PECULIARITIES OF COCKNEY RHYMING SLANG

Ildikó Gy. ZOLTÁN[1]

Abstract

Cockney rhyming slang is the product of the eternal human fascination with rhyme and word-play. Its beginnings reach back to the first part of the 19th century when its speakers were the inhabitants of London from the area around St Mary-le-Bow church in the old City. This type of slang has a unique way of word-formation: a common word is replaced by a phrase of two or three elements that rhymes with it and then the second rhyming element is omitted in most cases by a process called hemiteleia. This makes the new slang term unintelligible to outsiders since its meaning is totally at variance with that in standard language and the key to the etymology, the rhyme, is lost. Rhyming slang is most prolific in coining nouns, but adjectives, verbs and even whole sentences can be replaced. Today rhyming slang has spread beyond the UK to several other English-speaking countries and these variants all contribute to its further development.

Keywords: cockney, rhyming slang, phrase, rhyme.

The eternal human fascination with rhyme, rhythm and word-play that will manifest itself in speakers of any language, not just English, is perhaps more enhanced and lively in Cockneys. They are, in Bill Bryson's view "among the most artful users of English in the world" and their sheer enjoyment of words makes cockney rhyming slang one of the most exuberant linguistic forms slang can take.

The etymology of the word 'cockney' takes us back to the 14th century, when it was originally *cokene-ey,* meaning a "cock's egg" (Middle English *coken* 'of cocks' and *ey*, Old English *æg, ǽg* 'an egg', most likely relating to Old English *cocena* "cock's egg". The term was first applied to the small misshapen, usually yolk-less egg occasionally laid by young hens, or 'the runt of the clutch'. In Middle English the forms *cokeney* or *cokenay* came to mean 'a foolish or spoilt child' or 'a simpleton'. The second form appears in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with the meaning 'a child tenderly brought up, an effeminate fellow, a milksop'. By the 1520s the meaning of the word extended and it came to be applied derisively by country folk, the majority of the population, as a derogatory reference to 'townsfolk' or 'effeminate town dwellers' in general because of their reputed ignorance of country life, customs and habits. From the 17th century the term was restricted to Londoners, particularly those born within earshot of the famous Bow Bells, i.e. the bells of St Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside in the City of London. As an adjective, it used to denote London peculiarities of speech.

An alternative derivation could be from the word 'Cockaigne' or 'Cockayne', an imaginary land of idleness and luxury, famous in medieval myth (something like the modern-day 'Cloud-cuckoo-land'). The name was later used jocularly to refer to London, possibly with punning reference to 'the land of Cockneys'. However, the linguistic connection between the two words is debatable.

[1] Assistant, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş

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Even less believable is the story Francis Grose relates as etymology in his *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785): "Cockney. A nick name given to the citizens of London, or persons born within the sound of Bow bell, derived from the following story: A citizen of London being in the country, and hearing a horse neigh, exclaimed, Lord! How that horse laughs! A by-stander telling him that noise was called *neighing*, the next morning, when the cock crowed, the citizen, to shew he had not forgot what was told him, cried out, Do you hear how the *cock neighs*?" The story was probably apocryphal at the time.

In modern times, the traditional definition of a 'true Cockney' as someone "born within the sound of Bow Bells" is no longer valid. The centuries have wrought major changes in the townscape of London, the City has been transformed into the square mile of money and trade it is today and the area around St Mary-le-Bow Church or even "within earshot" of its famous bells is no longer residential. During the period when the City of London rose as the capital's financial district, Cockneys dispersed to more outlying districts of the East End. Thus today the term is mostly used to refer to working-class Londoners in this area, but it can also apply to others who have a Cockney heritage. Linguistically, it refers to the dialectal speech peculiarities, such as accent and form of English typical of Cockneys.

Cockneys have brought a most singular contribution to the English language: their rhyming slang which originated in the East End of London. No one knows when exactly cockney rhyming slang began, it was most probably in the 1840s, but several sources attest the fact that it has been popular ever since the mid-19th century. John Camden Hotten was the first one to use the term in his 1859 *Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant and Vulgar Words* which included a "Glossary of the Rhyming Slang" and is the first known such work: "The cant, which has nothing to do with that spoken by the costermongers, is known in Seven Dials and elsewhere as the Rhyming Slang, or the substitution of words and sentences which rhyme with other words intended to be kept secret."

