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# "Cool" Communication in the Classroom: A Preliminary Examination of Student Perceptions of Instructor Use of Positive Slang

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*This study explored participants' perceptions of instructor use of positive slang (e.g., "cool," "awesome," "sweet") and its perceived impact on the classroom environment and teacher's credibility, as well as the rules governing its usage. Participants viewed a video of a positive slang-using teacher and then responded to several open-ended survey questions. The results demonstrate that students generally appreciate teacher use of positive slang and cite the potential benefits of its usage. Implications of teacher use of positive slang are discussed.*

Beginning with the first class session and continuing until the end of the term, what an instructor says in the classroom is likely to influence student motivation and affect toward the teacher and/or the course as well as influence students' perceptions of the classroom climate. The language a teacher employs in classroom communication may range from informal words common to the typical college student population (e.g., "awesome" or "cool") to jargon-laden language that overshoots students' academic abilities (Giles & Williams, 1992). According to Jannedy, Poletto, and Weldon (1994), most people, including university instructors,

occasionally make use of informal and colloquial language such as slang. However, we know little about how students perceive such communication.

Few instructional communication scholars would dispute the fact that the way teachers communicate reflects their personality and affects students' perceptions of the teacher and the classroom climate. Communicator style refers to "the way one verbally, nonverbally, and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood" (Norton, 1983, p. 19). In terms of the relationship between communicator style and slang, it is reasonable to speculate that instructors who inject positive slang in classroom communication likely use language for emphasis to appear as lively, animated, and dramatic teachers (Norton, 1983).

**Communication Accommodation Theory**

Perhaps the reason that students perceive friendly, relaxed, animated, or dramatic instructors positively is that teachers adjust their behaviors toward the students in a form of "downward convergence" (Shepard, Giles, & LePoire, 2001). Since the first study in the 1970s, Giles and his colleagues have explored the concepts of convergence, divergence, and maintenance, developing what was first known as speech accommodation theory and has since evolved into communication accommodation theory (Shepard et al., 2001). The main thesis of the theory is that individuals use language to achieve a desired social distance between self and interacting partners (Giles, 1973).

Convergence refers to how "individuals adapt to each other's speech by means of a wide range of linguistic features, including speech rates, pauses and utterance length, pronunciations, and so on" (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987, p. 14). Communication accommodation theorists (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) indicate that convergence typically occurs when the speaker may need to gain social approval or when there is a high probability of future interaction.

In later drafts of the theory, Shepard et al. (2001) elaborate on the direction of convergence, noting that "upward movement (i.e., convergence) refers to a shift toward a consensually prestigious variety, whereas downward shifts (i.e., downward convergence) reflect a move toward more stigmatized or less socially valued forms of communication" (p. 37). For example, during a classroom discussion an instructor may downwardly converge to students by saying "Hey, that's an *awesome* example!" Additionally, while lecturing on Aristotle's persuasive appeals, an instructor may say "Aristotle created three *cool* persuasive appeals that you may use in your speeches. They are ethos, pathos, and logos." An instructor may employ downward convergence (e.g., using positive slang to adopt the speech patterns of students) to gain social approval of the students because of the high probability of future interaction or the desire to have students regard the content (and the instructor) warmly.

*Slang*

Eble (1996) defines slang as "an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a

group or with a trend or fashion in society at large'' (p. 11). Martin, Weber, and Burant (1997) argue that slang

> differs from verbally aggressive messages in that there is no intention to hurt anyone by using slang. While certain slang words may be considered offensive by some, unless a person intentionally says a slang word to offend someone, using slang is not an aggressive communication act. (p. 4)

For the purpose of this study, positive slang refers to informal language that a speaker utilizes to signal identification with the listener. For example, a speaker may use terms, such as ''cool,'' ''sweet,'' or ''awesome'' to identify or relate to a younger listener. Teachers may use positive slang to establish or reinforce social identity in the classroom or as a mechanism to improve classroom climate by attempting to reach a specific age group. Furthermore, teachers may strategically use positive slang to enhance verbal immediacy and reduce psychological distance between themselves and their students (Gorham, 1988; Mottet & Richmond, 1998).

