



Bloomsbury  
**Dictionary of  
Contemporary Slang**

TONY THORNE

江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章



B L O O M S B U R Y

世界图书出版公司

北京·广州·上海·西安

For Lída and Saša

All rights reserved, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Publishers.

First published in 1930

This paperback edition published 1991

Copyright © 1990 by Tony Thorne

Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd, 2 Soho Square, London, W1V 5DE

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7475 0969 7

ISBN 7 - 5062 - 1585 - 3

Reprint Authorized by Bloomsbury Publishing Limited

Reprinted by World Publishing Corporation, Beijing, 1993

Licensed for sale in The People's Republic of China only

---

## Introduction

### What is Slang?

The first problem confronting the compiler of a dictionary of slang is to define what slang does and does not include, firstly as an aid to compilation, and later for the benefit of the reader. Definitions chewed over in bar-room arguments or in learned debate may turn out to be red herrings; for example a symposium on slang held in France in 1989 broke up after several days without having arrived at a definition acceptable to even the majority of participants. Nevertheless, a multitude of possible definitions are available, ranging from 'illegitimate colloquial speech' and the language of 'low, illiterate or disreputable persons' to 'the plain man's poetry'. The American poet Carl Sandburg's memorable definition, '... language that rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands and goes to work ...', is often quoted, but is ultimately unhelpful, while the 1987 *Readers Digest Universal Dictionary* offers 'language peculiar to a group, argot or jargon'.

However, slang is not in fact jargon, a secret code, dialect, unacceptable usage or the idiom of everyday speech, although it may contain elements of all of these. To continue defining by exclusion, slang is not catchphrases, journalese, neologisms and buzzwords, or idiolect (the private language of an individual), although examples of all of these may be found within it. Looked at from a linguist's point of view, slang is a style category within the language, which occupies an extreme position on the spectrum of formality. Slang is at the end of the line; it lies beyond mere informality or colloquialism, where language is considered too racy, raffish, novel or unsavoury for use in conversation with strangers. Slang also includes forms of language through which speakers identify with or function within social sub-groups, ranging from surfers, schoolchildren and yuppies, to criminals, drinkers and fornicators.

All this may clarify the issue, but falls short of providing a universally applicable definition—one which can demonstrate beyond argument for instance that whereas in 1990 the adjective *sleazy* is a widespread and acceptable term, the noun *sleazeball* is slang and should (and does) appear in this dictionary. *Sleazy* itself was until recently considered to be a colloquialism by many speakers, and the borderline between what is considered to be colloquial and what is deemed to be slang is highly fluid, problematical and open to varied interpretation. The status of words varies in time: what was considered slang in the 1960s may by now have been assimilated into most people's vocabulary. It will vary according to the age, social background and the linguistic perceptions and prejudices of individual speakers, and, whatever linguists might say, most people think that they know what slang in general is, but their judgement about specific examples will differ.

In the pages that follow, the ultimate criterion for inclusion is the judgement of the compiler. Where there is doubt as to whether a term is true slang, or where the consensus on a particular term appears to have shifted, this is indicated in the text.

The lexicographer (characterized by Dr Johnson as a 'harmless drudge') is faced by other difficulties when working in the area of slang. An examination of the word 'slang' itself highlights some of these. Apart from the difficulty in defining the word as discussed above, the history and etymology of the term is uncertain, too—a feature shared by many of the expressions recorded in this book. When it was first used, 'slang' was probably a slang word itself, and as such may have existed for many years in the spoken language before becoming more widely known or being committed to paper. Its primary meaning when it first appeared in print in the mid 18th century seems to have been 'abuse'.

The origins of the word 'slang' are obscure and alternative derivations are on offer. This is likewise typical of the words in the following pages, and the lexicographer must beware of accepting too readily the explanations advanced by predecessors, however confidently they are expressed.

In the case of 'slang' the consensus is that it is related to the standard word 'sling' as used in picturesque archaic expressions such as 'to sling one's jaw', meaning 'to speak rowdily or insultingly' (itself perhaps inspired by cognate forms in other Germanic

languages including *slenja kleften*, a **synonymous phrase** in Norwegian). A quite different theory is that the word is a corruption of the French word for language, *langue*, but this alteration goes against the normal sound patterns involved in anglicization.

I have noted in the text where I disagree with or doubt the standard etymologies for slang terms: in a few cases a new derivation is cautiously suggested.

## Dictionaries of Slang

The first dictionary of English slang was Francis Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, published in 1785. Since that date, several major works have been produced on the same subject, along with an increasing number of scholarly and popular glossaries and lexicons. Eric Partridge's monumental *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* was last revised by Paul Beale in 1984; Robert L. Chapman's *New Dictionary of American Slang*, based on the earlier works by Wentworth and Flexner, appeared in Britain in 1987. Several interesting anthologies of new language have been published in the late 1980s, but these have treated slang only peripherally. Because of the frequently transitory nature of slang, there is a perennial need for updating such works.

