

NEW DICTIONARY OF

A M E R I C A N

S L A N G

E D I T E D B Y

ROBERT L. CHAPMAN, PH.D.

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This work is based on the *Dictionary of American Slang* by Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner.

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... banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.

Henry IV, Part 1

Considering Language then as some mighty potentate, into the majestic audience-hall of the monarch ever enters a personage like one of Shakespeare's clowns, and takes position there, and plays a part even in the stateliest ceremonies. Such is Slang, or indirection, an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably.

Walt Whitman, "Slang in America"

Preface

The editor of a new dictionary of slang owes explanations to people at large and to those who use the book. To the public he should explain *why* such a book is made and deserves to be made. To the users he must explain *how* the book was made and how to use it. Finally, to all these and to himself, he must attempt to explain *what* slang is, anyway. (For a brief working answer to this last question, the reader may look up *slang* in this dictionary; for a more considered account, see below.)

Why This Book Was Made The question will be: Why does a serious scholar devote himself to this uncouth sort of language, and why does he connive, worse yet, in foisting it on us and our innocent youth? Even though to a lexicographer that question is not very relevant, it is far from trivial. Dictionaries are popularly thought to have strong influence. They are thought to give validity and authority to their entries, and therefore to have social and moral impact. A dictionary like this, which specializes in terms not to be lightly used in polite society, is therefore thought of as teaching and advocating these terms, and hence akin to pornography.

The question may be answered in two veins, the theoretical and the historical. Theoretically, in linguistics any corpus or body of vocabulary is worth recording, and all are equally worthy. Linguistics, lexicography, is like a science in that its values have to do with accuracy, completeness, and demonstrability rather than with moral or social good. As a lexicographer I collect and record slang because it is there, and I take as much professional delight in a faithful transcript of all this nasty talk as I do in capturing and recording for our descendants the differing elegancies of standard language.

So, as a lexicographer I answer that I will collect every slang term I can get my hands on, will treat these as carefully and responsibly as I am able, and will leave their use up to others, who will have been warned against the undeliberate wielding of these powerful and provocative words. Yes, children will sneak off into corners with this book, and find the dirty words, and have dirty thoughts. If I believed that our whole culture could be made the least bit more

decent, more respectful, more harmonious, happier, and mentally healthier by *not* making a slang dictionary, I might refrain. But I do not believe that and have not refrained.

This line of justification is nicely summed up in a story I heard Elie Wiesel tell: A magisterial historian was challenged with the question, "Why does a scholar like you occupy himself with a silly and contemptible subject like X?" To which the savant replied, "X is, as you say, silly and contemptible; but the *history* of X is scholarship!"

History of Slang Lexicography In historical justification, this book joins itself to an Anglo-American tradition going back just over two hundred years, and of which the high spots may be mentioned.

Credit as founder of general slang lexicography, as distinct from those who dealt in specialized lexicons, goes to the distinguished British antiquarian Francis Grose, who published *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* in 1785. After two further editions, the book became the basis of an 1811 updating and expansion called *Lexicon Balatronicum: A Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit, and Pickpocket Eloquence*, of about 260 pages, with nearly five thousand defined entries. A half-dozen or so earlier compilations exist from as early as the 1560s, but they deal only in the special vocabularies of thieves and tramps. Grose's book and its successor include the slang of the so-called *balatrones*—"jesters, buffoons, contemptible persons; literally, babblers," who are urban dandies or men-about-town—and of the learned humorists of and from the universities, as well as of thieves.

Grose's work held the field until 1859, when it was superseded by John C. Hotten's *A Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words*, which had new editions in 1860, 1864, and 1874. The attribution to Hotten is not certain, since the book was anonymous, but it is generally accepted. Henry Bradley of the *Oxford English Dictionary* judged it "a work of considerable merit" and praised its scholarly authority.

In 1887 Albert M. V. Barrere, Professor of French at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich, published at his own expense *Argot and Slang: A New French and English Dictionary*. Two years later the Ballantyne Press brought out for subscribers only *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon & Cant*, in two volumes totaling 956 pages. Barrere had as collaborator Charles Godfrey Leland, an American. Leland had been a Philadelphia lawyer, a journalist and editor, a three-day barricades veteran of the 1848 Revolution in Paris, on the whole a rather Hemingwayish character, and was the first American to figure prominently in general slang lexicography. He had made a particular study of British gypsies and their language, and was the first to describe Shelta, a jargon of certain Irish and Welsh gypsies. The dictionary embraces "English, American, and Anglo-Indian slang, Pidgin English, tinkers' jargon and other irregular phraseology."

