When Mistake Rolls up Its Sleeves and Becomes Slang

by Elisa Mattiello

1. INTRODUCTION

"Slang is language that rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands and goes to work". This is how the American poet Carl Sandburg defined the linguistic phenomenon of slang in the *New York Times* in 1959. Although this definition is somewhat restrictive and limiting, it exactly describes the nature of slang, suggesting its peculiarities of informality, vulgarity, and rudeness. It is not surprising, therefore, that the semantic area of 'mistake', with its negative connotations of awkwardness, ineptitude, and consequent disapproval, is prolific in new slang words and phrases which enrich the lexicon of contemporary English. The noun *wrongo* [1937], for instance, attested in *Green's Dictionary of Slang* (henceforth, GDS) with the meaning 'a mistake, error or lie', is used in a 2009 exchange reported in *Urban Dictionary* (henceforth, UD):

(1) Excited woman says: "I just bought this Louis Vuitton bag for $20! What a deal! I can't believe that I…" "**WRONGO**! IT'S A FAKE!"… said by a truthful male while pointing. (UD, 2009)

The etymology of the term – derived from the adjective *wrong* and the slang suffix *-o* used variously to create nouns from adjectives (e.g. *pinko* 'a communist', *weirdo* 'an eccentric', GDS) – suggests both that the word is outside the grammar of standard language, or "extra-grammatical" (Mattiello 2013), and that its meaning is

derogatory. The base, *wrong*, is commonly used to indicate what deviates from correct norms. Furthermore, another slang meaning of *wrongo* which has been used, according to GDS, since 1938 is 'a criminal; an undesirable person', whose negative connotations similarly conform to the area of 'deviation' from integrity and rectitude.

This study aims to show how slang has enriched the twentieth/twenty-first English lexicon with a variety of new words or neologisms whose meaning is connected with 'error', 'mistake', or 'misconduct'. These new words do not provide synonymous alternatives to standard words, but rather show (1) how small speech communities can develop their own new (and often secret or private) vocabulary to refer to undesirable entities or concepts, and (2) how slang contributes to colour neutral language with tinges of familiarity or abusiveness.

More specifically, the study conducts a quantitative analysis of modern dictionaries of slang and advanced searches in both general English and English slang dictionaries with the goal of demonstrating that slang accounts for a considerable part of the English lexicon, especially that part which is innovative, original, and out of the ordinary.

A more detailed qualitative analysis of the slang database collected from the same sources has the goal of substantiating that slang departs, both morphologically and semantically, from Standard English linguistic norms/meanings. In terms of creativity of the new words, slang contributes with extra-grammatical formations and peculiar affixes, or irregular word-formation processes. In terms of originality of the words' semantics, slang adds new meanings to existing words, thus increasing ambiguity and difficulty in interpretation. For instance, the word *mistake* [1600] which in standard language variously refers to 'a misconception about the meaning of something', 'a thing incorrectly done or thought', or 'an error of judgement' (OED3), has acquired since 1957 the slang meaning of 'an unplanned pregnancy and the child that follows', as in:

(2) Arthur was mum's **mistake** before she met our dad. (GDS, 1957)

The metaphorical extension from an abstract concept (error) to concrete ones (pregnancy, baby) may generate vagueness and difficulty in understanding. However, the conceptual mapping between the domain of 'mistake' and that of 'unplanned pregnancy', or 'unplanned baby', suggests correspondences of undesirability, unintentionality, and related surprise or concerns that cannot be expressed by any equivalent standard term.

Thus, the motivations behind the transgressing nature of slang are not only negative or intended to be damaging. On the one hand, slang words often obstruct form and meaning recognition, but, on the other hand, they can facilitate group cohesiveness, or help convey semantic denotations/connotations that ordinary language does not commonly express. Evidence from the semantic area of 'mistake' will help corroborate these claims.

2. METHODOLOGY

Since the focus of attention in this paper is on modern English lexicon, the data collected for the analysis belongs to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sources for this data are both online dictionaries (GDS, OED2-3, UD, *Cambridge Dictionaries Online* 2016, hereafter CDO) and paper dictionaries (*The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* 2007, henceforth, CNPDS).

