The Chronicle of Higher Education
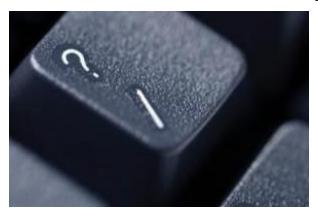
(Accessed December 23, 2013)

Lingua Franca

Language and writing in academe.

April 24, 2013 by **Anne Curzan**

Slash: Not Just a Punctuation Mark Anymore

In the undergraduate history of English course I am teaching this term, I request/require that the students teach me two new slang words every day before I begin class. I learn some great words this way (e.g., *hangry* "cranky or angry due to feeling hungry"; *adorkable* "adorable in a dorky way"). More importantly, the activity reinforces for students a key message of the course: that the history of English is happening all around us (and that slang is humans' linguistic creativity at work, not linguistic corruption).

Two weeks ago, one student brought up the word *slash* as an example of new slang, and it quickly became clear to me that many students are using *slash* in ways unfamiliar to me. In the classes since then, I have come to the students with follow-up questions about the new use of *slash*. Finally, a student asked, "Why are you so interested in this?" I answered, "Slang creates a lot of new nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. It isn't that often that slang creates a new conjunction."

Let me explain. Lots of us use the slash (/) in writing to capture two or more descriptions of the same thing, with a meaning something like "or," "and," or "and/or"—e.g., "my sister/best friend" or "request/require." The slash typically separates two things that are the same part of

speech or parallel grammatically; and we can say that slash out loud if needed: "my sister slash best friend."

Now I wouldn't write that phrase down that way, with the slash spelled out, but students tell me they now often do. A student kindly sent me some real examples from her Facebook chat (shared with her permission):

1. Does anyone care if my cousin comes and visits slash stays with us Friday night?

2. I have been asking everyone I know in the Chicago area if they're going slash if they'd willing [sic] to let me tag along slash show me around because frankly I'd have no idea how to get around Chicago on my own

Another student sent me this excerpt from her blog post:

3. ... culminating in Friday's shootout-slash-car-chase-slash-manhunt-slash-media-circus around the apprehension of the bombing suspect.

That same student then provided me this example of *slash*, which demonstrates a slightly different, although clearly related, meaning:

4. I spent all day in the UgLi [library] yesterday writing my French paper slash posting pictures of cats on my sister's Facebook wall.

As this sentence makes clear, the slash is distinguishing between (a) the activity that the speaker or writer was intending to do or should have been doing, and (b) the activity that the speaker or writer actually did or anticipated they would do (yes, I did use "they" as a singular right there—more on that in a future post).Other students provided these additional examples:

5. I went to class slash caught up on Game of Thrones. [I made sure to clarify that this was not in reference to our class!]

6. I need to go home and write my essay slash take a nap.

If the story of *slash* ended there, with a perfectly logical semantic extension of*slash* from its more conventional use, I wouldn't be writing about it here on Lingua Franca. But for at least a good number of students, the conjunctive use of*slash* has extended to link a second related thought or clause to the first with a meaning that is often not quite "and" or "and/or" or "as well as." It means something more like "following up." Here are some real examples from students:

7. I really love that hot dog place on Liberty Street. Slash can we go there tomorrow?

8. Has anyone seen my moccasins anywhere? Slash were they given to someone to wear home ever?

9. I'll let you know though. Slash I don't know when I'm going to be home tonight

10. so what've you been up to? slash should we be skyping?

11. finishing them right now. slash if i don't finish them now they'll be done in first hour tomorrow

The student who searched her Facebook chat records found instances of this use of *slash* as far back as 2010. (When I shared a draft of this post with the students in the class to make sure I have my facts straight, several noted that in examples like (7) and (9), they would be more likely to use a comma in between the clauses and a lower-case "slash.")

The innovative uses of *slash* don't stop there either: some students are also using *slash* to introduce an afterthought that is also a topic shift, captured in this sample text from a student:

12. JUST SAW ALEX! Slash I just chubbed on oatmeal raisin cookies at north quad and i miss you

This innovative conjunction (or conjunctive adverb, depending on how you want to interpret it) occurs, students tell me, even more commonly in speech than in writing. And in writing, it is often getting written out as *slash*, even in electronically mediated communication, where one might expect the quicker punctuation mark (/) rather than the five-letter word *slash*.

Slash is clearly a word to watch. Slash I do mean word, not punctuation mark. The emergence of a new conjunction/conjunctive adverb (let alone one stemming from a punctuation mark) is like a rare-bird sighting in the world of linguistics: an innovation in the slang of young people embedding itself as a function word in the language. This use of *slash* is so commonplace for students in my class that they almost forgot to mention it as a new slang word this term. That young people have integrated innovative *slash* into their language while barely noticing its presence is all the more reason that conjunctive *slash* might have staying power.