

TAKING SLANG SERIOUSLY

This story has no moral. If it points out an evil at any rate it suggests no remedy.

Saki author's note *Unbearable Bassington* (1912)

My talk is entitled 'Taking Slang Seriously'. And I do. Which, given the prevailing assumptions about my beloved obsession, makes me egregious if not exceptional.

Not, and I must apologize, that this is the lecture as advertised: the analysis of a single column, perhaps a single page of headwords, definitions, etymologies and citations. This book has been 17 years in the making; too long, now, to ascertain where its contents came from.

Did this cite come from some research by my partner, Susie Ford, who has spent a decade truffling out material from libraries in London and New York. A veritable *ratte de bibliothèque*. Or was this one a gift from Google Book Search, that useful if poorly edited source, which renders hypocrites of all of us who use it, while simultaneously claiming that Messrs Page and Brin are only thieves, stealing our copyrights as they pretend to enrich the world. Or from my peerless editor Sarah Chatwin, demanding that I cannot simply offer a headword, but must trace some proof of its existence. Or plagiarized, or at least borrowed, from my predecessor Eric Partridge, or from the OED, or from some other lexicon which has found what I cannot. Or simply from the 6000+ plus books that have been read, the hundreds of

newspapers and magazines, the websites, blogs, lyrics, scripts and all the rest? I can no longer remember.

What I do know is that I have dedicated my life to taking slang seriously. In every sense of the phrase. Amassing a database and thence a dictionary from the widest possible sources, and assessing what I have found in a manner that I hope both exceeds and by-passes the slipshod, easy dismissal of the topic as ‘dirty words’.

That said, slang certainly offers a vocabulary and a voice to all our negatives. Our inner realities: lusts, fears, hatreds, self indulgences. It subscribes to nothing but itself – no belief systems, no true believers, no faith, no religion, no politics, no party. It is, for Freudians, the linguistic *id*. The *id*, as laid out in the New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (1933)

is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality, [...] most of this is of a negative character and can be described only as a contrast to the ego. We all approach the id with analogies: we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations... It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle.

Which word *id* means ‘it’ in Latin and the original German and which monosyllable *it*, in English-language slang at least, means sex or one of the bodily parts it requires for consummation. So be it.

It is voyeuristic, amoral, libertarian (libertine). It is vicious. It is cruel. It is self-indulgent. It treats all theologies – secular as well as spiritual – with the contempt that they deserve. It is funny. It is fun.

Given its position on the margins one might see it as a means of self-affirmation: I denigrate/blaspheme/am obscene therefore I am. Shouting dark words into the darkness.

Like the tramp I see almost daily on my walks along a street near my flat in Paris, it lies cheerfully in the gutter. It may be gazing at the stars, but far more likely beneath the skirts of passing women.

There are few languages that have resisted a slang. Perhaps they are spoken in the few countries that have no city, slang’s necessary crucible. The languages, of course, are different: some vastly, some relatively slightly, but all are different. But in slangs as in the people who speak them: *plus ça change*. The details differ, the big picture is much the same. Slang has a story, and that story has universal themes.

In a way slang is the true esperanto – the real international language. Or, since because it is found in so many different languages it cannot be a true esperanto, it is certainly so in its over-arching imagery and its role in communication and as a statement of self.

It might be said that the very narrowness of its ‘waterfront’ (the range of themes that recur over and over again and in a wide range of languages; and they are there from classical Latin onwards) is the best testament to its utility. Stripped down, modernist, cutting edge – at whatever time, that is, that it has reflected the currently ‘modern’ and whatever edge has been at that moment ‘cutting’.

Which to me proves that even if the individual terms that make up the vocabulary may be dismissed – and it is a far from accurate dismissal – as ‘ephemeral’, the persistence of these themes ensures that slang lasts. The imagery does not vanish; it is not short-term. It reflect the way that we think of certain topics. One might call it stereotyping since it is often in stereotypes that slang deals but could a better synonym be psychological ‘shorthand’?

So what do the similarities tell us? That the basics remain consistent in slang as in much that is human: sex, money, intoxication, fear (of others), aggrandizement (of oneself).

Let me offer some heresies:

The official definitions of ‘slang’ are ultimately a waste of time, intellectual marginalia for a supremely non- (but not anti-) intellectual code.

