

Hella Controversial: A summary of both the grammatical and societal role of the slang term *hella*

PATRICK LE



WRITER'S COMMENT: *In my UWP 101 class, Theresa Walsh gave students free reign in choosing the topic for our final research paper, encouraging us to investigate what we were genuinely interested in. This way, we're not overwhelmed by the potential dryness of an instructor-assigned article; we can instead direct our efforts toward improving our writing as the quarter progresses. My research focused on the Northern Californian slang word "hella," and I hoped to establish a scientific explanation for this pervasive ornament of our vocabulary. Examining this sociolinguistic phenomenon proved to be as challenging as it was interesting, but Dan Villarreal, a PhD candidate in sociolinguistics at UC Davis, aided me throughout the research process. Though the essay's linguistic content may be a bit esoteric, I think that anyone who has had experience with the word "hella" (nobody in Davis is immune to its spread) can find some interest in the word's history and perception. Through the duration of the class, the task of refining my writing was made enjoyable thanks to Theresa's stimulating curriculum and invaluable support. I hope that this essay inspires readers to find an appreciation for language and the influence it has on our society.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *In this UWP 101 course, I asked students to establish a professional or disciplinary focus and then conduct an investigation of that subject through a series of writing assignments. Patrick's exceptional paper, "Hella Controversial," is an investigation of the Northern California slang term "hella" and began with research generated by notable UC Santa Barbara linguist Dr. Mary Bucholtz. Patrick developed his own treatment of the subject by gathering research that attempted to trace the emergence of the term in Northern California and addressed a few prevailing theories of its origins. Patrick's dedication to the research process shone through in his primary research. Students were all required to either interview an expert on the topic of their projects or collect primary data in some other way. Patrick interviewed UC Davis PhD candidate Dan Villarreal, but also surveyed his classmates in order to convey how UC Davis students who hail from both Northern and Southern California perceive those who use the divisive term.*

The paper is fascinating, especially for those of us who are familiar with the “hella” as “the primary linguistic Shibboleth that divides ‘NorCal’ and ‘SoCal,’” to borrow from Patrick’s discussion.

—Theresa Walsh, University Writing Program

Abstract

The following paper documents three aspects of the Northern Californian slang word *hella*: its grammatical usage, its origins, and its perception among Californians. After establishing its syntactic function and exploring its ambiguous history, I conducted a simple survey that examined various individuals’ different perceptions of *hella*. My survey borrows ideas from Dr. Mary Bucholtz et al’s existing studies of perceptual dialectology in California. Aided by PhD candidate Dan Villarreal, I compiled research and survey results to provide a platform for my social commentary about the linguistic dichotomy between Northern California and Southern California. Ultimately, the data exposed the word’s divisive influence that fuels an ongoing rivalry between the two regions of California. *Hella* is the primary linguistic shibboleth that divides “NorCal” and “SoCal”; NorCal residents’ embrace of *hella*, evidenced by T-shirts proudly reading “I hella love SF,” further encourages Southerners’ active disdain for it.

Introduction

Sociolinguistics studies an inherent linkage between language and the culture of its speakers. Various linguistic phenomena shape a community’s culture. As a lifelong resident of Northern California, I practically grew up with the word *hella* and considered it no more significant than any other slang. However, as I have matured and encountered Americans from other parts of the country, I realized that *hella* is not as commonplace as I had once accepted. Where did this word come from? How did it spread? What do outsiders think about the word? I hope to answer these questions in this essay. The focus of my research paper is Northern Californians’ use of the word *hella* in speech and the stigma attached to it. I will examine its grammatical usage, history, and perception.

Methods

Online academic findings constituted the majority of my research. I used the UC Davis library’s webpage to consolidate peer-reviewed

*Hella Controversial: A summary of both the grammatical
and societal role of the slang term hella*

academic journals, and Google provided additional non-academic sources. I augmented my findings with an interview with Dan Villarreal, a PhD candidate in Linguistics at UC Davis, whose focus involves perceptual dialectology in sociolinguistics. To round out my analysis, I conducted a simple survey of a variety of UC Davis undergraduates. The survey asked students the following:

1. Where did you grow up in adolescence? (Northern California, Southern California, Outside of California, or Outside of the country)
2. When did you first hear the word hella? (Middle school, high school, or at UC Davis)
3. How did you first hear the word? (Peers or Media/Pop Culture)
4. How often do you say the word? (In everyday speech, sometimes, seldom, or never)
5. How do you react when someone uses “hella” in their speech?

