

# Check This One out: Analyzing Slang Usage among Iranian Male and Female Teenagers

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## Abstract

Slang usage in modern age Iran is a popular phenomenon among most male and female teenagers. How pervasive this variation of language use is among various age and sex groups in Iran has been a question of debate given the significance of religion in a theological system of social structure. The work presented in this study aims to investigate the effect of age and sex on variability of slang usage. Sixty Iranian participants were selected, and then were divided into three age groups (i.e. primary school, high school, and senior university students) each group consisting of ten males and ten females. A self-made questionnaire in the form of Discourse Completion Test (DCT) describing nine situations of friendly conversations was given to the participants. They were asked to make their choice on the responses, which ranged from formal to very informal style (common teenage slang expressions), or to write down what they wish to say under each circumstance. The results of the chi-square tests indicated that slang usage among high school students is more frequent as compared with other age groups. Unlike the popular belief suggesting that slang is used by boys rather than girls, the findings suggested that young Iranians both male and female use slang as a badge of identity showing their attachment to the social group they wish to be identified with.

**Keywords:** Slang expressions and terms, Age, Sex, Adolescents

## 1. Introduction

Slang refers to speech expressions used by a speech community (e.g. teenagers, criminals, etc.) that wishes to show its attachment to a favorable social identity; a usage which is not often approved of by other social groups. It is a style of usage that is not acceptable in situations outside the group and is unfavorable to the general population. Hudson (2000) believes that slang starts out as clever alternative ways of saying things which could otherwise be expressed in polite ways. On the other hand, Allan and Burridge (2009) argue that the politeness of this category of language is wedded to context, time and place. It has even been stated by Brown and Levinson (1978) that the use of slang (known as in-group language) is a positive politeness strategy that shows high involvement in a particular group. Slang also illustrates various generative processes through which language system intakes new words and usages including: neologisms, meaning extensions, derivations, clippings, borrowings, etc.

One particular type of slang is the teenage slang, a language style used by adolescents or in other words a generation-specific use of language. An important function of this type of slang is to create an identity which is distinct from the general adult world. Adolescents usually make themselves distinct from children and adults by using a style of language which demonstrates their belonging to their own age group and their distinction from other age groups (Chambers, 1995). Teenagers usually do not use such expressions in their interactions with other generations whom they generally claim to be outsiders and do not approve of their usage. Teenage slang changes rapidly because people are teenagers for a limited period of time, when adults, they become outsiders and gradually forget the group words and the developments happening in the course of time to the old expressions and meanings.

Before the 1990s, the analysis of age and generation-specific use of language was seen relatively straightforward. A series of studies during the last two decades have problematised this area of research and questioned some issues that had previously been taken for granted (e.g. Cheshire, 2005; Coupland, 1997; Giles et al., 2000; Ota et al., 2000). Most of the early research in this area considered adult language as the target; thus, children's language was conceptualized



At the end of the questionnaire the participants were asked if they were familiar with these expressions before; if so, they were asked to mention the way they got familiar with these expressions.

### 2.3 Procedure

Initially, the questionnaires were handed out to the sixty participants. Then, they were told to read the instructions of the questionnaire carefully and answer the questions. They were asked to write their age, sex and level of education before starting to answer the questions and were told to keep it in their minds that the conversations were between them and one of their close friends of the same sex. In other words, when the females are talking to one of their close friends who is a female (i.e. a female to female conversation) and when the males are talking to one of their close friends who is a male (i.e. a male to male conversation). Fifteen minutes time was allotted to fill out the questionnaires, but more time was also given on demand. The design of the study included three variables: two social variables which were age and sex, and a linguistic variable that was slang usage.

### 3. Results

After the questionnaire data were collected, the formal, colloquial and very informal answers (i.e. the most common slang expressions used) were counted and tabulated (See Tables 3 – 5). Figure 1 illustrates the answers given by the three age groups.