It is a subject of speculation even today what the real purpose of creating rhyming slang really was. It might have been devised on purpose as a cryptolect (like the cant of thieves and beggars) to help criminals hide their meaning from the law and confuse the police, or as a type of code to be used by street merchants or traders in the marketplace to communicate with each other without their customers and non-locals being able to understand what they were saying. On the other hand, it might simply have been a linguistic accident, a game, a form of word-play that caught on, became exceedingly popular within the community and served both to maintain the sense of bonding within this group and to exclude outsiders, those not 'in the know'.

As Hotten stated, rhyming slang means replacing a common word with another word or, more frequently, a phrase or expression of two or three semantically and/or syntactically related words that rhymes with it. The great majority of these are nouns, but verbs, adjectives and even sentences can be replaced. To take examples that have been around since his days, 'stairs' is replaced by *apples and pears* and 'road' by *frog and toad*. To complicate matters, the secondary element ('and pears', 'and toad') is almost always

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omitted, so 'stairs' becomes *apples* and 'road' becomes *frog*. The main consequence of this kind of ellipsis is that the rhyme is lost and the etymology is obscured. The technical term for this process is *hemiteleia*. In some cases, however, this shortening does not happen: the British tabloid newspaper "The Sun", for example, is always referred to as *currant bun*. Rhyming slang expressions can vary in their construction: there is no hard and fast rule for this, it is more a matter of convention whether a phrase is shortened, used in full form, or can be used either way. (In the subsequent examples the final step of hemiteleia has been omitted so that the original rhyme in the substituted phrases should be identifiable.)

A further complication is that some constructions rely on the Cockney pronunciation for the rhymes to work, and this particular accent often differs considerably from conventional British pronunciation. A few examples are *Joanna* for 'piano', where 'piano' is pronounced as [pi'ænə]; *Max Miller* for 'pillow' when pronounced ['pilə] or *rabbit* for 'chatter mindlessly', shortened from *rabbit and pork*, since in the East End both *pork* and *talk* are pronounced similarly to *soak*. Since the mid-19th century *Charing Cross* has been used for 'horse', but 'cross' and 'horse' do not rhyme unless 'horse' is pronounced as 'hoss' – most probably the local-dialect pronunciation at the time. The characteristic which Cockney speech is most famous for, the dropping of the initial *h*, is at work when we consider the formation of *horse and cart* (or rather *horse'n cart*) = fart sl., which is then shortened to *Orson*.

Another consequence of omitting the second rhyming element is that, occasionally, the elliptic form becomes ambiguous: *brass*, for example, can stand for *brass nail* = tail, slang for 'prostitute', or *brass tacks* = facts, or *brass band* = hand. *Duke* is either 'rent', from *Duke of Kent*, or in the plural, *dukes* = hands, from *Duke of York* = fork, the slang word for 'hand'. The latter made its way across the Atlantic to America where it came to mean 'fist', hence the expression *put up your dukes*. The same pattern can be found in *Jack*, for *Jack Jones* = alone, or *Jack's alive* = five; and *Jimmy*, either for *Jimmy O'Goblin* = sovereign, or *Jimmy Riddle* = piddle (slang for 'urinate') or even the more recent *Jimmy Nail* = email.

In some cases the shortened form can acquire a further rhyme. For example, *bottle* has long been used to indicate the buttocks, from *bottle and glass* = arse. At some point, however, a second iteration of rhyme was added, and *bottle* became *Aristotle*, which in turn was truncated to *Aris* (as in *Oo, I just fell on my Aris!*). In the next step, *Aris* spawned *plaster* (from *plaster of Paris*) or, more recently, *spring* (from *spring in Paris*). The result is the rather convoluted genealogy: arse = *bottle and glass* = *bottle* = *Aristotle* = *Aris* = *plaster of Paris/ spring in Paris* = *plaster/ spring*. Another, somewhat shorter chain starts with the slang term 'crap' (which can refer to 'faeces' as a noun, or 'to defecate' as verb, but is most frequently used in the sense of 'nonsense, rubbish' or 'low quality'), replaced with *pony and trap* = *pony* which in turn spawned *macaroni*, eventually cut down to *maca*.

