

Dictionary of
AMERICAN
SLANG

Dictionary of American Slang

Second Supplemented Edition

Compiled and Edited by
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and
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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

to the Second Supplemented Edition

THE FIRST EDITION of the *Dictionary of American Slang*, published in 1960, was in preparation for more than ten years. The late Dr. Harold Wentworth compiled a vast number of entries, chiefly regionalisms and colloquialisms, on which he had become a well-known authority with the publication of his *American Dialect Dictionary*. To this material Stuart Berg Flexner added thousands of slang definitions from the recent and contemporary worlds of the prohibition era, the underworld, jazz, the Armed Forces, business, politics, various fields of entertainment, teenagers, and the beat generation. He also included those derogatory and taboo words that form such a significant part of everyday speech, and which, although they appear with increasing frequency in current writing, seldom find their way into standard dictionaries.

Mr. Flexner prepared the Appendix and was ultimately responsible for the final redefining and editing of all the entries. He also wrote two sections of the book which have generated almost as much critical acclaim as the dictionary proper: the Preface, which contains a provocative discussion on the sociocultural factors that influence the creation of a slang vocabulary; and the Introduction to the Appendix, which analyzes the linguistic processes involved in the formation of new slang terms.

Mindful of the transient nature of much slang, and aware of the obligation to keep the *Dictionary of American Slang* a truly useful and current reference tool, the publisher in 1967 printed an edition with a 48-page supplement by Mr. Flexner. The entries in that supplement are incorporated here with an equal number compiled by Sheila Brantley and Herbert Gilbert. The supplemental material includes nearly 1,500 definitions for terms that have come into use since 1967 and for familiar terms that have taken on new meanings since that time, as well as an updated bibliography and an expanded group of word lists.

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PREFACE

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). Linguistic processes are described in the appendix matter under The Mechanical Formation of New Words.

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* (see Appendix, Rhyming Slang).

*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 char-

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

acteristic 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).² The shaded areas represent only general overlapping between groups:



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*, *Chevvy*, *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*,

² See Appendix, The Major Sub-Groups Contributing to American Slang.

wash-and-wear, fringe area, fallout.
turbulent eras: *Redskin, maverick, speak,*
Chicago pineapple, free love, fink,
breadline.

evolution in the styles of eating: *apple-*
sauce, clambake, luncheonette, hot
dog, coffee and.

dress: *Mother Hubbard, bustle, shimmy,*
sailor, Long Johns, zoot suit, Ivy
League.

housing: *lean-to, bundling board, chuck-*
house, 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, pin-*
to, jitney, kayducer, hot shot, jet
jockey.

new modes of entertainment: *barnstorm-*
er, 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-dig-*
ger, money-mad, Momism, Oedipus
complex, do-gooder, sick.

personal relationships: *bunky, kids, old*
lady, steady, ex, gruesome twosome,
John.

work and workers: *clod buster, scab, pen-*
cil pusher, white collar, graveyard
shift, company man.

politics: *Tory, do-nothing, mug-wump,*
third party, brain trust, fellow trav-
eler, 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. Teen-agers are an example of a large sub-group 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.³ 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

³ 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 per cent 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 per cent of all communication is composed of just nine words. According to McKnight's study, another 25 per cent of all speech is composed of an additional 34 words (or: 43 words comprise 50 per cent 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
and	a	a
be	and	
have	in	I
	is	is
it	it	it
		on
of	of	
	that	that
the	the	the
to	to	to
will		
you		you

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." 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 proving 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 teen-age 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 teen-age 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 1920's), from listening to television programs, seeing both American and British movies, reading popular literature, and from frequent meetings with people having completely different backgrounds. When he uses cool terms on the golf course; college expressions at home, business words at the bridge table, when he refers to whiskey or drunkenness by a few words he learned from his parents, curses his next-

door neighbor in a few choice army terms—then he too is popularizing slang.

It is, then, clear that three cultural conditions especially contribute to the creation of a large slang vocabulary: (1) hospitality to or acceptance of new objects, situations, and concepts; (2) existence of a large number of diversified sub-groups; (3) democratic mingling between these sub-groups and the dominant culture. Primitive peoples have little if any slang because their life is restricted by ritual; they develop few new concepts; and there are no sub-groups that mingle with the dominant culture. (Primitive sub-groups, such as medicine men or magic men, have their own vocabularies; but such groups do not mix with the dominant culture and their jargon can never become slang because it is secret or sacred.)