Eleven chi-square tests were run to see whether the frequency of slang usage differs in the three age groups and whether males and females differ in using slang expressions. The results of six chi-square tests indicated that the three age groups significantly differed in the frequency of the formal, colloquial and slang expressions they provided: primary school (*males*,  $\chi^2 = 13.06, p < 0.05$ ; *females*,  $\chi^2 = 17.27, p < 0.00$ ); high school (*males*,  $\chi^2 = 35.27, p < 0.00$ ; *females*,  $\chi^2 = 20.87, p < 0.00$ ); and senior undergraduates (*males*,  $\chi^2 = 16.46, p < 0.00$ ; *females*  $\chi^2 = 24.27, p < 0.00$ ).

As it is shown in Table 3, the subjects in the first age group (primary school students) tended to use the informal style more frequently when communicating with their friends, and slang expressions was not favorable to this age group. Therefore, we can infer that slang usage is less popular among the children below the age of twelve. However, the results of the chi-square test indicated that among those boys and girls who were familiar with slang expressions in this age group, boys significantly differed with girls and used more slang expressions than girls ( $\chi^2 = 5.00, p < 0.05$ ).

Table 4 illustrates that the participants in the second age group (high school students) used slang expressions much more in their conversations with their peers. According to the data obtained, there was a slight difference between the females and males in slang usage in this age group; however, the result of the chi-square test showed the difference was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 0.49, p > 0.05$ ).

The data in Table 5 indicate that the slang usage among the third age group (senior university students) was less than the second age group. When comparing the results obtained for these two age groups, it can be seen that the males belonging to the third age group still continue to use slang expressions; however, the females of this group used these expressions less than the females of the second age group. Therefore, we can suggest that females entering in the adult age group tend to change their choice of words when talking with their peers and they use less slang terms. In this age group, it was also seen that males use slang expressions much more than females ( $\chi^2 = 8.9, p < 0.05$ ), which shows the difference between males and females in their language use.

Two other chi-square tests were run to see whether the frequency of the slang usage was the same among the females and males of the three age groups. The results obtained depicted that there was a change in the slang usage pattern of these three age groups (*males*  $\chi^2 = 6.49, p < 0.05$  and *females*  $\chi^2 = 22.20, p < 0.00$ ). Figure 2 demonstrates the changing pattern of the slang usage among children, teenagers and adults.

### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, it appears that in Iran like other countries age is a determining factor in slang usage. The primary school participants (mean age 8.7) are not familiar with the entire slang expressions used by teenage groups and do not know the meanings of most of the slang expressions. They consider it as inappropriate language and believe that the students who use this kind of language are impolite. However, teenage slang usage has been seen more often among high school students. It can be concluded that Iranian adolescents like most of the speakers of various other languages use slang as a badge of identity showing their attachment to the social group they wish to be identified with. This finding is interesting considering the emphasis the educational system places on religious and ethical norms to be followed by the youngsters. The pattern of use did reveal that adolescents in Iran are more influenced by their peers rather than by the training system sponsored by the Government and families. Regarding the age effect our data support Chambers (1995) and Hudson's (1996) claim concerning adolescents' preferences in their speech with their peers resulting in rich variation in language use.

The frequency of teenage slang usage of the participants who had left their teenage-hood and entered their adult-life (the third age group), displayed a decreasing slope, indicating that they no longer tend to reveal their membership to the social group of their teenage time; the change from a free liberal style towards a radically constrained style which followed the social norms could demonstrate how motivation for conformity increased as reflected in their speech preferences. In the first and third age groups, males used slang words and expressions more than females. Males display, by using these expressions, their toughness, representing their masculinity, their society requires of them; in contrast, females usually are more cautious than males in their choices of style, which is in line with Tannen's (1990) belief about the difference between males and females in their language use. However, it seems that male and female differences in speech are not significantly obvious in the speech of adolescence.

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Table 1. The mean age of the three age groups

	Primary school students		High school students		Senior university students	
	male	female	male	female	male	female
Mean age	8.8	8.6	16.6	16.3	22.9	23.0

