

[Please note that a revised, updated, and expanded version of this paper has been accepted for publication in *Transactions of the Philological Society*, and is expected to appear in print (and online) in 2011. When the final version becomes publicly available, you can acquire it from the *TPhS* website, <http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0079-1636>.]

## THE GENUINE ETYMOLOGICAL STORY OF *PHON(E)Y*<sup>1</sup>

By PAUL S. COHEN

### ABSTRACT

The etymological source and history of English *phon(e)y* ‘fake, sham, counterfeit’ have been the subject of speculation and disagreement for over 100 years, and are still problematic. In the present paper, I outline the treatment of *phon(e)y* in the three editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) as well as in more specialized dictionaries, and in the relevant scholarly and popular literature; where appropriate, I make a careful examination of cited documents in the original. I go on to make a critical analysis of all these, adduce new evidence, and advance a coherent theory to account for the data, including heretofore unexplained phonological aspects.

### 1. WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE *OED*

As a kind of thumbnail sketch of the way etymological views of English *phon(e)y*<sup>2</sup> have changed over the decades, we can look at what the three editions of the *OED* have to say.

*OED1* does not have an entry for the item in the main text; however, in the Supplement we find an entry, labeled *US*, for the adjective *phoney*, *phony*,<sup>3</sup> with the following etymology: ‘Of uncertain origin; but see quot. 1904.’ The 1904 quotation, which is chronologically the second one given,<sup>4</sup> is from the New York *Evening Telegram* newspaper of December 9 (p. 8). It reads:

The paraphernalia found in the palatial gambling den ... proved to be what the detectives oddly styled ‘phony’. This ... word ... implies that ... a thing so qualified has no more substance than a telephone call with a supposititious friend.

**This passage has clear implications: The quotation marks around *phony* show that the writer felt the word to be new and/or slangy; and the writer’s perceiving the need to supply a (rather fanciful) etymological source points to the same conclusion.**

*OED2* has an entry for *phoney*, *phony*, with subentries for both an adjective and a noun, and gives an etymology of ‘of uncertain origin.’ Notably, it has eliminated the 1904 *Evening Telegram* quotation (and thus, of course, the reference to it in the etymology). The earliest quotation is still the one from George Ade used in the *OED1* entry, but its date has been correctly revised backward to 1900.<sup>5</sup> The quotation reads “‘Overlook all the Phoney Acting by the Little Lady, Bud,’ said the Fireman.’ The entry for the (derived) noun has a quotation from

Cullen (1902: 99)<sup>6</sup> as its earliest: ‘If youse tink’s f’r a minnit dat youse is goin’ t’ git away wit’ a phony like dat wit’ me youse is got hay in y’r hemp, dat’s wot.’

*OED3* gives the Ade and Cullen quotations, but has a surprise in store: a much earlier quotation. It cites a letter quoted in Lane (1977 [1990]: 116)<sup>7</sup> from a B. Moody with a date of April 25, 1862.<sup>8</sup> The cited quotation, from a letter written in a Confederate Army camp near Yorktown, VA by Pvt. (later, Cpl.) Benjamin Franklin Moody, who came from outside Campbellton, GA, reads as follows: ‘[They keep skirmishing along the line. I will tell you of a phoney scrape and also a serious one, too.]’<sup>9</sup>

**Since Moody’s letter dates from 1862, 14 years before the telephone was patented and publicly demonstrated, it would seem that (*tele*)phone is not the source of *phon(e)y*.**<sup>10</sup>

The etymology in *OED3*—annotated there as being a Dec. 2008 draft revision—reads ‘Probably alteration of FAWNEY n. (compare FAWNEY n. 2).’ The *OED3* entry for *fawney* is unchanged from *OED2* (indeed from *OED1*). The second noun definition has two subparts; the first of these reads ‘= *Fawney rig*. *To go on the fawney*: to practise the fawney-rig,’ and the second, ‘One who practises the fawney-rig.’ *Fawney-rig* is found within the third noun definition, which lists compound forms. It is defined through the use of an entry in Egan (1823):

*Fawney rig*, a common fraud, thus practiced:—a fellow drops a brass ring, double gilt, which he picks up before the party meant to be cheated, and to whom he disposes of it for less than its supposed, and ten times more than its real, value.

The earliest citations given at the entry are three quotations from Parker (1781), of which the first (2.167) is the most informative: ‘There is a large shop in London where these kind of rings are sold, for the purpose of going on the Fawney.’ The etymology of *fawney* is given as ‘a[doption of] Irish *fáin(n)e* ring.’