One year later the first volume of John Stephen Farmer and William Ernest Henley's *Slang and Its Analogues* was published, without Henley's name on the title page. Henley let his name be used on Volume 2 in 1891 and on the subsequent five volumes through 1904. He was a poet and editor, now undervalued as a poet though popularly known for the stirring *Invictus*, set to music as a virile baritone solo and ending "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." Contemporary biographies of Henley refrain from mentioning the slang dictionary, and indeed his part in it is not well understood. Farmer, probably the originator and

major author, was a prodigious scholar and editor, especially of Tudor drama and other text of that epoch. His production comes to more than twenty volumes in that field alone. He also collected and edited six volumes of songs, especially of the "merry" sort. He wrote three books on spiritualism, a late Victorian craze. More to the point here, in 1888 he published *Americanisms Old and New*, "by J. S. F.," surely written as a preliminary by-product of his work on the seven-volume slang dictionary. An American authority on our national English, Richard H. Thornton, discovered that nine-tenths of the examples in Farmer's 564-page book came from material published in 1888. This indicates very great efficiency and/or a white-hot pace of work. When the Farmer and Henley work was completed in 1904, it amounted to 2736 pages.

A less useful contribution to general slang lexicography was James Maitland's 308-page *The American Slang Dictionary* of 1891. This book is not a jewel in the tradition, perhaps for the reasons that caused an anonymous reviewer in the *Nation* to observe that most of the entries were not American and not slang, and that the philological grounding of the editor was meager indeed. The review concluded, in cruelly measured words that make any slang lexicographer cringe in a nightmare, "... it must be said of the present work that it not only has no reason to show for its existence, but furnishes a good many reasons to suggest the desirability of its non-existence."

After Farmer and Henley, good general slang lexicography was not resumed until 1937 when Eric Partridge brought out the first edition of his masterwork, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, which was updated and enlarged in seven editions and numerous reprintings by Partridge himself through 1980 and has recently been posthumously revised and published in an eighth. Eric Partridge—New Zealander, Australian, Englishman, soldier, scholar, university teacher, essayist, novelist—is the lofty star at whose work and book all other slang lexicographers must hopelessly aim. He is also, for the twentieth century, the one who made slang lexicography more or less respectable and enabled us to cease lurking behind pseudonyms oronyms or initials, or being privately and furtively printed.

The first full-scale dictionary of American slang had to wait until 1960, when Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner's *Dictionary of American Slang* was published by Thomas Y. Crowell (a company now incorporated into Harper & Row). Professor Wentworth had previously written an *American Dialect Dictionary*, portions of which were adapted for the slang dictionary. Mr. Flexner added thousands of slang definitions from other sources and wrote the invaluable preface, our best treatment of the sociolinguistics of slang. The preface to that edition is reprinted in this book. He also did the immense analytical work reflected in the appendix, which treats the processes of word-formation in slang with unequaled authority and exhaustiveness. Flexner was responsible for final defining and editing of all the entries in the seven-hundred-page volume, which at once became the standard work in its field. Wentworth and Flexner, as it is usually called, was enlarged and updated in 1967 and 1975 and is the basis of the present book.

These are the theoretical and historical justifications of this book, to which a practical note must be added. First, obviously the book has a primary utility for people who find slang terms in their reading, or who overhear them, and need help with their meaning. Finally, it means to serve people who just plain enjoy slang and are curious about it and where it came from.

Preface

How This Book Was Made This dictionary came into being in a five-stage process that may be quickly explained but was only slowly carried out.

1. Policies were determined and a "style manual" made that embodied these decisions on the format of the entries, their typefaces, their punctuation, the ordering of information, etc. The basic policies of the book are that it means to be a general dictionary of current American slang, rather than a collection of special vocabularies, a scholarly historical treatment, or a book with regional or other bias.
2. The Wentworth and Flexner *Dictionary of American Slang* was "recycled" and its wealth of material retained, altered, or discarded according to the new policies.
3. A corps of collectors was recruited for the accumulation of new material. At its most numerous this group consisted of fifty or more collectors, these dwindling as the years passed to an indefatigable hard core who are still submitting material as this preface is written. The collectors are listed, gratefully, at the end of the preface.
4. The definitions were written, rewritten, and then were edited and reedited by gimlet-eyed faultfinders whose crucial work is also acknowledged, gratefully, below.
5. Computers were used throughout in many ways. Citations were stored and sorted in computers. Entries were coded and typed directly onto discs, making editing and checking more easy, fast, and reliable. And, the typesetting was computer-generated.

Working by these stages and with this copious help, and having the advantage of standing on the strong shoulders of predecessors, making a dictionary is not the momentous and Olympian task it is popularly thought to be. It is simply an affair of knowing it can be done and knowing the practical steps to take. And working and worrying.