Table 2. The slang expressions used in the questionnaire

N o.	Farsi slang expressions and their English transliteration	Translation
1	<i>Paye-ie?</i> Column 2 <sup>nd</sup> sing	Are you in the mood to do sth?
2	<i>sooti</i> dad-ie, <i>zaye</i> kard-ie. whistle gaye-2 <sup>nd</sup> sing spoiled past-do-2 <sup>nd</sup> sing	You shouldn't have said that.
3	<i>khafan-e</i> awesome-is	It's very exciting and has a lot of action.
4	<i>rele-e</i> Set-is	It's ok.
5	<i>kaf</i> <i>mi-kon-ie</i> bubble pres-do-2 <sup>nd</sup> sing	It's really excellent.
6	Golabi-e Pear-is	It's really easy.
7	<i>Sare</i> <i>kar-esh</i> gozasht-am On work-him/her put-1 <sup>st</sup> sing	I got rid of her/him.
8	<i>Pichond-am-esh</i> turn-1 <sup>st</sup> sing- her/him	I fooled her/him.
9	Bache <i>maye-dar-e</i> Child liquid-have-is	She/he is very rich.

Table 3. Answers given by the first age group (primary school students)

	Males	Females	Males %	Females %
Formal Answers	16	28	17.8	31.1
Colloquial Answers	44	47	48.9	52.2
Slang Expressions	30	15	33.3	16.7
Total	90	90	100	100

Table 4. Answers given by the second age group (high school students)

	Males	Females	Males %	Females %
Formal Answers	7	11	7.8	12.2
Colloquial Answers	30	33	33.3	36.7
Slang Expressions	53	46	58.9	51.1
Total	90	90	100	100

Table 5. Answers given by the third age group (senior university students)

	Males	Females	Males %	Females %
Formal Answers	12	20	13.3	22.2
Colloquial Answers	37	52	41.1	57.8
Slang Expressions	41	18	45.6	20
Total	90	90	100	100

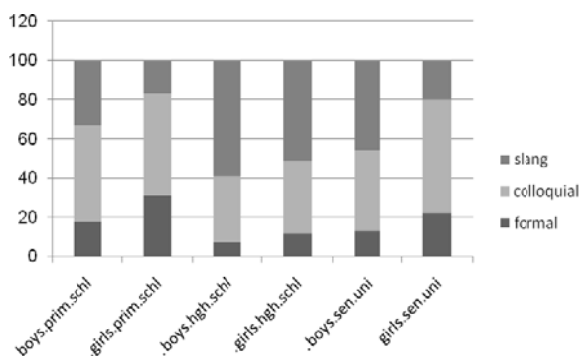


Figure 1. The answers of the three age groups (%)

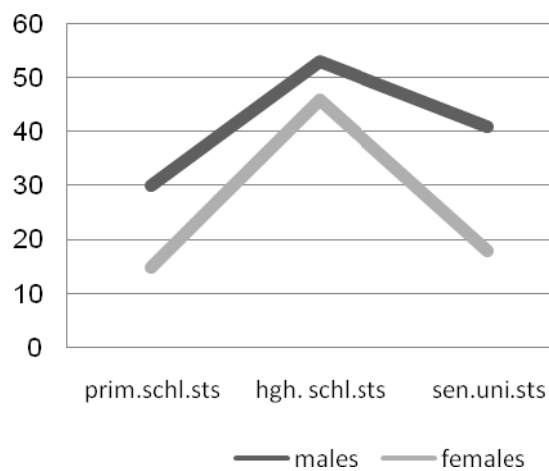


Figure 2. The slang usage of the three age groups (%)

## 6. Appendix:

### Please fill out this section:

Name:..... Sex:..... Level of education:.....

### Please answer the following questions:

(Note that these conversations are made between you and one of your best friends)

1. If you wanted to invite your best friend to come with you to the cinema what would you say?

- a) *Paye-ie* be-ri-m sinama? (slang expression)  
column- 2<sup>nd</sup> sing subj-go-we cinema? (transliteration)
- b) Aya shoma mayel-id ba man be sinama bi-ya-id? (formal style)  
ques-marker you interested-3<sup>rd</sup>pl with I to cinema subj-come-3<sup>rd</sup>pl? (transliteration)
- c) Mi-ya-ie be-ri-im sinama? (informal style)  
pres-come-2<sup>nd</sup> sing subj-go-we cinema?
- d) Any other thing you would say:

2. If you wanted to tell your best friend she/he has said the wrong thing at the wrong time, how would you tell her/him?

- a) Ei baba *sooti* dad-ie, *zaye* kard-ie. (slang expression)  
Oh daddy whistle gave-3<sup>rd</sup> sing spoiled past-do-2<sup>nd</sup> sing (transliteration)
- b) Kash in harf-o ne-mizad-ie. (informal style)  
wish this word-obj.marker neg.past.hit-2<sup>nd</sup> sing (transliteration)
- c) Behtar an bod ke in chenin sohbat nemikardid (formal style)  
better this was that this such talk neg.past.dot-3<sup>rd</sup> sing (transliteration)
- d) Any other thing you would say:

3. If you wanted to tell your best friend that you have seen a very exciting movie with a lot of action, what would you say?