We will vet, and expand on, various aspects of the *OED3* materials—and adduce several other sources—below.

## 2. MOODY’S LETTERS AND WHAT THEY TELL US

Lane (1977 [1990]: xxix), the source for the 1862 Moody quotation in *OED3*, writes:

The letters in this volume ... have been taken from many sources—faded, barely legible manuscripts, microfilms and early typed transcripts. Recognizing that absolute precision is impossible with sources which vary so much in quality, we have made our best effort here to transcribe each letter as if it had been spoken rather than written. Thus, the word order remains unchanged, but spelling has been corrected, punctuation and paragraphs have been added, abbreviations completed. Some missing or illegible words have been inserted inside brackets to complete the meaning.

Lane’s editorial practices may well make sense for a more general readership, but, for our etymological purposes, we need, as far as feasible, to work with what Moody actually wrote. And it turns out that Moody could barely spell; to the extent of his skills, he based what he wrote primarily on his speech, and thus there are important phonological clues, discussed below, in his written output.<sup>11</sup>

The present article uses the microfilmed collection of Moody's letters at the Georgia Archives,<sup>12</sup> which is made up of 1) partially illegible and often difficult-to-decipher manuscripts of some of his letters with rather accurate typescripts based on these, 2) some manuscripts without corresponding typescripts, and 3) some typescripts without corresponding manuscripts. There are approximately<sup>13</sup> 23 in the first category, 3 in the second, and 13 in the third. These letters, which include a few poems, are from Moody to his wife and children, as well as to a couple of other addressees back home. The letters range in length from 33 to about 800 words; a precise number would depend on how one counts such items as 'a ford' (for *afford*) and 'aday' (for *a day*). A typical letter is about 400–500 words long.

To give an idea of what the letters are like linguistically and with respect to spelling, punctuation, etc., I will quote here the start of a fairly typical letter (another portion of which we will be looking at in detail below), with my glosses for items that may be difficult to decipher or interpret inserted within square brackets:

Ivins Port [*Evansport*] Va February the 9th 1862 Dier wife and children it is with plesher that I take my pen in hand to drop you a few lines to let you no how I am giting a long I have bin rite [*right* (= 'very', 'extremely')] sick with the flacks [*flux* (= 'dysentery')] but I thinke that I am most [*almost*] well at this time tho I am very weak and am porer than you ever saw mee I am taking as good cier [*care*] of my slf as I can I hant [*han't*, a dialectal variant of *haven't*] bin out of the tent in a weeke I live on mush and milke when I can get the milk

Returning to the crucial portion of Moody's April 25, 1862 letter (to his wife), we find that it actually reads 'they keep scrumishing [*skirmishing*] a long the line I will tell you of a foney scrape and all so a serious one too'.

**In addition to its probably eliminating the (*tele*)*phone* etymology,<sup>14</sup> there is another notable set of points we can draw from what Moody has written: Since he makes no attempt to define or explain the term *foney* to his wife, there is a clear implication that he does not think the word would be unfamiliar to her or unusual in any way. We may thus infer that his usage was not military slang or jargon and that the word was probably in fairly general use—at least in Georgia—for some time before 1862. This stands in sharp contrast to our conclusions above about the apparent novelty of the word in New York at least 42 years later, as based on the *Evening Telegram* quotation in *OED2*. It is noteworthy that the author of the 1894 citation in fn. 7 above, from a central Illinois newspaper, gives no indication that *phony* is in any way novel or special. A reasonable working assumption would therefore be that *foney/phon(e)y* had its origins in the US South (perhaps making its way through the Midwest before coming to the Northeast).**

### 3. MORE WRITINGS ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF *PHON(E)Y* AND *FAWNEY*

The etymology of *phon(e)y* in *OED3* puts us, I believe, on the right track, although it is far from the whole story. Most importantly, the word *alteration* in the etymology sweeps a major problem under the rug: There is no path via normal, attested sound-change that would take us from the /ɔ/ of *fawney* to the /o/ of *foney/phon(e)y*. We will deal with this key problem in detail later in the paper, but first we will look further into the etymology of *fawney* and *phon(e)y*.

Green (2005) gives an etymology for *fawney*—‘Irish *fáin(n)e*, a ring’—that accords with the one in *OED3*. His etymology for *phoney* is more equivocal, however, though it offers valuable references to the relevant technical literature; it reads:

? FAWNEY-RIG n. and allied terms (proposed by E.P. but disputed by Simes, *A Dict. Of Australian Underworld Slang* (1993)); for link to *fawney* see P. Tamony in *American Speech* XII:2 p.108–10.