But what, after all, are the advantages that slang possesses which make it useful? Though our choice of any specific word may usually be made from habit, we sometimes consciously select a slang word because we believe that it communicates more quickly and easily, and more personally, than does a standard word. Sometimes we resort to slang because there is no one standard word to use. In the 1940's, *WAC*, *cold war*, and *cool* (music) could not be expressed quickly by any standard synonyms. Such words often become standard quickly, as have the first two. We also use slang because it often is more forceful, vivid, and expressive than are standard usages. Slang usually avoids the sentimentality and formality that older words often assume. Taking a girl to a *dance* may seem sentimental, may convey a degree of formal, emotional interest in the girl, and has overtones of fancy balls, fox trots, best suits, and corsages. At times it is more fun to go to a *hop*. To be *busted* or without a *hog* in one's *jeans* is not only more vivid and forceful than being penniless or without funds, it is also a more optimistic state. A *mouthpiece* (or *legal beagle*), *pencil pusher*, *sawbones*, *boneyard*, *bottle washer* or a course in *biochem* is more vivid and forceful than a lawyer, clerk, doctor, cemetery, laboratory assistant, or a course in biochemistry—and is much more real and less formidable than a legal counsel, junior executive, surgeon, necropolis (or memorial park), laboratory technician, or a course in biological chemistry.

Although standard English is exceedingly hospitable to polysyllabicity and even sesquipedalianism, slang is not. Slang is sometimes used not only because it is concise but just because its brevity makes it forceful. As this dictionary demonstrates, slang seems to prefer short words, especially monosyllables, and, best of all, words beginning with an explosive or an aspirate.⁴

We often use slang *fad* words as a bad habit because they are close to the tip of our tongue. Most of us apply several favorite but vague words to any of several somewhat similar situations; this saves us the time and effort of thinking and speaking precisely. At other times we purposely choose a word because it is vague, because it does not commit us too strongly to what we are saying. For example, if a friend has been praising a woman, we can reply "she's *the bee's knees*" or "she's a real *chick*," which can mean that we consider her very modern, intelligent, pert, and understanding—or can mean that we think she is one of many nondescript, somewhat confused, followers of popular fads. We can also tell our friend that a book we both have recently read is *the cat's pajamas* or *the greatest*. These expressions imply that we liked the book for exactly the same reasons that our friend did, without having to state what these reasons were and thus taking the chance of ruining our rapport.

In our language we are constantly recreating our image in our own minds and in the minds of others. Part of this image, as mentioned above, is created by using sub-group cant and jargon in the dominant society; part of it is created by our choice of both standard and slang words. A sub-group vocabulary shows

⁴ Many such formations are among our most frequently used slang words. As listed in this dictionary, *bug* has 30 noun meanings, *shot* 14 noun and 4 adjective meanings, *can* 11 noun and 6 verb, *bust* 9 verb and 6 noun, *hook* 8 noun and 5 verb, *fish* 14 noun, and *sack* 8 noun, 1 adjective, and 1 verb meaning. Monosyllabic words also had by far the most citations found in our source reading of popular literature. Of the 40 words for which we found the most quotations, 29 were monosyllabic. Before condensing, *fink* had citations from 70 different sources, *hot* 67, *bug* 62, *blow* and *dog* 60 each, *joint* 59, *stiff* 56, *punk* 53, *bum* and *egg* 50 each, *guy* 43, *make* 41, *bull* and *mug* 37 each, *bird* 34, *fish* and *hit* 30 each, *ham* 25, *yak* 23, *sharp* 14, and *cinch* 10. (Many of these words, of course, have several slang meanings; many of the words also appeared scores of times in the same book or article.)

that we have a group to which we "belong" and in which we are "somebody"—outsiders had better respect us. Slang is used to show others (and to remind ourselves of) our biographical, mental, and psychological background; to show our social, economic, geographical, national, racial, religious, educational, occupational, and group interests, memberships, and patriotisms. One of the easiest and quickest ways to do this is by using counter-words. These are automatic, often one-word responses of like or dislike, of acceptance or rejection. They are used to counter the remarks, or even the presence, of others. Many of our fad words and many student and quasi-intellectual slang words are counter-words. For liking: *beat, the cat's pajamas, drooly, gas, George, the greatest, keen, nice, reet, smooth, super, way out*, etc. For rejection of an outsider (implying incompetence to belong to our group): *boob, creep, dope, drip, droop, goof, jerk, kookie, sap, simp, square, weird*, etc. Such automatic counters are overused, almost meaningless, and are a substitute for thought. But they achieve one of the main purposes of speech: quickly and automatically they express our own sub-group and personal criteria. Counter-words are often fad words creating a common bond of self-defense. All the rejecting counters listed above could refer to a moron, an extreme introvert, a birdwatcher, or a genius. The counters merely say that the person is rejected—he does not belong to the group. In uttering the counter we don't care what the person is; we are pledging our own group loyalty, affirming our identity, and expressing our satisfaction at being accepted.