Data was collected via both advanced search and manual selection. The former provided consistent data for the quantitative analysis, selecting the entries whose meaning is related to 'mistake'. The latter refined automatic search with close reading of data, choosing only relevant examples and excluding, e.g., dated or unrelated terms. A manual search was also necessary for paper dictionaries, such as CNPDS, or for UD, where the advanced search tool only allows for entry quest, rather than meaning quest.

A remark on the concept of 'neologism' vis-à-vis related notions, such as 'nonce word' or 'occasionalism', is also in order in this section on methodology. According to Dressler (1993: 5028), neologisms are "new words which are meant to enrich the lexical stock of a language (or which are already accepted as such)". Nonce words (or occasionalisms) instead refer to "ad hoc formations which are coined for a single occasion only, that is, just for a specific chunk of a text, with no pretension for survival in ordinary language" (Dressler 1993: 5028). However, new words that are mainly produced for specific textual effects, but have not been recognised by lexicographers or the speech community, go beyond the scope of our study. In other words, only slang words that have become established, or institutionalised, in the English lexicon (Brinton and Traugott 2005: 45) have been included in the analysis. The analysis lastly involves neosemantisms, or old words with new meanings. The detection of this type of entries was possible via advanced search, looking for standard headwords as main entries, which also acquire a slang label and (a) new sense(s) connected with 'mistake' in the word description.

3. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

An advanced search in the OED with 'slang' as label and 'mistake' as word description produced 45 results, 22 entries of which (48.8%) were relevant to our research. Words such as *bloomer* [1889] 'a very great mistake' and *howler* [1872] 'a glaring blunder, esp. in an examination' were excluded because diachronically irrelevant. By contrast, some words were counted twice because they actually represented two separate (that is, syntactically different) entries in the dictionary: e.g., the noun *boob* [1934] 'a foolish mistake or blunder' and its converted verb [1935] 'to make a foolish mistake or blunder'.

A parallel search with 'error' in headword definition gave 62 results, all of which proved, however, to be unconnected with our research after close reading, whereas a

'blunder' search gave 32 results, which entirely overlapped with the 'mistake' search results.

An advanced search in the electronic edition of GDS with 'mistake' specified in the 'definition sense' produced 83 results, 71 entries of which (85.5%) were relevant to our research. Of the relevant cases, 11 entries overlapped with the OED selected entries. The fact that some slang neologisms were not only recorded in specialised dictionaries of slang, but also in general English dictionaries confirmed their establishment in the lexicon.

Crosschecking some of the slang neologisms in UD allowed for further evidence of the institutionalisation of the terms and of their current use in authentic contexts. For instance, the earliest attestation of slang *boo-boo* 'a foolish mistake or blunder' in the OED is:

(3) Defense Secretary Wilson, whose recent **boo-boo**… threatens to become historic. (OED2, 1954)

but UD also mentions its use in the current century, fifty years later:

(4) Oh darling I made a **boo boo**! (UD, 2005)

The case of *goof* 'a mistake, esp. in an entertainment; a gaffe' is analogous. The OED records its earliest use in 1955:

(5) He was convinced there was no '**goof**' by the government at all in the polio vaccine distribution program. (OED2, 1955)

and UD confirms its recent use, both as a noun 'a careless mistake; a slip' and as a verb 'to make a silly mistake'. The latter use is also illustrated by:

(6) If Tom hadn't **goofed** and missed that shot, we'd have won the game. (CDO, 2016)

Confirmation of the slang words establishment in the lexicon was also given by Dalzell and Victor's (2007) CNPDS, where at least 17 entries were found pertinent to our research and overlapping with the OED's results. For instance, for *boo-boo* the authors mention the use as 'an error' in American children's vocabulary [1953], whereas *goof* is recorded with negatively connoted meanings in CNPDS (e.g. [1916] 'a silly, soft or stupid person', [1952] 'to ruin'), but none of these meanings strictly belongs to the 'mistake' area, although alluding to it (e.g. a 'stupid person' is one that may 'make mistakes').

The final database for the present research includes 39 nouns, 20 verbs, and 23 phrases (especially verb phrases), totalling 82 slang words and expressions.

4. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

4.1. Morphological Patterns

The area of 'mistake' includes a wide spectrum of slang formations that range from grammatical to extra- and even ungrammatical words. Regular word-formation processes intervene in the creation of derived words, such as the nouns *clanger* [1938] 'a mistake, esp. one that attracts attention' (OED2) and *floater* [1913] 'a mistake' (OED2), both obtained by regularly adding the suffix *-er* to a verb base. A contextualised example with *floater* is offered in:

(7) I've as good as said that we don't want your money... Just the sort of **floater** I would make, babbling on. (OED2, 1967)

Similarly, noun compounds belong to prototypical regular patterns: namely, Adj. + N (e.g. *bad poker* [1928] 'a mistake, a foolish move' GDS, *wrong riff* [1944] 'a mistake, a blunder' GDS, the latter is from jazz *riff* 'refrain') and N + N (e.g. *goofhead* [1952], *goofbrain* [1992], both metonymically designating 'a fool, a blunderer' GDS). Complex nouns from phrasal verbs include *carve-up* [1969] (GDS), *cock-up* [1946] (GDS/OED2), and *piss-up* [1950] (OED3), all meaning 'an error, a mistake'. The origin of the latter formations is military, on the pattern of *fuck-up* [1941] and earlier *balls-up* [1889] (cf. the verb phrase *make a balls of* [1937] 'to make a mistake, to get into trouble') (GDS).

Grammatical verb compounds are also common, as in *break ill* [1989] 'to make a mistake, to take the wrong course of action' (GDS) and *party foul* [1988] 'to behave in a socially unacceptable manner at a party' (OED3). The latter compound is also used as a noun, or as an exclamation in:

(8) Danny Chavis rushed over to hand me a gin-and-tonic, drawing the ire of model Oluchi when he spilled it on her arm. **Party foul**! (OED3, 2002, s.v. *party*)

Compounds from phrasal verbs are particularly productive with the preposition *up* (e.g. *bitch up* [1928] 'to make a mess of things, to make a mistake', *mess up* [1918]) and *out* (e.g. *chump out* [1969] 'to make a mistake', *sucker out* [1969]) (GDS).

Lastly, converted words either conform to the V ← N pattern (e.g. *beef* [1900], *boob* [1915], *boff* [1963], *faux* [1986], all meaning 'to blunder, to make a mistake', GDS), or to the opposite N ← V pattern: e.g., like Standard English *mistake* [1600] ← *to mistake* [*a*1382], the above-mentioned *goof* [1956] 'a mistake' (GDS) comes from the corresponding verb [1954]:

(9) When I make a **goof** or fail at school, I'm just being human, not bad or a fool! (GDS, 1994)

Extra-grammatical operations also contribute to slang formations related to 'mistake'. Extra-grammatical formations, such as abbreviations, acronyms, and reduplicatives, "do not belong to morphological grammar, in that the processes through which they are obtained are not clearly identifiable and their input does not allow a prediction of a regular output" (Mattiello 2013: 1). For instance, the clipping *boob* [1934] 'a foolish mistake or blunder' (OED2) is shortened from *booby*:

(10) With so many dates flying around, a few **boobs** occur. (GDS, 1999)

The etymology of the slang words *blue* [1941] and *ricket* [1958], both used for 'a blunder, a mistake', is more uncertain. According to the OED, the former either may be a punning alteration of a shortening of *bloomer* 'a very great mistake', or may have been shortened from the phrase *to turn the air blue* 'to use obscene language'. Similarly, *ricket* may be either shortened from the adjective *rickety* 'affected by or suffering from rickets' or come from the military word *ricochet*.