And does the etymology of the word ‘slang’ really matter? Because it remains unknown. Slang is an evocation of (marginal/rebellious/contrary) self. Again, the etymology of the term is unnecessary icing on the cake. Is it, to keep things culinary, over-egging the imagistic custard to suggest that like the great human givens that provide its vocabulary, slang too simply *is*.

Perhaps I do it too much honour. Yet how can I not admire something that has reached so far beneath the moralizing skin.

And is it even a language? or no more than an aggregation of words. A lexis. If a language demands the fulfillment of certain rules: pronunciation, word order, grammar, then no, it is not. Only a few ‘made-up’ versions – France’s *verlan* and *louchebem* – make that cut. It is marginal, used by the marginal, expressing marginality. Those who use it may see it as a language, they may be wrong. One of its own posited etymologies, eliding *s* for ‘secret’ and *lang* for ‘language’ suggests that the belief is deep. But that suggested etymology is wrong. It may be, or rather may have been secret, but no matter: it still fails the tests that render it a fully fledged language. What it is, perhaps, is a lexis of synonymy. There are themes: topics it embraces, the philosophy of its use (‘counter’) but even if it demands dictionaries, it is not a language as such.

Yet all that said, the diagram with which Murray prefaces the OED equates slang with jargon / technical terms / dialect / etc. as equally valuable subsets

of the central 'English language'. Even if he seems to mix the concepts of 'vocabulary' and language'.

2009 OED:

language 1.a. The system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure.

No. It is not a system. But let us look further:

2. a. The form of words in which something is communicated; manner or style of expression

Then yes, slang is certainly that. And here the OED even cross-references to 'slangism' and 'slanguage'

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It must come from somewhere. People need that it should come from somewhere. It has creation myths. Like the Biblical original they are almost certainly unsound.

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The French term *argot* denoted a people before it was a language (or rather jargon). In France, at least, this was probably true until the last world war: the *milieu* had its own lexis and it, as much as any street, delineated its boundaries. It is harder to see where cant of the underworld and the slang of

the common user draws its lines in the Anglophone world. Cant dictionaries abounded, albeit plagiarizing relentlessly each from its predecessor, until the 19th century. But by the end of the 18th they were already being overlapped and the words that appear in volume after volume are estranged ever further from their actual users. By the 20th century the rule is fissiparity. Not, perhaps, because such options, such varieties of specialist languages had not hitherto existed, but because they had not been noticed or if noticed left uncollected.

It is, of course, quite possible that I reject the linguistic aspects of slang because I lack the intellectual equipment to approach them. But true or otherwise, I still see slang first and foremost less as a language phenomenon but as a psychological one: it seems visceral, hard-wired. A need. But perhaps I flatter it, this mongrel subset of a greater social marginality.

At its heart, even its most obscene and gutter-dwelling heart, it is subversive. So many of its terms do no more than turn standard usage upside down. Appropriating them for reinterpretations that mock their lost respectability. Standing aside, voluntarily or otherwise, from the standard world the slang user rejects standard language and substitutes a code within which he/she feels secure and which serves to define him/herself. But of course no-one exists purely in slang-world. It is feasible, perhaps, in a closed society such as a prison, but rarely elsewhere. One must discard slang to enter 'real life' just as most of us must discard casual clothes to go to work.

And for all the cries of ‘limited vocabulary’ to use slang demands articulacy. Thus the city person creates and expresses it. The taciturn peasant – inarticulate through choice or verbal inadequacy – cannot rise to slang. And it offers articulacy to the otherwise inarticulate, or at least those who lack the mastery of standard usage. Like beauty, articulacy is wholly relative.

Another heresy: the job itself.

As slang lexicographers we are making a vast and complex concrete structure with no choice but to settle its foundations on sand – well-packed sand at best, shifting sand, even quicksand at worst.

Such records that we have of early slang use are as frustrating as they are insufficiently informative. Slang was not a privileged discourse; slang was thus left largely unrecorded. The earliest material on which we draw is minimal, quite fragmentary. Some 13th century passion plays in France, a few terms in Chaucer or Piers Ploughman, the trial, in 1455, of the Coquillards in Dijon, the near incomprehensible poetry of Villon, the so-called beggar books of 16th century Europe. This is not a solid record. And in all cases these are pieces of underworld jargons, of criminal codes rather than general slang. Yet the fact that records are relatively scanty in no way ‘proves’ that even cant emerged fully developed in, to take the UK as an example, Robert Copland’s glossary of c.1531 or, in Germany, first in 1479 and then the *Liber Vagatorum* of 1510. As for slang ‘proper’, France’s ‘bas-langage’, literally ‘low language’, slang as used by the butcher, the baker and their urban peers, the term does not exist, at least as so far recorded in

England, until 1756. I do not care. That there are no records in no way 'proves' the language's non-existence. I cannot 'prove' that I am right, but I believe unreservedly that I am. I believe in a natural, even hard-wired human drift from conformity. In language as in other aspects of existence.