In like manner, at various periods in history, our slang has abounded in words reflecting the fear, distrust, and dislike of people unlike ourselves. This intolerance is shown by the many derogatory slang words for different immigrant, religious, and racial groups: *Chink, greaser, Heinie, hunkie, mick, mockie, nigger, spik*. Many counters and derogatory words try to identify our own group status, to dare others to question our group's, and therefore our own, superiority.

Sometimes slang is used to escape the dull familiarity of standard words, to suggest an escape from the established routine of everyday life. When slang is used, our life seems a little fresher and

a little more personal. Also, as at all levels of speech, slang is sometimes used for the pure joy of making sounds, or even for a need to attract attention by making noise. The sheer newness and informality of certain slang words produces a pleasure.

But more important than this expression of a more or less hidden esthetic motive on the part of the speaker is slang's reflection of the personality, the outward, clearly visible characteristics of the speaker. By and large, the man who uses slang is a forceful, pleasing, acceptable personality. Morality and intellect (too frequently not considered virtues in the modern American man) are overlooked in slang, and this has led to a type of reverse morality: many words, once standing for morally good things, are now critical. No one, for example, though these words were once considered complimentary, wants to be called a *prude* or *Puritan*. Even in standard usage they are mildly derisive.

Moreover, few of the many slang synonyms for drunk are derogatory or critical. To call a person a standard drunk may imply a superior but unsophisticated attitude toward drinking. Thus we use slang and say someone is *boozed up, gassed, high, potted, stinking, has a glow on*, etc., in a verbal attempt to convey our understanding and awareness. These slang words show that we too are human and know the effects of excessive drinking.

In the same spirit we refer to people sexually as *big ass man, fast, John, sex pot, shack job, wolf*, etc., all of which accept unanctioned sexual intercourse as a matter of fact. These words are often used in a complimentary way and in admiration or envy. They always show acceptance of the person as a "regular guy." They are never used to express a moral judgment. Slang has few complimentary or even purely descriptive words for "virgin," "good girl," or "gentleman." Slang has *bag, bat, ex, gold digger, jerk, money mad, n.g., old lady, square*, etc.; but how many words are there for a good wife and mother, an attractive and chaste woman, an honest, hard-working man who is kind to his family, or even a respected elderly person? Slang—and it is frequently true for all language levels—always tends toward degradation rather than elevation. As slang shows, we would rather share or accept vices than be ex-

cluded from a social group. For this reason, for self-defense, and to create an aura (but not the fact) of modernity and individuality, much of our slang purposely expresses amorality, cynicism, and "toughness."

Reverse morality also affects slang in other ways. Many use slang just because it is not standard or polite. Many use slang to show their rebellion against *boobs*, *fuddy-duddies*, *marks*, and *squares*. Intellectuals and politicians often use slang to create the "common touch" and others use slang to express either their anti-intellectualism or avant-garde leanings. Thus, for teen-agers, entertainers, college students, beatniks, jazz fans, intellectuals, and other large groups, slang is often used in preference to standard words and expressions. Slang is the "official" modern language of certain vociferous groups in our population.

In my work on this dictionary, I was constantly aware that most American slang is created and used by males. Many types of slang words—including the taboo and strongly derogatory ones, those referring to sex, women, work, money, whiskey,⁵ politics, transportation, sports, and the like—refer primarily to male endeavor and interest. The majority of entries in this dictionary could be labeled "primarily masculine use." Men belong to more sub-groups than do women; men create and use occupational cant and jargon; in business, men have acquaintances who belong to many different sub-groups. Women, on the other hand, still tend to be restricted to family and neighborhood friends. Women have very little of their own slang.⁶ The new words applied to women's clothing, hair styles, homes, kitchen utensils and gadgets are usually created by men. Except when she accompanies her boy friend or husband to his recreation (baseball, hunting, etc.) a woman seldom mingles with other groups. When women do mingle outside of their own neighborhood and family circles, they do not often talk of the outside

world of business, politics, or other fields of general interest where new feminine names for objects, concepts, and viewpoints could evolve.

Men also tend to avoid words that sound feminine or weak. Thus there are sexual differences in even the standard vocabularies of men and women. A woman may ask her husband to set the table for dinner, asking him to put out the *silver*, *crystal*, and *china*—while the man will set the table with *knives*, *forks*, *spoons*, *glasses*, and *diskes*. His wife might think the *table linen* attractive, the husband might think the *tablecloth* and *napkins* pretty. A man will buy a *pocketbook* as a gift for his wife, who will receive a *bag*. The couple will live under the same roof, the wife in her *home*, the man in his *house*. Once outside of their domesticity the man will begin to use slang quicker than the woman. She'll get into the *car* while he'll get into the *jalopy* or *Chevvie*. And so they go: she will learn much of her general slang from him; for any word she associates with the home, her personal belongings, or any female concept, he will continue to use a less descriptive, less personal one.