As well as reflecting current speech accurately, the aim in compiling the *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* was to represent a fresh approach to the material itself. Previous compilers have been amateur enthusiasts, journalists or academics, each with their own idiosyncracies or preconceived opinions. Most of the existing dictionaries have a clear regional bias. Some have inappropriately excluded taboo items, others have drawn their examples mainly from fiction, the press and reference books and have excluded oral sources. Some have defined their headwords without further comment, a few have appeared distanced from, or disapproving of, the slang of certain social groups. The *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* will also inevitably reflect the obsessions and limitations of its originator, but I have attempted to combine the enthusiasms of a user and participator in the slang milieu with the more rigorous analysis demanded by the precepts of modern lexicography.

Having moved among mods, hippies and punks, and having observed **Sloane Rangers**, **preppies**, **Valley Girls** and **yuppies** at close quarters, I feel qualified to pass some comment on the peculiarities of their speech. Having some experience in branches of applied linguistics I am aware of the dangers of an entirely subjective approach (the risk of becoming, as a colleague damningly put it, 'self-authenticating').

Modern lexicography, the science, or rather, craft of dictionary-making, proceeds roughly as follows. One's choice of words to define should be based as far as possible on a survey of language in use, as well as the initial choices of the compiler. The terms chosen should be divided into different senses of meaning and each should be defined in natural, 'user-friendly' language. It is now thought preferable to go beyond the definition of a word or phrase and to look at how it 'behaves' in the language, in other words to comment on its overtones or nuances, to examine the unconscious associations and partly-perceived influences affecting the sound or meaning of the term. It is useful to read a term in its social context—who typically says it, in what circumstances and with what intention? Where possible, a history of the word and suggestions as to its origins should be given. The usage of the word should be illustrated by a quotation or example. Finally, when a word or phrase has been analysed in these ways, mention should be made of any interesting relationships with other words or groups of words.

## The Bloomsbury Dictionary of Contemporary Slang

This dictionary aims to describe the core of English language slang in use between 1950 and 1990. These are the 5,000 or so terms and the 15,000 or so definitions most likely to be encountered by anyone reading modern fiction or journalism, listening to popular music, watching films and television or taking part in conversation. In a compendium of this size it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a particular item should be included or not. When all the criteria previously discussed have been applied, the final rule of thumb has been whether or not the word in question is inherently interesting. The words are here not only to help those wanting to 'de-code' difficult

---

or unknown language or those hunting for colourful terms to use themselves, but also to amuse and distract the browser.

Although the collection has been assembled in Britain, I have made a conscious effort to include slang from the other anglophone areas. Whereas the most fertile source for many years was the United States, since the 1960s the often picturesque and sardonic idioms of Australia have been increasingly influential in Britain and North America. Disappointingly, speakers in the British Isles (with the possible exception of Northern Ireland and Eire) seem on the whole more reluctant to coin new and exciting forms than slang users in other parts of the English-speaking world. One theory is that as conscious or unconscious guardians of the 'parent tongue', they will prefer existing and orthodox patterns, even when expressing new ideas. American English has been influenced until very recently by the speech of people for whom it was not a first language, and by ethnic and regional variations. Australian speech has preserved and embellished earlier British and Irish eccentricities (notably dialect terms and rhyming slang), and **Jamaica talk** recycles even older forms.

In looking at English as a world language it is interesting too how the influence of the mass media in propagating slang has shifted subtly since the 1950s. At the time, American popular culture was dominant. Since the 1960s Britain has exported comedy and re-exported musical styles and youth cults to the USA. In the 1980s the Australian film and music industries have penetrated the US market, while Australian television series appear everyday in the UK. Rock, reggae, soul and disco music have spread American and Caribbean slang worldwide.

## Slang Today

Some general tendencies can be discerned in 20th-century English slang. The main categories of slang remain what they have always been, with one or two exceptions: the language of crime, or 'cant' as it used to be known, provides a large number of entries (**grass**, **snitch**, **squeal**, **banged-up**, etc.); sex, alcohol and drugs continue to feature strongly (witness the many euphemisms for sexual intercourse, the hundreds of synonyms for being drunk and the proliferation of alternative terms for illicit substances and the states of intoxication they produce); parts of the body (particularly the breasts and penis) and peculiarities of physique and personality are also popular sources. The argot of schools and colleges produces a wealth of slang terms, as do the youth cults of the last forty years. The slang of the workplace continues to be significant, although the workplace may now be a computer workstation or merchant bank rather than a factory, office, or farm. With the exceptions of the euphemisms of Vietnam and a few terms highlighted by the Falklands war, armed-services slang seems to have dwindled in relevance. The media and entertainment industry continue to contribute and promote novelty in language; a relatively new phenomenon is the free use of slang in the quality as well as the tabloid press (all types of newspaper and magazine were used in the preparation of citations for this dictionary).

