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## Green's Dictionary of Slang by Jonathon Green and Guardian Style by David Marsh & Amelia Hodsdon – review

Feeling like a boiled owl? Then soothe your head with these treasuries of slang and style, says Steven Poole



**Steven Poole**

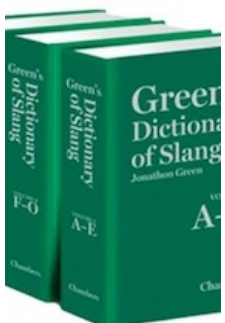
The Guardian, Saturday 18 December 2010  
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'To feel like a boiled owl' ... a vivid phrase for being hungover. Photograph: Vasily Fedosenko/Reuters

After more than a decade's labour, Jonathon Green, lexicographer of the subversive, has produced as fine a three-volume dictionary of slang as you would desire to piss upon (1700: phrase meaning "excellent, first-rate"). Like the OED, it is built on "historical principles", with dates for citations, impressing upon us the boisterous demotic creativity of our forebears, who were no less interested than we are in making up new ways to describe getting drunk (1650: "go to the scriveners and learn to make indentures").

**Green's Dictionary of Slang**  
by Jonathon Green



It is surprising to learn how old some current slang is: you could keep someone posted in 1864, and "put up or shut up!" goes back at least to 1873 gambling dens. The boys who admired my "hard" jacket on the Tube the other week were probably no more aware than I was that this usage to mean "excellent" or "fashionable" dates from at least 1936.

Slang, Green argues in his introduction, is a language "of marginality and rebellion, of dispossession and frustration". The great themes here are sex, death, religion, alcohol and intense dislike of other people, which is to say the great themes of all literature. It can be faintly disheartening to come across yet

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another word bigging up the penis as a weapon of violence (there are 1,000 of them, Green says), but there are also many obscure beauties: exflunct ("to destroy or overwhelm"), taradiddler ("a petty liar"), or the splendid puddlejumper ("an excitable person").

One marvels too at the variety of usages to which a single word has been put: a "growler"

has been a dog, a four-wheeled cab, a whisky-flask, a toilet, the vagina and food. And consider the nuanced spectrum of "get" phrases including get off, get off with, get off on, tell someone where to get off, get her!, get you!, get down with your bad self, and, of course, get fucked (the last to be pronounced while giving someone the hairy eyeball).

Such a mammoth work must inevitably contain slips: I doubt that "geeky", in a quoted newspaper article's description of "a geeky guy with silly facial hair", was intended to mean "unattractive" exactly; and Green has "bare" in modern yoofspeak meaning "many, lots of", though it can also mean simply "very" (I overheard a girl last week admitting sweetly: "My mum's bare nice to me"). Meanwhile, "long" in the sense of boring or unpleasant seems to have been missed altogether.

This is forgivable since slang is such a fast-moving target, of which any snapshot will be instantly out of date. In this day and age, perhaps the business of producing printed reference books is, anyway, all holiday at Peckham (1788: "all over, finished, hopeless"). Green says that he intends "to render the material available electronically", which would be very useful for performing reverse lookups: once one has found "to feel like a boiled owl", one instantly wants to collect other similarly vivid phrases for being hungover, just in case they come in useful one day.

Nowhere in Green's pages will you be shown a word only to be told it "doesn't exist", which paradoxical judgment is the domain of language police rather than language herders. As cant cops go, the guardians of the Guardian's own style guide are more forgiving and much wittier than most (ruefully quoting mistakes from this very paper), though they veer somewhat unpredictably between two flavours of normativity: the pragmatic and local (what is right for the Guardian), and the universal (what is right *tout court*).

This tension reflects the dual nature of the publication: it is an internal rulebook for working hacks, but also sold as a writing guide for the general reader. Many entries are simply helpful facts for the toiling subeditor (spellings of placenames; names of Spice Girls or Tory prime ministers). On the other hand, there is an excellent section of very nicely turned grammar and punctuation heuristics: essentially a less annoying Lynne Truss in a bottle. Of universal interest, too, ought to be the admirable thread of caution about the political implications of vocabulary (eg: "We should not take [. . .] use of the word [reform] at face value"), with coolly sensible entries for "terrorism" or the language of illness. (In turn, some might object to the use here of "mainland China", which just goes to show that the price of such sensitivity is eternal vigilance.)

No such volume can be impregnably armoured against the determined pedant. The plural of court martial is given as "courts martial" yet "attorneys general" is not only disallowed but ridiculed. Meanwhile, anyone trying to understand the Guardian's rules for capitalisation ("Nazi but nazism"; "information commissioner but Information Commissioner's Office") will, I fear, end up not knowing whether to shit or buy gas (1973: "an expression of total confusion").

