

Game over

Jonathon GREEN
Slang lexicographer
jgslang@gmail.com



LANGUAGE PERSISTS, SLANG never dies, but lexicography, of either set or subset: what is becoming of that. A death, a rebirth, or a metamorphosis?
It is possible that I am the last.

A gross generalization and somewhat melodramatic conceit, and what do I, after all, know of worlds beyond the ever self-regarding Anglophone, but it is possible. Distinctly so. It is wholly possible that there will be no more full-scale dictionaries of slang published in print. And if that is so, and since as far as I know mine remains the most recent (albeit six years old), I may, as claimed, be the last. After all, as was widely noted at the time: publishing a 6,200 page, three-volume work in 2010? You must be joking. Forget the reviews, just marvel at the existence. Trust me, as I like to say: I'm a lexicographer. Or should I say: was one?

This is not to seek sympathy, let alone to proclaim myself the equivalent of those tragic figures who, tottering towards death, represent the final speaker of a soon-to-be extinct language. Nor, in my pursuit of slang lexicography's lonely art (a phrase not coincidentally, some suggest, an English slang synonym for masturbation), some kind of carnival freak. Of all forms of dictionary-making, the collection of slang has always been a solo occupation. If I look, again strictly within the Anglophone sphere, I can see a succession of predecessors, and none worked in tandem, let alone in a team. This was, of course true of 'mainstream' lexicography — when it came to the actual writing Johnson worked alone, the gang of drunken Scots notwithstanding, Webster likewise and all those who came before. The *Académie Française* had combined the talents of its forty 'immortals' in producing its own *Dictionnaire* of 1694, but they had taken 60 years and as in 1755 the actor David Garrick noted of his friend, the solo Johnson, working for just nine, 'had beat forty French and could beat forty more'. Not until the *New*, later *Oxford English Dictionary* began issuing its fascicles around 1880 did the team return. And Oxford, in an unconscious nod to an on line future, even enlisted 'amateur' contributors to comb the printed world for examples.

Slang does not, of course, exist as description of a form of language prior to 1756; prior to that, its collection focused largely on criminal jargon, cant. It was the language of the gutter and many felt that there it should stay. To set oneself up as a maker of glossaries and in time dictionaries of the lexis was not a good career move. Soloists emerged, collected, published and, on the whole, vanished without leaving a discernible biography. A number failed, even, to sign their anonymous lexicons or left us frustrated by initials to which we have yet to fit full names.

Slang's collectors remain isolated. And generally found it necessary to pursue another job. The first, Robert Copland c. 1530, was a printer who claimed an apprenticeship with Caxton, Britain's first; the second, John Awdeley thirty years later, defies all biography; the third Thomas Harman was a magistrate; after him Dekker and Greene, a pair of cant-infatuated playwrights. Later on we encounter the antiquary and militia captain Francis Grose, a man whose physique satisfactorily matched his surname and of whom it was said butchers begged him to allow them to advertise his patronage of their shops, so customers might be persuaded in turn to enjoy the meat that had contributed to his splendid girth. (This may be apocryphal: but Grose still worked unaided). Grose's successor Pierce Egan was a sporting journalist and creator of 1821's best-seller *Life in London*; his contemporary and rival John Badcock (as 'Jon B.') devoted himself to aping Egan, including the penning of his own slang dictionary. The mid-19th century John Camden Hotten was a publisher and pornographer: he termed the latter list his 'flower garden' and titles specialized in flagellation. John Farmer, perpetually impoverished, doubled as a leading spiritualist; Albert Barrère taught French to the embryo subalterns of Sandhurst and Eric Partridge, after leaving New Zealand to fight in Flanders, intended to be a publisher in his own right, rather than to serve one. Jonathan Lighter, his work tragically cut short by a publisher who placed profit above scholarship, worked in parallel to an academic career. Finally, my contemporary Tom Dalzell, working from California, is a labour leader. As for myself, I have employed researchers, and remain grateful to them all, but the dictionary itself is still my own work. Though unlike those who came before, I have never had any other job.

I plunged into my major work in 1993 and returned 17 years later to find the world turned upside down. Far from standing atop a mountain, surveying the fruitful acres below, I found myself at the bottom of the deepest of holes, gazing at the explosions of digital light far above. Explosions mean sound and fury and destruction and among the victims has been traditional reference publishing. The production of what an 18th century aristocrat, addressing the

historian Edward Gibbon famously called ‘damned thick square books’. Where once I might have pitched my work to a dozen houses, there are but a handful. And none would take on a project such as I had recently concluded.

To date I have had two meetings with the publisher whose name sits on the title page. At the first they informed me they did not wish to publish the book; at the second, having performed the task nonetheless, they rejected my request that they support its furtherance. I do not blame them: they did not commission the book but had it thrust upon them by the multi-national of which they are a part; its publication represented an expense they did not need. I do regret, however, that they seem to despair of its future. Times are tough and to be caught on the cusp of change is interesting in long-shot but less appealing in tight focus. It is perhaps one of the less reported downsides of our increased longevity. One is not meant to be working at 67.