Much slang is simply the substitution of more forceful, emotive or humorous forms for standard words—**pooch** or **mutt** for dog, **dogs** for feet, **rug** for wig or toupee, etc. In this context it is interesting to see how older slang expressions are often revived—in the money-conscious 1980s, many obsolescent synonyms such as **pelf**, **rhino**, **ackers**, **moolah**, **spondulicks** and **dosh** reappeared; in the drug world **dope** was replaced during the 1950s by terms such as **charge**, **shit**, **gear**, etc and then resurfaced in the 1970s. Succeeding generations have their own terms of approbation—**fab** gives way to **groovy**, **brill** and **wicked**. In successive eras, slang reflects society's preoccupations (the 1960s were characterized by words of euphoria, sex, drugs and popular music; the later 1970s by epithets applied to misfits and unfortunates—**wally**, **nurd**, **wimp**, and the 1980s by references to money, work and consumerist sub-cultures). Who in the 1960s would have predicted that **serious** would become a fashionable buzzword twenty years later? On current evidence, adolescent slang in Britain seems to reflect a return to childish, schoolchildren's humour (**Desmond**, **love blobs**) and to native forms such as rhyming slang (**Alans**, **porkies**, **farmers**), as opposed to the more worldly and cosmopolitan flavour of the 1970s. Fortunately, the use of wit by the anonymous coiners of slang is not dead—there are plenty of examples in the text, of which the archaic **love-in-a-punt** and the more recent **Archer** spring to mind.

---

## Sources

To compile this dictionary I consulted both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were the users of slang themselves who were interviewed, as were other informants such as teachers, colleagues and parents of slang users and 'connoisseurs' or collectors of slang. I also carried out 'fieldwork' which essentially consisted of eavesdropping on conversations, the contents of which the speakers were unlikely to recall accurately in an interview. A certain amount of first-hand information on earlier usage was supplied from my own notes and diaries, supplemented by similar extracts kindly made available by friends and acquaintances. A selective survey was made of written sources, including magazines, newspapers, comic books and novels. Films, television broadcasts and song lyrics were also consulted. Existing glossaries compiled by researchers or journalists were inspected, but treated with caution: there has sometimes been a tendency for these authorities to be misled by their informants, just as language reported by the press (for example, the many post-yuppie acronyms) may be invented or embellished in the reporting, and slang occurring in fictional settings (the works of Raymond Chandler, Barry Humphries and Johnny Speight are examples) may not always be authentic. Finally, the data collected was checked against existing reference sources.

## Acknowledgements

For help in the preparation of the dictionary the following acknowledgements are due:

First and foremost, grateful thanks must go to Ray Granger who, during crucial stages of the project, performed the demanding role of amanuensis, editor and advisor, as well as allowing his extensive archives to be plundered. Also in the UK, particular thanks go to Kit Gleave, Jamie Morse, Stephanie Fayerman, Chip Granger, Gordon Lochhead, Gerald Miller, Bill Boyes, Terry Pizzey, Chris Pape and John Hackney; in Australia, Elizabeth and Chris Corbel, and Robyn Marsh; in the USA, Nick Harrison, Dan Rowe, Ellen Jo Schur and William Winship III; and at Bloomsbury, Kathy Rooney, Tracey Smith and Sian Facer.

## Suggestions from Readers

This survey of English slang cannot be exhaustive; it is certain that many colourful and interesting expressions in use in many parts of the English-speaking community have so far escaped the collector's net. It is intended that this dictionary should be extended and updated and we would be very grateful for the help of readers in this task. Contributors, who will be acknowledged, should contact the publishers with slang terms or definitions, ideally adding details of where and when the word or phrase was used, and a direct quotation if possible. Comments or criticisms based on the current text would also be most welcome.

Tony Thorne  
London May 1990

---

## How to Use this Book

A typical entry in the dictionary will contain the components described below (with the typefaces explained in brackets):

The HEADWORDS are entered in alphabetical order (in **primary bold** face), together with any variant spellings or alternative forms.)

Next the PART OF SPEECH is given (in *italics*): these have been somewhat simplified so that an adjectival phrase appears as an adjective, noun phrase as noun.

Unless a word is used in all parts of the English-speaking world, it is given a REGIONAL LABEL (in *italics*). This indicates the country of origin, or the country in which the term is most prevalent.

If a particular term has more than one quite separate meaning, these meanings are NUMBERED (in **bold** type).

