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SLANG

TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

WITH A SHORT HISTORICAL SKETCH AND
VOCABULARIES OF ENGLISH, AMERICAN,
AND AUSTRALIAN SLANG.

BY
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For
PETIT PÈRE AND PETITE MÈRE
Two of the Best

PREFACE

A FRIEND, when I told him that I was writing a book on slang, looked at me with surprise and exclaimed: "Splendid! But what the devil can you find to say about it?"

Well, I would like it to be plainly understood that:—

(1) The historical sections, both the English and especially the American, are the merest sketches, and that as I couldn't keep saying "X used little, Y much slang", I have here confined myself, in the main, to examples. To set forth the history of English or American slang would be to write the history of the language and the literature and the social development and the cultural development and . . . and . . .

(2) The General Considerations are meant not to be exhaustive, but to give only the principal features of slang.

(3) In the Particular Aspects I have laboured to be brief: if anyone complains that I have dealt far, far too briefly with his pet subject, all I can say is that I would have liked to treat of every single aspect far more fully than I have here done. There are limits to every book, however interesting its author may find it.

(4) I do not claim to be an "expert" on American slang, nor have I met anyone rash enough to make such a claim. I am, however, something more than a dabbler: how little more, I leave to American critics.

(5) I shall be disappointed if a single person is satisfied with even one of the three vocabularies.

(6) And I do not pretend to have read every contribution to the subject of slang. I would even assert that, providing one has consulted the chief sources, one has no need to trouble with the non-valuable contributions; nor do I, to give the book an appearance of erudition, cite every such writer on the subject (still less every such author that has used slang) as I have happened to read.

Also, I confess that, much as I have enjoyed writing the main part and compiling the vocabularies, I have found it an extremely difficult book to put together.

Acknowledgments are made in the course of the book. If I have failed to admit absolutely every debt it is through inadvertence, and not because I wish to appear original where perchance I was merely derivative.

ERIC PARTRIDGE.

May, 1933.

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SLANG

TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

PART I

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Winged words : *ἔπεα πτερόεντα*.—HOMER.

Words are the very devil ! " (Australian officer on receiving, in August, 1916, at Pozzières, a confusing message.)

CHAPTER I

SLANG : DEFINITION, ETYMOLOGY, SYNONYMS, RANGE

Slang is easy enough to use, but very hard to write about with the facile convincingness that a subject apparently so simple would, at first sight, seem to demand. But the simplest things are often the hardest to define, certainly the hardest to discuss, for it is usually at first sight only that their simplicity is what strikes one the most forcibly. And slang, after all, "is a peculiar kind of vagabond language, always hanging on the outskirts of legitimate speech, but continually straying or forcing its way into the most respectable company."¹ Circumstance conspires to complicate the issue, for—as we read in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*—"at one moment a word or locution may be felt definitely as slang, but in another set of circumstances the same word or locution may not produce this impression at all."

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that *monumentum ære perennius* which is almost insolently cheap for the large amount of "brass" that it costs to buy, Sir William Craigie gives four separate headings to *slang*, and this is for the noun alone. He implies that these headings probably represent four separate groups and origins but adds that, in the one strictly relevant class, "some of the senses may represent independent words"; on the other hand he does not rule out the possibility that certain of the many senses of *slang* may be interrelated either etymologically or semantically. The five senses approximating to that in general use since about 1850—to the free and easy, "shirt-sleeves," essentially spoken language with which we are concerned—are Cant (i.e., thieves' slang), other very low and vulgar speech,

¹ Greenough and Kittredge, *Words and their Ways in English Speech*, 1902. (An excellent, very readable book.)