The style and apparatus of this dictionary are explained in the section called "Guide to the Dictionary."

What Is Slang? In linguistics, where definitions at best are often imprecise and leaky, that of slang is especially notorious. The problem is one of complexity, such that a definition satisfying to one person or authority would seem inadequate to another because the prime focus is different. Like the proverbial blind men describing an elephant, all correctly, none sufficiently, we tend to stress one aspect or another of slang. My own stress will be on the individual psychology of slang speakers.

Sociolinguistic Aspects of Slang The external and quantitative aspects of slang, its sociolinguistics, have been very satisfactorily treated, nowhere more so than in Stuart Berg Flexner's masterful preface to the *Dictionary of American Slang*, included in this book. Readers may also consult Eric Partridge's 1954 book *Slang To-Day and Yesterday*, in particular parts III and IV.

Updating Flexner's discussion of the social milieux from which American slang emerges would involve no real correction of his findings, but only an account of the historical shifts that twenty-five years have brought.

Recorded slang emerged, as the sketch of dictionaries has shown, from the special languages of subcultures, or perhaps we should call the more despised of them "undercultures." The group studied longest and most persistently has been the criminal underworld itself, includ-

ing the prison population, whose "cant" or "argot" still provides a respectable number of unrespectable terms. Other undercultures contributing heavily are those of hoboes, of gypsies, of soldiers and sailors, of the police, of narcotics users, of gamblers, of cowboys, of all sorts of students, of show-business workers, of jazz musicians and devotees, of athletes and their fans, of railroad and other transportation workers, and of immigrant or ethnic populations cutting across these other subcultures.

In the 1980s, we must note that some of these traditional spawning grounds for slang have lost their productivity, and that other subcultures have emerged to replace them. For example, general adoption of terms from hoboes, from railroad workers, from gypsies, and from cowboys has very nearly ceased, although the contributions of all these persist in the substrata of current slang. Criminals and police (cops and robbers) still make their often identical contributions, and gamblers continue to give us zesty coinages. Teenagers and students can still be counted on for innovation and effrontery. Show business workers, although they have largely shed the raffish image of their roving and carnival past, are still a fertile source of slang. But several centers of gravity have shifted greatly during the past fifty or so years, as reflected in the entries of this book.

For example, the adoption of military, naval, and merchant marine slang has slowed to a relative trickle, not surprisingly. World Wars 1 and 2 probably gave us more general slang than any other events in history but they are now history, and the Korean and Vietnam wars have had in comparison a meager effect. Railroad slang has been replaced, though on a lesser scale, by the usage of airline workers and truck drivers. The jazz world, formerly so richly involved with drug use, prostitution, booze, and gutter life, is no longer so contributory, nor has rock and roll quite made up the loss, but taken as a whole, popular music—rock, blues, funk, rap, reggae, etc.—are making inroads.

Terms from "the drug scene" have multiplied astronomically, and a specialized book this size could easily be made from them alone. The "counterculture" helped disseminate many drug terms that might otherwise have remained part of a special vocabulary. Sports also make a much larger contribution, with football and even basketball not challenging but beginning to match baseball as prime producers. Among the immigrant-ethnic bestowals, the influx from Yiddish continues strong in spite of the sociological shifting of the Jewish population. The old Dutch and German sources have dried up. The Italian carries on in modest proportion. The Hispanic has been surprisingly uninfluential, although a heavier contribution is surely predictable. All these are far outstripped by increased borrowing from black America, and this from the urban ghetto rather than the old Southern heartland. Close analysis would probably show that, what with the prominence of black people in the armed forces, in music, in the entertainment world, and in street and ghetto life, the black influence on American slang has been more pervasive in recent times than that of any other ethnic group in history. This can be conjectured, of course, without any implication that black Americans constitute a homogeneous culture.

Some sources of the slang in this book will be entirely or relatively new. Examples of this are the computer milieu and the hospital-medical-nursing complex. In the first case an exciting technological inundation is at the base, and in the other, as in so many other trends of our era, the reason is television.

In the matter of sex, our period has witnessed a great increase in the number of terms taken over from homosexuals, especially male homosexuals. And it would be wrong to restrict the range of their contribution to sex terms alone, since the gay population merges with so many others that are educated, witty, observant, acerbic, and modish.