If one overall sense of a term is commonly subdivided into several slightly different meanings, these are indicated by LETTERS (in **bold** type: a, b, c, etc).

The headword, part of speech and regional label are followed by a DEFINITION (in roman typeface).

This in turn is followed by more information about the use and origin of the term (in roman typeface). In these explanations foreign words are placed in *italics* and slang terms found elsewhere in the dictionary are shown in **bold** (these act as cross references throughout the dictionary).

Many definitions are followed by an ILLUSTRATIVE PHRASE or sentence (in *italics*). If this example is an actual citation, its source follows in brackets.



# A

---

## **aardvark** *n* British

hard work, onerous tasks. A probably ephemeral pun heard among university students in the late 1980s.

- 'They're giving us too much bloody *aardvark*, that's the problem.'  
(Recorded, undergraduate, London University, 1988).

## **'abdabs** *n pl* British

See **screaming (h)abdabs**.

## **Abdul** *n*

a pejorative nickname for a Turk or other person of middle-eastern origin. The term is particularly prevalent in Australia where it is used to refer to immigrants.

## **abo** *n* Australian

an Aboriginal. A standard shortening used by whites which is now considered condescending or abusive: it is often part of offensive comparisons, as in 'to smell like an *abo's* armpit/*abo's* jockstrap'.

## **A.C.A.B.** *phrase* British

an abbreviation of the catchphrase 'All coppers are bastards!' which appeared in graffiti, football and demonstration chants and on tattoos, leather jackets, etc., especially in the 1950s and 1960s.

## **Acapulco Gold** *n*

a strain of marihuana or **grass** from the foothills above Acapulco in West-central Mexico. The golden leaves, im-

ported into the USA in large quantities from the late 1960s, are sought after for their supposed potency and quality.

## **AC/DC** *adj*

bisexual. From the label on electrical appliances indicating that they can be used with either alternating or direct current. The slang term originated in the USA and spread to Britain around 1960.

## **ace** *n*

**1** a best friend or good person. Used by males to other males, usually as a greeting or a term of endearment. In this sense the term probably spread from black American street-gangs in the 1950s to working-class whites in the USA, Australia and, to a lesser extent, Britain.

- 'Hey, *ace*!'

**2** Australian the anus. By association with **arse** and the black mark on a playing card.

**3 a** a single item or person, in the restricted jargon of many different trades. In street language, especially in the USA, the word is used to refer to an individual pill, banknote, etc.

**b American** a one-dollar bill.

## **ace, ace out** *vb*

**1** to outmanoeuvre, outwit or defeat.

- 'I had it all figured, but those guys *aced* me!'

(*The A Team*, US TV series, 1985).

**2 American** to succeed, win or score very highly.

- 'She *aced* out/aced the test.'

**ace, aces** *adj*

excellent, first class. Used extensively since the late 1950s in the USA, since the mid-1960s in Australia, and by the 1970s, especially by teenagers, in Britain. The origin of the term is obviously in the highest value playing card, the meaning now extended from 'best' to 'smartest', 'cleverest', etc.

- 'An *ace* car/that film was really *ace*/she's *aces*!'

**ace in the hole** *n*

an advantage held in reserve until it is needed. From American stud-poker terminology, an ace (the most valuable card) dealt face down and not revealed.

**aces** *n pl*

See *ace*.

**acey-deucey** *adj* American

both good and bad, of uncertain quality. The term is at least pre-World War II, but still heard occasionally, especially from middle-aged or elderly speakers. It comes from a card game similar to backgammon in which *aces* are high and *deuces* (twos) are low.

**acher** *n*

See *acre*.

**acid** *n*

1 LSD-25, the synthetic hallucinogenic drug. From the full name, Lysergic Acid Diethylamide. This has been the standard term by which users refer to the drug since its first popularity in California in 1965, in spite of the appearance of more picturesque but ephemeral alternatives. In the late 1980s, adherents of the **acid house** cult adopted the word as a slogan (usually a cry of *a-c-e-e-e-d!*) and to refer to LSD or **ecstasy**.

2 British sarcasm, snide comments, or cheeky exaggeration, especially in the expression 'come the old *acid*', popular in working-class usage in the 1950s and 60s and still heard. In such phrases as 'his *acid* comments' the adjectival meaning is similar, but cannot be described as slang.

- 'Don't come the old *acid* with me!'

3 Australian 'put the *acid* on', to demand money or information (from someone).

**acid casualty** *n*

a person supposedly suffering from impaired faculties, incoherence or derangement as a result of taking the drug LSD or other hallucinogens. The term was used particularly by young rock-journalists in the mid-to late 1970s when referring contemptuously to the remnants of the hippy movement.

