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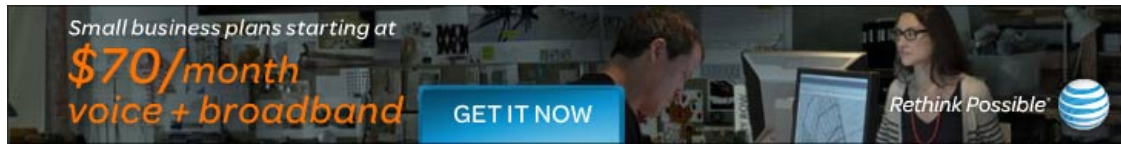
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ESSAY

The Definitive Slang Dictionary

By BEN ZIMMER

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Back in 1937, when Eric Partridge's groundbreaking "Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English" was first published, The New York Times Book Review ran a glowing notice. "The lost words of the language have finally come to roost," it began. "The unmentionables are mentioned and carefully placed in proper alphabetical form."

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Now, nearly 75 years later, can a slang dictionary possibly hope to uncover any "lost words"? Are there any unmentionables left to mention? After all, mainstream English dictionaries now make ample space for slang, much to the chagrin of traditionalists alarmed by Merriam-Webster's Collegiate including "ginormous" (gasp!) or the Oxford English Dictionary including "bootylicious" (double gasp!). And for the more ephemeral slang that the print dictionaries fail to cover, well, don't we have Urban Dictionary and other online user-generated repositories for that?

Thankfully, the heirs to Partridge's legacy continue to uphold the value of rigorous slang-ology. Jonathan Lighter's exhaustive "Historical Dictionary of American Slang" got the ball rolling in the 1990s, but after the publication of two volumes it has not moved past the letter "O." Since then, Partridge's own dictionary received a thorough makeover in a 2005 revision by Tom Dalzell and Terry Victor, and the British scholar Jonathon Green has put out a series of single-volume efforts. Now the man hailed by Martin Amis as "Mister Slang" has raised the bar with his three-volume behemoth, **GREEN'S DICTIONARY OF SLANG (Oxford University, \$450).**

Despite these prodigious achievements, slang remains a notoriously slippery object of study. In a 1978 essay in the journal *American Speech*, Lighter, writing with Bethany K. Dumas, said of slang, "We are all sure it exists, most of us are sure we know what it is, and many of us are sure that everyone else agrees with us." Green, for his part, makes a case for slang as a special "counter-language" in the introduction of his new dictionary (already tagged "GDoS" by fellow slang-watchers). For Green, slang fulfills "the desire of human beings, when faced by a standard version, of whatever that might be, to come up with something different, perhaps parallel, perhaps oppositional." Of course, it's hard for oppositional uses of language to stay oppositional or the exclusive preserve of a select few for long, especially today when "the speed of modern information transfer makes that level of secrecy almost impossible." Once a term is

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“revealed,” there is an “immediate need . . . for re-coinage.”

This endless process of reinvention might suggest that slang is necessarily ephemeral. Yet the historical evidence suggests that some slang is remarkably sturdy. The word “booze” meaning liquor, for instance, has existed in one form or another since at least the mid-1500s, and yet it somehow maintains its slangy appeal nearly five centuries later.

Since the latter-day Partridges arrange their dictionaries according to historical principles, supported by O.E.D.-style citations, we can readily track slang’s more remarkable survivals. Consider “crib,” which Shakespeare used to mean a modest house (King Henry IV soliloquized about his subjects sleeping in “smoky cribs”). By the 19th century, this meaning lingered only in thieves’ cant, but after World War II, it came alive again in African-American slang, eventually begetting the not-so-modest domestic displays of the television show “MTV Cribs.”

And speaking of MTV programs of recent years, how did Ashton Kutcher come to call his now-defunct prank show “Punk’d”? Consult Green’s dictionary, and that simple question will take you on a three-page odyssey through the grungy nuances of punk as a noun, adjective and verb. The noun referred to a young female prostitute in the 16th century, but by the turn of the 20th century it could refer to a prison inmate’s “boyfriend” or a tramp’s catamite companion. It broadened by the ’20s and ’30s to signify a young criminal, an adolescent boy or a coward. Meanwhile, the adjective evolved to mean “inferior, worthless” or “weak, effeminate.” The verb took on some brutal shades: “sodomize,” “beat up,” “insult,” or “make into an acquiescent weakling.” Finally, in 2003, coinciding with the first season of Kutcher’s show, punk shows up more innocuously on American campus slang lists as “to trick, to tease.”

Reading through Green’s entry for punk brings home what a truly colossal undertaking slang lexicography can be. Green spent 17 years compiling his opus, and the historical material he has amassed, in some 415,000 citations, is astounding. Whenever possible, he includes a citation from every decade of a term’s existence. Thus, if you look up the expression “on the Q.T.” (meaning “surreptitiously,” from the first and last letters of quiet), you find it from 1870 in a British broadside ballad, then attested from such writers as Joseph Conrad, Ezra Pound and Tom Wolfe, with stops along the way for the country singer Merle Travis and the pimp-turned-novelist Iceberg Slim.

Of course, even in a dictionary as gargantuan as GDoS, there are occasional oversights, like the aforementioned “ginormous,” which Partridge identified as deriving from the slang of Britain’s Royal Air Force in World War II. If “humongous” and “hugeaceous” both find a home in the dictionary’s pages, why not ginormous as well? Conversely, a few too many entries take their evidence from a single source and could safely be omitted. Then again, slender documentation is often outweighed by the charming colorfulness of such finds as “dyspepsia in a snowstorm” (late-19-century hash-house lingo for an order of pie topped with powdered sugar), “go to Europe with Ralph and Earl in a Buick” (ornate American student slang for vomiting) and “couldn’t catch a cold if they sat naked all night in an icy pond” (a New Zealand phrase for someone who is extremely unlucky).

A single page of a slang dictionary can yield unexpected delights. Take Green’s Volume III, Page 976, deep in the heart of “S.” There’s “skeeve,” meaning “a disgusting person” or “to disgust,” along with the adjective “skeevy,” possibly derived from an Italian word for disgusting, *schifoso*. There’s “skeeza,” black slang for a promiscuous woman dating back to a 1987 rap song, followed by “skeeze,” which meant “to ogle” in James Joyce’s “Ulysses.” And then there’s “skeezeicks,” a fine old Americanism for a troublemaker, attested from 1850.

Whereas Partridge spent most of his days at a desk in the British Library, contemporary slang scholars combine library research with investigations into the latest digitized databases and other online resources. The expansion of these databases in recent years, however, means that the earliest dates given by slang dictionaries can sometimes be trumped by a quick trip to Google. For instance, Green dates “magic mushroom” (the hallucinogenic kind) to 1968, but Life Magazine ran a feature article on “Seeking the Magic Mushroom” in 1957.

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slang, but that is the lexicographer’s lot. Green plans to put his dictionary online for continuous revision, which is indeed the direction that many major reference works (including the O.E.D.) are now taking. In the meantime, his monument to the inventiveness of speakers from Auckland to Oakland takes its place as the pièce de résistance of English slang studies. To put it plain, it’s copacetic.

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