While positive slang may serve as an effective form of classroom communication, negative slang can have adverse effects on classroom communication phenomena. For the purpose of this project, negative slang refers to informal language that may be perceived offensive by the listener. As a result of a speaker's negative slang use, receivers may consider meanings to be offensive, depending upon the communicative interaction and context (Martin et al., 1997). For example, ''jerk,'' ''waste,'' and ''shit'' illustrate negative slang that may be considered offensive by some, would be viewed by most as being inappropriate for the classroom, and would likely have a negative effect on student learning and perceptions of the instructor.

Combined, the theories and research presented here suggest that the use of language (slang) and the influences (communicator style) and processes (accommodation) of that language use are central to developing a positive classroom climate. However, a paucity of research exists examining student perceptions of teacher use of positive slang. Given this lack of research attention and the theories and research summarized here, we posed the following research question:

> RQ:   *What are participants' initial perceptions of an instructor who uses positive slang?*

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 126 students (48 men, 78 women) enrolled in sections of an introductory communication course at a large Midwestern university. Because the introductory communication course is required of all students at the university, the participants represented various academic disciplines. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years ($M = 18.18$, $SD = .83$).

### Procedures and Instrumentation

All procedures were approved through the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants, who were offered extra credit for participation, viewed a four-minute

video of a male confederate presenting a classroom lecture on group conflict. The video was a "shoulder-shot" (from the chest up) of the confederate (i.e., the teacher did not gesture or move around the room). During the presentation, the teacher read from a teleprompter and injected the following positive slang terms: *cool, awesome, rocks, sweet*, and *let's get fired up!* These slang terms were generated from a focus group comprised of university students; the focus group served as a pilot study for this project. The slang terms were used once and equally spaced throughout the four-minute script. The confederate was a 36-year-old male communication teacher and scholar with a doctoral degree in instructional communication and 14 years of university teaching experience.

After viewing the video, participants responded to three open-ended survey questions to gauge their perceptions of the instructor's use of positive slang (Denzin, 1989):

1. What did you like about the instructor's use of slang in the video and why?
2. What did you NOT like about the instructor's use of slang in the video and why?
3. What suggestions do you have for the instructor in regard to his presentational style?

*Stimulus check*

To assess the presence of slang in the video, participants responded to, "The instructor in this video used slang," on a five-point Likert scale with items ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Data collection occurred during regularly scheduled class meetings. Participants took, on average, 10–15 minutes to respond to the survey questions.

*Data Analysis*

We followed Glaser and Strauss's (1968) interpretive, three-step comparison approach to working with the data: discovery, coding, and discounting. During initial analysis, the researchers worked together to identify emergent themes, concepts, and patterns inherent to the data after carefully reading through participants' answers several times. As we read through the answers, we focused on coding and sorting the data into appropriate coding categories through a constant comparison method. A full coherent sentence served as the unit of analysis. Each unit was compared to the other units in the category to ensure the cohesion of the categories. When all units were placed into categories, we conducted a cursory glance at the units placed under the categories and clarified any disagreements through discussion. The final phase of data analysis dealt with inferring meaning from the coded categories and understanding the data in context of the classroom environment and participants' meaning.

## Results

The participants provided a total of 153 comments (full coherent sentences) regarding the teacher's use of positive slang. They offered 86 responses to question one, 26

to question two, and 41 to question three. With regard to the stimulus check, a simple frequency distribution revealed a mean score of 3.56, indicating that participants detected the presence of slang in the video.