**acid flash** *n*

a sudden recurrence of a much earlier experience of the drug LSD. Some users are disturbed months or years after taking the drug by sudden disorientation which lasts from seconds to hours and which may or may not be due to its effects.

**acid head, acid freak** *n*

a user, especially a heavy or habitual user, of the drug LSD. The terms are not pejorative, and were used from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s by takers of LSD or other hallucinogens about themselves and each other.

**acid house** *n*

a youth cult involving synthetic electronic dance-music (**house**) and the taking of euphoric hallucinogens such as **ecstasy** and LSD (**acid**). This fashion, celebrated in clubs and large impromptu parties, and with garish clothing and lighting effects, succeeded hip-hop, rap and other fads in 1988.

'A-c-e-e-e-d!' (an elongated version of **acid**) was a rallying cry of celebrants, shouted and written on walls.

- 'The redeeming features of last year's summer of Acid-House were that it generated energy and ideas for both the fashion and the music industry.'  
(*Independent*, 11 July 1989).

### **acid rock** *n*

guitar-based electric rock-music of the late 1960s and early 70s, supposedly influenced by, or trying to recreate, the effects of LSD. This is strictly speaking commercial jargon rather than a slang term, as it was probably coined, and certainly used, by the music industry rather than musicians or devotees.

### **acid test** *n*

a party or informal ritual at which a group of people take food and/or drink laced with LSD. The expression and the practice were originated by Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, a group of hedonistic travellers in the USA in the early 1960s who were successors to the **beats** and precursors of the **hippies**.

- 'The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.'  
(Title of a book by Tom Wolfe, 1969).

### **acid trip** *n*

a period under the influence of the drug LSD, or **acid** (which produces an altered state of awareness and, sometimes, hallucinations). The experience lasts 4–6 hours at an average dose.

### **ackers** *n* British

money. The word, which has been in armed-forces and working-class use since the 1920s, has been revived, in common with synonyms such as **pelf**, **rhino**, etc., for jocular use in the 1980s by middle-class speakers. It comes

from the Egyptian word *akka*: a coin worth one *piastre*.

### **acre, acher** *n*

1 buttock(s). In this sense the word is common in Australia, normally in the singular.

2 testicle(s). Usually in the plural, this sense of the word is typically used by British schoolboys.

Both senses of both words stem from the simple play on the word 'ache' which has formed part of many different puns and dirty jokes, during the last forty years, involving sensitive parts of the (male) anatomy.

- 'I told the estate agent I couldn't afford any land, so he kicked me in the balls and said, "There's a couple of achers for you".'  
(Schoolboy joke, London, 1965).

### **action** *n*

something desirable or stimulating. Typically used as a euphemism for sex, profit, available drugs or fun and excitement. The word is often used in the phrase 'a piece of the action', meaning a share in what is going on, or '(let's go) where the action is'; the most exciting place to be. This use of the word may derive from the military sense of 'to see action', meaning to be involved in fighting. Originally an Americanism, this usage was adopted in Britain in the late 1960s, and is now a widespread colloquialism.

### **action man** *n* British

a devotee of military exercises or strenuous physical activities, or someone who makes a show of (relentless) energy. The term is applied derisively, originally by members of the armed forces to unpopular or excessively **gung-ho** colleagues, and now by extension to anyone who is showily or mindlessly **macho**. The satirical magazine *Private Eye* referred to Prince An-

## actor

drew by this name in 1986 and 1987. The origin of this piece of sarcasm is the 'Action Man' doll – a poseable commando scale model in full kit sold to children in Britain since the 1960s.

- 'Right little action man i'n' 'e? 'E simply wants to be prepared when the east wind blows 'ot.'  
(Minder, British TV series, 1988).

## actor *n*

a person who is good at playing a role, or bluffing, especially in order to deceive a victim or fool the authorities. In these specific senses the word is used typically by inmates of institutions or members of the underworld in the USA.

- 'We need an actor for this job.'
- 'I tell you, the guy's an actor.'

## A.D. *n*

drug addict. From the first two letters of 'addict', or a reversal of the initials of 'drug addict' to avoid confusion with 'District Attorney'. The term was quite popular among addicts themselves and the police in the USA. (In Britain D.A. was the 1960s vogue version.)

## adam *n* British

the drug MDA; methyl diamphetamine. Adam is an acronym from the initials, used by middle-class Londoners during the vogue for the drug since the mid-1980s. MDA is more commonly known to the press and non-users as **ecstasy**; to users it is also **E**, **X**, **xtc**, **Epsom salts**.

## adam and eve *vb* British

to believe. Well-established rhyming slang which is still heard among working-class Londoners and middle-class imitators, usually in the expression of astonishment 'Would you adam 'n' eve it?'.