Clipped compounds include the military slang noun *black* [1941] 'a serious error' (GDS), a shortening from *black mark* 'a (formal or official) record or notification of a person's misdemeanour, bad behaviour, poor performance', and the US Campus slang term *faux* [1996] (GDS), from the French loanword *faux pas* 'a false step, a slip':

(11) That was a real **faux**. (GDS, 1996)

Another frequent operation is acronym formation, as with the military catchphrase *s.n.a.f.u.* [1941] (GDS), which abbreviates '*s*ituation *n*ormal, *a*ll *f*ucked (or *f*ouled) *u*p'. Since the Second World War, *s.n.a.f.u.* has also entered mainstream slang with the meaning 'a serious mistake':

(12) A single **snafu** by an airline can leave a lasting impression on travelers. (CDO, 2016)

It has also served as model for novel analogies, although none has had the same impact. Examples include, in diachronic order, *t.a.r.f.u.* [1944] '*t*hings *a*re *r*eally *f*ucked-*u*p', *f.u.b.b.* [1955] '*f*ucked *u*p *b*eyond *b*elief', *s.a.p.f.u.* [1955] '*s*urpassing *a*ll *p*revious *f*uck-ups', *f.i.g.m.o.* [1967] '*f*uck *i*t, *g*ot *m*y *o*rders', *f.u.b.i.s.* [1967] '*f*uck *y*ou *b*uddy, *I*'m *s*hipping out', *s.a.m.f.u.* [1984] '*s*elf-*a*djusting *m*ilitary *f*uck-up', and *t.u.i.f.u.* [1996] '*t*he *u*ltimate *i*n *f*uck *u*ps', the latter referring to 'a terrible blunder' (GDS). These formations are still productive in the twenty-first century: e.g., *f.u.m.t.u.* '*f*ucked *u*p *m*ore *t*han *u*sual' and *s.u.s.f.u.* '*s*ituation *u*nchanged, *s*till *f*ucked *u*p' are both dated 2003 in GDS. Among them, the military verb *f.u.b.a.r.* [1946] (GDS), formed, by conversion, from an adjective abbreviating '*f*ucked *u*p *b*eyond *a*ll *r*ecognition', is used for 'to blunder, to make a mess, to make a mistake':

(13) **Fubar** on the nets and you can louse up an entire landing team. (GDS, 1953)

Within extra-grammatical morphology, reduplication has also produced instances that belong to the 'mistake' area. For instance, from the noun *boob*, slang creates the reduplicated noun *boo-boo* [1954], as in:

(14)   Oops, I think I made a **boo-boo** there – I hope she's not too upset. (CDO, 2016)

In addition, phonaesthemes are relevant in slang neologisms connected with 'mistake': e.g., the phonaestheme *-oo-* /u:/, which is generally associated with a deprecative meaning, appears in the above-mentioned verb *goof*, but also in *boot* [1908] 'to blunder, to make a mistake':

(15)   I somehow managed to play three allegedly sacred gatherings without **booting** it. (GDS, 1958)

The origin of the latter verb is from sporting, where it suggested the action of reaching for a ball but kicking it rather than holding it.

Lastly, a number of processes have created ungrammatical formations related to 'mistake'. The process of "word manufacture" (Bauer 1983: 239), which consists in creating words *ex nihilo*, with no morphological motivation, has obtained the juvenile word *bish* [1953], used for 'a stupid mistake or situation' in:

(16)   It was just a sort of accidental **bish** – er – a mistake, I should say. (GDS, 1953)

Similarly, the etymology of *stumer* [1999] 'a blunder, a mistake' (and all its variants *schtumer*, *shtoomer*, *shtumer*, *stewmer*, *stoomer*, *stuma*, *stumour*) (GDS) and *jig* [1914] 'a problem; a mistake' (GDS) is unknown.

Other ungrammatical formations exhibit familiarising suffixes, which do not derive new words, but rather more colloquial variants of standard English (or, rarely, other slang) words. For instance, in *hummer* (← *humbug* 'a misunderstanding, esp. if trivial'), the suffix *-er* is added to a shortened base to convey the meaning of 'a minor or insignificant mistake', thus jocularly suggesting lack of importance or triviality:

(17)   I was caught off guard, but that's the way the man shows, on a **hummer** when you least expect it. (GDS, 1961)

A tricky case is in *boner* 'a serious mistake',[1] where the suffix *-er* conveys an idea of seriousness and gravity:

---

[1] The etymology of *boner* offered by the OED – i.e. from *bone* + Oxford University slang *-er* – may be debatable. Indeed, the *-er* suffix is commonly used in slang to make jocular formations on nouns, distorting their form (e.g. *footer* 'football', *brekker* 'breakfast', Mattiello 2008: 100-101), but not their denotative meaning. By contrast, in *boner*, the meaning 'serious mistake' is inexplicably given to a word whose base, *bone*, has nothing to do with 'mistake'. A more plausible origin for *boner* could be as a shortening from earlier *bone-head* [1908] 'a block-head' + *-er*.