The "growth sector" hardest to characterize just now is in linear descent from the people old Captain Francis Grose, and Ben Jonson and others before him, called "university wits." Today, trying to mark off this most fecund assemblage, I need a clumsy compound like "the Washington-Los Angeles-Houston-Wall Street-Madison Avenue nexus." Our culture occupies these centers, and they occupy the culture through pervasive and unifying communications media. They give us the slang of the brass, of the execs, of middle management, of dwellers in bureaucracies, of yuppies, and of the talk shows and the "people" sort of columns and magazines. Bright, expressive, sophisticated people, moving and prospering with our lively popular culture, and not entirely buying it. They are the trend-setters and source of the slang that seems to come from everywhere and not to be susceptible of labeling. We will need more historical perspective before we can be usefully analytic about them, but they, whoever they are, clearly make up the wave of the present.

This new emphasis in the fortunes of American slang, by the way, points to one of its important distinctions, that between what I call "primary" and "secondary" slang. Primary slang is the pristine speech of subculture members, so very natural to its speakers that it seems they might be mute without it. Of course they would not be, since we know that slang is by definition always an alternative idiom, to be chosen rather than required. Much of teenage talk, and the speech of urban street gangs, would be examples of primary slang. Secondary slang is chosen not so much to fix one in a group as to express one's attitudes and resourcefulness by *pretending*, momentarily, in a little shtick of personal guerilla theater, to be a member of a street gang, or a criminal, or a gambler, or a drug user, or a professional football player, and so forth—and hence to express one's contempt, superiority, and cleverness by borrowing someone else's verbal dress. Secondary slang is a matter of stylistic choice rather than true identification. The increasing currency of the "Washington-Los Angeles-Houston, etc.," sort of slang may mean that in the future secondary or acquired slang will be our major variety. That is, the old disreputable groups will blend gradually into the mass, and slang will become more a matter of individual wit and self-advertisement, with its sources no more apparent than those of, say, a dirty joke. In fact it may be conjectured that even now the strong influence of black slang and gay slang has less to do with those subcultures *per se* than with the fact that both put a very high premium on verbal skill. Blacks, for example, are particularly given to rhyme and other prosodic features that seem to be increasingly prominent in slang.

Individual Psychology of Slang Obviously an individual in one of the groups or subcultures mentioned above, or any of many others, resorts to slang as a means of attesting membership in the group and of dividing him- or herself off from the mainstream culture. He or she merges both verbally and psychologically into the subculture that preens itself on being different from, in conflict with, and superior to the mainstream culture, and in particular to its assured rectitude and its pomp. Slang is thus an act of bracketing a smaller social group that can be comfortably joined and understood and be a shelter for the self. It is simultaneously an act of featur- ing and

obtruding the self within the subculture—by cleverness, by control, by up-to-dateness, by insolence, by virtuositities of audacious and usually satirical wit, by aggression (phallic, if you wish). All this happens at fairly shallow levels in the psyche and can be readily understood. It explains most of what we know and feel about slang.

But what explains "it"? If, as the authorities agree, slang is a universal human trait and as old as the race itself, and if it came into being in the same human society where language itself was born, can we not seek deeper and more generalized explanations? Authorities also agree, as it happens, that the roots of slang must be sought in the deepest parts of the mind, in the unconscious itself. Although that territory is perilous ground for a working lexicographer, a few conjectures and a few relationships can be proposed for consideration.

It seems to me that the deeper psychodynamics of slang have to do with two things: (1) defense of the ego against the superego, and (2) our simultaneous eagerness and reluctance to be human.

Surely wounded egos are the most common human nonanatomic possession. Slang might be seen as a remedy for them, as a self-administered therapy old as the first family that spoke. The family, like society, entails a hierarchy of power and of right, against which the healthy growing self of the child needs measures to compensate for its weakness and sinfulness. Slang as a remedy denies the weakness and brags about the sinfulness.

In this view, it would not be too much to claim that therapeutic slang is necessary for the development of the self; that society would be impossible without slang. It is curious that a linguistic phenomenon that seems so fleeting and so frivolous, as slang undeniably does, should at the same time be so deep and so vital to human growth and order. This is only one of the paradoxes of slang.

This aspect of slang is "deeper" than the matters mentioned above, like group identification and so on, only because it existed before groups, and it persists as groups themselves chop and change in the flux of history. In this aspect slang is similar to, and perhaps the same as, profanity. Like profanity slang is a surrogate for destructive physical action. Freud once remarked that the founder of civilization was the first man who hurled a curse rather than a rock or spear at his enemy. Slang also has this usefulness, and I suspect that profanity is a subcategory of slang, the more elemental phenomenon.

Hence, slang is language that has little to do with the main aim of language, the connection of sounds with ideas in order to communicate ideas, but is rather an attitude, a feeling, and an act. To pose another paradox: Slang is the most nonlinguistic sort of language.

"Our simultaneous eagerness and reluctance to be human"—what can that have to do with slang? My notion here is that when you try to consider it deeply slang seems to join itself with several other phenomena: with Freud's "dream-work," with comedy, with elements of myth.