*What Did You Like about the Instructor's Use of Slang in the Video and Why?*

Several clear themes emerged in answers to this question: *Relate to students* (38 examples or 44.2% of the responses), *humor* (19 examples or 22.1% of the responses), *delivery of course material* (16 examples or 18.6% of the responses), and *comfort level* (13 examples or 15.1% of the responses). Participants made references to the fact that the instructor was attempting to relate to the audience. For example, several participants said: "It was geared more toward people my age. Even though he was older, the use of his language made me tune in more because I was used to the language," "It helped me to relate to the subject," "Felt more personal, like one-on-one communication," "I liked that he was trying to relate to his students," "I think it made him seem believable because he appeared more at my level."

According to the participants, slang also functioned as a form of humor in the classroom. Participants commented: "It was funny and attention grabbing," "Creative, funny, kept you watching," "It was kind of humorous because he was so serious and all of a sudden he said something like, 'that rocks.'" In essence, the participants perceived the teacher's use of positive slang as a method of incorporating unique informal communication in the classroom.

Participants also indicated that the confederate's use of positive slang improved his delivery of the course material. Participants said: "The slang the instructor was using was helpful, because it helped me to understand what point he was trying to make," "The slang made me pay more attention to him," "It helped the instructor keep the interest on the topic," and "It was used appropriately, and wasn't used excessively. Grabs your attention."

Participants also credited the teacher with establishing a comfortable classroom environment through his use of positive slang. "It made me feel on the same level as him; more comfortable," and "It made it more personal using words I know and can relate to." Additionally, some participants indicated that they would be more inclined to approach the instructor with class questions and concerns. "It made him seem more down to earth and easier to relate to/communicate with," "It makes him slightly comical and more approachable," and "It made him seem more down to earth and one the same level as the students."

*What Did You NOT Like about the Instructor's Use of Slang in the Video and Why?*

Through our analysis, we found that a majority of the participants perceived the teacher's use of slang positively, and as a result, a clear set of categories did not appear to emerge in answers to questions two and three. In their responses to question two, some of the participants noted that the confederate's presentation did not warrant the use of slang.

For example, one participant questioned the teacher's credibility: "He used slang like a student would use and I don't feel a teacher should use it very often." Other participants said the confederate was trying to be "cool," and that the use of slang appeared out of context for a teacher. Another participant commented: "He didn't use it right and he sounded unintelligent as if he was trying way too hard." One participant referenced a possible limitation to the study: "He just looks funny doing it because it's supposed to be an intellectual video." In this case, the participant likely expected the confederate's speech to be free of informal language because of the inherent formality of videotape.

*What Suggestions Do You Have for the Instructor in Regard to His Presentational Style?*

Participants offered diverse responses relating to the teacher's delivery of the material. Specifically, participants recommended that the teacher improve behaviors that were not present in the videotape due to the positioning of the camera and confederate. Some participants commented: "More movement with his entire body, not just his head and not look like he is reading from a teleprompter" and "It was somewhat boring—have more pauses otherwise it's too much like a lecture and typically people like to participate rather than be bored by words." Participants also said the teacher should incorporate "more use of body and arms" to engage the audience and "change voice tones and get audience involved." Finally, participants offered minor suggestions for the teacher: "His overall presentation was good, but as I stated above he seemed to be acting a little bit. I would have liked to have him seem more original, and show us more of his personality" and "No suggestions, keep on doing what you do."

## Discussion

Our results offer important implications for communication scholars. The findings shed new light on communication accommodation theory generally and downward convergence specifically. Based on the responses of our participants, it appears that instructors can successfully use downward convergence to gain the social approval of their students. Such approval, in turn, appears to positively affect students' affect for the instructor and course material. While the precise nature of this relationship needs to be more carefully examined in future research, it is clear that scholars can build upon the data from this study and employ communication accommodation theory as a framework for exploring teacher–student communication.

The findings of this study also have significant implications for instructors. Most importantly, the results of this project suggest that instructors should use positive slang cautiously. The findings highlight the fact that, as with any teaching tool, a certain style is not evaluated positively by all students. While this study examined a male teacher's use of slang, several instructor traits, such as age, sex, and communicator style, can affect how students perceive instructor use of positive slang. Furthermore,

student traits (e.g., cultural backgrounds, age, life experiences, learning styles) likely also affect how they perceive a teacher's use of positive slang.