‘E.P.’ is Eric Partridge. Partridge (1949 [1961]) has entries for ‘*fawney* or *fawny*’ and *the fawney rig* (with quotations from Parker [1781]), and at his entry for ‘*phoney* (occ. spelt *phony*)’ Partridge asserts that the word is

... [n]ot from *funny* (cf. ‘*funny business*’), as Webster’s suggests; nor from *telephone* (or *telephony*), as Godfrey Irwin<sup>15</sup> thinks and The O.E.D. hesitantly proposes; but from *fawney*, n., used attributively as in ‘the *fawney rig*’....

Partridge (1949 [1961]: vii) also writes:

...[M]ost people think of *phoney* as very modern: yet it has been current in the United States at least as early as 1890 and, in its original shape, *fawney*, in England since at least as early as 1770.

**Partridge’s etymology is a forerunner of what we see in *OED3* and is presumably one of *OED3*’s etymological sources. The dates he gives are about ten years earlier than the citations we can assume him to have had,<sup>16</sup> but perhaps they are reasonable estimates.**

Simes (1993) is a compilation, along with a good deal of analysis and added material, of two glossaries of prison slang and argot, which, for the most part, had not been published previously.<sup>17</sup> Simes does not have a separate entry for *phoney*, but includes it in the long and detailed discussion at his entry for *fawney*:

**fawney** 1955 Phoney, false (Eng. 19th cent.). So **fawney dropping** Issuing counterfeit currency. The old practice of *fawney dropping* meant dropping a purse containing worthless property (e.g. a worthless ring and watch), in such a spot that a gull would pick it up and attempt to ‘steal by finding’.... Thirty-five proposes *fawney*, old slang meaning a ‘finger-ring’, hence elliptically for *fawney rig* or *fawney-dropping* (as Thirty-five calls the confidence trick), as the ‘correct’ spelling of *phoney*. This proposed etymology, although offered by Partridge (*Underworld* 508-9) and some later dictionaries, is not accepted by etymological dictionaries or *OED3*, which say that the origin is unknown or uncertain. The problem with it is that *phoney* is recorded from the turn of the century and is invariably spelt *phoney* or *phony*. The few twentieth-century writers who, *per contra*, seem to have meant *fawney* and who spelt the word *phoney* are just as likely to have done so in ignorance of the real spelling and to have grasped at a word that was familiar to them.

**We can see that Simes is understandably troubled by the lack of a credible transition from *fawney* to *phoney*. Tamony (1937) supplies that transition.**

Tamony<sup>18</sup> writes (p.108): ‘... it is hoped that the definite connection between *fawney* and *phoney*, established in the examples cited [later in his paper—PSC], reveals the origin of this valuable word.’ After rejecting possible connections to *telephone*, *phoo*, and *funny*, he goes on to say:

Another origin advanced in *Notes & Queries*, and given wide circulation in the syndicated newspaper column of Mr. Walter Winchell, says that the word is derived from the name of a manufacturer of cheap jewelry, one Forney, and was common in the East at the turn of the century.

It is very probable that the originators of this theory mistook *fawney*, as developed in the examples of use that follow, for the proper name ‘Forney.’ Proper names have been used in the cheap jewelry trade to designate

the product, and some of them became so widely known that inclusion in dictionaries and glossaries was warranted....

Forney was a well-known proper name in the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> But it is not evident that as a name for cheap jewelry it was so general that it gave currency to a derivative. Rather, Forney establishes the fact that a pronunciation existed that represents the transition of *fawney* to *phoney*. Frank Tarbeaux (see 1930 example)<sup>20</sup> construes correctly the meaning of *forney* in the advice given him by his father. His assertion of usage in the eighteen-seventies further precludes the possibility of derivation, and even coincidental support, from the proper name.