It seems to me that slang (I mean the slang impulse of the psyche) shares with all these the salvational and therapeutic function of both divorcing us from and maintaining our connection with genetic animality. Dream-work relieves us of the need to be reasonable and discharges the tension of the great burden with which our angelic rationality charges us. Although we are uncomfortable with paradox in ordinary language, we easily tolerate it in slang, where it seems as much at home as it is in the study of logic.

Slang links itself with comedy in the respect that it exploits and even celebrates human weakness, animality, without working to extirpate it. It makes room for our vileness, but only so much room. The great comic figures of our culture usually come in pairs, each member having its legitimacy, and each limiting the other: Sancho Panza and Don Quixote; Falstaff and Prince Hal; Huck Finn and who?—Tom Sawyer, Aunt Polly, even Jim. To these we may add the Wife of Bath, whose counterfigure was a part of herself, making her more like most of us than Sancho or Falstaff or Huck are. We may add, without too much strain, the comic figure Dante Alighieri over against Beatrice and the lightweight devil Mephistopheles over against Faust. What we seem to have in the comic heroes and in our own slang impulse is a reaching for or clinging to the primal earth, a *nostalgie de la boue*, which helps make tolerable the hard aspiration to be civilized and decent.

As to myth, Sancho, Alice of Bath, and Falstaff are modern myths themselves. For ancient myth we might think of Antaeus, whose strength was valid only while he had his feet on the earth, and of Silenus and the satyrs, and even of the Devil himself, who must, when he is not quoting scripture, speak a great deal of slang. We may also attend to the intriguing “trickster” figure who is so prevalent in world mythology. C. G. Jung reminds me of the slang impulse when he asserts, for example, “. . . [the trickster’s] fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks, his powers as a shape-shifter, his dual nature, half animal, half divine, his exposure to all kinds of tortures, and—last but not least—his approximation to the figure of a saviour.” In the same essay, “On the Psychology of the Trickster-Figure,” Jung relates the trickster to the medieval Feast of Fools and other manifestations of the comic and slang spirit, especially those that deflate pomp, that prick presumption, that trip up our high-horses. Jung believed that the civilizing process began within the framework of the trickster myth, which is a race memory of the human achievement of self-consciousness.

As the literary scholar Wylie Sypher said, “. . . man is not man without being somehow uneasy about the ‘nastiness’ of his body, [and] obscenity . . . is a threshold over which man enters into the human condition.” For *obscenity* we might read *slang*, and observe that we are not so far beyond the threshold that we cannot always reach it with our foot, which is of clay.

Slang is also the idiom of the life force. That is, it has roots somewhere near those of sexuality, and it regularly defies death. What I have in mind is partly the “dirty” and taboo constituent of slang, but even more its tendency to kid about being hanged, electrocuted, murdered, or otherwise annihilated. Gallows humor is, from this point of view, more central to slang than may have been thought.

One changing pattern that has obvious connections with both socio- and psycholinguistics is the relation of slang to gender. In these times, and partly because of the feminist movement, women are more and more using the taboo and vulgar slang formerly accounted a male preserve. Sociologically this shows the determination of some women to enter the power structure by taking on this badge, among others, that denotes “maleness,” and simultaneously to shed the restrictions of the “ladylike” persona. Psychologically the implications are not that clear, but it may be that some women are determined to replicate at the core of their psyches the aggressive and ordering nature we have usually identified as a part of profound maleness, or else to show that these masculine traits do not lie as deep as we thought.

Apologies Our aim has been to make a dictionary of current general American slang, but even a cursory look will show that we have retained from the *Dictionary of American Slang* many entries that are only dubiously current and not very general. We have done so for two reasons: (1) we felt that these would be helpful to readers baffled by slang found in earlier writings or writings that use earlier slang, and (2) some of these obsolete terms are aids in understanding the derivation of current terms.

In the absence of a litmus test for slang and nonslang we must ask some indulgence. Slang shares misty boundaries with a relaxed register usually called "informal" or "colloquial," and we have inevitably strayed across the boundary. Eric Partridge spared himself the embarrassment of this apology by calling his book the dictionary of "slang and unconventional English." This book should probably have the same title.

Slang also shares a boundary with a stylistic register we might call "figurative idiom," in which inventive and poetic terms, especially metaphors, are used for novelty and spice, and incidentally for self-advertisement and cheekiness, in relief of a standard language that is accurate and clear but not personal and kinetic. Here again we beg the indulgence of those who disagree with our choices, as we would hope to be indulgent of theirs.

We are interested in getting the book right, and would be grateful for corrections and suggestions. These can be addressed to the publisher.