- a) Ye film-i did-am kheili *khafan* bud. (slang expression)  
One film-det past-see-1<sup>st</sup> sing very awesome was
- b) Ye film por hayejan va jalebi didam (formal style)  
One film full excitement and interesting past-see-1<sup>st</sup> sing (transliteration)
- c) Ye film bezan-bezan did-am (informal style) (transliteration)  
One film hit-hit past-see-1<sup>st</sup> sing
- d) Any other thing you would say:

4. If you wanted to tell your best friend that everything is set and okay regarding an issue, what would you say?

- a) Hame chiz *rele-ast* (slang expression)  
every thing set-is (transliteration)
- b) Hame chiz moratab ast (formal style)  
every thing in order is (transliteration)
- c) Hame chiz seri-e (informal style)  
every thing series-is (transliteration)
- d) Any other thing you would say:

5. If you wanted to tell your best friend that something is excellent and without any faults, what would you say?

- a) Kheili *bahal-e kaf mikon-ie* be-bin-ish (slang expression)  
Very awesome-is bubble pres-do-2<sup>nd</sup> sing subj-see-2<sup>nd</sup> sing-her/him (transliteration)
- b) Bi-nazir ast (formal style)  
without-same is (transliteration)
- c) Harf na-dar-e (informal style)  
word neg-have-3<sup>rd</sup> sing (transliteration)
- d) Any other thing you would say:

6. If you wanted to tell your best friend that something is very easy, what would you say?

- a) Kheili *golabi-e* (slang expression)  
very pear-is (transliteration)
- b) Kheli sade ast (formal style)

- very simple is (transliteration)
- c) ab khordan-e (informal style)  
water eating-is
- d) Any other thing you would say:
7. If you wanted to tell your best friend that you wanted to get rid of a person and sent him to do a useless thing, what would you say?
- a) *sare* *kar*-esh gozashtam. (slang expression)  
On work-him/her put-1<sup>st</sup>sing (transliteration)
- b) *Ou* *ra* *donbale* *kar* *bihude*-ie *ferestad*-am. (formal style)  
she/he obj-marker after work useless-det past-send-1<sup>st</sup>sing (transliteration)
- c) *ferestad*-am-esh *donbale* *nokhod* *siyah* (informal style)  
past-send-1<sup>st</sup>sing-him/her after *pea* *black*. (transliteration)
- d) Any other thing you would say:
8. If you wanted to tell your best friend that you have given a nonsense reply to person since you didn't want to tell him/her the truth, what would you say?
- a) *Pichond*-am-esh (slang expression)  
past-turn-1<sup>st</sup>sing-him/her (transliteration)
- b) *Javab*-e *bi*-sar-o *tah* *be* *ishan* *dad*-am (formal style)  
answer without-head-and bottom to he/her past-give-1<sup>st</sup>sing (transliteration)
- c) *Ye* *cherto*-pert-i *javabesh* *dadam* (informal style)  
One nonsense-det answer-him/her past-give-1<sup>st</sup>sing (transliteration)
- d) Any other thing you would say:
9. If you wanted to tell your best friend that somebody is very rich and has never had any problems, what would you say?
- a) *bache* *maye*-dar-e (slang expression)  
child liquid-have-3<sup>rd</sup>sing (transliteration)
- b) *Laye* *pare* *ghu* *bozorg* *shode* *ast*. (formal style)  
inside feather swan big become is (transliteration)
- c) *bache* *pol*-dar-e (informal style)  
child money-have-3<sup>rd</sup>sing (transliteration)
- d) Any other thing you would say:
10. Have you heard these expressions before if yes, explain where and how?