Some rhyming slang phrases are even more obscure today because the word they were originally meant to substitute refers to things that have become obsolete throughout

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the years. A notable example is *kettle* meaning 'watch'. This would confuse anybody, even those who know the full phrase, *kettle and hob*. (Today 'hob' is the flat top part of a cooking stove or cooker where food is cooked in pans, or a separate flat surface built into a kitchen unit, containing hotplates or burners. In the past, however, it meant a metal shelf at the back or side of an open fireplace or an oven range, used for heating pans, kettles, etc., or keeping food warm.) Still, the connection is unclear – until we discover something more about the watches of the time when the phrase was probably coined: up until the beginning of the 20th century the most popular type of watch (in men's wear) was the pocket watch, or *fob watch*. The *'fob'* is in fact a small pocket at the front waistline of the trousers or in the front of a waistcoat, designed especially for holding a watch, attached and secured by a short *fob chain* that was worn hanging in front of the waistcoat, so that the watch could be extracted and slipped back without dropping it; but the word could also be used to refer to the chain or the watch itself – therefore *kettle and hob* for 'fob'. During and after World War I, however, pocket watches began to be gradually superseded by wristwatches and the *kettle – watch* connection has become apparently meaningless.

As with other types of slang, some of the expressions of cockney rhyming slang moved out into the wider world and have now passed into the mainstream of English and their roots have largely been forgotten. A few examples of substitutions that are widespread in common usage in their contracted form are *have a butcher's* for 'to have a look' (short for *butcher's hook* = look); *use yer loaf* for 'use your head' (*loaf of bread* = head); *me old china* for 'my old friend' (*china plate* = mate); *rabbiting on* for 'talking incessantly' *(rabbit and pork* = talk) or the exclamation of surprise or anger *Blimey!*, from 'God blind me', pronounced as *gorblimey*. To make a rude sound of derision or contempt by sticking out the tongue and blowing is *to blow a raspberry at someone* and *raspberry* is from the rhyming slang phrase *raspberry tart* for 'fart'. (This is the not so subtle allusion in the Golden Raspberry Awards or Razzies held in recognition for the worst in film.) When you tease, ridicule or mock somebody, especially by copying them or laughing at them for reasons they do not understand, you are said *to take the Mickey (out of them)*, occasionally even 'gentrified' to *take the Michael*, and few people realise that it is the rhyming slang version of the more vulgar *to take the piss (out of somebody)*, where *Mickey Bliss* = piss sl. (= urine).

Eloquent proof of the fact that most speakers are blissfully unaware of the lowly and coarse origins and true meaning of the terms they use in everyday conversation is the word *berk*. Today it is applied as a mild expletive, a pejorative term meaning 'a stupid or foolish person, an idiot' and is not considered particularly rude, probably because hardly anyone knows that it comes in fact from the contraction of *Berkeley Hunt* or *Berkshire Hunt* (that most famous of all fox hunts in the heyday of the sport) and rhymes with the significantly more offensive taboo word 'cunt'.

As seen in the last example and others cited above, rhyming slang has a strong tendency to build on taboo and slang words rather than their standard equivalent. A testimony to this are the series of expressions coined for the strongest taboo words, those

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'four letter words' so carefully avoided in polite conversation. These rhyming slang phrases are in fact euphemisms and their purpose is precisely to avoid being rude and offensive, but they do tend to aggregate around words which are 'better left unsaid'.

Besides the above mentioned *Berkeley Hunt*, the taboo 'cunt' has several other variants, which are all used as an insult to a person, never as an anatomical reference to the female genitalia: *Anthony Blunt, bargain hunt, Gareth Hunt, grumble and grunt, James Blunt, James Hunt, Oxford punt, struggle and grunt,* etc. There are fewer examples for phrases that replace the slang terms 'dick' or 'prick' (= penis): *candle wick, lolly lick, Moby Dick, three card trick* or *Hampton Wick*, from which the latter is usually shortened to *Hampton*, but is also used as *wick*, as in the expressions *to get on someone's wick* = to annoy or vex someone, to get on somebody's nerves, or the more vulgar *to dip one's wick* = to have sexual intercourse. The list of rhyming slang phrases for 'balls' (= testicles) include *Albert Halls, Davina McCalls, market stalls, Town Halls, Niagara Falls, orchestra stalls;* but the best known remains *cobbler's awls*, shortened to *cobblers*, which is mostly used today in the sense of 'rubbish, nonsense', like in *That's a load of cobblers!* The enumeration of rhyming slang replacements for taboo terms could go on, but this should suffice to illustrate the point.