Males also use slang to shock. The rapid tempo of life, combined with the sometimes low boiling point of males, can evoke emotions—admiration, joy, contempt, anger—stronger than our old standard vocabulary can convey. In the stress of the moment a man is not just in a standard "untenable position," he is *up the creek*. Under strong anger a man does not feel that another is a mere "incompetent"—he is a *jerk* or a *fuck-off*.

Men also seem to relish hyperbole in slang. Under many situations, men do not see or care to express fine shades of meaning: a girl is either a *knockout* or a *dog*, liquor either *good stuff* or *panther piss*, a person either has *guts* or is *chicken*, a book is either *great* or nothing but *crap*. Men also like slang and colloquial wording because they express action or even violence: *we draw pay*, *pull a boner*, *make a score*, *grab some sleep*, *feed our face*, *kill time*—in every instance we tend to use the transitive verb, making ourselves the active doer.

The relation between a sub-group's psychology and its cant and jargon is interesting, and the relation between an individual's vocabulary and psychological personality is even more so. Slang

⁵ It would appear that the word having the most slang synonyms is *drunk*. A discussion of the reasons for this, and a list of the slang words, will be found in the Appendix, Synonyms for Drunk.

⁶ Women who do work usually replace men at men's jobs, are less involved in business life than men, and have a shorter business career (often but an interim between school and marriage). The major female sub-groups contributing to American slang are: airline stewardesses, beauty-parlor operators, chorus girls, nurses, prostitutes, and waitresses.

can be one of the most revealing things about a person, because our own personal slang vocabulary contains many words used by choice, words which we use to create our own image, words which we find personally appealing and evocative—as opposed to our frequent use of standard words merely from early teaching and habit. Whether a man calls his wife *baby*, *doll*, *honey*, the *little woman*, the *Mrs.*, or my old lady certainly reveals much about him. What words one uses to refer to a mother (*Mom*, *old lady*), friend (*buddy*, *bunkie*, *old man*), the bathroom (*can*, *John*, *little boy's room*), parts of the body and sex acts (*boobies*, *gigi*, *hard*, *laid*, *score*), being tired (*all in*, *beat*), being drunk (*clobbered*, *high*, *lit up like a Christmas tree*, *paralyzed*), and the like, reveal much about a person and his motivations.⁷

The basic metaphors, at any rate, for all levels of language depend on the five senses. Thus *rough*, *smooth*, *touch*; *prune*, *sour puss*, *sweet*; *fishy*, *p.u.*, *rotten egg*; *blow*, *loud*; *blue*, *red*, *square*. In slang, many metaphors refer to touch (including the sense of heat and cold) and to taste.

Food is probably our most popular slang image. Food from the farm, kitchen, or table, and its shape, color, and taste suggest many slang metaphors. This is because food can appeal to taste, smell, sight, and touch, four of our five senses; because food is a major, universal image to all people, all sub-groups; because men work to provide it and women devote much time to buying and preparing it; because food is before our eyes three times every day.

Many standard food words mean money in nonstandard use: *cabbage*, *kale*, *lettuce*. Many apply to parts of the body: *cabbage head*, *cauliflower ear*, *meat hooks*, *nuts*, *plates of meat*. Many food words refer to people: *apple*, *cold fish*, *Frog*, *fruitcake*, *honey*, *sweetie pie*. Others refer to general situations and attitudes: to *brew* a plot, to receive a *chewing out*, to find oneself in a *pickle* or something *not kosher*, to be unable to *swallow* another's story, to ask *what's*

cooking? Many drunk words also have food images: *boiled*, *fried*, *pickled*; and so do many words for nonsense: *apple-sauce*, *banana oil*, *spinach*. Many standard food words also have sexual meanings in slang. The many food words for money, parts of the body, people, and sex reveal that food means much more to us than mere nourishment. When a *good egg brings home the bacon* to his honey, or when a *string bean* of a *sugar daddy* takes his *piece* of *barbecue* out to get *fried* with his hard-earned *kale*, food images have gone a long way from the farm, kitchen, and table.

Sex has contributed comparatively few words to modern slang,⁸ but these are among our most frequently used. The use of sex words to refer to sex in polite society and as metaphors in other fields is increasing. Sex metaphors are common for the same conscious reasons that food metaphors are. Sex appeals to, and can be used to apply to, most of the five senses. It is common to all persons in all sub-groups, and so we are aware of it continually.

Slang words for sexual attraction and for a variety of sexual acts, positions, and relationships are more common than standard words. Standard non-taboo words referring to sex are so scarce or remote and scientific that slang is often used in referring to the most romantic, the most obscene, and the most humorous sexual situations. Slang is so universally used in sexual communication that when "a man meets a maid" it is best for all concerned that they know slang.⁹ Slang words for sex carry little emotional connotation; they express naked desire or mechanical acts, devices, and positions. They are often blunt, cynical and "tough."