the jargon of a trade or profession, abuse or impertinence, and—as in Foote's play, *The Orators*, 1762—humbug or nonsense. The Oxford definition of slang in our sense is, despite Professor G. H. McKnight's doubt "if an exact definition of slang is possible", admirably clear: "language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense." A rather different definition, which is also to some extent complementary, is that of Mr. H. W. Fowler: "the diction that results from the favourite game among the young and lively of playing with words and renaming things and actions; some invent new words, or mutilate or misapply the old, for the pleasure of novelty, and others catch up such words for the pleasure of being in the fashion." In this specific sense—as indeed in that of a vocational-jargon—*Slang* is not recorded before the early nineteenth century; as meaning cant, whether noun or adjective, it occurs about 1750. The etymology of *slang*—that prize-problem word—is dubious, for whereas the Oxford Dictionary¹ considers any connexion with certain Norwegian forms in *-sleng* to be unlikely, Dr. Bradley and Professors Weekley and Wyld² think that cognates are furnished by *slenja-ord*, a new slang word, by *slenja-namm*, a nickname, and *slenja-kjeften*, to sling the jaw, i.e., to abuse. The "sling" sense gains probability from two sides: the O.E.D.'s quotation, dated about 1400,

But Eneas be war he abyges
The bolde wordes that [he] dede sclyng;

and low colloquial³ usage. The latter has *sling language* or *words*, to talk, and *sling the bat*, to speak the vernacular, especially to speak the language of that foreign country (the Tommy in 1914-18 often used it for "to speak French, Arabic") where one happens to be; but, although with both of these we should certainly compare the even more highly colloquial *sling off at*, to taunt, to jeer at a person, which approximates to the less familiar *slang*,⁴ to scold, to address very abusively, we must not allow ourselves to be will-o'-the-wisped into taking any notice of *spin the bat*, which, popular with the Tommies in India during the nineteenth century, represents a deliberate variant of *sling the bat*, but has a rather different meaning—to speak with

¹ After this, referred to as O.E.D. The debt to the O.E.D., in my second and third paragraphs, is too obvious to be laboured.

² In future references, Weekley, Wyld. So with other authorities.

³ Hotten, whose evidence from Crabb's *Gipsies' Advocate*, 1831, I find unsupported elsewhere, asserts that *slang* is pure Gipsy, whereas it was merely adopted by the Gipsies. Another theory is that *slang* is an argotic corruption of the Fr. *langue*, language; too ingenious!

⁴ Dating, in this sense, from about 1840; *sling off at* from about 1880. *Slang*, to speak in slang, is first recorded in Lytton's *Pelham*, 1828.

great gusto, considerable vividness, and remarkable vigour—obviously analogous to *spin a yarn*, to tell a story. We can, however, indulge ourselves to the extent of finding the theatrical use, in the 'eighties, of *slanging* to mean singing, relevant to our purpose, for singing in music halls was so called because of the quantity of spoken slang inserted—often by way of a "gag"—between the verses of a song.

Slang has, from about 1850, been the accepted term for "illegitimate" colloquial speech; but even since then, especially among the lower classes, *lingo* has been a synonym, and so also, chiefly among the cultured and the pretentious, has *argot*. Now *argot*, being merely the French for slang, has no business to be used thus—it can rightly be applied only to French slang or French cant: and *lingo* properly means a simplified language that, like Beach-la-Mar and Pidgin-English, represents the distortion of (say) English by coloured peoples speaking English indeed but adapting it to their own phonetics and grammar. *Jargon*, originally—as in Chaucer—used of the warbling of birds,¹ has long been employed loosely and synonymously for slang, but it should be reserved for the technicalities of science, the professions, and the trades: though, for such technicalities, *shop* is an equally good word. An earlier synonym is *flash*, which did duty from 1718 until 1850 or so, but even in the eighteenth century it was more generally and correctly applied to the slang of criminals (i.e., cant), not to slang in our wider sense. Before 1850, *slang* meant all definitely vulgar language except cant, or at least this was its prevailing acceptance after 1800, before which (as Grose's invaluable dictionary shows) it served as an alternative to *flash* in the sense of cant. Nor, after 1850, was *slang* accepted with general good grace, for in 1873, we find Hotten protesting against the restriction of the term to "those lowest words only which are used by the dangerous classes and the lowest grades of society". As slang is used by every class, and as this fact is now everywhere recognized, the stigma once attached to the word has long since been removed; in 1911, indeed, a foreign research-student at Cambridge could rightly say: "It is impossible to acquire a thorough knowledge of English [or of any other language, for that matter] without being familiar with slang and vulgarism. Whoever is uninitiated . . . will be at a loss to understand many of the masterpieces of English literature. Nay . . . he will scarcely be able even to understand an English newspaper."²