**Tamony is, to our knowledge, the first to suggest that *Forney* is what we might term the catalyst in ‘the transition of *fawney* to *phoney*.’ We believe this suggestion is generally correct, though we reject his disallowance of ‘even coincidental support’ from *Forney*, which he presumably based on the apparently false assumption that *foney/phon(e)y* originated later than the 1870’s. We will make some clarifications and adjustments and then supply a phonological path for the transition.**

We begin by noting that Tamony seems to indicate that Walter Winchell’s statements are based on articles in the British journal *Notes & Queries*, when in fact it’s the other way around: Winchell writes in his *New York Daily Mirror* ‘On Broadway’ column of July 1, 1933 (under the subheading of ‘*Things I Never Knew, Etc.* [But which Woollcott<sup>21</sup> didn’t, either!]’):

That Woollcott says he would like to know the origin of the word ‘phoney.’ Well, no dictionary is certain, either. The first time we heard it was in 1916, long before Al Smith helped popularize ‘baloney.’ In 1916 Broadwayites would say: ‘That’s a lotta phoney-baloney!’

And in his ‘On Broadway’ column of September 14, 1933 (under the subheading of ‘*The Morning Mail*’):

‘Dear Winchell’ writes F. E. of Milwaukee, ‘not long ago you and Alexander Woollcott wanted to know the origin of “phoney”. The word was originally “Forney”, the name of an Eastern manufacturer of cheap jewelry. When I was a kid in New York and Philadelphia and those spurious gem merchants made the rounds showing a piece of junk—we always said: “Aw, that’s a Forney!” Our snide way of saying it was cheap, false and counterfeit.’

**There are several points of interest in F. E.’s note. First of all, we note that F.E. is from New York (i.e., New York City). In the era when F. E. was growing up, New York City speakers were *r*-less (i.e., they deleted non-prevocalic /r/ or converted it to a *ɹ*-offglide). Thus, F. E. and his peers would have pronounced *Forney* and *fawney* indistinguishably. He claims that there was ‘an Eastern manufacturer of cheap jewelry’ named Forney, but offers nothing that would give us a more specific locale. Although absence of evidence does not prove evidence of absence, I note here that a great deal of research on my part has failed to turn up any indication—beyond various people’s folk-etymological assertions—of there actually having been a jewelry-maker named Forney. I therefore strongly suspect that the purported existence of such a jewelry-maker is based on a piece of urban folklore. It is worthwhile repeating the quotation given above from Parker (1781: 2.167): ‘There is a large shop in London where these kind of rings are sold, for the purpose of going on the Fawney.’ Here, there is no reason to believe that the shop had *Fawney* (or *Forney*) in its name. Whether or not there ever was a person or firm named Forney that made cheap jewelry (such jewelry then coming to be termed *forney*) turns out to be peripheral. The key to unlocking the puzzle of *phon(e)y* is that *fawney* was an unfamiliar word and *Forney* a**

**(relatively) familiar name. When this is coupled with the phonological discussion below, a complete explanation emerges.**

Back to *Notes & Queries*. In a note in the October 14, 1933 issue (p. 261), which is signed only ‘B.’, we see:

AMERICAN SLANG: ‘PHONEY.’—A correspondent of New York’s best known newspaper columnist sent in the following explanation of a word which is in wide usage in America. I have not seen this explanation in any slang dictionary or word-list.

The rest of the note is an exact quotation of F. E.’s etymological account. Two weeks later in *Notes & Queries*, W. Keatinge Clay comments (p. 304):

With regard to the suggestion that this American slang word was originally ‘forney,’ and a name given to cheap jewellery, I may point out that a word pronounced in that way is used among English gypsies as slang for a ring worn on the finger. May it not once have had some connection with the word ‘foreigny’ or ‘foreign’—and so presumably cheap?

**There is of course no evidence that would cause us to treat Clay’s invented *foreigny* (and thus *foreign*) as anything other than a folk etymology, and so we see that these two articles in *Notes & Queries* do not add anything of significance to the discussion.**

#### 4. GETTING FROM *FAWNEY* TO *PHON(E)Y* WITH THE HELP OF *FORNEY*

First of all, I see no reason to reject the standard etymology of *fawney*—i.e., that it is borrowed directly from Irish *fáin(n)e*<sup>22</sup> ‘ring’: No dialect of Irish has emerged as the standard, but a widely-found Modern Irish pronunciation of *fáinne* is [ˈfɑːn̪i], quite close to the Standard Modern British English pronunciation of *fawney*, [ˈfɔːni]; and in the far southwest of Ireland—in Cork and around Dingle—a pronunciation of *fáinne* even closer to [ˈfɔːni], namely [ˈfɒːn̪i], can be heard. We note, furthermore, that most dialects of English do not distinguish [ɔː] and [ɒː] phonemically.