(18)   Don't repeat your **boner**. (GDS, 1969)

Rhyming slang or "the process whereby an item is replaced by one or more words that rhyme with it" (Mattiello 2008: 42) has originated other expressions for 'mistake', namely *raffle ticket* [1992] (GDS) and *penny banger* [1992] (GDS), which respectively rhyme with 'ricket' and 'clanger'. In both cases, the understanding process is obstructed by the fact that the novel expressions rhyme with slang, rather than standard words.

Folk-etymology and mispronunciation have finally contributed to the coinage of some slang neologisms. For instance, the French loanword *faux pas* [1676] has been adapted in slang as *fopper* [1909] (GDS), which is a more English-sounding word (cf. also antecedent *fox's paw* [*c.*1786] GDS).

4.2. Semantic Areas

Many of the novel terms or expressions that are used in slang to refer to the concept of 'mistake' or the action of 'mistaking' evoke a series of semantic areas characterised by negative (and often vulgar) features. What follows is a sample of contextualised cases from our database:

(19)   It's **bad poker** 'a mistake, a foolish move' to assume that all these Communists in Europe and Asia are being made by Joe Stalin or Karl Marx. (GDS, 1953)

(20)   Far from committing the **black** 'serious mistake, blunder' they expected, she showed great heroism. (OED, 1943)

(21)   You've made a right royal **carve-up** 'error' and no mistake. (GDS, 1969)

(22)   Rappers boast and brag about their lyrical skills / But they all shut the fuck up when I **break ill** 'make a mistake'. (GDS, 1989)

(23)   "Dude, I just spilled my drink all over Sarah's lap!" "Wow… major **party foul** 'an instance of socially inappropriate behaviour at a party or social gathering'" (UD, 2009)

(24)   Just what a pissy-arsed bugger like you would say… You mean it might be one hell of a **piss-up** 'a blunder, a mistake'. (OED3, 1969)

(25)   He had been acquitted then, thanks to a **cock-up** 'an error' made by a couple of greedy, bribe-seeking detectives. (GDS, 2010)

(26)   Doctors are lucky. Their **fuckups** 'blunders' get buried under headstones. (GDS, 2011)

(27)   How many other times have you **dropped the ball** 'made a mistake' on patrol? (GDS, 1948)

(28)   Kevin really **dropped a bollock** 'made a mistake' when he tried to get his leg over with the girl at the club. It was Keith's wife! (UD, 2003)

(29)   He had to suffer the social stigma of having **messed up** 'made a mistake, failed' in front of 33 million people. (GDS, 2000)

The slang terms/phrases in bold allow us to identify the most frequently evoked semantic areas, including:

(a) <u>Wrongness</u>: The area of wrongness is triggered by the modifiers in some noun compounds, such as *bad* (*poker*) (see (19)), *wrong* (*riff*), by the abbreviated *faux* (from *faux pas*, § 4.1.), as well as by the above-mentioned suffixed noun *wrongo* (see § 1.).

(b) <u>Darkness</u>: The area of darkness is triggered by services' slang *black* (see (20)), which in the Second World War was shortened from the earlier compound *black mark* [1624] (§ 4.1.). The clipping retains the modifier *black*, which is semantically more salient than the head *mark*. *Black* is also used in the verb phrase *put up a black* [1941] 'to make a blunder', which Green (2010/2016) interprets as coming from 'the two black balls hauled to the mast of Royal Navy ships when a ship was out of control' (GDS, s.v. *black*).

(c) <u>Carving/Cutting</u>: The area of carving/cutting is suggested by the noun compound *carve-up* (see (21)), from a phrasal verb, as well as by the verb phrases *cut a big gut* [1936] 'to make a mistake, esp. an embarrassing one' (GDS, s.v. *cut*) and *cut a hog* [1912] 'to make a mistake, esp. when attempting a task beyond one's abilities' (GDS, s.v. *cut*). According to Green (2010/2016), the former expression – i.e. *cut a big gut* – refers to 'the butchering of an animal, when a slip of the knife, typically into the gall-bladder, can ruin the meat' (GDS).