¹ Weekley, *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, 1921; a happy hunting-ground for the etymologizing brave.

² Olof E. Bosson, *Slang and Cant* in Jerome K. Jerome's Works, 1911.

CHAPTER II

ORIGIN, USES, AND REASONS FOR USE ; ATTITUDES TOWARDS SLANG

Slang, being of the very essence of colloquial speech, must always be related to convenience rather than to scientific laws, grammatical rules and philosophical ideals. As it originates, so it flourishes best, in colloquial speech. "Among the impulses which lead to the invention of slang," Dr. Bradley remarked some years ago, "the two most important seem to be the desire to secure increased vivacity and the desire to secure increased sense of intimacy in the use of language." The most favourable conditions are those of "crowding and excitement, and artificial life. . . . Any sudden excitement or peculiar circumstance is quite sufficient to originate and set going a score of slang words", as John Camden Hotten, a publisher and lexicographer, more sinned against than sinning, noted in the excellent *Short History* that prefaces his valuable collection of mid-Victorian and other slang. Its origin and usage are lit with interest if we remember one of the primary laws: slang is not used merely as a means of self-expression: it connotes personality: "its coinage and circulation comes rather from the wish of the individual to distinguish himself by oddity or grotesque humour."¹ Another aspect is presented by Mr. Earle Welby² when he says: "Some slang originates in an honourable discontent with the battered or bleached phrases in far too general use," this fresh slang being further described by him as "the plain man's poetry, the plain man's aspiration from penny plain to twopence coloured".

But the most interesting pronouncements on the origins and uses of slang are those of Mr. Mencken and M. Niceforo. The former is so illuminating that to paraphrase him were an impertinence. "What slang actually consists of," he says,³ "doesn't depend . . . upon intrinsic qualities, but upon the surrounding circumstances. It is the user that determines the matter, and particularly the user's habitual way of thinking. If he chooses words carefully, with a full understanding of their meaning and savour, then no word that he uses seriously will belong to slang, but if his speech is made up chiefly of terms poll-parroted, and he has no sense of their shades and limitations,

¹ Greenough and Kittredge, *op. cit.*

² The Week-end Review, 25th April, 1931.

³ The American Language, 3rd ed., 1923, p. 374.

then slang will bulk largely in his vocabulary. In its origin it is nearly always respectable [comparatively !]; it is devised, not by the stupid populace [what about the Cockneys?], but by individuals of wit and ingenuity; as Whitney says, it is a product of an 'exuberance of mental activity, and the natural delight of language-making'. But when its inventions happen to strike the popular fancy and are adopted by the mob, they are soon worn threadbare and so lose all piquancy and significance, and in Whitney's words, become 'incapable of expressing anything that is real'. This is the history of such slang phrases as . . . 'How's your poor feet?' . . . 'Have a heart!', 'This is the life'."