Next, let us consider the pronunciation of *Forney*; and since *phon(e)y* apparently originated in the US (likely in the South), we will focus on American English dialects. It is important to note that there are still areas in the US, chiefly in the South, where a distinction is made between /o/ and /ɔ/ immediately before (underlying) /r/, whether the /r/ is realized consonantly or as [ə] or [ɹ], or is deleted altogether. That is, speakers in those areas have minimal pairs like *hoarse* (/hɔrs/—with Modern English /o/ reflecting Middle English /ɔː/—realized as [hɔːs], [ˈhɒvəs], etc., and, in parts of the South, [hɔːs] and the like) vs. *horse* (/hɔrs/—with Modern English /ɔ/ reflecting Middle English /ɔː/—realized as [hɔs] [hɔːs], [hɔrs], etc.). As documented by Labov, Ash & Boberg (2006: 49, 51–52; see, esp., the map on p. 52), this distinction is nowadays disappearing, but there remain speakers scattered throughout the deep South that maintain it. It was quite widespread in the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well).<sup>23</sup> For those who make the distinction, *Forney* is in the *hoarse*-class; i.e., it has /o/.<sup>24</sup>

We repeat here with approval the statement by Tamony (1937: 108): ‘... Forney establishes the fact that a pronunciation existed that represents the transition of *fawney* to

*phoney*.’ But we need to go further: The specific scenario, with *Forney* acting as catalyst, would be

1. The *fawney-rig* is successfully introduced into the US prior to 1862, with the ring or other jewelry involved referred to as the previously-unknown word *fawney*.
2. In the South (and probably elsewhere), this was interpreted as an *r*-less pronunciation of *Forney*.
3. Since, for those who had the /or/–/ɔr/ distinction, *Forney* had /o/, Southern *r*-less pronunciations would have included [ˈfoːni], [ˈfoʊni], and the like—i.e., pronunciations that showed no trace of an underlying /r/; these would therefore be interpreted, particularly by speakers without the /or/–/ɔr/ distinction, as *foney*, which later, presumably under the folk-etymological influence of (*tele*)*phone*, was respelled *phon(e)y*.<sup>25</sup>

Benjamin Moody, as mentioned above, came from outside Campbellton, GA, which, today, is an unincorporated township in Fulton County, about 15 miles southwest of Atlanta. In Moody’s time, Campbellton was a town of a few thousand people and the county seat of the now-defunct Campbell County. The speaker in Kurath & McDavid (1961) geographically closest to Moody (Speaker #157, whose data are given on p. 100), is from Atlanta, is *r*-less, and clearly maintains the /or/–/ɔr/ distinction. An analysis of the spellings<sup>26</sup> in Moody’s letters indicates that he, on the other hand, is *r*-ful (at least in accented syllables)<sup>27</sup> and does not maintain the /or/–/ɔr/ distinction. The decisive information on the latter point comes from his spelling of *mourn*, a member of the /or/-class that he spells <morn> in its only occurrence, as against *morning*, a member of the /ɔr/-class that he spells correctly in all 11 of its occurrences; that is to say, he does not deem it necessary to evince the /or/–/ɔr/ distinction.

Thus Moody appears to be the very kind of speaker who could interpret a pronunciation of *Forney* with no trace of /r/ as something that could validly be represented as *foney*.

## 5. A STRONG CAVEAT

All of this seems to hold together very well, but it turns out that there is a fly in the ointment. The tangible evidence for our scenario of the evolution of *phon(e)y* from *fawney* with the catalytic aid of *Forney* comes from a single citation—the one taken from Benjamin Moody’s April 25, 1862 letter to his wife. But what if that citation is unreliable? We have discovered just that: It is far from certain that Moody’s spelling <foney> represents *phon(e)y*; it may, in fact, represent *funny*, most probably in its primary adjectival sense, given by *OED3* (unchanged from *OEDI*) as ‘[a]ffording fun, mirth-producing, comical, facetious.’<sup>28</sup> First of all, we have the following from Moody’s February 9, 1862 letter to his wife:

I would like to no what litel fony thing you have bin dooing that you air a fraid that I wood laf at you about as I love to laf I wood bee glad to bee with you a while so I could laf withe you a while

In this example, the context seems to indicate that the spelling <fony> represents *funny*. Let us also take another look at the crucial citation from the April 25, 1862 letter (repeated here with a good deal more of the surrounding context):

