technical jargon instead of plain English? Using technical jargon among professionals saves time and offers a great range of accuracy, as not all technical terms can be expressed in plain English with concision. Many jargon terms exist due to their use among specialists or groups of professionals. For students in Automation, Computers and Electronics, the main purpose of using jargon is to make the interaction among peers easier. For common individuals, terms such as *the Big Blue*, *gremlin* or *glitch* may sound funny, although for students they make sense.

### 4. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study, which was conducted over a period of 12 weeks on a group of 86 students in the first year, first semester, at the Faculty of Automation, Computers and Electronics from the University of Craiova, was to identify the frequency and the degree of complexity of the jargon and slang words they use.

### 5. Research methods

The methods used for this study were survey, participant observation and secondary analysis. The frequency of jargon and slang words was measured for 1 occurrence per 10000 word corpus, grouped in 10 series, in spoken production, spoken interaction and writing, while the degree of complexity was analyzed by observing the level of comprehension from the collocutor's part, expressed through the need for further clarification.

### 6. Findings

The results of the study are shown below:

**Table 1: Results**

Word/expression	Type	Referent	Frequency	Complexity
<i>meg</i>	jargon	megabyte	5,7	low
<i>comms</i>	jargon	communications	5,6	low
<i>zap</i>	slang	to delete	5,4	low
<i>RAM</i>	jargon	Random Access Memory	5,4	low
<i>kludge</i>	slang	temporary correction	5,3	high
<i>gremlin</i>	slang	an unexpected fault	5,0	medium

## IT-Related Jargon and Slang - Necessity or Gibberish?

		in the system		
<i>asap</i>	jargon	as soon as possible	5,0	low
<i>glitch</i>	slang	an error that causes the system to crash	4,8	medium
<i>vapourware</i>	jargon	products which exist in name only	4,7	medium
<i>to pass the smoke test</i>	jargon	casual test	4,5	high
<i>wetware</i>	slang	the knowledge, human brain	4,3	medium
<i>LAN</i>	jargon	Local Area network	4,2	low
<i>Big Blue</i>	jargon	I. B. M.	4,0	medium
<i>bozo</i>	slang	stupid guy	4,0	low
<i>KISS</i>	jargon	Knowbot Information Service System	3,7	high
<i>black hole</i>	slang	a place where deleted mails are sent on the web	3,6	low
<i>snail mail</i>	slang	traditional postal services	3,4	medium
<i>404</i>	jargon	a web page which cannot be found or a person who is absent	3,4	medium
<i>lurker</i>	slang	a person who does not participate actively in forums or discussion	3,1	medium
<i>MIME</i>	jargon	Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions	2,8	high
<i>trojan</i>	slang	A type of computer virus	2,5	low
<i>CAFE</i>	jargon	Common Access for Everybody	2,5	high
<i>SysOp</i>	jargon	System operator	2,5	low
<i>bells and whistles</i>	slang	unnecessary things	2,3	low
<i>chrome</i>	jargon	thing meant to embellish	2,2	medium
<i>martian</i>	slang	a message received following a routing error	2,1	high
<i>VERONICA</i>	jargon	Very Easy Rodent Oriented Netwide Index to Computerized Archives	2	high
<i>wow and fluttering</i>	slang	background noise	2	medium

**Adrian Florin BUŞU**

		(e.g. on computer speakers)		
<i>Easter egg</i>	jargon	message hidden inside a program	1,7	medium
<i>baud barf</i>	slang	meaningless digits on screen, as a result of faulty internet connection	1,6	high
<i>geek</i>	slang	a person keen on technology	1,5	low
<i>hamster</i>	slang	chordless mouse	1,5	low
<i>WINS</i>	jargon	Windows Internet Name Service	1,4	medium
<i>luser</i>	slang	contraction of <i>lose</i> and <i>user</i> ; a ridiculous guy	1,4	low
<i>wintel</i>	jargon	contraction of Windows and Intel processors; it refers to a type of computers using Intel processors and running Windows	1,4	low
<i>newbie</i>	slang	a new subscriber	1,4	medium
<i>spam</i>	slang	sending messages sistematically for advertising purposes	1,3	low
<i>PING</i>	jargon	Packet Internet Groper	1,2	low
<i>flooding</i>	jargon	sending countless messages in order to block a system or a user	1,1	medium
<i>PIN</i>	jargon	Personal Identification Number	1	low
<i>spider</i>	slang	search engine	1	medium
<i>net lag</i>	jargon	long time awaiting for server response	1	low

Note: if the collocutor required no further explanation, the degree of complexity is considered low. If the collocutor required partial explanation, the complexity is considered medium. If the collocutor required extended explanation, the complexity is considered high.

As we can see from the table above, the first four words, *meg*, *comms zap* and *RAM* have the highest rate of occurrence and a low degree of complexity, as they were understood immediately, without the need of any supplementary explanation. What is really interesting is that, in terms of word type and frequency, out of the 42 words listed in the table, the number of jargon words (22) is slightly similar to the number of slang



## IT-Related Jargon and Slang - Necessity or Gibberish?

words (20). By continuing the analysis of the results provided in the table, we can note that 19 words/expressions have a low level of complexity, 15 have a medium level of complexity and just 8 have a high level of complexity. One observation that is worth mentioning is that technical jargon and slang have become so ingrained in students's practice that they use them unintentionally. This just goes to show that words belonging to technical jargon and slang are interwoven in communication, so that to ensure the most efficient way of communication among students while maintaining a satisfactory level of comprehension.

### 7. Conclusions

All things considered, the jargon words and slang related to Internet Technology play an important role in communication among peers. Technical jargon describes terminology that can only be understood by those with a technical background. Rather than using normal, accessible words that can be easily understood by everyone, jargon is a kind of shorthand that is used to simplify communications among certain groups. It implies the use of words and phrases that are unintelligible to ordinary people, if these structures are taken out of context. Moreover, jargon is different from slang in that slang is an informal use of language, while jargon is simply a collection of terms and phrases that can only be understood by certain groups of people. However, jargon and slang are interwoven within the framework of Information Technology domain, as jargon is used to convey meaningful information in a convenient way and to exchange information optimally among students, whereas slang plays a role in constructing identity and helps students reinforce connection with their peer group.

### References:

- Anderson, Lars Gunnar, Trudgill, Peter. (1992). *Bad Language*, Penguin Books
- Finegan, Edward. (2008). *Language: Its Structure and Use*, Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth
- Greenough, James Bradstreet, Kittredge, George Lyman. (2011). *Words and Their Way in English Speech*, Nabu Press
- Gotti, Maurizio. (1999). *The Language of Thieves and Vagabonds. 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Canting Lexicography in England*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag
- Hudson Richard. (2010). *Sociolinguistics*. 2nd edition (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Shulman, H.C., Bullock, O. M., Colón Amil, D., Dixon, G. N. (2019). *Jargon as a barrier to effective science communication: Evidence from metacognition in Public Understanding of Science*, 28 (7), p. 847
- Yule, George. (2006). *The Study of Language*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---

### Article Info

*Received:* March 25 2022

*Accepted:* March 31 2022

---

**How to cite this article:**

Buşu, A. F. (2022). IT-Related Jargon and Slang - Necessity or Gibberish? *Revista de Ştiinţe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, no. 73/2022, 191-200.