—ROBERT L. CHAPMAN
May 1986

Preface to the *Dictionary of American Slang*

by Stuart Berg Flexner

American slang, as used in the title of this dictionary, is the body of words and expressions frequently used by or intelligible to a rather large portion of the general American public, but not accepted as good, formal usage by the majority. No word can be called slang simply because of its etymological history; its source, its spelling, and its meaning in a larger sense do not make it slang. Slang is best defined by a dictionary that points out who uses slang and what "flavor" it conveys.

I have called all slang used in the United States "American," regardless of its country of origin or use in other countries.

In this preface I shall discuss the human element in the formation of slang (what American slang is, and how and why slang is created and used).

The English language has several levels of vocabulary:

Standard usage comprises those words and expressions used, understood, and accepted by a majority of our citizens under any circumstances or degree of formality. Such words are well defined and their most accepted spellings and pronunciations are given in our standard dictionaries. In standard speech one might say: *Sir, you speak English well.*

Colloquialisms are familiar words and idioms used in informal speech and writing, but not considered explicit or formal enough for polite conversation or business correspondence. Unlike slang, however, colloquialisms are used and understood by nearly everyone in the United States. The use of slang conveys the suggestion that the speaker and the listener enjoy a special "fraternity," but the use of colloquialisms emphasizes only the informality and familiarity of a general social situation. Almost all idiomatic expressions, for example, could be labeled colloquial. Colloquially, one might say: *Friend, you talk plain and hit the nail right on the head.*

Dialects are the words, idioms, pronunciations, and speech habits peculiar to specific geographical locations. A dialecticism is a regionalism or localism. In popular use "dialect" has come to mean the words, foreign accents, or speech patterns associated with any ethnic group. In Southern dialect one might say: *Cousin, y'all talk mighty fine.* In ethnic-immigrant "dialects"

one might say: *Paisano, you speak good the English*, or *Landsman, your English is plenty all right already*.

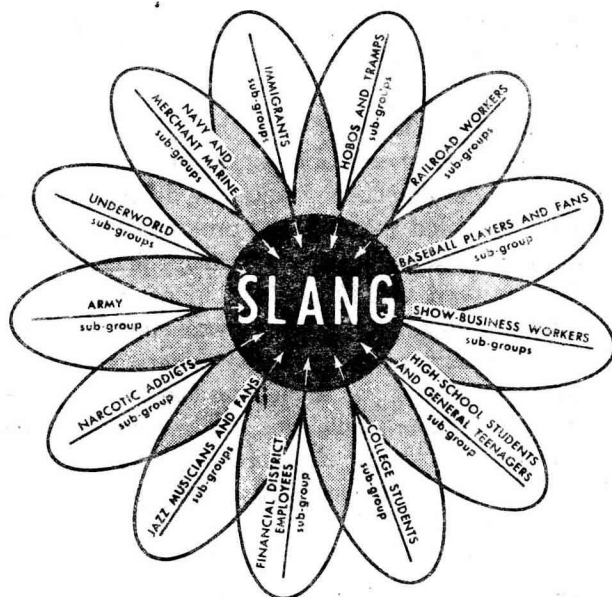
Cant, *jargon*, and *argot* are the words and expressions peculiar to special segments of the population. *Cant* is the conversational, familiar idiom used and generally understood only by members of a specific occupation, trade, profession, sect, class, age group, interest group, or other sub-group of our culture. *Jargon* is the technical or even secret vocabulary of such a sub-group; jargon is "shop talk." *Argot* is both the cant and the jargon of any professional criminal group. In such usages one might say, respectively: *CQ-CQ-CQ . . . the tone of your transmission is good*; *You are free of anxieties related to interpersonal communication*; or *Duchess, let's have a bowl of chalk*.

*Slang*¹ is generally defined above. In slang one might say: *Buster, your line is the cat's pajamas*, or *Doll, you come on with the straight jazz, real cool like*.

Each of these levels of language, save standard usage, is more common in speech than in writing, and slang as a whole is no exception. Thus, very few slang words and expressions (hence very few of the entries in this dictionary) appear in standard dictionaries.

American slang tries for a quick, easy, personal mode of speech. It comes mostly from cant, jargon, and argot words and expressions whose popularity has increased until a large number of the general public uses or understands them. Much of this slang retains a basic characteristic of its origin: it is *fully* intelligible only to initiates.

Slang may be represented pictorially as the more popular portion of the cant, jargon, and argot from many sub-groups (only a few of the sub-groups are shown below). The shaded areas represent only general overlapping between groups:



1. For the evolution of the word "slang," see F. Klaeber, "Concerning the Etymology of Slang," *American Speech*, April 1926.