Grammatical Usage

Speakers use *hella* as an intensifier modifying a variety of lexical categories, including verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. As a quantifier, it can express a large amount of something, as in “*I ate hella*” (or “*I ate hella food*”). More commonly, as an intensifier, it precedes the word it modifies and emphasizes or strengthens the impact of that word.

Uniquely, the word can be utilized unmodified in a vast array of applications. The syntactic distribution of *hella* is “broader than any single specifier previously seen in English” (e.g. *really* and *very*) (Waksler). Consider the following examples:

- 1) He drove hella fast.
- 2) That candy was hella sour.
- 3) I hella love UWP101!

In examples 1 and 2, *hella* intensifies an adverb and an adjective, respectively. It can be replaced with *very* or *really*. In example 3, *hella* modifies a verb and can be substituted with the adverb *really*, but it cannot be substituted with *very*. These examples show that *hella* acts as a universal intensifier for adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, assuming the roles of both *very* and *really*.

- 4) There were hella cars on 80 going to Sacramento.
- 5) Hella coolant spilled from the radiator.
- 6) There were hella too many questions on that midterm.

Hella quantifies both count and mass nouns, and its adaptability is manifested in examples 4 and 5. Quantifiers in English either modify count nouns or mass nouns. For example, *many* describes countable nouns, like in “too many cars”; *much* describes uncountable mass nouns, like in “too much coolant.” *Hella* modifies both types of constituents, as shown in the examples above. In examples 4–6, one can substitute *hella* with the phrase *a lot of*, because it too can quantify both mass and count nouns. However, *hella* transcends *a lot of* in its ability to appear in front of another quantifier, as seen in example 6 (Pereltsvaig, 2012). It would be ungrammatical to say, “There were a lot of too many questions on that midterm.” Ultimately, this word is exceptionally flexible, behaving in a broader semantic scope than any other English modifier.

Etymology

Although the contemporary usage of *hella* is well documented, its origins are not as definitive. One school of thought adheres to a simple logically sound hypothesis that *hella* is merely a contraction of “*hell of a*” or “*hell of a lot of*” (“*hella*”). George Zipf’s Principle of Least Effort states that, over time, speakers will homologate adjacent sounds to facilitate easier pronunciation (“Principle of least effort,” 2014). This phenomenon explains how *helluva* became a contraction of *hell of a*. Further assimilation and syllable omission theoretically resulted in *hella* (Schmitt & Marsden, 2006). However, one flaw in this hypothesis is that *hell of a lot of* is a quantifier that can only precede nouns, whereas *hella* can precede many more types of words, as seen in the analysis in the section above. It is possible, though, that somehow the quantifying function expanded to also become intensifying.

Another etymological theory suggests that *hella* evolved from *hellacious*, which means “very great, bad, or overwhelming” (“*hella*,” n.d.). This hypothesis is supported by the fact that *hella* and *hellacious* have nearly parallel semantic roles. *Hellacious* is similarly used in a broad number applications; certainly, *hellacious* can be used more freely than *helluva*. Despite this, *hellacious* is not analogous to *hella* in its definition. *Hellacious* has been recorded as conveying negative connotation to something, while *hella* is used solely as an intensifier. *Hella* in itself does not carry any negative or positive connotation. This inconsistency discredits the theory that *hellacious* is the root word of *hella*.

Spread

The word gained national recognition through the song “Hella Good” by No Doubt in 2001, which peaked at #13 on *Billboard’s* Hot 100 after its release. In the song, *hella* is used only as an intensifier (further supporting the hypothesis that the quantifying function evolved later from its original intensifying role). In 1998, an episode of *South Park* aired, featuring the word being spoken several times by Cartman, much to the annoyance of other characters.

However, many believe that the slang has been prominent in the Bay Area since the late 1980s through hip-hop music: “. . . mainly hip-hop artists, have also brought the term to the masses. Bay Area legends E-40 and Mac Dre have been heard using the phrase since 1986” (“Hella,” 2013). The prominence of rap culture in the Bay Area is a possible factor preventing its spread to other parts of the United States.

