



U3AM at Home

Dunnies, Durries and Dropkicks

Recently, I watched an edition of the quiz game *Mastermind* where one of the contestants had chosen as her special subject Australian Slang. As I'm a recent visitor to Australia, most of it went over my head; in fact I was utterly *bamboozled* (British or Australian slang?) This reminded me of Shaw's famous saying about England and America as "*two countries separated by a common language*" and got me thinking about the differences (and similarities) between British and Australian slang, how and why slang evolves, what purpose it serves and why it should exist at all.

Personally I find slang expressions fascinating and am particularly interested in what areas of human, social and national experience give rise to this variation on standard speech in different languages. Leaving aside computer languages it's probably true to say that slang exists in all languages – even in sign languages used in deaf communities. This should not surprise us as language is dynamic, ever changing and evolving and slang is essentially a creative, colourfully imaginative and fanciful use of language.

As parents you have probably at some time been surprised, shocked, embarrassed by some of the slang expressions that you hear from your children and have been tempted to admonish them for their perceived mangling or abuse of the national tongue. That of course is precisely the purpose of slang. Slang is characterised by two essential features: firstly, it is a kind of jargon which allows members of particular groups to communicate with each other without being understood. Part of this usage would also allow individuals to know who is "in" and who is "out" of the group. Secondly, it represents a consciously intended offence against some conventional standard of propriety. If you find your hackles rising, then that is only to be expected.

Linguists like to differentiate between different types of usage within a common language. We are all familiar with differences between a formal "correct" usage and an informal, colloquial usage and most people instinctively know in which situations and on what occasions each usage would be appropriate. But within those two broad bands, there are dialects, vulgarisms, obscenities, archaic terms, slang, etc. These distinctions are often highly subjective. In the early days of dictionaries it was commonplace to categorise words according to the editor's personal taste. Dr Johnson's dictionary of 1755 is full of his own judgments and prejudices: "*a low bad word, a barbarous corruption, unworthy of use*", etc. The modern successor to Johnson's dictionary, the Oxford English Dictionary, that bible of the English Language, adopts a more balanced, less authoritarian approach whilst maintaining its essential aim of directing speakers in

reliable directions: definitions tend to be more circumspect, avoiding potential accusations of being authoritarian or prescriptive: judgments such as “*now generally condemned as vulgar or slovenly...*”, etc are abundant.

Because slang is so difficult to track historically and is very often the kind of language that resists standard treatment, slang often gets spoken before it gets written down or published. This prompted the OED in 2018 to launch its Youth Slang Appeal asking young people especially to send in examples of new words and expressions that they are aware of. According to the OED Senior Editor, Fiona McPherson: “[Words used by younger people] *often have a bigger story to tell about varieties of English used by particular ethnic or cultural groups, and their influence on the language as a whole*”.

Her reference to the “bigger story” is what makes slang so interesting. Slang has, of course, suffered such a bad press over recent centuries because its raw material often comes from those life experiences that “polite” society has tended to shy away from talking about: sex, bodily actions and functions etc. Its range however extends much further probably finding material in every niche of human experience.

So where do all the new slang words come from? We humans are essentially inventive and new meanings for old words come about as people seek to express themselves in new, creative ways. Slang allows us to be funny, clever, different, shocking, friendly, secretive even.

Over the past 20 to 30 years many slang words have come from three specific sources: popular music, politics and the internet. Pop music, especially rap and hip-hop, has contributed many slang words as songwriters come up with increasingly creative ways of expressing themselves: *Yard – your house (as in I’m going yard)*; *Dime - A very attractive female*: a modern take on the old slang use of “10”. This kind of slang often has only a very local meaning: eg *east van* – referring to the hippest area of Vancouver, Canada, and by extension: *cool and laid-back*. Similarly in Australia: *Skip* – used chiefly by young men of Greek and Italian origins referring to Australians of other European origins (based on Skippy the Bush Kangaroo).

The divisiveness of politics in recent years has also given rise to numerous slang words. For better or worse words such as *snowflake* and *woke* have taken on new meanings thanks to constant sniping between political opponents. *Woke* is particularly interesting for its close connection with the #BlackLivesMatter movement. When I heard Tony Abbott threatening to **shirtfront** President Putin I was not so much bamboozled as hornswaggled – good old American cowboy slang that I actually first came across in one of P G Wodehouse’s Jeeves books. That new use of an Australian football term in a political context has even caused the editors of the authoritative Macquarie Dictionary to consider revising its definition.

Perhaps the biggest source of modern slang words however is the Internet. In today's electronic age, that fact should surprise no one. Whether it's the changing nature of technology: *selfie*, or a quickly-changing trend: *yolo* - you only live once, or even the most innocuous of acronyms such as *btw* – by the way (which apparently carries all kinds of esoteric hidden nuances, known only to the initiated), the Internet inspires more new slang words than anything else.

Slang is such a rich, creative, ingenious and endlessly metamorphosing substratum of standard language usage. So if you are tempted to instinctively recoil on encountering some of its more "in-your-face" examples, remember that some of the most prestigious pieces of imaginative writing in English make good use of exactly the same creative process: Carroll's *Jabberwocky* – remember *brillig* and *galumphing*; Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* – remember *nadsat* and *droogs*; Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* - remember "Three quarks for Muster Mark!" That one eventually was resurrected and inducted into the basic theory of Quantum Mechanics, so who knows what the final resting place could be of some of the current examples that whirl and swirl around us.

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