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The takeaway language of slang

The sheer linguistic inventiveness and indestructible quality of slang can keep some of its terms in use for centuries

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In the Preface to his Dictionary of the English Language, Samuel Johnson informed his readers that there was one aspect of his compatriots' discourse that he was unwilling to engage with. "Of the laborious and mercantile part of the people", he wrote,

"the diction is in a great measure casual and mutable; many of their terms are formed for some temporary or local convenience, and though current at certain times and places, and in others utterly unknown. This fugitive cant, which is always in state of increase or decay, cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of a language, and therefore must be suffered to perish with other things unworthy of preservation."

Yet, as Johnson must have been aware, published works recording this "casual and mutable" English had existed since Thomas Harman added a glossary of canting terms to his Caveat or Warening for Commen Cursetors of 1567 and, indeed, a generation after Johnson dismissed what we would call slang as "unworthy of preservation", a very different view was being propounded. For Francis Grose, the antiquary and former military man, author of A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue, published in 1785, it was a matter of regret that "terms of well-known import, at New-market, Exchange-alley, the City, the Parade, Wapping, and Newgate", and which also "find their way into our political and theatrical compositions", were not recorded in conventional dictionaries. Indeed Grose (as had Johnson) managed to establish a patriotic slant to his dictionary-making. Referring to a recent dictionary of "satyrical and burlesque French", he claimed that with "our language being at least as copious as the French, and as capable of the witty equivoque", his dictionary was fully justified. He pursued this theme further, adding that

"The freedom of thought and speech, arising from, and privileged by our constitution, gives a force and poignancy to the expressions of our common people, not to be found under arbitrary government, where the ebullitions of vulgar wit are checked by the fear of the bastinado, or of a lodging during pleasure in some gaol or castle."

Whether as a consequence of their constitutional arrangements or not, as Jonathon Green has wonderfully demonstrated, the "ebullitions of vulgar wit" of the English-speaking peoples have produced a rich, multilayered and constantly evolving colloquial language. Green's Dictionary of Slang is a major achievement. The industry and scholarship underpinning it are massive. The work encompasses about 110,000 words and phrases, grouped under headwords. It is written "on historical principles", meaning that every definition which might be attached to each word or phrase is supported by citations going back, as far as can be established, to the first occasion in which the use of a term as slang can be located in a published or other media source.

The range of these sources is breathtaking. Green, for example, lists around 6,000 titles of printed works he has drawn on, limiting admission to that list to works which he has cited five or more times. He cites Chaucer, goes further back into medieval literature, takes in the cant terms found in the rogue pamphlets of the Tudor era, runs through Shakespeare and other Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, works through English literature for the following four centuries, and takes on board such unequivocally modern sources as the lyrics of the East London rapper Dizzee Rascal.

The breadth and complexity of Green's entries are extended by his evident familiarity with slang terms from the United States, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Ireland, and the anglophone

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Caribbean. He also makes constant use of slang derived from various English-speaking gay cultures and criminal underworlds and from the drugs scene. This is a work which, as one might imagine, defies being read through at one sitting: but as well as its obvious function as a work of reference it amply repays the curious reader who has time to browse, for there are many delights and surprises to be found scattered among its entries.

Slang relating to sex, of course, figures prominently. Taking a non-exhaustive list from the first two letters of the alphabet, we find the penis being referred to as Aaron's rod, Adam's arsenal, arse-wedge, augur, bacon bazooka, bald-headed bastard, and bayonet. There are some noteworthy implicit groupings of terms, perhaps two of the most striking being those dealing respectively with foreigners and with animals. Among the former, English slang seems to have treated the Dutch particularly harshly: thus we have not only Dutch treats, uncles, auctions and courage, but also the less familiar Dutch act (suicide), Dutch dumplings (gay slang for buttocks), and Dutch doggery (a low grog-shop). And as this last expression indicates, among animals, dogs seem to come off especially badly as objects of slang, considering the human capacity to be dog-poor, dog-drunk, dog-tired, to dog around, to be in the doghouse, and to create dogs' dinners.

One of the many earlier slang dictionaries upon which Jonathon Green draws is A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and modern of the canting Crew . . . with an addition of some Proverbs, Phrases, figurative Speeches, &c., now republished by the Bodleian Library as The First English Dictionary of Slang 1699. The identity of its author, "B. E., gent", remains elusive; there is also some uncertainty about the exact date of publication, while it is, as might be expected, a much less substantial work than Green's, with something in excess of 4,000 entries. Nevertheless it merits serious attention.

As already noted, cant terms – the secret language allegedly employed by thieves and beggars – had been listed in print since the 1560s, and it is of interest that B. E. should refer to "the canting crew" on his title page, where it is implied that understanding the crew's language would help "all sorts of people . . . to secure their money and preserve their lives". But the title-page also informs the potential purchaser that the work was "very diverting and entertaining": there is little doubt that the modern reader will also find it so.