M. Alfredo Niceforo, a widely travelled Italian, notes that, as in general speech, so inevitably in slang, one speaks as one judges—and one judges according to how one feels. His opinions on this subject, together with its relation to the influence of groups, are of first-rate importance.¹ "Every social fact—and the language of a group is a social fact," writes Niceforo, "is the result of two classes of cause: personal (or biological) causes, represented by the physiological and psychological characteristics of the individual; and external (or mesological) causes, represented by the great accumulation of the social pressures, economic and geographical and other factors, which so powerfully influence mankind." He shows how language varies in passing from one social group to another and even in the different situations in which any one person may find himself. He indicates the further distinction that sometimes it is feeling or sentiment, sometimes one's profession or trade which determines the nature of one's speech, whether it be standard or unconventional. For instance, children and lunatics speak very much as their emotions dictate; soldiers have a multitude of words and phrases that reflect their daily existence in barracks, on the march, in bivouac, or in the front line. The specialization that characterizes every vocation leads naturally to a specialized vocabulary, to the invention of new words or the re-charging of old words. Such special words and phrases become slang only when they are used outside the vocational group and then only if they change their meaning or are applied in other ways. Motoring, aviation, and the wireless have already supplied us with a large number of slang terms. But, whatever the source, personality and one's surroundings (social or occupational) are the two co-efficients, the two chief factors, the determining causes of the nature of slang, as they are of language in general and of style.

Why is slang used at all? That question, like a small child's, is a natural one to ask, but a difficult one to answer. Reasons have occurred to the writer, who, however, is not quite so fatuous

¹ *Le Génie de l'Argot*, 1912.

as to consider that they account for every slang expression used in the past, much less every slang expression that will be used by the bright lads, sprightly lasses, and naughty old men of the future. That all the following reasons why slang is used are either actually or potentially operative he is nevertheless as sure as a mere man can be, and he would like to add that the order in which they are set down is not so haphazard as it may seem.

Slang, he believes, is employed because of one (or more) of fifteen reasons :—

(1) In sheer high spirits, by the young in heart as well as by the young in years ; “ just for the fun of the thing ” ; in playfulness or waggishness.

(2) As an exercise either in wit and ingenuity or in humour. (The motive behind this is usually self-display or snobbishness, emulation or responsiveness, delight in virtuosity.)

(3) To be “ different ”, to be novel.

(4) To be picturesque (either positively or—as in the wish to avoid insipidity—negatively).

(5) To be unmistakably arresting, even startling.

(6) To escape from clichés, or to be brief and concise. (Actuated by impatience with existing terms.)

(7) To enrich the language. (This deliberateness is rare save among the well-educated, Cockneys forming the most notable exception ; it is literary rather than spontaneous.)

(8) To lend an air of solidity, concreteness, to the abstract ; of earthiness to the idealistic ; of immediacy and appositeness to the remote. (In the cultured the effort is usually premeditated, while in the uncultured it is almost always unconscious when it is not rather subconscious.)

(9a) To lessen the sting of, or on the other hand to give additional point to, a refusal, a rejection, a recantation ;

(9b) To reduce, perhaps also to disperse, the solemnity, the pomposity, the excessive seriousness of a conversation (or of a piece of writing) ;

(9c) To soften the tragedy, to lighten or to “ prettify ” the inevitability of death or madness, or to mask the ugliness or the pity of profound turpitude (e.g., treachery, ingratitude) ; and/or thus to enable the speaker or his auditor or both to endure, to “ carry on ”.

(10) To speak or write down to an inferior, or to amuse a superior public ; or merely to be on a colloquial level with either one’s audience or one’s subject matter.

(11) For ease of social intercourse. (Not to be confused or merged with the preceding.)

(12) To induce either friendliness or intimacy of a deep or a durable kind. (Same remark.)

(13) To show that one belongs to a certain school, trade, or

profession, artistic or intellectual set, or social class ; in brief, to be "in the swim" or to establish contact.

(14) Hence, to show or prove that someone is *not* "in the swim".

(15) To be secret—not understood by those around one. (Children, students, lovers, members of political secret societies, and criminals in or out of prison, innocent persons in prison, are the chief exponents.)