The subconscious relating of sex and food is also apparent from reading this dictionary. Many words with primary, standard meanings of food have sexual slang meanings. The body, parts of the body, and descriptions of each, often call food terms into use: *banana*, *bread*, *cheese cake*, *cherry*, *jelly roll*, *meat*, etc.

⁸ Many so-called bedroom words are not technically slang at all, but are sometimes associated with slang only because standard speech has rejected them as taboo. However, many of these taboo words do have further metaphorical meanings in slang: *fucked*, *jerk*, *screw you*, etc.

⁹ On the other hand, Madame de Staël is reported to have complimented one of her favorite lovers with "speech is not his language."

⁷ For just the last example, *clobbered* may indicate that a drinker is punishing himself, *high* that he is escaping, *lit up like a Christmas tree* that he is seeking attention and a more dominant personality, and *paralyzed* that he seeks punishment, escape or death. See Appendix list, Synonyms for Drunk.

Beloved, or simply sexually attractive, people are also often called by food names: *cookie, cup of tea, honey, peach, quail, tomato*, etc. This primary relation between sex and food depends on the fact that they are man's two major sensuous experiences. They are shared by all personalities and all sub-groups and they appeal to the same senses—thus there is bound to be some overlapping in words and imagery. However, there are too many standard food words having sexual meanings in slang for these conscious reasons to suffice. Sex and food seem to be related in our subconscious.

Also of special interest is the number of slang expressions relating sex and cheating. Used metaphorically, many sex words have secondary meanings of being cheated, deceived, swindled, or taken advantage of, and several words whose primary meaning is cheating or deceiving have further specific sexual meanings: *cheating, fucked, make, royal screwing, score, turn a trick*, etc. As expressed in slang, sex is a trick somehow, a deception, a way to cheat and deceive us. To curse someone we can say *fuck you* or *screw you*, which expresses a wish to deprive him of his good luck, his success, perhaps even his potency as a man.¹⁰ Sex is also associated with confusion, exhausting tasks, and disaster: *ball buster, screwed up, snafu*, etc. It seems clear, therefore, that, in slang, success and sexual energy are related or, to put it more accurately, that thwarted sexual energy will somehow result in personal disaster.

Language is a social symbol. The rise of the middle class coincided with the period of great dictionary makers, theoretical grammarians, and the "correct

usage" dogma. The new middle class gave authority to the dictionaries and grammarians in return for "correct usage" rules that helped solidify their social position. Today, newspaper ads still implore us to take mail-order courses in order to "learn to speak like a college graduate," and some misguided English instructors still give a good speaking ability as the primary reason for higher education.

The gap between "correct usage" and modern practice widens each day. Are there valid theoretical rules for speaking good English, or should "observed usage" be the main consideration? Standard words do not necessarily make for precise, forceful, or useful speech. On the other hand, "observed usage" can never promise logic and clarity. Today, we have come to depend on "observed usage," just as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social climbers depended on "correct usage," for social acceptance.

Because it is not standard, formal, or acceptable under all conditions, slang is usually considered vulgar, impolite, or boorish. As this dictionary shows, however, the vast majority of slang words and expressions are neither taboo, vulgar, derogatory, nor offensive in meaning, sound, or image. There is no reason to avoid any useful, explicit word merely because it is labeled "slang." Our present language has not decayed from some past and perfect "King's English," Latin, Greek, or pre-Tower of Babel tongue. All languages and all words have been, are, and can only be but conventions mutually agreed upon for the sake of communicating. Slang came to America on the Mayflower. In general, it is not vulgar, new, or even peculiarly American: an obvious illustration of this is the polite, old French word *tête*, which was originally slang from a Latin word *testa*—cooking pot.

Cant and jargon in no way refer only to the peculiar words of undesirable or underworld groups. Slang does not necessarily come from the underworld, dope addicts, degenerates, hoboes, and the like. Any cultural sub-group develops its own personal cant and jargon which can later become general slang. All of us belong to several of these specific sub-groups using our own cant and jargon. Teen-agers, steel workers, soldiers, Southerners, narcotic addicts, churchgoers, truck drivers, advertising men,

¹⁰ See F. P. Wood, "The Vocabulary of Failure," *Better English*, Nov., 1938, p. 34. The vocabulary of failure is itself very revealing. Failure in one's personality, school, job, business, or an attempted love affair are all expressed by the same vocabulary. One gets the *brush off*, the *gate*, a *kiss off*, or *walking papers* in both business and personal relationships. As the previous discussion of counter-words demonstrates, slang allows no distinction or degree among individual failures. Incompetence does not apply to just one job or facet of life—either one belongs or is considered unworthy. This unworthiness applies to the entire personality, there are no alternate avenues for success or happiness. One is not merely of limited intelligence, not merely an introvert, not merely ugly, unknown, or lacking in aggression—but one is a failure in all these things, a complete *drip*, *jerk*, or *squave*. The basic failure is that of personality, the person is not a mere failure—he is an outcast, an untouchable; he is taboo.

jazz musicians, pickpockets, retail salesmen in every field, golf players, immigrants from every country, college professors, baseball fans—all belong to typical sub-groups from which slang originates. Some of these sub-groups are colorful; most are composed of prosaic, average people.