Its claim to being the "first English dictionary of slang" is justified by its being the first work not just to list underworld cant terms, but also to incorporate a broad range of contemporary proverbs, sayings, colloquialisms, and, in the modern sense of the term, slang: indeed, entries dealing with these categories far exceed those drawn from the language of the canting crew. There are, as with Green's Dictionary, numerous entries which relate to sex: "beard-splitter" for "an enjoyer of women" has a modern ring, while the reader will also come across such terms as "butter'd bun", meaning "lying with a woman that has been just layn with by another man". Numerous other entries relate to crime and punishment, and to drink and the milieu of the alehouse.

What is rather less expected is the variety of ways in which the entries B. E. draws together lead us into the widening world of England, and thus English, at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Intellectual and political themes are touched on, with entries for Hobbist, Jacobites, non-jurors, Tories and "Whiggs", and with "Greshamite" being defined as "a virtuoso, or member of the Royal Society". The inclusion of a number of military and naval terms ("powder monkey" was already current) points to England's steady elevation to world power status, while even English cuisine was evidently being influenced by long-distance cultural contacts. B. E. explains that "arack" was "an East-Indian brandy", and that "pillau" was "a hen and rice boil'd, a Turkish dish, but now in use in England, France and Holland", while the prototype of a currently favoured takeaway food is recorded as "cabob", a Turkish and Persian dish consisting of "a loin of mutton roasted with an onyon betwixt each joint". The presence of William III on the throne obviously set limits on the use of "Dutch" in pejorative expressions, but linguistic contacts paralleling the political ones were suggested by a scattering of entries explaining Dutch words or phrases: "gelt" for money; "Hans-en-kelder" for a jack-in-the-box or a baby in the womb; "placaert", defined as "a Dutch proclamation, an order of the States"; and "skipper", defined as "a Dutch master of a ship or vessel". The origins of few familiar modern terms are indicated, as when "French and Vaudois Protestants, forced to quit their own and fly into other countries to have the exercise of their religion", provides the definition of "refugies".

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These two rather different yet equally fascinating works raise some fundamental thoughts about the nature and function of slang, a word itself of uncertain derivation. All students of the subject will agree that it is at once, like fashion in clothing, a means of inclusion and exclusion, whether for Tudor vagrants, nineteenth-century Oxbridge undergraduates, or modern gays or drug-users. Cracking the code that slang can constitute therefore admits outsiders, if only vicariously, to a new, and often deviant, cultural environment. Thus the early commentators on cant seem to have been fully aware that the terms they listed not only represented the argot of underworld characters conspiring against the norms of straight society, but also constituted a safe means of access to members of straight society into a world of adventure and freedom from convention.

Cracking that code is difficult because, as Dr Johnson and anybody else who has seriously considered the subject will have noted, slang changes, perhaps ever more rapidly in an age of mass communication. Yet some terms can be shown to have changed their meaning little or slowly, and one of the many delights to be derived from reading Green's Dictionary of Slang is to see how the import of slang terms altered, sometimes less perhaps than might have been expected, over time. Thus "abraham man", first cited in 1561 meaning a beggar who pretended to be mad, "and nameth himself poore Tom", had by 1859 acquired the meaning of "a naked poor man or a beggar in rags", and by 1932 (the last citation given by Green) was defined as a "veteran vagrant". Over a more compressed chronological span, "basket case", moved from its First World War meaning of a paraplegic, a person without the use of any of their limbs who had literally to be carried in a basket, to its current sense, as Green puts it, of "one who behaves in a notably eccentric manner". Even B. E. implies some changing usages: thus "family of love" is defined as "lewd women; also a sect".

Perhaps the most fascinating, if usually intractable, issue raised by reading these two dictionaries is the question of origins and dissemination. Who first decided that we should be dog tired rather than cat, stoat, or chicken tired, or that a female hairstyle that pulls the hair sharply back should be called a Croydon facelift, or that coughing at the badger might be an appropriate euphemism for cunnilingus? And why, although most slang phrases sink fairly quickly, are there a few which survive, so that, for example, against the mass of underworld terms listed by B. E. and now forgotten, we find "fence" already in 1699 having its modern sense of "a receiver and securer of stolen-goods"? These questions, although largely unanswerable, help remind us of the sheer linguistic inventiveness which lies behind the creation of slang, its indestructible quality, and those "ebullitions of vulgar wit" which welcome slang terms, bring them into common usage, and in a few select cases keep them there for centuries.

Jonathon Green
GREEN'S DICTIONARY OF SLANG
Three volumes, 6,085pp. Chambers. £295 (US $450).
978 0 550 10440 3
John Simpson
THE FIRST ENGLISH DICTIONARY OF SLANG, 1699
196pp. Oxford: Bodleian Library. £ 12.99
978 1 85124 348 8

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