Such critics as Hotten, Mencken, and Niceforo are almost genial in their attitude towards slang, but others are scornful. As early as 1825 J. P. Thomas, in *My Thought Book*, inveighed thus : "The language of slang is the conversation of fools. Men of discretion will not pervert language to the unprofitable purposes of conversational mimicry. . . . The friends of literature will never adopt it, as it is actively opposed to pure and grammatical diction." In our own century the authors of *Words and their Ways* condemn slang on the ground that, being evanescent, vague, and ill-defined, slang has a deleterious effect on those who use it often, for it tends to remove all those delicate shades of meaning which are at the root of a good style ; they point out that it is a lazy man's speech ; and assert that when a slang word becomes definite in meaning it has almost ceased to be slang. Perhaps a fairer conception is that of the Merton Professor of English Language at Oxford : "While slang is essentially part of familiar and colloquial speech, it is not necessarily either incorrect or vulgar in its proper place," which, as the Fowlers say, "is in real life." That is, in conversation,—for, the Fowlers continue, "as style is the great antiseptic, so slang is the great corrupting matter ; it is perishable, and infects what is round it." The same thought is conveyed from a different angle by Professor McKnight,¹ who remarks that, "originating as slang expressions often do, in an insensibility to the meaning of legitimate words, the use of slang checks an acquisition of a command over recognized modes of expression . . . [and] must result in atrophy of the faculty of using language." This applies mainly to authors and orators. But no real stylist, no one capable of good speaking or good writing, is likely to be harmed by the occasional employment of slang ; provided that he is conscious of the fact, he can even employ it both frequently and freely without stultifying his mind, impoverishing his vocabulary, or vitiating the taste and the skill that he brings to the using of that vocabulary. Except in formal and dignified writing and in professional speaking, a vivid and extensive slang is perhaps preferable to a jejune and meagre vocabulary of standard English ; on the other hand, it will hardly be denied that, whether in writing or in speech, a sound though restricted vocabulary of

¹ *English Words and their Background*, 1923. (Whence all later quotations.)

standard English is preferable to an equally small vocabulary of slang, however vivid may be that slang.

The same contradictoriness applies to the various attempts to set forth the primary characteristics of slang. Greenough and Kittredge, at the beginning of their thoughtful if somewhat reactionary chapter on Slang and Legitimate Speech, say that "slang is commonly made by the use of harsh, violent, or ludicrous metaphors, obscure analogies, meaningless words, and expressions derived from the less known and less esteemed vocations or customs", and, twenty pages further on, admit that "it is sometimes humorous, witty, and not seldom picturesque". A much neater thumb-nail sketch¹ is that of Niceforo: "concrete terms, vivid metaphors, brilliant turns of phrase, contrasts, ellipses, and abbreviations." In fairness, however, to the two American professors, it is to be added that they note that slang, so far from being a novelty, is the most vital aspect of language, the only speech in which linguistic processes can be observed in unrestricted activity; as they remark, there is no primary difference between the processes of slang and those of standard speech. Slang may and often does fill a gap in accepted language; as J. Brander Matthews had observed in 1893,² "in most cases a man can say best what he has to say without lapsing into slang; but then a slangy expression which actually tells us something is better than the immaculate sentence empty of everything but the consciousness of its own propriety."

But there is a decided hint of "It isn't done" in a few of the general accounts of slang. After reading Hotten's famous justification—"the squeamishness which tries to ignore the existence of slang fails signally, for not only in the streets and in the prisons, but at the bar, on the bench, in the pulpit, and in the Houses of Parliament, does slang make itself heard, and, as the shortest and safest means to an end, understood too"—it is diverting to arrive at the opinion that the word associations of this "pariah" branch of language are "low, or at least, undignified, and perhaps disgusting"; if they obtain the franchise of respectability by becoming accepted, for other than trivial or frivolous purposes, by the users of standard speech, then their lowly origins will probably be forgotten and they will become pure as driven snow. This view smacks of the year in which it was expressed—1902; but the Fowlers³ are almost as severe. "Foreign words and slang are, as spurious ornaments, on the

¹ These opinions are recorded here in order to establish a point of departure for the ensuing consideration of the "components" of slang; the real discussion of the essentials of slang is held over till the end of the chapter.