## aerated *adj*

angrily over-excited or agitated. Perhaps originated by educated speakers who were familiar with the technical senses of aerate (to supply the blood with oxygen or to make effervescent), but usually used nowadays by less sophisticated speakers who may mispronounce it as 'aeriated'.

- 'Now, don't get all aerated.'

## af, aff *n* South African

a black African. The shortening is normally used dismissively or pejoratively, and usually in the plural. The term was more widespread in the 1960s than today. It is less offensive than the synonymous **kaffir** or **munt**.

## african lager *n* British

Guinness. A jocular London term of the 1970s, coined in the tradition of the earlier **african woodbine**. Lager has become the most popular beer served in southern English pubs; Guinness is of course black. The synonymous term 'Nigerian lager' has also been heard from the late 1980s.

## african woodbine *n* British

a cigarette containing cannabis, a joint or reefer. Woodbines are a well-known and long-established brand of cheap cigarette, particularly popular in the 1950s and 1960s.

## afro *n*

a hairstyle consisting of a mass of tight curls which was worn by Afro-Caribbeans and imitated (often by perming) by white **hippies**, particularly between 1967 and 1970.

## afterbirth *n*

1 rhubarb (raw or stewed) in armed forces and school slang in Britain and America.

2 American excessive paperwork, **bumf**. A rare usage.

**agate** *n*

1 a marble (as used in children's games).

2 **agates** testicles. A usage which is archaic in Britain but which survives in Australian speech. (**Marbles** is a more common synonym.)

**aggle** *n* British

a marble (as used in children's games). An old term, usually for a striped marble, still heard in the 1950s. From **agate**, the banded stone from which marbles were originally made.

See **alley**.

**aggravation** *n* British

serious trouble, victimization or mutual harassment. A colloquial extension of the standard meaning of the word, used by police and the underworld. Aggravation is, like **bother** and **seeing-to**, a typical example of menacing understatement as practised in London working-class speech.

**aggro** *n* British and Australian

**aggravation**. Originally the slang term was a euphemism for threatened or actual violence, offered typically by **skinheads**, although it is not clear whether they or their (typically **hippy**) victims first adopted the shortened form at the end of the 1960s. (Whichever is the case, the word is a derivation of aggravation in its colloquial sense as used by police and criminals since the 1950s.) **Aggro**, like **bother**, is a typical example of the use of menacing understatement in British working-class slang. The word was soon taken up by other users and in informal English has now reverted to something like its original unspecific meaning of annoyance or trouble. In Australian usage **aggro** can be used as an adjective as in 'I guess I was a bit **aggro** last night'.

**aggro** *adj* American

wonderful, excellent. This probably ephemeral term was recorded among teenagers in New York and California in late 1987. It is probably based on a misunderstanding or deliberate shifting in the meaning of the earlier British term.

**a-head** *n*

a user of the drug amphetamine. An American term employed by those taking **speed** or **pep pills**, which was occasionally heard in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s. **Speedfreak** was a more popular alternative in both Britain and the USA.

**a-hole** *n* American

a euphemism for **asshole**, usually in the literal rather than metaphorical sense.

**aim archie at the armitage**

*vb* Australian

(of a male) to urinate. A later version of the widely known **point Percy at the porcelain**, popularized in Barry Humphries' Barry McKenzie cartoon series. ('Armitage Ware' is a brand name of toilet bowls.)

**aimed** *adj* American

identified, singled out, and/or victimized. A slang version of 'targeted' which probably originated in the argot of black street-gangs. It is now used in milder contexts by teenagers.

- 'There's no way we'll get out of this; we've been **aimed** ...'

**airball** *n* American

a dim-witted, eccentric or unpleasant person. This mildly pejorative term of the 1980s is a combination of **airhead** and the more offensive **hairball**.

**airbrained** *adj* American

silly, frivolous, empty-headed. Slightly less derogatory than the noun **airhead**, this term has not been imported into Britain to any significant extent, perhaps because of possible confusion with 'hare-brained' which is still in widespread use.

- 'She's not just some airbrained bimbo, you know.'

**air-dance** *n*

death by hanging. A sardonic euphemism in police and underworld use until the abolition of capital punishment in Britain in 1965.

**airhead** *n*

a fool; a silly, empty-headed person. An American teenager's term heard since the mid-1970s, used for instance by **Valley Girls**; it has been adopted by British teenagers in the 1980s.

- 'Debbie's a total airhead.'
- 'The usual crowd of airheads, phonies, deadlegs, posers, bimbos, wallies, wannabees, hangers-on and gatecrashers ...' (Christena Appleyard, *Daily Mirror*, 11 May 1989).

**air hose** *n* American

shoes, typically loafers (leather moc-casins), worn without socks. A **preppie** term for a preppie sartorial convention, punning on the American sense of 'hose' meaning socks, stockings, etc. and the compressed air pipe at a filling station.