Many people erroneously believe that a fundamental of slang is that it is intentionally picturesque, strained in metaphor, or jocular. Picturesque metaphor (and metonymy, hyperbole, and irony) does or should occur frequently in all levels of speech. Picturesque metaphor is a frequent characteristic of slang, but it does not define slang or exist as an inherent part of it. The picturesque or metaphorical aspect of slang is often due to its direct honesty or to its newness. Many standard usages are just as picturesque, but we have forgotten their original metaphor through habitual use. Thus slang's *jerk* and *windbag* are no more picturesque than the standard *incompetent* and *fool*. *Incompetent* is from the Latin *competens* plus the negating prefix *in-* and = "unable or unwilling to compete"; *fool* is Old French, from the Latin *foliis* which actually = "bellows or wind bag"; slang's *windbag* and the standard *fool* actually have the same metaphor.

As for picturesque sounds, I find very few in slang. Onomatopoeia, reduplications, harsh sounds and pleasing sounds, even rhyming terms, exist on all levels of speech. Readers of this dictionary will find no more picturesque or unusual sounds here than in a similar length dictionary of standard words. Many slang words are homonyms for standard words.

As has been frequently pointed out, many slang words have the same meaning. There seems to be an unnecessary abundance of counter-words, synonyms for "drunk," hundreds of fad words with almost the same meaning, etc. This is because slang introduces word after word year after year from many, many sub-groups. But slang is a scatter-gun process; many new words come at the general public; most are ignored; a few stick in the popular mind.

Remember that "slang" actually does not exist as an entity except in the minds of those of us who study the language. People express themselves and are seldom aware that they are using the artificial divisions of "slang" or "standard." First and forever, language is language, an attempt at communication and self-expression. The fact that some words or expressions are labeled "slang" while others are labeled "jargon" or said to be "from the Anglo-Saxon" is of little value except to scholars. Thus this dictionary is a legitimate addition to standard dictionaries, defining many words just as meaningful as and often more succinct, useful, and popular than many words in standard dictionaries.

It is clearly impossible to acknowledge specifically all the help received on so vast a project as this dictionary. Certain people, however, contributed heavily in particular areas. Clinton A. Sanders and Joseph A. Blackwell, Jr., provided indispensable glossaries from the worlds of the circus, carnival, theater, tramps and hoboes, the railroad, miners, jive, and swing. Godfrey Irwin helped further with a list of tramp and hobo terms. During the course of the work access was generously given to the files of Professor Louise Pound and of the late H. L. Mencken. Noteworthy assistance or suggestions came from Professors C. K. Thomas, H. W. Thompson, A. H. Marckwardt, W. C. Greet, and from A. W. Read. Jim Tully, author of *Circus Parade*, contributed much assistance and advice on circus and hobo terms. George Jean Nathan, J. G. Taylor Spink, E. G. Swen, James Asa Shield, Gene Buck, as well as many other scholars, authors, critics, journalists, and friends, have been most helpful. Dr. David W. Maurer has contributed much more than the bibliography to this book can possibly reveal. Dr. Maurer's influence will be found in many passages of this work, as indeed it must in all future works on the American language.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

A BRIEF EXPLANATION of the kind of information found in a typically full entry in the text will make this dictionary more useful. But first a note on the selection of the words themselves: In addition to including as large and representative a body of American slang as possible, some colloquialisms, cant, jargon, argot, and idioms frequently used in popular novels and movies appear because the user is likely to encounter them and want to know what they mean. Moreover, in a few instances standard words are also listed because many readers still consider them slang and will expect to find them here. Naturally, priority has been given to popular and historically valuable slang words over words having but little or routine use. Entries come from every period of American history, but the emphasis is placed on modern slang. Certain categories have, by and large, been minimized: popular nicknames, abbreviations, and affectionate names for regions, states, and cities, and their inhabitants. All but the most popular neologisms and recurring nonce words have been rejected. Many words referring to the particular maneuvers and plays in sports have been excluded, but some true slang deriving from sports has been included. Many words referring to specific styles of dress, coiffeurs, food, etc., have been omitted; but the more popular, such as *black cow*, *crew cut*, *dagwood* are included. Finally, words coined and popularized for a season or two by the fashion industry or by advertising are largely excluded. Trade names are, for the most part, ignored.