² In Harper's Magazine (reprinted in the collected essays, *Parts of Speech*, 1901): an important contribution.

³ *The King's English*, 3rd ed., 1930. A mine, withal a trifle conservative here and there, of dicta on good writing and correct speaking.

same level . . . The effect of using quotation marks with slang is merely to convert a mental into a moral weakness." But they are very sound on the quarters from which slang may come. Taking the averagely intelligent middle-class man as the norm, they show that he can usually detect with ease such words as come from "below" and add that these constitute the best slang, for many such terms assume their place in the language as "words that will last", and will not, like many from "above", die off after a brief vogue; from the same direction, however, derive such colourless counters as *nice*, *awful*, *blooming* (this last, by the way, is on the wane). Words from above are less easily detected: *phenomenal*, *epoch-making*, *true inwardness*, *psychological moment*, *philistine* "are being subjected to that use, at once over-frequent and inaccurate, which produces one kind of slang. But the average man, seeing from what exalted quarters they come, is dazzled into admiration and hardly knows them for what they are." The slang from "the sides" or from "the centre" consists of those words which, belonging at first to a profession or trade, a pursuit, a game or sport, have invaded general colloquial speech—and very often the printed page. "Among these a man is naturally less critical of what comes from his own daily concerns, that is, in his view, from the centre." These two lexicographers and grammarians acutely caution us that, in any collection of slang words and phrases, the degree of recognizability will depend largely upon whether the occupation, for example, is familiar or not, "though sometimes the familiarity will disguise, and sometimes it will bring out, the slanginess."

CHAPTER III

SLANG CHARACTERISTICS IN RELATION TO LANGUAGE IN GENERAL

Obviously (when, at least, one thinks about the matter), slang is on various levels, the grades being numerous ; innocent, cultured, vigorously racy, cheaply vulgar, healthily or disgustingly low ; thoroughly—in the linguistic sense—debased ; picturesque, claptrappingly repetitive, and (to be merciful !) so forth : and, for all levels and all kinds, the most serviceable criterion is the degree of dignity, or perhaps rather the degree of familiarity, casualness, impudence. Socially, slang belongs to no one class, for it is an accumulation of terms that, coming from every quarter, most people know and understand, and, in the main, “it is composed of colloquialisms everywhere current . . . not refined enough to be admitted into polite speech.”¹ But there exist argotic grades and classes, as we see if we adopt a standard based on the values of different kinds of slang relative to the general speech and the general vocabulary. In 1893—his excellent observations hold good to-day—Brander Matthews,² the famous American don, writes thus : “An analysis of modern slang reveals the fact that it is possible to divide the words and phrases of which it is composed into four broad classes, of quite different origin and very varying value. Two unworthy, two worthy. Of the two unworthy classes, the first is that which includes the survivals of ‘thieves’ latin’ (i.e., cant) . . . Much of the distaste for slang felt by people of delicate taste is, however, due to the second class, which includes the ephemeral phrases fortuitously popular for a season, and then finally forgotten once for all. These mere catchwords . . . are rarely foul, as the words and phrases of the first class often are, but they are [almost] unfailingly foolish.” E.g., *where did you get that hat?*

“The other two classes of slang,” he continues, “stand on a different footing . . . They serve a purpose. Indeed, their utility is indisputable, and it was never greater [—the remark is still valid—] than it is to-day. One of these consists of old and forgotten phrases and words, which, having long lain dormant, are now struggling again to the surface. The other consists of new words and phrases, often vigorous and expressive, but . . . still on probation” : these two classes help to feed and refresh

¹ Professor E. W. Bowen in *The Popular Science Monthly* of February, 1906.

² In the essay already quoted.