Perception

Currently, Dr. Mary Bucholtz and her colleagues have conducted the only formal academic research involving the term *hella* and its perception. Her first journal article on the subject, “Hella Nor Cal or Totally So Cal,” involves a map-labeling experiment that surveyed a total of 703 respondents. The surveyed individuals divided a map of California based upon differences in speech: “By far, the most frequently remarked-upon slang term in the map-labeling data was *hella*, accounting for 47.4 percent of the slang and other lexical labels” (Bucholtz, Bermudez, Fung, Edwards, Vargas, 2007, p. 342). Obviously, the word is one of the most prominent distinguishing linguistic markers of California, and its influence, whether positive or negative, is significant in the field of perceptual dialectology.

According to Bucholtz et al’s studies, *hella* is received negatively among those outside of Northern California, especially by residents of Southern California. To support this, she notes, “Hella users were negatively evaluated by Southern Californians, and the term came in for a good deal of criticism, such as ‘*Hella is not a real word*’ and ‘*[hecka is] probably the worst word ever*’” (Bucholtz et al, 2007, p. 343). In her 2008 peer-reviewed journal article, “The Normative North and the Stigmatized South: Ideology and Methodology in the Perceptual Dialectology of California,” Dr. Bucholtz and colleagues evaluate language attitudes within the state of California, asking the open-ended

questions, “Where do Californians speak the best?” and “Where do Californians speak the worst?” (Bucholtz et al, 2007, p. 67). The results largely stigmatized Southern Californian speech, particularly due to the stereotypical “Valley girl” schema and the region’s close proximity to Mexico, resulting in a greater number of foreign immigrants. However, many respondents replied that Northern Californians spoke the worst English, “largely due to the use of *hella* and other slang terms unfamiliar (and hence annoying) to Southern Californian residents” (Bucholtz et al, 2008, p. 68). A significant majority of Southern Californians responded, “*I don’t like the term hellalhecka*” as the primary reason why Northern Californians speak the worst. To contrast Southern Californians’ negative assessment of *hella*, a Northern Californian respondent in Bucholtz et al’s study offered an explanation defending the word. He points out that Southern Californians use “the” to preface interstate freeways, for example “the 101.” Everywhere else in the United States, speakers usually just call freeways by their number, without “the” as a determiner. The respondent claims that “[SoCal’s use of ‘the’] goes beyond slang and goes against what is nationally accepted as proper grammar whereas ‘hella’ which is attributed to NorCal is just a slang word [sic]” (Bucholtz et al, 2008, p. 75).

Survey Results

Mary Bucholtz et al’s studies did not directly address *hella*. The perceptions she uncovered were merely byproducts of her primary research. To further specify my data, I conducted a survey that was explicitly designed to elicit responses to the word. The questions on the survey are outlined in the Methods section of this paper above and were distributed among 23 students in my UWP 101 class, consisting of a variety of Californians. The results of the survey were almost exactly consistent with Dr. Bucholtz et al’s findings. All of the responses followed the divisive attitudes outlined by their articles, “Hella Nor Cal” and “The Normative North.” Predictably, two thirds of Southern Californian respondents evaluated the word in a negative way. One Southern Californian considered the word “so absurd that when I hear it I cringe inside.” Another Southerner wrote, “I make an actual effort to not incorporate it into my vernacular. It’s mostly stubbornness. I like it being a quaint word that belongs to northerners.” All Southern Californian respondents selected “Never” when asked how often they use *hella* and

*Hella Controversial: A summary of both the grammatical
and societal role of the slang term hella*

stated that they received no exposure to it before college. Contrarily, all Northern Californians were exposed to it either in middle school or high school, and a majority use *hella* in speech. Every respondent in the survey was originally exposed to the word by peers. Nobody heard it from media or pop culture first. Northerners' opinions on the word were overwhelmingly neutral, and sometimes even positive, reflecting the word's deeply rooted presence in Northern Californian speech. One noted that *hella* "makes me feel that the current subject has the value of more than *a lot*."

Discussion of Etymology

According to PhD candidate Dan Villarreal, a native of the East Coast now residing in California, *hella* has entered into the vernacular of certain regions of the East Coast only as an intensifier, not a quantifier. For example, "He drove *hella* fast" would be acceptable in speech among Pennsylvanians, but "There were *hella* questions on that midterm" would be ungrammatical (at least according to East Coast slang). This suggests that the intensifying function is the "purer" form of *hella*, and that the quantifying function stemmed from it later on. The fact that the word acts only as an intensifier in that region supports the theory that *hella* originated from *hell of a*, not the quantifying phrase *hell of a lot of*. Villarreal posits that the word's ambiguous history can be attributed to a lack of recordings when the word's usage began to rise. In today's social-media driven era, new slang can be easily analyzed through seemingly infinite internet resources and archives.