The dictionary, which to the best of its writer's ability, must deal with unimpeachable facts, cannot allow itself this luxury – and nor can I in making one. But in theory, if not in practice, I can and do.

Like the accumulation of money for the very rich, who no longer need it, the amassing of that dictionary is no more than a means of 'keeping score'. Or if one seeks an alternative image, slang lexicography – perhaps all lexicography – is an attempt to map a territory that remains fluid, shifting and in the end unmappable. The lack of full and/or accessible records ensures that we must leave blank spaces on our maps. 'Here Be Dragons' or anthropophagi – or at least we hope so. But the 'game' will continue whether or not the score is maintained; the territory exists, mapped or otherwise. The interested world requires its guides.

The slang dictionary (especially that offering citations) is an oral history of marginality and rebellion, of dispossession and frustration. Little capons on dunghills made of shifting sands.

Partridge's comment, ascribed to his self-serving pseudonym 'Corrie Dennison', that 'There is far more of imagination and enthusiasm in the making of a good dictionary than in the average novel' is not wholly foolish. Although it is of the coiners and users of slang, rather than of its collectors, that the terms are most accurately used.

And the slang dictionary, that short-lived, unfinished scorecard, that map that can never fill in every territory, is inadequate in almost every way. It stands as an authority, it displays itself as concrete, but it is clay from top to toe. It is made, after all, by human beings. It is incomplete – how else can it be when slang is in constant evolution? – it takes as its starting point an arbitrary date based on circumstances beyond lexicographical control. Its definitions may be correct but its dating almost invariably is not or at least very well may not be – governed as it has to be by the essential serendipity of research, however devotedly pursued. Its etymologies aim for pertinence, but are too often leaps in the dark, however inspired, and there is, there has to be at times, an admission (perhaps tacit) of guesswork. Its orthography, since of all languages slang remains the most resolutely oral, can be equally debatable. And despite that orality, a guide to its pronunciation is never even attempted. What the lexicographer knows and attempts to pass on to the reader exists only in the shadow of just how much he or she does not know.

None of which, however, in any way invalidates the dictionary's supremely necessary existence. Nor that of the dictionary-maker's job. But one must never forget that the great river it (one?) attempts to tame would and does flow on quite regardless.

Is this constant stressing of the ultimate untrustworthiness (fallibility? failure?) of the work to which I have dedicated more than 25 years tell me something: something obvious? Probably. Very probably.

For its lexicographer, usually male, middle aged, middle class, it is the great escape. Sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll and never leave your desk. Even more so with the Internet. Anatomists of the underbelly. Dr Frankensteins with our monster dictionaries. Letting them free to wander in the name of our unattained, unessayed lives. Voyeurs of other people's dramas. Flaneurs, to be kinder, in the streets – some lit brightly, some less so – of slang's languages.

Nor are we merely voyeurs upon the sensational. We are heartless; we have no human interest. Nor human interest stories. Just words, words, words. The beggar is whipped, the whore has a back-story, the junkie dies. We do not care. Only if, frustratingly, impudently, they remain mute.

Lexicography might be represented as the great jigsaw puzzle. Constantly turning the bits until one fits another and gradually, so gradually, the picture emerges.

So is it absurd to be, as of course I am, so proud of something so generally disdained, or worse: rarely even noticed but for its least important content.

What option do I have now. It has become my life, expanding over the years like some science fiction virus, slithering everywhere, invading every cranny. And since dictionaries are made by human beings, the canny reader could presumably reconstruct me from my 12,000-odd text-columns, my 120,000 lemmas, my 10 plus million words. I can see the end, not just of the book but of me. This is my scratch on the tree.

I began or almost so, with Freud. Since among the next books I have been asked to write is one that includes French as well as English slang, let me end with a somewhat free translation of a French authority. The veteran lexicographer Alain Rey.

On croit que l'on maîtrise les mots, mais ce sont les mots qui nous maîtrisent.

As lexicographers believe that we master the words. We are wrong. It is the words that master us.
