SLANG DICTIONARIES:

MIRRORING OUR FLEXIBLE USE OF LANGUAGE

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The reference section of every library contains one or more slang dictionaries.¹ At first it is puzzling to consider why there are slang dictionaries and how they are used. People who use slang do not get it out of a slang dictionary, do not check the spelling of slang, and do not look up the meaning of an unfamiliar slang expression they may hear used by a friend or coworker. Close examination of slang dictionaries, however, suggests that these works reflect the flexible ways people shift back and forth between informal and formal speech. On one hand, we often communicate in a standardized way, so we can be clearly understood and can successfully fit into the larger society. On the other hand, we often talk in many diverse and free-style ways, so we can express our individuality and belong to various sub-groups within society. Slang dictionaries convey the message that both types of speech have validity and historical interest.

Slang exists largely in relation to what it is not—it is not Standard English. James Stalker makes this point as he summarizes colleagues’ attempts to date the beginning of slang:

Lighter (1994) maintains that we cannot really label words as being slang before c. 1660, the Restoration period, because “standard” English did not exist before that time, hence the concept of slang could not exist before that time, although cant, criminal jargon, could. Partridge (1954) seems to agree. Slang arose as a response to Standard.²
In-group slang is informal, irreverent, and edgy, while Standard English is formal, respectful, and mainstream. Slang dictionaries make these distinctions clear, neatly translating slang into Standard English and highlighting the difference between the two in a non-judgmental way.

These dictionaries let a reader know, for instance, that in Australia *narky* means “upset,” that in the Royal Air Force *pukka gen* means “trustworthy information,” or that in England in 1811 *Pompin* meant “A man or woman of Boston in America; from the number of pompkins raised and eaten by the people of that country.” With slang words and their definitions each presented in this straightforward, neutral manner, it is easy to see both as valid ways of expressing oneself. Which you use depends on your choices, aims, priorities, audience, time period, and context.

Interestingly, many people have always felt strongly that Standard English needs to be championed as the only way to communicate. Other people have always felt equally strongly that English must be appreciated and preserved in all its natural exuberance and variety. Tom McArthur, a scholar of global English, writes, for instance, about early “dialectologists,” who “pursued their cataloging and commentary under the vast shadow of standardization . . . and so worked with a sense of urgency.” Clearly slang dictionary writers are more aligned with this second group, valuing slang’s idiosyncrasies. But slang dictionary writers also approve highly of Standard English, as found in their prefaces and definitions. Both slang and Standard English have their place, slang dictionaries seem to say, and are worthy of attention and preservation.

In *Democratic Eloquence*, Kenneth Cmiel considers how nineteenth-century citizens of America wrestled with slang, “the riff-raff of language.” Americans were
famous for being able to use language in colorful, casual ways, but they actively questioned the role of slang in a democracy. They wondered whether slang was a good thing, embodying friendliness, independence, self-confidence, and a democratic disregard for class distinctions, or a bad thing, indicating boorishness, low sensibility, incivility, poor education, and an embarrassing lack of culture and refinement? Or both? People were ambivalent, in other words. Cmiel writes:

Americans were pulled in contradictory directions. The new expressive decorum encouraged informal speech, and slang, dialect, and familiarity all contributed to moments of egalitarianism. Popular education, however, encouraged refined and elegant prose. 8

Cmiel follows the debate in newspapers, grammar guides, speeches, and dictionaries of the day. In the mid-nineteenth century, regular dictionaries condemned slang as vulgar and low, leaving most of it entirely out. By the 1880s and into the twentieth century, not only do more slang dictionaries appear, but the next generation of general dictionaries includes more slang words. As the editors of Funk and Wagnell’s Standard (1890) put it in their preface to their new edition: “The question that should control the lexicographer is not, should the word be in the English language? But is it?”9

Expressing this non-judgmental philosophy, long, new, academic-style slang dictionaries appear. They document in great detail that people in all walks of life and occupations use slang sometimes and that a person sometimes talks freely or rudely, sometimes more delicately. For example, in one slang dictionary is the slang expression—“Blue o’clock in the morning,” followed by the definition—“Pre-dawn, when black sky gives way to purple. Suggestive of rollicking late hours.”10 Both parts of this entry seem like fine uses
of language, and the mind goes happily back and forth between them. That back-and-
forth mirrors how we vary our mode of communication according to mood, audience, and
situation.

So, finally, what is the purpose of slang dictionaries? Some slang dictionary
prefaces say that their purpose is to preserve a national language and national pride. Some say their purpose is to “help ESL students learn informal English as it is spoken or
heard on TV.” Some dictionaries of technical terms such as computer slang can have a
practical, job-training aspect. But mostly slang dictionaries seem to celebrate the
quirkiness of slang. They present old slang, such as *frisk* for search or *racket* for noise
(both from c. 1780) and newer slang, such as *24/7* for constantly (from c. 2000), and in
the process make clear that people move easily back and forth between the slang and
Standard English, usually without any dictionary at all.
Notes


4. This concept is discussed in Harvey Daniels, *Famous Last Words: The American Language Crisis Reconsidered* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 68. In his chapter “Nine Ideas about Language,” Idea 5 is, “Speakers of all languages employ a range of styles and a set of subdialects or jargons.”


6. In an interview (Janny Scott, “That All-American Dictionary Adds an All-American Coach,” *New York Times*, 19 August 2000, sec. A, p. 1), dictionary editor Jesse Sheidlower echoes this point: “You can be interested in slang or dialect or things that people call ungrammatical, but still think that there is a formal way of speech. . . Our entire conversation has been conducted in a relatively formal standard English despite the fact that I know a lot of words that will make people’s hair crawl.”


8. Ibid., 90.

9. Quoted in Cmiel, 224.