(d) <u>Destruction</u>: The area of destruction is evoked by the idiomatic phrase *hit one's head on the ceiling* [1976], which is used in US Campus slang for 'to make a mistake' (Eble 1996, in GDS, s.v. *head*). Another expression related to the same area is *break ill* [1989] 'to make a mistake, to take the wrong course of action' (GDS, s.v. *break*), which is similarly used in Campus slang, but also in lyrics, as illustrated by (22).

(e) <u>Filth</u>: This area is triggered by the verb compound *party foul* [1989], which is described by Pamela Munro (1989) as 'to do something inappropriate or rude at a party or social gathering: especially, to vomit or spill alcohol' (OED3, s.v. *party*). The origin of this compound is indeed from the verb *foul* 'to render (materially) foul, filthy, or dirty', as when vomiting at a party. The use of the compound as a noun is illustrated in (23), while its use as an exclamation is in (8) (§ 4.1.).

Filth and dirtiness are also activated when urine and excrements are involved: e.g., in *piss-up* (see (24)), whose origin is from the coarse slang verb *piss* 'to urinate' (cf. the meaning of *piss up* [1977] 'to vomit' in GDS), and in the expression *my shit*, used as an apology to admit 'one's mistake' (GDS).

(f) <u>Sex</u>: This is another area activated, for instance, by words related to sexual organs. The compound *balls-up* [1889] was firstly used in military slang with the meaning 'a blunder, an error' (GDS). Then it acted as model for analogical compounds having the same meaning, namely *cock-up* and *fuck-up* (see (25)-(26) and § 4.1.). Another verb phrase related to the action of 'mistaking' is *drop a ballock* [1922] (also *drop a bollock*, see (28)) 'to make a mistake, to blunder' (GDS), in which *ballock* is a slang word for 'testicle'. Synonymous phrases offered by CNPDS include *drop a clanger* [1942] 'to make a mistake, especially in a social context' and *drop a goolie* [1961] 'to make a mistake', respectively based on *clangers* and *goolies* 'the testicles'.

(g) <u>Drop</u>: The area of drop is activated by various phrases collocating with the verb *drop*. Besides the above-mentioned *drop a ballock*, *drop a clanger*, and *drop a goolie*, all involving a figurative drop, slang offers *drop a brick* [1923] 'to commit an indiscretion' (OED2, s.v. *brick*), *drop one's candy* [1908] 'to make a serious mistake' (GDS, s.v. *drop*), and *drop the ball* [1948] 'to make a mistake at a crucial moment' (GDS, s.v. *ball*). The latter, which is exemplified in (27), metaphorically alludes to sporting. A comparable metaphor is in *drop an oar in the water* [1998] (CNPDS, s.v. *drop*), which has been described as an elaboration and variation of *drop a bollock*, after rhyming slang *oars and rowlocks* for 'bollocks'.

(h) <u>Confusion</u>: The area of confusion is lastly activated by the verb *mess up* [1918] 'to make a mistake, to get into trouble, to fail' (GDS), as in (29), and by the noun *piss-up* [1950] 'a blunder, a mistake' (OED3), after the phrasal verb *piss up* meaning 'to ruin, make a mess of'.

The semantic areas in (a)-(h) share negative traits, connected with vulgarity ('sex'), uncertainty, vagueness ('darkness', 'confusion'), harm, damage ('carving/cutting', 'destruction', 'drop'), or disgust ('filth'). Therefore, these areas trigger associations of slang words with semantic connotations which are not commonly found in the standard terms *mistake*, *error*, or in *to (make a) mistake*.

For instance, in Standard English the idea of 'wrongness' is inherently activated by the standard noun *mistake* 'a thing incorrectly done or thought', or by the verb *mistake* 'to take improperly, wrongfully, or in error', but features connected with 'filth' or 'sex' are not involved in these items.