I have nothing of grate intrust to rite onley the expected batle they keep scrumishing [*skirmishing*] a long the line I will tell you of a foney scrape and all so a serious one too wee was ling [*lying*] in the diches last Sunday nite when an a larme broke out amungst the North Carolinens and they comenced firing and our rigeмент [*regiment*] all so and it continued on threw the hole brigad sum fired 4 rounds before thay found out the mistake som companeys fired befor thair pickets got in and thair was one killed and one wounded and I don't know how thay eny escaped I was a sleepe when the firing comenced and I got in the ditch in time to fire 2 I saw the fireing as it com up the line and it looked like a streeke of fire or mor like litning I think if the yankeys had bin in our frount thay wood have lost a meny a man I thinke thair will be a hard fite at this place the forces is 2 aganst to [1] of us but wee can fite them 4 to one and whipe them easy

Here, things are somewhat less clear. However, if we interpret Moody as referring to the same 'scrape' with both '<foney>' and 'serious,' as I am inclined to do, taking <foney> to represent *funny* is quite reasonable—especially since the other battle he writes of at both the beginning and the end of the quoted passage is hypothetical.

One might argue that the discrepancy in spelling—<fony> vs. <foney>—is significant, but I would disagree, since Moody's spelling is remarkably inconsistent in general.<sup>29</sup> Of most relevance to the matter under consideration, there are three common words that rhyme with *funny*: *honey*, *money*, and *sunny*. We have no instances of *honey* or *sunny* in Moody's letters, but *money* occurs as both <mony> (9× in the typescripts and 2× in the manuscripts having no corresponding typescripts) and <money> (3×).<sup>30</sup> (The phonologically similar *Monday* occurs 1× [spelled <mondy>], and *Sunday* 3× [1× each as <Sondy>, <Sunday>, and <sonday>].)

**So where does that leave us? I would say that the scenario given in §4 above remains viable, but, to buoy our confidence in it, we still need a solid example of *phon(e)y* from the US South, dating from before 1894.**

3271 Nutly Circle  
Yorktown Heights, NY 10598 USA  
Email: pausyl@aol.com

## REFERENCES

- ADE, GEORGE, 1900. *More Fables in Slang*, Chicago: Stone.
- B., 1933. ‘American Slang “phoney”’, *Notes & Queries* 165 [Oct. 14], 261.
- CLAY, W. KEATINGE, 1933. ‘American Slang “phoney” (cxlv. 261)’, *Notes & Queries* 165 [Oct. 28], 304.
- CULLEN, CLARENCE LOUIS, 1902. *Six Ex-tank Tales*, New York: J. S. Ogilvie.
- EGAN, PIERCE, 1823. *Grose’s Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue, Revised and Corrected, with the Addition of Numerous Slang Phrases, Collected from Tried Authorities*, London: Sherwood, Neely & Jones.
- FOX, JOHN J., III, 2004. *Red Clay to Richmond: Trail of the 35<sup>th</sup> Georgia Infantry Regiment, C.S.A.*, Winchester (VA): Angle Valley Press.
- GREEN, JONATHON, 2005. *Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang*. 2nd edn., London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- KURATH, HANS & MCDAVID, RAVEN I., JR., 1961. *The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States*, Ann Arbor (MI): University of Michigan Press.
- LABOV, WILLIAM, ASH, SHARON & BOBERG, CHARLES, 2006. *The Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology and Sound Change*, Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- LANE, MILLS (ed.), 1977 (1990). *Dear Mother: Don’t Grieve about me. If I get Killed, I’ll Only Get Dead: Letters from Georgia Soldiers in the Civil War*, Savannah (GA): Beehive Press. [Repr. 1990. Savannah (GA): Beehive Foundation.]
- OED1*, 1933 (1971). = *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. London: Oxford University Press.
- OED2*, 1989 (1991). = *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn. [repr. with corrections], 20 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- OED3*, 2000—. = *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd edn. (also known as the *OED Online*), available online from Oxford University Press at <http://www.oup.com>.
- PARKER, GEORGE, 1781. *A View of Society and Manners in High and Low Life: Being the Adventures in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, &c., of Mr. G. Parker in which is Composed a History of the Stage Itinerant*, 2 vols., London: self-published.
- PARTRIDGE, ERIC, 1949 (1961). *A Dictionary of the Underworld, British & American, Being the Vocabulary of Crooks, Criminals, Racketeers, Beggars and Tramps, Convicts, the Commercial Underworld, the Drug Traffic, the White Slave Traffic, Spivs*, New York: Bonanza Books. [Repr. with new addenda, 1961.]
- RHD2*, 1987. = *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd edn., unabridged, New York: Random House.
- SIMES, GARY, 1993. *A Dictionary of Australian Underworld Slang*, Melbourne, Oxford, et al.: Oxford University Press.
- TAMONY, PETER, 1937. ‘The Origin of “phoney”’, *American Speech* 12(2) [Apr.], 108–110.
- TARBEAUX, FRANK, 1930. *The Autobiography of Frank Tarbeaux*, as told to Donald Henderson Clarke, New York: Vantage Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> The present paper is a slightly expanded and updated version of a presentation made on June 17, 2010 at the Fifth International Conference on Historical Lexicography and Lexicology (ICHLL5), held at St Anne’s College, University of Oxford, where Philip Durkin, Michael Proffitt, and Jesse Sheidlower made helpful suggestions. I thank Benji Wald for earlier proposing some important additions and improvements, Adam Hyllested for clarifying several issues concerning the pronunciation and spelling conventions of Modern Irish, Anders Richardt Jørgensen and, especially, Janus Bahs Jacquet for detailed information on dialectal variation and sound changes in Middle and Modern Irish; thanks are also due to Eithne Ní Ghallchobhair for verifying, at ICHLL5, the Irish pronunciations given below. I am also grateful to Elizabeth Ciccone for her excellent ideas about how to go about finding some of the requisite source material and particularly to James Katz, who corrected a misconception of mine and whose question to me about the etymology of *phon(e)y* was the impetus for this investigation.