The entries themselves conform to the following pattern:

Entry words. Each entry word appears in boldface type. The absolute system of alphabetization is used: multiple-word entries are listed in alphabetical order as if they were spelled as one word. Phrases and clauses which are solely and completely slang are normally entered under their first word; phrases and clauses which are slang only because a key word is used in a slang sense are listed under that slang word in almost all instances.

Since many slang words are seldom found in print, confusion exists about exact spelling and the use of hyphens. Where several variants exist, they are listed in decreasing order of popularity. When a phrase or clause may have alternate wording, the alternate words are given in parentheses, in decreasing order of popularity. When a phrase or clause includes a direct or indirect object (depending

on who is being spoken to, or whether the object is animate or inanimate), the possible variant noun or pronoun uses are bracketed.

Taboo and derogatory terms. Preceding some definitions are the bracketed notations [taboo] and [derog.]. If the notation precedes only one of several definitions in the entry then only that specific use is taboo or derogatory.¹ Most taboo and derogatory terms are so obvious as to leap to the eye; in many instances where a word or expression has once been labeled derogatory or taboo in this dictionary, further uses of it in cross references, editorial comment, and the like, have not always been so qualified. Because of the loosening of taboos and moral restraints during recent years, it has not been felt necessary to place these labels next to some words and some meanings that in earlier times would have been considered offensive.

Parts of speech. Single word entries are labeled with their usual basic part of speech in italics before the definition. Many entries may be commonly used as several parts of speech and are so marked before the appropriate definition. One of the characteristics of modern slang is the blurring of parts of speech, the converting of a word historically used as one part of speech into another part of speech. Many words used historically as nouns are now used as verbs, as the standard "*to orbit* a satellite." Adding all such functional shifts would have unnecessarily lengthened this dictionary; but some of the most frequent are included.

Definitions. If a word is commonly used as more than one part of speech, definitions for other forms are given. When a word has more than one meaning for any part of speech, each is numbered in boldface type. When simple definite histories of the various meanings are known, the definitions are given in chronological order of origin. When etymologies and original usage dates are not well established or easy to follow, the various meanings are listed in decreasing order of popularity of interest. When it may not be obvious that one meaning has evolved from a previous one, an arrow (→) is placed before the dependent meaning. Quotes around

¹ The basic taboo words, especially those commonly called "four-letter Anglo-Saxon words," are not properly slang. They have remained outside standard speech only because of their taboo nature. When used with generalized or figurative meanings, however, they are slang, and are thus included in this dictionary.

slang words are used only to show that a word having both slang and standard meanings is used in its slang sense when this might not be obvious or to indicate that a word is referred to as a word rather than for its meaning.

Quotations and citations. Whenever possible and useful, at least one published quotation is given after each definition to support the definition and illustrate usage. Many additional quotations are included to: illustrate further meanings or connotations of the word; indicate every ten-year period when the word was in use; illustrate the extreme popularity and acceptance of the word. If illustrative quotations were not found for every ten-year period, one early and one recent quotation are usually given.

The year date is given before each quotation. The first quotation often indicates the earliest printed occurrence of the word which was found, but in no instance can it be assumed that this was its first appearance in print. Indeed, nearly all words are used orally—sometimes for years—before they appear in a published source. Before secondary citations from scholarly material, the date refers to the actual usage date of the original source.

Following each quotation is the citation of the publication in which it is found. When this information is abbreviated, more complete bibliographical details are given in the bibliography. (If several works by the same author are listed in the bibliography, the date of the quotation in the text will match the publication date of the specific work referred to.) When two dates for a work are given in the bibliography, the later date is that of a reprint edition from which the quotation was taken, and to which page citations refer. The year date in the text corresponds to the date of original publication.

Since most slang words are more popular orally than in writing, usage quotes occasionally are taken from speech. These oral quotes have been kept to a minimum.

Etymologies and comments. Etymologies are given only when they are valuable and of interest. Many etymologies are omitted as being obvious from glancing at the word; others are unknown; still others are so complex or so fully given in the standard etymological works² that they are only summarized or hinted at here. In any case, only the slang etymologies are included; if a slang word originated from a standard English or a foreign word, further etymologies of these origins are not given.

²Interested readers would enjoy browsing in Skeat's or Weekley's etymological dictionaries, the many volumes of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, or the volumes of *A Dictionary of American English*.

Italicized comments are added to many definitions and entries. These usually refer to possible origins, primary group users, approximate dates of origin or peak popularity, or to the spirit with which the word is uttered.

A lower case *c* before a date means *approximately*.

Some words are labeled as being colloquial (*colloq.*), obsolete (*obs.*), primarily associated with World War II (*W.W.II.*), or used primarily by major sub-groups, as *railroaders' use*, *hobo use*, etc. Such comments are general: *railroaders' use* may refer to words used only by engineers, brakemen, or conductors; *hobo use* covers all uses by hoboes, tramps, and vagabonds, who actually differ greatly in their way of life and attitudes; *underworld use* covers many specific groups, most words being further restricted to pickpockets, counterfeiters, confidence men, etc.