Cockney rhyming slang is most prolific in the coining of nouns, whether the rhyme is built on standard English words or slang terms: *almond rocks* = socks, *bacon and eggs* = legs, *baker's dozen* = cousin, *boat-race* = face, *bull and cow* = row (= argument), *cheese and kisses* = missus coll. (wife or girlfriend), *cock and hen* = ten, *custard and jelly* = telly (television), *daisy roots* = boots, *dog and bone* = telephone, *dustbin lid* = kid, *ginger-beer* = queer sl. and *iron hoof* = poof sl. (= a homosexual), *Gypsy's kiss* = piss sl., *kick and prance* = dance, *lemon and lime* = time, *north and south* = mouth, *ones and twos* = shoes, *pork pie* = lie (shortened to *porker, porky,* as in *Don't tell porkies!*), *pot and pan* = ol' man (father or husband), *rock of ages* = wages, *salmon and trout* = snout sl. (= tobacco), *sky rocket* = pocket, *syrup of figs* = wig, *tit-for-tat* =*hat* (shortened to *tifter*), *turtle-dove* = a glove, *weasel and stoat* = coat, *whistle and flute* = suit (of clothes), etc. Some of these nouns also have an undertone of ironical comment: *Artful Dodger* = lodger, *bees and honey* or *bread and honey* = money, *flowery dell* = (prison) cell, *God forbid* = kid, *holy friar* = liar, *skin and blister* = sister, *treacle tart* = sweetheart, *trouble and strife* or *storm and strife* = wife. The same forms of structure are found in adjectives: *bales of cotton* = rotten, *borassic/ boracic lint* = *borassic* (frequently contracted to *brassic*) = skint sl. (= penniless), *Brahms and Liszt* or *Mozart and Liszt* = pissed sl. (= drunk, intoxicated), *brown bread* = dead, *cream crackered* = *creamed* = knackered (= exhausted or beaten), *daffadown dilly / Daffy-down-dilly* = silly, *Dolly Dimple* = simple, *elephant's trunk* = drunk, *Pete Tong* = wrong (as in *It's all gone Pete Tong* = It's all gone wrong), *potatoes in the mould* = cold (shortened to *potatoes* = *taters*), *Tom and Dick* = sick, etc. Rhyming slang verbs are less frequent and include: *Adam-and-Eve* = believe, *cocoa* = say so (as in *I should cocoa!* = I should say so!), *chew the fat* = have a chat, *duck and dive* = skive sl. (= avoid work or school, evade an unpleasant situation), *half-inch* = pinch sl. (to steal), etc.

Several rhyming slang phrases are obtained from names. These can be the names of locations in London, like *Hampstead Heath* = teeth, *Hampton Wick* = prick, *Peckham Rye*

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= tie; places in other parts of England and the British Isles: *Chalfont St Giles* (village in Chiltern district) = piles sl. (= haemorrhoids), *Tilbury docks* (town in the borough of Thurrock, Essex) = socks, *Lakes of Killarney* (Ireland) = barmy sl.(= mad, crazy), *Scapa Flow* (a body of water in the Orkney Islands, Scotland) = *scarper* = go (as in Run for it!); or even as far as the Middle East: *Khyber Pass* = arse. From famous events we get *Ascot Races* (the most famous of English horse races held in Ascot, Berkshire) = braces, and *Barnet Fair* (annual horse and pleasure fair held near Mays Lane, Barnet) = hair.

Personal names figure prominently in rhyming slang. These can be names of fictitious persons: *Darby and Joan* (symbols of a devoted old couple) = moan, *Jimmy O'Goblin* = sovereign, *John Hop* = cop sl., *Nelly Duff* = puff sl. (=breath, life; as in the phrase *Not on your Nelly!), Pat Malone* = own (as in *on your pat* = alone), *Rosy Lee* = tea, *Tom Tit* = shit sl., or *Uncle Bert* = shirt. There are characters of legend, like *Lady Godiva* = fiver (a five-pound note); from history: *Richard the Third* = turd sl. (= lump of faeces), *Rory O'More* (Irish rebel in the 16th century) = the floor/ a door; as well as from nursery rhymes: *Lucy Lockett* = pocket; and literary works: *Sexton Blake* (fictional detective in 20th century British comic strips and novels) = fake or cake; *Artful Dodger* (form *Oliver Twist*) = lodger, *Oliver Twist* = pissed sl. (= drunk) and *Barnaby Rudge* (the eponymous character of the historical novel) = judge – the last three all from Charles Dickens's works.