The findings provide useful insight into the classroom climate that may be created by this unique use of language. The results support prior research (Cooper, 2001) in that positive slang may lay a firm foundation for a comfortable classroom environment that places the teacher in a positive light among his or her students. This may be especially important in the basic communication course where instructors frequently work with students who are apprehensive about the prospect of public speaking. It is important to note that we are not advocating that instructors encourage students to model slang behavior. Instead, teachers may use the speech device as a mechanism to improve class climate. Critics may pose a logical contradiction: we (as teachers) are training our students for professional careers. Slang can be inappropriate in the professional world: why should we be using positive slang in the classroom as we educate future professionals? Ultimately, the teacher who uses positive slang in the classroom faces the burden of resolving this issue for students. In an effort to use positive slang effectively and appropriately in the classroom, teachers should establish the difference between slang speech and professional speech, discuss the differences between each, and address when each would or would not be appropriate.

A few of the participants indicated that positive slang made the instructor seem unprofessional, which heightens concerns about how participants perceive the instructor's credibility. This is likely the result of the participants' lack of exposure to the teacher. Participants viewed a four-minute video of the teacher lecturing on a basic communication course concept. One can certainly argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess a presenter's credibility in a four-minute presentation. In the real classroom setting, students' perceptions are likely to change over the course of the semester as they become more acquainted with the teacher. Future research should explore students' perceptions of an instructor's use of positive slang after the classroom culture emerges in the third or fourth week of the semester. Also, rather than asking students questions about what they liked, did not like, and suggestions for improvement, future research might assume a more phenomenological stance. Such studies could ask students to discuss whether they notice anything different or unusual about a professor's use of slang in his or her presentation or prompt them to describe what they think this professor is like, as a person, teacher, and so on.

Given some of the participants' responses, it also seems possible that the medium used to prompt students mattered. A participant noted: "He just looks funny doing it because it's supposed to be an intellectual video." Because the teacher appeared in a brief video, participants may have expected the presentation to be formal and free of informal language. To provide an atmosphere more like a real classroom setting, scholars should examine participants' reactions to a "live performance" of a teacher who uses positive slang. In addition, researchers might also consider asking students to report their perceptions of a current slang-using teacher and then compare this professor with the confederate in the video. It may

be that a student's tolerance, impression, or preference for slang depends on a specific  teacher–student relationship.

This study explored participants' reactions to a male teacher's use of positive slang. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be applied to all teachers, simply to male instructors. Future research should examine how students perceive slang use by male instructors compared to female instructors. Beyond the sex difference, this may allow scholars to draw upon literature that explores communicative differences among males and females who may take a more masculine and/or feminine approach to communication (Beck, 1988; Fishman, 1978; Johnson, 1996; Lewis & McCarthy, 1988; Saurer & Eisler, 1990).

Instructional communication scholars should also explore students' perceptions of positive and negative slang and note the similarities and differences between each. This would provide a valuable starting point for a program of research with the potential to contribute substantially to our understanding of classroom communication. In addition, this line of research could further contribute to the refinement of communication accommodation theory by exploring the instructional implications of teachers' use of negative language to increase, rather than decrease, social distance. Furthermore, scholars may find it profitable to examine students' reactions to the age of the slang-using teacher. Scholarship in this area might examine communication barriers that exist between typical graduate teaching assistants, tenure-track professors, and their students.

Educators may interpret the results of this study and try their tongue at incorporating positive slang in the classroom; however, it is important to consider the factors that may affect student reactions to this colloquial form of speech. Without a doubt, future research in this area will enhance our knowledge of communication used during interactions between students and teachers. This, in turn, will place students in classrooms with teachers who are more aware of unique and, more importantly, effective forms of classroom communication.

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