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Beyond Slayer Slang: Pragmatics, Discourse, and Style in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

[1] This special issue of *Slayage*, titled *Beyond Slayer Slang: Pragmatics, Discourse, and Style in* Buffy the Vampire Slayer, explores linguistic aspects of the show, as well as culture associated with it, beyond issues of lexis (that is, beyond slayer slang) as described in scholarship so far (that is, beyond *Slayer Slang*) into more broadly communicative structures of language, such as pragmatics (speech acts in their contexts), discourse (continuous speech longer than a sentence), and style (characteristic, perhaps self-conscious use of language), none of which excludes the others. The issue's purpose is two-fold: pursuit of linguistic interests and linguistic methods assist in the project of interpreting *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its cultural consequences; conversely, study of *Buffy* within the lines drawn here exercises linguistic methods and enriches the contribution of linguistics to contemporary intellectual and cultural life. On 22 September 1997, when I watched *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for the first time, I had no idea that a television show could be so lexically interesting, let alone that a single show would stand up to serious linguistic inquiry of all kinds. This issue measures the distance between then and now, but it isn't an end itself: a point of summary beyond slayer slang, it is also antecedent to further exploration of language in the Buffyverse.

[2] I first noticed slayer slang while surfing channels: I was sitting on my sofa, eating my dinner, plate balanced on my knee, when I heard Buffy say, "Love makes you do the wacky," and I thought, "Too true." I also reached for my notepad, in the way that lexicographers do, because I thought, "Huh. That's an interesting functional shift from adjective to noun," and I wanted a record of *wacky* in that hitherto unrecorded sense. I had never watched a show on the WB Network before that night; significantly, I heard slayer slang before I knew that I was watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I started watching regularly and took more notes, not intending to write anything particularly about slayer slang—I take notes about all kinds of language all of the time.

[3] Early in the afternoon of 13 August 1998, I realized that I had only four hours to write and submit an abstract to the American Dialect Society's annual meeting. In a panic, I thought through material I had collected about all sorts of American speech during the year and concluded that my best bet was to give a paper about slayer slang. I decided to call the paper "Slayer Slang." The conference paper, in other words, was an act of desperation, not part of a carefully considered program of research. I revised the paper as an article in two parts for *Verbatim: The Language Quarterly* (1999); eventually, the article became *Slayer Slang: A* Buffy the Vampire Slayer *Lexicon* (2003). You might call this scholarship by accretion rather than scholarship by design. In any event, *Slayer Slang* is a lexical study by a lexicographer and was barely meant to be what it is, let alone

anything more.
[4] *Slayer Slang* was well received on its own terms, but there has been an undercurrent of criticism ever since it was published. Some reviewers argued that lexis misses the point of language in the Buffyverse, that it necessarily underestimates *Buffy*'s quippiness, sense of humor, discourse structure, and style, all of which are much more interesting, much more complex, much more contextual, than any study of vocabulary alone could convey. At first, the complaint took me by surprise: undoubtedly, it had a point, but then all language is more than words; we don't do without dictionaries just because they can't capture language in all of its complexity. I came to slayer slang as a lexicographer, not as a fan, and, as a lexicographer and historian of English, I vouch for the value of a lexical study of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; yet I also accept the criticism and, more or less immediately after *Slayer Slang* was published, I began to consider how best to balance my lexical emphasis, whether over- or mis-.
[5] I found the answer at the Slayage conference in Nashville. Versions of the articles by Caroline Ruddell, Jesse Saba Kirchner, and Katrina Blasingame published in this issue of *Slayage* were presented there, and when I heard them or (in the case of Blasingame's paper) read them in the conference archive, I was impressed with how far the authors had taken study of Buffyspeak beyond lexis and how linguistics had led to fresh understanding of *Buffy* and its influence. Mark Peters was scheduled to speak at the conference, too, but was unable to attend; once I had determined to pursue publication of the other papers, however, I asked him to contribute an expanded version of the paper he had planned to present. While the rest of us were busy revising and editing, Cynthea Masson submitted the article published here, and the journal's editors passed it along to me, as particularly appropriate to a special issue on *Buffy* and linguistics. Some of the articles in the issue are completely new, then, and those aired earlier have been thoroughly reconsidered and revised. Authors and editors all hope that you will find them informative, illuminating, and, at times, provocative.
[6] Cynthea Masson's article, "'Is That Just a Comforting Way of Not Answering the Question?': Willow, Questions, and Affective Response in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," and Caroline Ruddell's "'I am the Law' 'I am the Magics': Speech, Power and the Split Identity of Willow in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," are both remarkable for their insight into Willow's character and her evolving position in the series, and they are surely right to focus on Willow's speech acts, because the show's writers certainly understood how certain types of speech project personality, social status, and power (both asserted and enacted, which are not exactly the same thing). Questions are put to various linguistic uses: we use them to assert facts ("Isn't that the button we're not supposed to push?"), challenge ("Do you feel lucky? Do you?"), apologize ("Have I hurt your feelings?"), command ("Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?"), deplore ("Isn't that just the ugliest child you've ever seen?"), congratulate ("Isn't she just the most beautiful child you've ever seen?"), and to do many other things. Questions can sound harsh or they can sound hesitant; they characterize a questioner both psychologically and socially. Masson recognizes the preeminence of questioning as a pragmatic motif in *Buffy* and as a characterological marker particularly important in Willow's case. Ruddell identifies the polar rhetorical modes central to the show: Buffy assumes and asserts (with mixed results) the power of argument and law; Willow enacts power in magic, by its nature performative speech act, in which saying and doing are the same thing (judges who give verdicts—when the judge says you're guilty, then you're guilty—and those who "perform" marriages—a couple is married when someone with authority pronounces that they are married—exercise analogous linguistic powers).
[7] While they serve *Buffy* studies when they identify pragmatic elements in the show,