The names of contemporary personalities and outstanding figures of the day have always been used in rhyming slang. In the first part of the 20th century these were mostly popular actors and performers or sportsmen, and we have examples like *Tod Sloan* (a famous American jockey at the turn of the century) = own (*on one's tod* = alone), *Bob Hope* (English-born American actor, comedian) = soap, *George Raft* (American film actor and dancer) = draft, *Gregory Peck* (American actor) = neck or cheque; *Vera Lynn* (famous English singer, songwriter and actress during the Second World War, widely known as "The Forces' Sweetheart") = skin sl. (= cigarette paper), or chin, or gin.

From about the mid-20th century the names have been those of famous people from an ever wider variety of domains, such as music, television, cinema, sport, politics, media, etc. and even of from popular cartoon strips, animated cartoons, movies and serials. Such personal names feature in rhyming slang as *Alans* = *Alan Whicker* (journalist, TV presenter and broadcaster) = knickers, *Brian Clough* (English footballer and football manager) = rough, *Cilla Black* (singer, actress, media personality) = back, *Claire Rayners* (nurse, journalist, broadcaster and novelist) = trainers, *Edward Heath* (Prime Minister between 1970-74) = teeth, *George Best* (Northern Irish footballer) = chest, *Judi Dench* (English actress and author) = stench, *Lionels* = *Lionel Blairs* (English variety performer and television presenter) = flares (= flared trousers), *Melvin Bragg* (English broadcaster an author) = shag sl., *Michael Cain* (actor, author) = pain, *Mutt and Jeff* (characters of a long-popular American newspaper comic strip in the early 20th century) = deaf (shortened to *mutton*), *Ruby* = *Ruby Murray* (one of the most popular singers in the UK and Ireland in the 1950s) = curry, *Tommy Steele* (English entertainer and rock-and-roll star) = eel, etc.

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In recent years the formation of modern rhyming slang has been based almost exclusively on the names of celebrities of different kinds: *Ayrton Senna* (Formula One racing driver) = tenner (10 pound note), *Billy Ocean* (main character in the film *Ocean's Eleven* and sequels) = suntan lotion, *Bristol City* (football team) = titty sl. (shortened to *Bristols* = titties) = the breasts, *Britney Spears* (singer and entertainer) = beers, *Calvin Klein* (American fashion house) = wine, *Emmas* = *Emma Freud* (English broadcaster and columnist) = haemorrhoids, *Giorgio Armani* (Italian fashion house) = sarnie/ sarney/ sarny sl. = sandwich, *Jerry Springer* (English-born American TV presenter, talk show host = minger sl. (= an unattractive or unpleasant person or thing), *Scooby Doo* (the dog from the American animated cartoon) = clue (as in *I haven't got a Scooby!), Steffi Graf* (former World No. 1 tennis player) = laugh, etc. A few 'updates' have also occurred: *Michael Cain* has been replaced by *Shania Twain* (Canadian country singer-songwriter) for 'pain', *Lionel Blair(s)* by *Tony Blair(s)* (Prime Minister between 1997-2007) for 'flares' and *Bob Hope* has come to mean 'dope' rather than 'soap'. There are few examples of new expressions that do not follow the 'celeb trend', the most notable of them being *wind and kite* for 'website'.

If you happen to wonder whether cockney rhyming slang is today an 'endangered species' of slang on the brink of extinction, the answer is: *Not on your Nelly!* True, it is no longer exclusively 'cockney'. It has spread far and wide beyond the East End and outside London not only to other regions of the UK but also to many English-speaking countries, particularly those that had strong maritime links with England in the 19th century (and are today in the Commonwealth of Nations) and has developed regional and local variants. These have all added their creations to this colourful word-hoard, most notably Australian rhyming slang, although England, and particularly London, is still the main contributor.

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