Discussion of Perception

Hella has become so deeply ingrained in Northern California speech that it has become a social signifier associated with the region. This idea is manifested through T-shirts that read "I *hella* love Oakland" or "I *hella* love SF," borrowing from the iconic T-shirt slogan "I love NY." Clothing sporting the pro-Bay Area slogan is sold by the websites hellalove.com and 4fifteenclothing.com, two Bay Area-based companies. The existence of such shirts is an example of enregisterment, "the processes by which particular linguistic forms become linked with social meaning" (Johnstone, 2009, p. 159). The article "Pittsburghese Shirts: Commodification and the Enregisterment of an Urban Dialect," by Barbara Johnstone of Carnegie Mellon University, illustrates the commodification of a region's dialect by emblazoning regional slang on

T-shirts, reinforcing linguistic phenomena as a social construct. In this case, it is through Pittsburgh-specific slang, such as *Stillers* (Steelers) and *dahntahn* (downtown). Johnstone proposes that these shirts contribute to dialect enregisterment in at least four ways: “they put local speech on display; they imbue local speech with value; they standardize local speech; and they link local speech with particular social meanings” (Johnstone, 2009, p. 159). Johnstone’s analysis of Pittsburgh-specific clothing can be directly paralleled with the shirts that proudly represent the Bay Area slang *hella*. One who wears such clothing proudly embraces the word *hella*, using it as a representation of Northern California as a whole.

It seems that there is an inversely proportional relationship between Northern California’s embrace of *hella* and Southern California’s disdain for it: “For Southern Californians in particular, *hella* represents a crucial shibboleth separating the two major regions of the state”; in fact, *hella* is probably the most crucial linguistic shibboleth that separates the regions; it instantly differentiates who is from Northern California and who is not, who is an ally and who is a foe (Bucholtz et al, 2007, p. 343). This polarizing word is another platform that facilitates the ongoing rivalry between NorCal and SoCal. Just as loyalty to either the Giants or the Dodgers will divide the state into two distinct pieces, so will the usage of *hella*. After all, one Southern Californian respondent from my survey “makes an actual effort to not incorporate it into [his] vernacular. It’s mostly stubbornness.” Southerners will make an active effort to dissociate themselves from *hella*, as it is one of the defining ornaments of Northern Californian culture.

Conclusion

Through research, interviews, and a survey, I consolidated a comprehensive summary of the grammatical function of *hella*, the possible etymological sources, its brief spread, and ultimately the perception surrounding it. Despite a lack of definitive evidence regarding the word’s roots, its unique syntactic versatility has proven to be grammatically unprecedented. It has played a major role in the study of California’s perceptual dialectology, as *hella* has been embraced by its Northern Californian users, who accept it as a cultural symbol of the region. However, this attitude has been met with much derision by their Southern Californian neighbors, who claim that the word is stupid and annoying, ultimately fueling the profound rivalry between the North and South.

Works Cited

- Bucholtz, M., Bermudez, N., Fung, V., Edwards, L., & Vargas, R. (2007). Hella Nor Cal Or Totally So Cal?: The Perceptual Dialectology Of California. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 35(4), 325-352.
- Bucholtz, M., Bermudez, N., Fung, V., Edwards, L., & Vargas, R. (2008). The Normative North and the Stigmatized South: Ideology and Methodology in the Perceptual Dialectology of California. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 36(1), 62-87.
- “hella.” (n.d.). *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved March 13, 2014, from <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/hella>.
- “Hella.” (2014, August 3). *Wikipedia*. Retrieved March 13, 2014, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hella>.
- Johnstone, B. (2009). Pittsburghese Shirts: Commodification and the Enregisterment of an Urban Dialect. *American Speech*, 84(2), 157-175.
- Pereltsvaig, A. (2012, February 12). Northern Californian English: Hella Different? *GeoCurrents*. Retrieved March 12, 2014, from <http://www.geocurrents.info/place/north-america/northern-california/northern-californian-english-hella-different>.
- “Principle of least effort.” (2014, August 6). *Wikipedia*. Retrieved March 13, 2014, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principle_of_least_effort.
- Schmitt, N., & Marsden, R. (2006). *Why is English like That?: Historical Answers to Hard ELT Questions*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Waksler, R. A HELLA New Specifier. Jorge Hankamer WebFest. Retrieved March 12, 2014, from <http://babel.ucsc.edu/Jorge/waksler.html>.