Words marked *W.W. II use* may have originated before the war or late in the war; the label only indicates that the use is associated with or was very popular during W.W.II. *Army use* and *navy use* are comments referring to the regular army and navy, meaning that the word has seen continuing use in those branches of the armed forces, as opposed to words made popular by the large number of men in uniform during wartime.

The comments *cool use*, *swing use*, etc. are also general, making no distinction between East and West Coast origins or between use by actual musicians and fans. The comment *jive use* primarily refers to Harlem jive use c1935, though some jive terms originated outside of Harlem and before and after this approximate date of the peak of jive term popularity. The comment *Negro use* primarily refers to the slang of Negroes living in large, industrial, Northern cities; *lunch-counter use* refers to all types of small restaurants, coffee shops, etc., and most frequently to waiter and waitress uses coined c1935; *teen-age use* refers to those words first popularized by that group; *prison use* refers only to convict use, but prison guards eventually pick up many of these terms. Words marked *archaic* in general use may still be quite popular among certain older or regional groups.

Cross references. Words of related meaning or usage are cross referenced. When a word is a less popular slang synonym for another word an = sign tells the reader to turn to the major word where a more complete definition is given.

After many entries the reader is referred to the appendix matter for a list of words similarly formed or of similar interest. The appendix lists, however, include many words not entered in the dictionary proper.

Abbreviations

For abbreviations of periodicals, news services, and dictionaries, see list of abbreviations in bibliography.

abbr. abbreviation,
abbreviated
ABC American
Broadcasting Company
adj. adjective, attributive
adjective
adv. adverb, -ial, -ially
advt. advertisement,
advertising
Am., Amer. American
anon. anonymous
ant. antonym
AP Associated Press
appar. apparently
approx. approximately
art. article
attrib. attributive, -ly,
attributed
bk. book
Brit. British, Briton
c. *circa*, about
C. City
cap. capitalized
CBS Columbia
Broadcasting System
Cf., cf. Compare, confer
cit. citation, cited
Co. Company
col. column
colloq. colloquial, -ly, -ism
conj. conjunction
def. definition; definite
derog. derogatory,
derogatory use
dial. dialect, -al
dict. dictionary
E. east, eastern
ed. edition; editor
e.g. *exempli gratia*, for
example
Eng., Engl. England,
English
equiv. equivalent
esp. especially
est. established
ety. etymology,
etymological
euphem. euphemism,
euphemistic, -ally
exclam. exclamation,
exclamatory
expl. expletive
f. and the following page
fem. feminine
ff. and the following pages

fig. figurative, figuratively
fn. footnote
Fr. French
freq. frequent, -ly;
frequent use
gen. generally
Ger. German
Hebr. Hebrew
hist. history
i. intransitive
indef. indefinite
inf. infinitive
interj. interjection
intr. intransitive
I.W.W. Industrial Workers
of the World
Jour. Journal
l. line
lit. literal, literally
ll. lines
mag., Mag. magazine
masc. masculine
MBS Mutual Broadcasting
System
ms. manuscript
n. noun; nominative
N. north, northern
naut. nautical, nautical use
NBC National
Broadcasting Company
n.d. no date, no date given
newsp. newspaper
no. number
N.W. U.S. Northwest U.S.
N.Y.C. New York City
obj. object; objective
obs. obsolete
occas. occasional, -ly,
occasional use
orig. original, -ly
p. page
partic. participle
perh. perhaps
pl., plur. plural
pop. popular, -ly
pp. pages
pred. predicate
prep. preposition
pret. preterit (past tense)
prob. probably
pron. pronoun
prop. proper
ptc. participle
pub. publisher; publication

ref. refer; reference
Rev. Review
S. south, southern
s. section
sing. singular
sl. slang
Sp. Spanish
specif. specifically
stand. standard; standard
usage
subj. subject; subjunctive
suf. suffix
Sup. Supplement
SW southwest,
southwestern
syl. syllable
syn. synonym, -ous
synd. syndicated
t., tr. transitive
univ. university
UP United Press
usu. usually
v. verb
var. variant
v.i. verb intransitive
vol. volume
v.t. verb transitive
W. west, western
W.W.I World War I
W.W.II World War II
& and
= equivalent in meaning
to; means, denotes
+ and; combined with, add-
ed to (in etymologies)
→ from which is derived,
whence
... in quoted material, indi-
cates deleted material
/ in citations, separates page
numbers from column num-
bers or separates lines of
quoted verse
[] in entries, encloses words
not in the slang expression
(as direct and indirect ob-
jects); in quoted material,
encloses words not in the
original quotation
() in entries, encloses var-
iant words which may or
may not be used as part
of a slang expression

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