

Looking at Language

Slang As It Is Slung

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

Slang is hot and slang is cool. Slang is nifty and slang is wicked. Slang is the bee's knees, the cat's whiskers, and the cat's pajamas. Slang is far out, groovy, and outta sight. Slang is fresh, fly, and phat. Slang is bodacious, ducky, and fabulous. Slang is ace, awesome, bad, sweet, smooth, copacetic, the most, the max, and totally tubular.

Those are 25 ways of saying that, if variety is the spice of life, slang is the spice of language. Slang adds gusto to the feast of words, as long as speakers and writers remember that too much spice can kill the feast of any dish.

What is slang? In the preface to their *Dictionary of American Slang*, Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner define slang as "the body of words and expressions frequently used by or intelligible to a rather large portion of the general American public, but not accepted as good, formal usage by the majority." Slang, then, is seen as a kind of vagabond language that prowls the outskirts of respectable speech, yet few of us can get along without it. Even our statespersons have a hard time getting by without such colloquial or slang expressions as *hit the nail on the head*, *team effort*, *pass the buck*, and *talk turkey*.

Nobody is quite sure where the word *slang* comes from. According to H. L. Mencken, *slang* developed in the 18th century (it was first recorded in 1756) either from an erroneous past tense of *sling* (*sling-slang-slung*) or from the word *language* itself, as in (*thieve*)*slang*(uage) and (*beggar*)*slang*(uage). The second theory makes the point that jargon and slang originate and are used by a particular trade or class group, but slang words come to be slung around to some extent by a whole population.

The use of slang is far more ancient than the word *slang* itself. In fact, slang is nearly as old as language itself, and in all languages at all times some slang expressions have entered the mainstream of the vocabulary to pollute or enrich, depending on one's view of the matter. We find traces of slang in the Sanskrit of ancient India, where writers amused themselves now and then by calling a head a "dish." In Latin literary records we discover, alongside *caput*, the standard term for "head," the word *testa*, which meant "pot" or "jug." Both the Sanskrit "dish" and the Latin "pot" share the flavor of our modern *crackpot*, *jughead*, and *mug*.

The 14th century poet Geoffrey Chaucer used *gab* for "talk" and *bones* for "dice," exactly as we employ them today. William Shakespeare, the literary lord of stage and classroom, coined *costard* (a large apple) to mean "head" and *clay-brained* and *knotty pated* to mean "slow of wit." We discover "laugh yourself into stitches" in *Twelfth Night*, "not so hot" in *The Winter's Tale*, and "right on" in *Julius Caesar*.

There are some very human reasons why the river of slang courses through every language. One of them is that people like novelty and variety in their lives and in their language. To satisfy this urge, they continuously coin new slang words and expressions. This disquisition began with twenty-five breezy ways of saying "wonderful," but that feat pales next to the 2,231 synonyms for *drunk* (and fifty pages' worth) that Paul Dickson trots out in his book *Words*—from the euphemistic tired to the comical *plastered*, from the terminal *stiff* to the uncategoryzable *zoozled*.

Second, slang allows us to break the ice and shift into a more casual and friendly gear. "What's cooking?" or "How's it going?" sound more easygoing and familiar than "How do you do?" "Slang," said Carl Sandburg, is "language that rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands, and gets to work."

A third motive is sheer playfulness. Slang such as *rubber-necker* for a sightseer in a car and motor-mouth for someone who gabs on and on and reduplications such as *heebie-jeebies* and *okeydokey* tickle our sense of humor.

Finally, as G. K. Chesterton proclaimed, "All slang is metaphor, and all metaphor is poetry." American slang abounds in fresh figures of speech that evoke arresting word pictures in the mind's eye. We intellectually understand "an angry, persecuted husband," but the slanguage version "a henpecked husband stewing in his own juice" takes a vivid shortcut to our imagination.

An English professor announced to the class, "There are two words I don't allow in my class. One is *gross* and the other is *cool*." From the back of the room a voice called out, "So, what are the two words?" Slang is a powerful stimulant that keeps our American language alive and growing. Slang is a prominent part of our American wordscape. In fact, the *Dictionary of American Slang* estimates that slang makes up perhaps a fifth of the words we use. Many of our most valuable and pungent words have begun their lives keeping company with thieves, vagrants, and hipsters. As Mr. Dooley, a fictional Irish-Irish saloon keeper, once observed, "When we Americans get through with the English language, it will look as if it has been run over by a musical comedy."



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