<sup>2</sup> The spelling <phony> is the more common one in the US nowadays; <phoney> is overwhelmingly the more common one in the rest of the world.

<sup>3</sup> There is no entry in *OEDI* for *phoney*, *phony* as a noun.

<sup>4</sup> The first quotation given is listed as being from p. 138 of George Ade’s book *More Fables in Slang* with a publication date of 1902. But, concerning this date, see below.

<sup>5</sup> The Bibliography section of *OEDI* indicates that 1902 is the date of the UK version of Ade’s book.

<sup>6</sup> This is a book of sketches originally having appeared in the *New York Sun* newspaper.

<sup>7</sup> The cited portion is on p.116; the letter occupies parts of that page and p.117.

<sup>8</sup> *OED3* has also added an 1894 citation (from the *Decatur [IL] Review* of November 7 [2/3]): ‘The only occasion on which we redeemed a ticket was when one of our responsible patrons was given a phony ticket by a tout.’

<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the square brackets surrounding the quotation is given in *OED3*’s front matter (<http://dictionary.oed.com/help/symbols.html>): ‘Around an entire quotation [ ] indicates a quotation is relevant to the development of a sense but not directly illustrative of it.’ Thus it would appear that the editors have decided, reasonably, that the meaning of *phoney* in this citation is not the core meaning, but, rather, something like ‘unimportant’ or perhaps ‘unreal’. We will return to this topic below.

<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, an etymology based on *(tele)phone* is widely believed to this day, even in such technical areas as communication studies (Prof. James Katz, Chair of the Dept. of Communication at Rutgers University, pers. comm.). And as Prof. Katz has also pointed out (pers. comm.), there are citations for the word *telephone* being used as the name of various apparatuses as early as 1835—and for the word *telephonic*, 1834 (see entries in the *OED*). Thus, an etymology based on one of these obsolete apparatuses is theoretically possible. Still, we find that to be so unlikely that we will eliminate it from further consideration.

<sup>11</sup> Fox (2004) is another work that gives quotations from letters from Moody’s military unit, including some from Moody himself (though not the April 25, 1862 letter). On p. 2, Fox quotes a letter from Moody to his wife Martha Jane, dated October 20, 1861, and correctly states in endnote 4, which appears on p.13, attached to that quotation, ‘It appears with proper spelling and punctuation and I assume that Lane cleaned the letter up before publication.’

<sup>12</sup> The letters are included in Part II of the Minnie North Milam Collection.

---

<sup>13</sup> The exact number of letters depends on how one counts them, since some have been written on two different days, with the separate sections individually dated, and there are some undated ones that may actually belong with other pages having dates.

<sup>14</sup> We note in passing that, if *(tele)phone* is eliminated, the spelling of *phon(e)y* with an initial <ph> rather than <f> is also rendered baseless.

<sup>15</sup> Irwin was the editor of *American Tramp and Underworld Slang*, a book of which Partridge was the assistant editor, first published in 1930.

<sup>16</sup> Presumably, he had no knowledge of the 1894 *Decatur Review* quotation.