**a.k.a., aka** *preposition, n*

also known as, alias, in other words. Initials used by law enforcement agencies in the USA when giving suspect's aliases in official bulletins. The term was extended in America to a more general 'also' or 'alternatively' in writing and in speech (it is spoken as the three letters), and is sometimes used as

a noun as in 'what's his a.k.a.?'. In Britain a.k.a. was picked up by rock music journalists in the 1970s but has not entered the spoken jargon.

**à la** *adj* British

pretentious, excessively refined or elegant. A term used typically by middle-aged and middle-class speakers in the 1950s and early 1960s, now colloquial but rare. It is usually said with envy or disapproval, or both, and derives from the French *à la*; in the style of, or *à la mode*; stylish, in fashion.

- 'They had a proper white wedding with a carriage and musicians; all very à la!' (Recorded, middle-aged woman, London, 1986).

**Alan Whickers, Alans** *n pl*

British

knickers, panties. The terms are non-working-class rhyming slang, heard among young people, particularly students, in the 1970s and 1980s. The reference is to Alan Whicker, a well-known punctilious and dapper television interviewer.

- 'There was this huge pair of Alan Whickers hanging on the line.'

**alec, aleck** *n*

a swindler's victim, dupe. This term from the early 20th century is still heard in the USA and Australia. It is not clear whether alec derives from 'smart alec' or vice versa. The word was used for instance in the film *House of Games* (1987, David Mamet), which dramatizes the world of small-time American gamblers.

**aled, aled-up** *adj* British

drunk. A mild and acceptable term which although short and to-the-point can be used in polite company or family newspapers. The expressions probably originated in the North of England

where ale has been and remains a common all-purpose word for beer.

- 'He's *aled* again.'

**alf** *n* Australian

a common, foolish person. In the 1960s this term briefly vied with **ocker** as the generic term for uncouth manhood.

**alfalfa** *n* American

1 tobacco.

2 money.

3 marihuana. The plant alfalfa is widely used as cattle-feed in the USA. The slang term is typically heard in underworld and prison jargon.

**alkie** *n*

an alcoholic, especially one who lives rough or frequents the streets. The obvious term, which usually carries overtones of contempt, has been widespread in the USA at least since the Depression; it was adopted after World War II in Australia and since the 1960s has been in limited use in Britain.

**alley, allie** *n* British

a marble (as used in children's games). Like **aggie**, the word is approximately a hundred years old and refers to a pale or white marble. Although rarely heard today, these terms probably survive where the traditional game is still played. The most likely origin of the term is a shortening of 'alabaster', from which some Victorian marbles were made.

**alley apple** *n* American

a lump of horse manure. A less common version of the expression **road apple**, which is now an international English term.

**alley cat** *n*

a person who frequents the streets,

particularly at night, a carouser, roisterer or promiscuous person. Those using this term, usually with disapproval, may have the cliché 'to have the morals of an alley cat' in mind. Alley cat may be applied to either sex and, although heard in Britain and Australia since the 1960s, is originally pre-World-War II American.

**alleycat** *vb*

to prowl the streets, particularly late at night.

- 'There's Arthur Smith *alleycatting* around, trying to pick up chicks.' (Kit Hollerbach, *The 39,000 Steps*, Channel 4 documentary on the Edinburgh Festival, July 1989).

**alligator shoes/boots** *n* pl

old footwear with the toes gaping open. A jocular play on (expensive and luxurious) alligator-skin shoes.

**all mouth and trousers** *adj*

British

blustering and boastful, showing off without having the qualities to justify it. A commonly heard dismissive phrase, typically said by women about a loud or assertive man. There is a suggestion that this is a corruption of a more logical, but rarely heard expression, 'all mouth and no trousers', meaning full of talk but deficient in the sexual area. A less racy version is 'all talk and no action'. There is an analogy with other colourful expressions, now mostly archaic, such as 'all my eye and Betty Martin', meaning nonsense, and more abusive versions such as **all piss and wind**.

- 'Oh him! He's *all mouth and trousers*, that one.'

**all over the shop/show/lot/ballpark** *adj, adv*

disorganized, in chaos or disarray. The first two versions are British, the

## all piss and wind

last two American. This is a more colourful extension into slang of the colloquial phrase 'all over the place', and the first version at least dates from the 19th century. ('Shop' is a working-class catch-all for any workplace.)

## all piss and wind *adj*

full of bluster and noise, but without real substance. This expression can have a similar meaning to **all mouth and trousers**, but can be applied for instance to a politician's speech or a theatrical performance, as well as to an individual. 'All piss and vinegar' is a rarer synonym.