Moreover, in standard language 'wrongness' may be metaphorically alluded to, for example, by the figurative meaning of *slip* or *faux pas* 'false step'. Indeed, they both metaphorically refer to the wrong movements one makes when sliding, taking a wrong step, or going in the wrong direction. This figurative interpretation is comparable to slang phrases connected with 'drop' (e.g. *drop the ball*, *drop one's candy*), which is in these cases regarded as the cause of 'mistake'.

However, slang highlights other negative aspects of mistake by associating it to words or expressions which, in standard language, are viewed as damaging, harmful (*hit one's head on the ceiling*, *break ill*), undesirable (*cut a big gut*), or bad (*put up a black*, *bad poker*). Lastly, slang nouns, such as *piss-up*, *cock-up*, or *fuck-up*, may even suggest vulgar connotations, the phrases *drop a bollock/clanger/goolie* appear rude and abusive because of their sexual allusions, the verb *mess up* conveys informality, and

the verb/noun compound *party foul* expresses disgust. These connotative features are irreproducible by standard terms. Consequently, slang words and expressions are particularly suitable when the speaker intends to be offensive with his/her hearer, or when the informality and familiarity of the context allows for or require the use of colourful expressions rather than neutral language.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown the variety of novel slang formations connected with the semantic area of 'mistake'. From the morphological viewpoint, it has demonstrated that slang neologisms for 'mistake'/'to mistake' are created both via regular derivation or compounding processes, and via extra-grammatical operations. Irregular (ungrammatical) formations, such as those obtained via word manufacture, folk-etymology, or rhyming slang, have also confirmed the creativity of slang. From the semantic viewpoint, the study has demonstrated that the slang words and expressions used for the concept of 'mistake' or the action of 'mistaking' convey shades of meaning which are absent from corresponding neutral standard terms. For instance, the connotations of vulgarity, familiarity, rudeness, and undesirability make slang words particularly suitable to informal conversation, or for their use among members of the same small speech community, such as college students, theatre actors, or the armed forces. More generally, the diachronic study of slang words for 'mistake' has substantiated the claim that, especially since the twentieth century, many slang neologisms and neosemantisms have enriched the English lexicon with new words and novel meanings.

WORKS CITED

Bauer L., 1983, *English Word-Formation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Brinton L.J. and E. Closs Traugott, 2005, *Lexicalization and Language Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Cambridge Dictionaries Online (CDO), 2016, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/> (30 June 2016).

Dalzell T. and T. Victor, 2007, *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (CNPDS), Routledge, London.

Dressler W.U., 1993, "Word-Formation: Poetic licence", in R.E. Asher (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics. Vol. IX*, Elsevier Pergamon, Oxford, pp. 5028-5029.

Green J., 2010, *Green's Dictionary of Slang* (GDS), 3 Vols, Chambers, Edinburgh, Digital edition, 2016, <https://greensdictofslang.com/> (30 June 2016).

Mattiello E., 2008, *An Introduction to English Slang: a Description of Its Morphology, Semantics and Sociology*, Polimetrica, Monza.

Mattiello E., 2013, *Extra-grammatical Morphology in English. Abbreviations, Blends, Reduplicatives, and Related Phenomena*, De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin.

Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED, Second Edition OED2, Third Edition OED3), 1989-2016, Oxford University Press, Oxford, <http://www.oed.com/> (30 June 2016).

Urban Dictionary (UD), 1999-2016, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/> (30 June 2016).

_____

Elisa Mattiello is Researcher in English Language and Translation at the University of Pisa. She holds a Ph.D. in English Linguistics from the same University, where she teaches courses of English Linguistics and ESP. Her main scientific interests range in the fields of English varieties, word-formation, and ESP. She has authored two monographs – *An Introduction to English Slang: A Description of Its Morphology, Semantics and Sociology* (2008, Polimetrica) and *Extra-grammatical Morphology in English: Abbreviations, Blends, Reduplicatives, and Related Phenomena* (2013, De Gruyter) – a textbook – *The Popularisation of Business and Economic English in Online Newspapers* (2014/2015, Cambridge Scholars Publishing) – and various articles published in national and international journals or collections. A book on *Analogy in Word-formation* is currently in preparation.

elisa.mattiello@unipi.it