<sup>17</sup> Describing his primary sources, Simes writes (pp. lviii–lix): ‘In Australia two prisoners were ... at work in the 1940s in N[ew] S[outh] W[ales] prisons. They were Ted Hartley, a young conscientious objector, active in 1943 and 1944, and a long-term prisoner calling himself Thirty-five, who gathered his material from round 1940 or earlier until round 1955. Thirty-five first put his material together in publishable form in 1950, and, utilising further material collected between August 1950 and 1955, revised the first half of his glossary in 1975.’

<sup>18</sup> Peter Tamony was apparently not trained in linguistics, but did write multiple articles on the etymology of various slang items.

<sup>19</sup> In fact, earlier than that: e.g., John W. Forney (1817–1881) was a prominent American journalist and politician; among other accomplishments, he was in charge of James Buchanan’s successful presidential campaign of 1856. It may be worth mentioning, in view of the presumed Irish source of *fawney*, that the name *Forney* is originally from Ireland.

<sup>20</sup> Tamony’s example (p. 110), slightly misquoting Tarbeaux (1930: 69), reads: “‘Whatever you do, avoid the scratch and forney.’” (Advice from father to son when son left home in what is now the Middle West in the late seventies of the last century: the text goes on to explain that “‘The scratch was forgery and the forney is counterfeiting.’”)

<sup>21</sup> I.e., Alexander Woollcott, a widely-read critic, commentator, and author, and a friend of Winchell’s.

<sup>22</sup> Nowadays the spelling with both *n*’s is used.

<sup>23</sup> Kurath & McDavid (1961) give detailed phonological and phonetic analyses of structured interviews of over 150 speakers from the Eastern US. Concerning the interviews, they write (p. vi): ‘All of the data from the Middle and South Atlantic States were gathered in the field [from] 1934– ... 1948....’; and concerning the interviewees (p. 11): ‘Though most of them were between 45 and 65 at the time of the interview, others were considerably older and a few younger.’ Thus if we assume (somewhat conservatively) a typical age of 55 and—since our crucial speaker, Benjamin Moody, is from (the South Atlantic State of) Georgia—a typical interview date of 1941, and combine this with the knowledge that dialectal aspects of phonology are usually solidified by age 13 or so, we come up with an approximate effective date of 1899 for the relevant pronunciation data in Kurath & McDavid. Benjamin Moody was born in 1829 or 1830 (the census data are vague), and so was 13 in 1842 or 1843. If anything, we would expect even wider distribution of the /or/–/ɔr/ distinction at that time.

<sup>24</sup> Verification of this pronunciation can be found in the entry for *Forney* in *RHD2*, where it is defined as ‘a steam locomotive having no front truck, four driving wheels, and a four-wheeled rear truck....’ The etymology given there is ‘named after J. H. *Forney* (1829–1902), American engineer.’

---

<sup>25</sup> Benji Wald (pers. comm.) has pointed out that this is not the only case in American English where the existence of the /or/-/ɔr/ distinction has induced, as he puts it, ‘... [an] example of relexification with dialect transfer’: The slang word *ho* ‘prostitute’ derives from an African-American Vernacular English pronunciation of *whore*, a word that, like *Forney*, has /o/ for those who make the /or/-/ɔr/ distinction. (See, e.g., Green [2005 s.v.] for provenance, definitions, etymology, etc., of *ho*.)

<sup>26</sup> Except where otherwise explicitly noted, all analyses of word counts and spellings hereinafter are based on what is in the typescripts.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Moody spells **all** 47 words that are clearly in the /or/ or /ɔr/ class with <ɹ> in **all** 242 occurrences. Of course, it is conceivable that he knows by heart that these words have <ɹ> in their “correct” spellings, but given all the other misspellings he uses in even the simplest words, the likelihood of this must be vanishingly small.

<sup>28</sup> Chronology is not a problem here: The *OED* gives six citations for this sense, all of them from before 1862 and the earliest from 1756.

<sup>29</sup> For example, within just the quoted passage, we find *they* as <thay> and <they>, *ditches* as <diches> and *ditch* as <ditch>, *before* as <before> and <befor>, and *some* as <sum> and <som>.

<sup>30</sup> Common items that rhyme with *phon(e)y* are *bony*, *pony*, and a widespread pronunciation of *only* with the /l/ deleted; we have no instances of *bony* or *pony*, and Moody has an <l> in all seven occurrences of *only* (as, e.g., in the first sentence of the quoted passage).