Masson and Ruddell also serve linguistics by considering pragmatics issues within the frame of a television show, indeed, particularly in *Buffy*. Rarely can we consider "extreme" performativity in language, unless we consider magical speech "usual" in discourse. Rarely do we observe the gamut of questioning's illocutionary effects in the speech of a single person or have the opportunity to consider those effects in social context by watching the person live with them. Of course, a television show is an artificial context, but nearly every laboratory is, to some extent.

[8] Jesse Saba Kirchner's contribution, "And in Some Language That's English? Slayer Slang and Artificial Computer Generation," is a more explicitly formal linguistic study of Buffyspeak. It explores the extent to which slayer style is rule-governed and predictable by reducing its structure into syntactic and semantic operators in a sentence-generating program. In one sense, it is hard-core linguistic description of slayer style according to standard linguistic theory; in another, it is a heuristic for understanding the nature and "translation" of style; in yet another, it is a *jeu d'esprit* in which we can speculate about the likelihood that the Buffybot would ever really speak like Buffy. Kirchner acknowledges the incompleteness of his research: after all, slayer style is a collection of characters' styles; it is also a collection of writers' styles; so we will have to take up the challenge posed by Kirchner's preliminary work on homogenized slayer style and identify the rules that govern particular styles in more complex sentence-generating programs.

[9] Mark Peters's "Getting a Wiggins and Being a Bitca: How Two Items of Slayer Slang Survive on the *Television Without Pity* Message Boards" is the most lexical study in the issue. Peters has paid careful attention to the progress of slayer slang post-*Buffy* and concludes that, at least in television-related media, some terms and speech practices have had unexpectedly long lives and seem to have moved from slayer slang into broader registers of American speech, though not quite mainstream speech—yet. *Bitca* and *wiggins* are two of the most successful items, and I am especially pleased that *wiggins* is thriving. In *Slayer Slang*, I wrote that "*Wiggins* is my favorite item of slayer slang, but it hasn't caught on outside of the Buffyverse, and it probably never will, in spite of its natural attractions and position in the system of items built on *wig*, which ought to give it a big boost." I am happy to admit that I spoke too soon, happy that others agree with my preferences: *wiggins* may be one of slayer slang's more successful incursions into the mainstream, after all. In lexicography, evidence is always more important than commentary: Peters's article is informative and interesting throughout, but the appendix of *bitca* and *wiggins* citations is particularly valuable.

[10] Like Peters's article, Katrina Blasingame's contribution, "I Can't Believe I'm Saying It Twice in the Same Century … but 'Duh …'" The Evolution of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Sub-Culture Language through the Medium of Fanfiction," charts the progress of slayer slang beyond the Buffyverse into other sub-cultural speech. Many speech practices typical of *Buffy* are exaggerated or refined in fanfiction; sometimes the difference is a matter of linguistics, sometimes a matter of perspective. There is no doubt, however, that fanfiction's appropriation of those practices models the migration of linguistic forms from sub-culture to sub-culture in an increasingly sub-culturally organized world. Blasingame points out that purely lexical study of sub-cultural language misses the point to some degree because words (necessarily) taken out of context in the course of lexicography suffer attrition of sub-cultural-meaning-by-agreement. In other words, study of discourse and style entails the study of relevant sub-cultures, and fanfiction style amply demonstrates the point, just as it also illustrates the dissemination of slayer slang and, in its attenuated relationship to the source style, the gradual diminishment of its slayerness and metamorphosis into something else.

[11] I hope that my preliminary account of this special issue of *Slayage* encourages you to

read further. There isn't anything else like it in *Buffy* studies or linguistics; it is, I believe, further proof that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* invites interdisciplinary study and promotes interdisciplinary interest. I would like to thank the editors of *Slayage* for allowing the authors to share their work in this forum; I would like to thank the authors for sharing their work and so persistently, avidly pursuing the language of *Buffy* beyond slayer slang.