As for new-minted words or usages, it is the rare style guide that can resist an absolutist urge to put its foot down. And so it is written here that "there is no such word as 'denialist'", though evidently there is now such a word (80,000 Google results as I write): it's just that we at the Guardian don't approve of it. The reader is instructed, too, that "gift" is "not a verb", though at my local Starbucks there is an exciting poster informing me that their coffee is "perfect for gifting". I'm pretty sure that means "gift" now *is* a verb, whatever anyone thinks about it. Does common usage, the vital urge to slangify so majestically celebrated in Green's dictionary, eventually steamroller even the most well-founded objections of style guardians? Do beavers piss on flat rocks?

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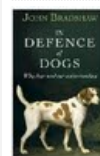


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**ahumanist**

18 December 2010 4:27PM

The reader is instructed, too, that "gift" is "not a verb", though at my local Starbucks there is an exciting poster informing me that their coffee is "perfect for gifting". I'm pretty sure that means "gift" now is a verb, whatever anyone thinks about it.

here we go again on the interminable descriptive - prescriptive confusion...

the guardian style guide is a guide, spelled "g - u - i - d - e", which believe it or not aims to advise the reader on what to write and what not to write, i.e. be prescriptive. this advice is bound, at times to take on an "absolutist" tenor (as in the sign i saw once in front of someone's garage in california: "don't even *think* of parking here"). certainly, the verb "to gift" may exist in retail outlets (where, for example, the plural of "avocado" is invariably "avocado's"), and if at such times the guardian style becomes "absolutist", it is trying to say: "don't do it, don't say we didn't warn you, if you use language in this way many people are going to think you are short on grey matter, or slovenly, or american, or all three". i wish i had this slang dictionary now, i'd put this much better.

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**Kibblecross**

19 December 2010 2:30PM

The word "sbhudsbaicalilr" does not exist in English. There genuinely is no such word. The word "denialist", and the verb "to gift", clearly do exist, whether the self-appointed guardians ('scuse pun) of the language would like it to or not. Does that help clear up the jolly old "interminable descriptive-prescriptive confusion", @ahumanist?

The article makes perfectly clear the problem inherent in publishing for general consumption of a set of specific in-house rules (which can be forgiven for being "absolutist" and even arbitrary) as if they were a genuine aid to writing "good" or "correct" English. But hey, if people will buy it, it's likely to get published. What you might call the "Boots homeopathy range" principle.

Of course, we know what the language police mean when they something "doesn't exist", but that doesn't make it any less ridiculous a way of talking. We would be quick enough to laugh at the absurdity if, say, a political polemicist were to do declare that there is no such thing as a millionaire (they don't genuinely "own" all that money, you see), or, I don't know, that "King Juan Carlos" did not exist, meaning that it was his father who was the rightful king.

However, perhaps such turns of phrase do serve some small purpose, in swiftly identifying the writings of those whose opinions are, frankly, unlikely to be worth the paper they are printed on when recycled for general consumption.

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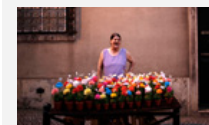
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And now some rules from a "G-U-I-D-E" for the keepers of petting zoos I've just written.

There is no such animal as an "elephant".

The so-called "Komodo dragon" does not exist.

The lion is not a cat.



**cathyrelf**

19 December 2010 5:19PM

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"Gifting" can go get gifted, in my opinion!

Nice post.



**Kibblecross**

19 December 2010 11:55PM

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Given that the use of "gift" as a verb goes back to the 16th century and before, it's a bit too late to hope it won't catch on, let alone claim it doesn't exist. Given that it's much more widespread in Scotland than England, the Guardian stylists' rejection of this unfamiliar term may well be simple ignorance.



**ahumanist**

20 December 2010 8:37PM

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i should get out more, instead of looking up old threads!

ah, kibblecross, a stalwart pedigree, going back to the 16th century!  
that's what is known as the "i shall return incontinent" argument: if shakespeare said it then it must be still ok to say incontinent when you mean you'll be back in a tick.

and scotland!

that is the "turnips and swedes" argument: perfectly ok for the Scotsman's style guide to say that the english turnip is the scottish swede, and vice versa.  
but why should the english deprive those outwith england of the distinctiveness of scots by incorporating it into english south of the border?

but at least now the next revision of the style guide can amend the entry under "to gift" to read "does not exist, except in north america, scotland and the 16th century"...



**Kibblecross**

27 December 2010 11:01PM

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With respect @ahumanist, this is all completely irrelevant. All I was doing was demonstrating the (surely obvious) nonsense of saying that "there is no such word as..." just because you've only come across it recently and don't like it. Sledgehammer to crack a nut perhaps.

The "incontinent" example is actually the reverse of the attitude of the tinpot pedants that swear by these style guides. Their line is not "no-one says that any more so it doesn't exist" but rather "I've only recently become aware of this, so it must be new and hence bad".

You might have it the wrong way about swedes and turnips, by the way: I've certainly never come across swede used in Scotland to mean turnip. And am I alone in thinking of the Guardian as (ostensibly at least) a British paper, not an English one -- or are there no such things as British papers? Should the style guide say "British English: does not exist"?

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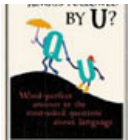
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