Eventually, some slang passes into standard speech; other slang flourishes for a time with varying popularity and then is forgotten; finally, some slang is never fully accepted nor completely forgotten. *O.K.*, *jazz* (music), and *A-bomb* were recently considered slang, but they are now standard usages. *Bluebelly*, *Lucifer*, and *the bee's knees* have faded from popular use. *Bones* (dice) and *beat it* seem destined to remain slang forever: Chaucer used the first and Shakespeare used the second.

It is impossible for any living vocabulary to be static. Most new slang words and usages evolve quite naturally: they result from specific situations. New objects, ideas, or happenings, for example, require new words to describe them. Each generation also seems to need some new words to describe the same old things.

Railroaders (who were probably the first American sub-group to have a nationwide cant and jargon) thought *jerk water town* was ideally descriptive of a community that others called a *one-horse town*. The changes from *one-horse town* and *don't spare the horses* to a *wide place in the road* and *step on it* were natural and necessary when the automobile replaced the horse. The automobile also produced such new words and new meanings (some of them highly specialized) as *gas buggy*, *jalopy*, *bent eight*, *Chevvie*, *convertible*, and *lube*. Like most major innovations, the automobile affected our social history and introduced or encouraged *dusters*, *hitch hikers*, *road hogs*, *joint hopping*, *necking*, *chicken* (the game), *car coats*, and *suburbia*.

The automobile is only one obvious example. Language always responds to new concepts and developments with new words.

Consider the following:

wars: *redcoats*, *minutemen*, *bluebelly*, *over there*, *doughboy*, *gold brick*, *jeep*.
 mass immigrations: *Bohunk*, *greenhorn*, *shillalagh*, *voodoo*, *pizzeria*.
 science and technology: *'gin*, *side-wheeler*, *wash-and-wear*, *fringe area*, *fallout*.
 turbulent eras: *Redskin*, *maverick*, *speak*, *Chicago pineapple*, *free love*, *fink*, *breadline*.
 evolution in the styles of eating: *applesauce*, *clambake*, *luncheonette*, *hot dog*, *coffee and*.
 dress: *Mother Hubbard*, *bustle*, *shimmy*, *sailor*, *Long Johns*, *zoot suit*, *lvy League*.
 housing: *lean-to*, *bundling board*, *chuckhouse*, *W.C.*, *railroad flat*, *split-level*, *sectional*.
 music: *cakewalk*, *bandwagon*, *fish music*, *long hair*, *rock*.
 personality: *Yankee*, *alligator*, *flapper*, *sheik*, *hepcat*, *B.M.O.C.*, *beetle*, *beat*.
 new modes of transportation: *stage*, *pinto*, *jitney*, *kayducer*, *hot shot*, *jet jockey*.
 new modes of entertainment: *barnstormer*, *two-a-day*, *clown alley*, *talkies*, *d.j.*, *Spectacular*.
 changing attitudes toward sex: *painted woman*, *fast*, *broad*, *wolf*, *jailbait*, *sixty-nine*.
 human motivations: *boy crazy*, *gold-digger*, *money-mad*, *Momism*, *Oedipus complex*, *dogooder*, *sick*.
 personal relationships: *bunky*, *kids*, *old lady*, *steady*, *ex*, *gruesome twosome*, *John*.
 work and workers: *clod buster*, *scab*, *pencil pusher*, *white collar*, *graveyard shift*, *company man*.
 politics: *Tory*, *do-nothing*, *mug-wump*, *third party*, *brain trust*, *fellow traveler*, *Veep*.
 and even hair styles: *bun*, *rat*, *peroxide blonde*, *Italian cut*, *pony tail*, *D.A.*

Those social groups that first confront a new object, cope with a new situation, or work with a new concept devise and use new words long before the population at large does. The larger,

more imaginative, and useful a group's vocabulary, the more likely it is to contribute slang. To generate slang, a group must either be very large and in constant contact with the dominant culture or be small, closely knit, and removed enough from the dominant culture to evolve an extensive, highly personal, and vivid vocabulary. Teenagers are an example of a large subgroup contributing many words. Criminals, carnival workers, and hoboes are examples of the smaller groups. The smaller groups, because their vocabulary is personal and vivid, contribute to our general slang out of proportion to their size.

Whether the United States has more slang words than any other country (in proportion to number of people, area, or the number of words in the standard vocabulary) I do not know.² Certainly the French and the Spanish enjoy extremely large slang vocabularies. Americans, however, do use their general slang more than any other people.