## all right, awright *interjection*

American

an exclamation of recognition, greeting, approval or admiration. The 'right' is emphasized, high-pitched and elongated when shouted. Used in this way the phrase was originally black American; it was picked up by whites, especially hippies, in the late 1960s.

## almond, almond rock *n*

British

penis. London working-class rhyming slang for **cock**, inspired by the almond rock cakes eaten in the early 20th century. The terms, like the sweetmeat, are now rarely encountered.

See also **almonds**, **almond rocks**.

## almonds, almond rocks *n pl*

British

socks. A London rhyming-slang term which is still in use. (Almond rock cakes were a popular working-class treat early in the 20th century.)

## amber fluid, amber nectar *n*

beer, Australian lager. A facetious euphemism used by Australians in the 1970s which was popularized in Britain first by Barry Humphries' *Barry*

McKenzie comic strip, then by TV advertisements featuring the actor Paul Hogan for Australian beer in the 1980s. The term was enthusiastically adopted by some middle-class British drinkers, themselves fond of mock-pompous coinages.

## ambidextrous *adj*

bisexual, AC/DC. An obvious pun on the conventional meaning of *ambidextrous*, using the word as a sexual euphemism.

## ambulance chaser *n*

a lawyer, literally one who specializes in claiming on behalf of accident victims. The phrase is also applied, facetiously or critically, to any lawyer who is known for sharp practice or unethical methods. This term was originally American (dating from the beginning of the century) but is now employed in other English-speaking areas.

- 'My daddy's a lawyer. Well, we often say he's an ambulance chaser.'

(Recorded, young woman, Chicago, 1983).

## amp *n*

1 an ampoule (of a drug). An obvious shortening by drug users.

- 'I scored a couple of amps of meth[edrine].'

2 an amplifier. A common shortening used by musicians and hi-fi enthusiasts since the 1960s.

- 'He rammed his guitar into the amp.'

## 'ampsteads *n pl* British

teeth. Cockney rhyming slang referring to the London beauty spot Hampstead Heath. The term (which is still heard) is invariably used with the dropped aspirate.



- 'A lovely set of 'ampsteads/kicked in the 'ampsteads.'

### **amscray** *vb*

**scram**, go away. One of the few examples of backslang or **pig Latin** which is actually used in speech, albeit rarely. The word is a pre-World-War II Americanism which has been heard in Australia and in Britain since the 1950s.

- 'We'd better amscray before he gets back.'

### **amyl** *n*

amyl nitrite (sometimes called amyl nitrate), a very powerful stimulant drug inhaled from a broken phial, or **popper**. Amyl nitrite is prescribed for the treatment of angina pectoris; it has been taken for fun since the 1950s, and for its supposed sexually stimulating effects, especially by **gay** men, since the late 1970s.

### **anchors** *n pl British*

brakes. Originally part of the jargon of pre-war professional drivers. The term was popular with some middle-class motorists throughout the 1950s and 1960s, usually in the phrase 'slam on the anchors'; to brake suddenly. It now sounds rather dated.

### **the Andrew** *n British*

the navy. A dated term which is a shortening of 'Andrew Miller' (or 'Andrew Millar'). The eponymous Andrew is said to have been a press-ganger whose name was taken as a nickname for a warship and later for the whole service.

### **'andsome** *adj British*

See **handsome**.

### **angel** *n British*

1 in theatrical parlance, a financial backer of a production.

2 a nurse, in colloquial usage.

3 a dot on a radar screen. The term was commonly used in this context until the late 1950s.

### **angel, angela, angelina** *n*

a passive male homosexual. These are slang terms used by homosexuals themselves and (usually pejoratively) by heterosexuals. The words may originate as terms of affection, as feminine nicknames, or possibly from earlier slang usage denoting a (female) prostitute.

### **angel dust** *n*

the drug **PCP**. A powdered (usually home-made) version of an animal tranquilizer which is smoked or sniffed through a tube and which produces in the user unpredictable and extreme physical and psychological effects. Users are capable of acts of violence, hallucinations and periods of imperviousness to pain and superhuman strength. PCP is easy to produce in home laboratories and became a severe social problem in US cities after 1975, principally among poorer teenagers. Fears of its spread to Britain and elsewhere were groundless. Its milieu is now largely given over to **crack**.

- 'For 15 years Washington has been struggling with abuse of PCP, also known as Angel Dust.' (Independent, 24 July 1989).

### **anglo** *n American*

a person of (mainly) anglo-saxon ethnic origin. The term came into widespread use in the 1970s, especially among Hispanics. This was the first attempt by Americans from other ethnic backgrounds to categorize white anglo-saxons as a sub-group. (**WASP** was first coined by wasps themselves; **honky**, **pinkie**, etc. are terms of abuse.)

- 'They're mainly anglos out on Long Island these days.'