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# SLANG IS AS NEW AS TO-DAY, AND AS OLD AS SPEECH

PERHAPS better than anything else—because it is an indelible social record—the history of a country's growth is to be found in the history of its language. And since the slang and vulgarisms of to-day are the standard speech of to-morrow, we would do well not to ignore the part that these play in our evolution.

Slang, indeed, is as old as speech itself and the congregating of people together in cities.

Even to the classics it was not unknown—witness the pages of Aristophanes and Plautus, Terence and Athenaeus. Martial, the epigrammatist, is full of slang.

English slang goes back to the earliest days of the nation, long before the printing press was evolved, but it is not until the sixteenth century that we are able to estimate its full range. Numerous vocabularies of thieves' cant were compiled, among them Copland's "The Hye Waye to the Spyttel Houise." Long before these days Chaucer had used slang in his Tales, so it is not without reason that we find the works of Shakespeare, Greene, Nashe, Dekker, and Jonson rich in cant and vulgarisms during the heyday of Elizabethan drama, and later.

Hundreds of terms originated by rufflers, pallyards, counterfeit-cranks, doxies, and priggers or prancers, to name but a few of the select company of thieves and vagabonds, were being passed into common speech.

## 15th Century Survivals

Some of the slang of the 15th and 16th centuries survives even to-day. Cove still describes a man; to plant means to hide; to prig means to steal; and to shop lift means to steal from shops. Though not specifically applied to clothes, duds was descriptive of personal possessions in Shakespeare's day.

Professor G. H. McKnight, in *English Words and Their Background* (1923) has paid particular attention to the slang used by Shakespeare. From a couple of the dramatist's plays he produces such terms as: dry, for dull; kickshaw, a trifle; tester, a sixpence; bum-baily, a

sheriff's officer; clod-pole, a blockhead; fat chuffs, rich misers; clay-brained, stupid.

But while these expressions have now graduated as standard speech, there are many more which, even after popular use for hundreds of years, have not as yet gained the imprimatur of official approval. Among verbs, we may trace to do (a person), to cheat, to 1789; to grease, to bribe, to 1557; to blow, to boast, to about 1400. Gas, as synonymous with empty talk, dates back to 1847; jug, for prison, to 1834; Murphy, for



The works of Shakespeare are rich in slang

potato, to 1811; grub, for food, to 1659; and lousy, in the sense of inferior or worthless, back to 1690.

## American Slang

According to H. L. Mencken, author of "The American Language," it was not until the great pioneering movement into the West, following the War of 1812, that American slang came into its own. By 1840 it was widespread throughout the whole country and our American brethren were well on the way to possessing a language of extraordinary colour and vigour. Here are some expressions for strong drink that were evolved before the Civil War: panther-sweat, nose paint, red-eye, cornjuice, mountain-dew, coffin-varnish, stagger-soup and tonsil paint; for drunk there were such terms as boiled, canned, cockeyed, stewed, tanked, pie-eyed and plastered.

What chiefly lies behind slang is a kind of linguistic exuberance, an excess of word-making energy, observes Mencken. It relates itself to the standard language a great deal as dancing relates itself to music. But there is something else. The best slang is not only ingenious and amusing; it also embodies a kind of social criticism. It not only provides

The place of slang in the languages of all time and in everyday speech was discussed by SIDNEY J. BAKER in two recent talks from 2YA which have already been summarised in "The Listener." Here is his conclusion to the whole matter.

new names for a series of everyday concepts, some new and some old; it also says something about them.

## Useful Borrowings

The English called the wedge-shaped fender that was put in front of the first locomotive a plough, which was more or less what it was; but the Americans called it a cow-catcher, and, strange to say, that is the term we prefer to use to-day. Chain store seems to meet the case more adequately than the English multiple shop; shock-absorber has certainly held the field against anti-bounce clip; and radio appeals to us in preference to that rather aimless term wireless, although the English still cling rather closely to the latter.

It is obvious from such examples as these that American slang is not to be condemned merely because it is American slang. We have borrowed some most serviceable terms from the United States and there is every reason to suspect that we will continue to do so.

However, this is what Professor Ernest Weekly, writing in 1929, has to say: "If . . . the American temperament persists in its present attitude towards a standardised speech, spoken American must eventually become as distinct from English as Yiddish is from classical Hebrew."

General evidence, therefore, supports the contention that while we can, and do, use many Americanisms in the course of our everyday speech, we rigidly refuse to accept other terms for the very good reason that they do not improve upon or seem worthy of preference over our present terms. It may be noted here that we in New Zealand and Australia generally prefer lolly to the English sweet and the American candy.

Slang touches practically every facet of our lives. It reaches into journalism and medicine; into universities and Parliaments; it is spoken by children and by criminals; by tramps and worthy citizens. It is the language of everyday life; it is always growing, continually sloughing old meanings to take on new meanings, continually being shaped to serve new purposes.

## Some Australian Additions

Only a few days ago I received from Sydney a budget of new slang used by Australia's soldiers who are going overseas. To them a Lewis gun is a chatter-box; a man on kitchen fatigue is a spud barber. A favourite expression among

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