American slang reflects the kind of people who create and use it. Its diversity and popularity are in part due to the imagination, self-confidence, and optimism of our people. Its vitality is in further part due to our guarantee of free speech and to our lack of a national academy of language or of any "official" attempt to purify our speech. Americans are restless and frequently move from region to region and from job to job. This hopeful wanderlust, from the time of the pioneers through our westward expansion to modern mobility, has helped spread regional and group terms until they have become general slang. Such restlessness has created constantly new situations which provoke new words. Except for a few Eastern industrial areas and some rural regions in the South and West, America just doesn't look or sound "lived in."

2. The vocabulary of the average American, most of which he knows but never uses, is usually estimated at 10,000-20,000 words. Of this quantity I estimate conservatively that 2,000 words are slang. Slang, which thus forms about 10 percent of the words known by the average American, belongs to the part of his vocabulary most frequently used.

The English language is now estimated to have at least 600,000 words; this is over four times the 140,000 recorded words of the Elizabethan period. Thus over 450,000 new words or meanings have been added since Shakespeare's day, without counting the replacement words or those that have been forgotten between then and now. There are now approximately 10,000 slang words in American English, and about 35,000 cant, jargon, and argot words.

Despite this quantity, 25 percent of all communication is composed of just nine words. According to McKnight's study, another 25 percent of all speech is composed of an additional 34 words (or: 43 words comprise 50 percent of all speech). Scholars do differ, however, on just which nine words are the most popular. Three major studies are: G. H. McKnight, *English Words and Their Background*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1923 (for spoken words only); Godfrey Dewey, "Relative Frequency of English Speech Sounds," *Harvard Studies in Education*, vol. IV, 1923 (for written words only); and Norman R. French, Charles W. Carter, and Walter Koenig, Jr., "Words and Sounds of Telephone Conversations," *Bell System Technical Journal*, April 1930 (telephone speech only). Their lists of the most common nine words are:

McKnight's speech

Dewey's written

Bell Telephone conversations

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We often act and speak as if we were simply visiting and observing. What should be an ordinary experience seems new, unique, or colorful to us, worthy of words and forceful speech. People do not "settle down" in their jobs, towns, or vocabularies.

Nor do we "settle down" intellectually, spiritually, or emotionally. We have few religious, regional, family, class, psychological, or philosophical roots. We don't believe in roots, we believe in teamwork. Our strong loyalties, then, are directed to those social groups—or sub-groups as they are often called—with which we are momentarily identified. This ever-changing "membership" helps to promote and spread slang.

But even within each sub-group only a few new words are generally accepted. Most cant and jargon are local and temporary. What persists are the exceptionally apt and useful cant and jargon terms. These become part of the permanent, personal vocabulary of the group members, giving prestige to the users by providing their acceptance and status in the group. Group members then spread some of this more honored cant and jargon in the dominant culture. If the word is also useful to non-group members, it is on its way to becoming slang. Once new words are introduced into the dominant culture, via television, radio, movies or newspapers, the rapid movement of individuals and rapid communication between individuals and groups spread the new word very quickly.

For example, consider the son of an Italian immigrant living in New York City. He speaks Italian at home. Among neighborhood youths of similar background he uses many Italian expressions because he finds them always on the tip of his tongue and because they give him a sense of solidarity with his group. He may join a street gang, and after school and during vacations work in a factory. After leaving high school, he joins the navy; then he works for a year seeing the country as a carnival worker. He returns to New York, becomes a longshoreman, marries a girl with a German background, and becomes a boxing fan. He uses Italian and German borrowings, some teenage street-gang terms, a few factory terms, slang with a navy origin, and carnival, dockworker's, and boxing words. He spreads words from each group to all other groups he belongs to. His Italian parents will learn and use a few street-gang, factory, navy, carnival, dockworker's, and boxing terms; his German in-laws will learn some Italian words from his parents; his navy friends will begin to use some of his Italian expressions; his carnival friends a few navy words; his co-workers on the docks some carnival terms, in addition to all the rest; and his social friends, with whom he may usually talk boxing and dock work, will be interested in and learn some of his Italian and carnival terms. His speech may be considered very "slangy" and picturesque because he has belonged to unusual, colorful sub-groups.

On the other hand, a man born into a Midwestern, middle-class, Protestant family whose ancestors came to the United States in the eighteenth century might carry with him popular high-school terms. At high school he had an interest in hot rods and rock and roll. He may have served two years in the army, then gone to an Ivy League college where he became an adept bridge player and an enthusiast of cool music. He may then have become a sales executive and developed a liking for golf. This second man, no more usual or unusual than the first, will know cant and jargon terms of teenage high-school use, hot rods, rock and roll, Ivy League schools, cool jazz, army life, and some golf player's and bridge player's terms. He knows further a few slang expressions from his parents (members of the Jazz Age of the 1920s), from listening to television programs, seeing both American and British movies, reading popular