But is reference dead, as some might suggest? Just, it seems, on paper. People require sources of information. But they will no longer appear in print. And in an age when top-down authority is no longer trusted, when even ‘broadsheet’ newspapers urge their readers to tell editors ‘what did you think?’ of every story and an all-encompassing digital egalitarianism has rendered the mass of people suspicious of the least suggestion of ‘elitism’, it will no longer be mediated by expertise, it will no longer be reliable. And no-one, it seems, will care.

Instead, because we must disavow what is termed elitism and because everyone has not just a novel but a dictionary or encyclopaedia in them, everyone will have their say. All must have prizes, even if the prize is a confirmation of their own, and far worse – since what they peddle is too often trash – the encouragement of other people’s ignorance. What the internet provides, yes, amid other things that are good no doubt, is the best means yet of ensuring that everyone may be comfortably reinforced in their own invincible solipsism, in their own mediocrity. The great equalizer, as gangsters once called their guns, and what gets shot is reliability. To focus on slang: who cares what the scholarly, researched etymology of *fuck* may be, if ‘Fornicate Under Command of the King’ is what so many believe, or of *shit*, when the popular vote opts for a fictional cargo ship instruction for unstable goods, ‘Store High In Transit.’

As things stand, the established antithesis of traditional lexicography, whether of mainstream or slang lexes, is the Urban Dictionary, founded in 1999 by a then 18-year-old Californian computer student, Aaron Peckham.

Its name combines the current use of *urban*, to mean young and hip and 'edgy' (and at least to some extent black) and the deeply old-fashioned concept of a dictionary. It once proclaimed itself a repository of slang, but that has been dropped.

If 99% of the Internet, like 99% of everything else, is crap, that leaves an interesting if not important 1% and it may just be that the Urban Dictionary is part of it. One cannot, after all, deny its presence — 7 million-plus definitions (as of 2014) since its founding in 1999, and amassing more at the rate 2,000 a day; with multi- million Facebook 'likes' and 253,000 Twitter followers. It is, without any doubt, the net's go-to lexicon in the realm of fresh-minted terminology. Journalists, some say of the lazier sort, adore it. It is regularly quoted, notably in courts, where the free online resource is increasingly likely to replace the expensive forensic lexicographer. Not for nothing has the UD won a Tribeca Disruptive Innovation Award, devoted to 'break-throughs occurring at the intersection of technology and culture where frequent clashes and resistance to change impede social progress.' Does the old-school dictionary represent such resistance? Apparently so.

With over eight million hits every month, and a range of statistics to match, how can we traditional lexicographers not stand in awe. We do. I do. I stand not just in awe, but also on one side — the wrong side, naturally — of a generational abyss. If I represent one aspect of slang lexicography, the traditionalists who model themselves on the OED, then the UD legions, the majority of whom are aged 14-25, represent the alternative. If I am looking at life's end, they have barely essayed the beginning. There is one pleasing irony: for all the contributors, the UD has but a single employee: its founder. If on no other grounds, Mr Peckham stands, like me, in a long tradition.

But awe is one thing, intellectual trust is quite another. Credibility is admirable but nebulous: my problems lie in the concrete. Dictionary, even to my reasonably descriptivist self, still means authority. You want to know? Here's the answer. If it cannot provide authority, what is left to the dictionary? Spelling is simply not enough especially in slang where one so often wonders as to the seeming randomness of orthographic choice. If its definitions cannot offer some form of accuracy, of 'truth', then what is their purpose? The dictionary is a tool, the tool should do its job and the job is providing information one can trust. It may err, but it is hoped that these are errors of omission not commission. Like the Fifties' TV show *Dragnet's* cop, Joe Friday the lexicographer aims for 'the facts, just the facts'. New facts, of course, may overturn their predecessors, especially in the sphere of dating,

which can always be pushed back a decade or more. Thus the traditional lexicon.

The Urban Dictionary does not, let us be quite blunt, give a fuck for all that. Look up an entry. See how it works. Here is a definition. Now here is another, and another and yet others too. They may jibe with one another they may not. They may contradict. All that differentiates them are a pair of icons: thumbs up and thumbs down. One can see by the appended numbers which definition the UD-ers prefer. But other than by checking the respective counts (and 'downs' may challenge 'ups' quite closely even in what those of us who still trade in such value judgments might see as the 'right' definition) there is no verdict. Merely the varied opinions of the UD crowd. Far from playing the traditional dictionary, it is relativism epitomised. 'Define your world' it urges, and they do. All are qualified, all are welcome, there is no comment, and defining is free. Like the Internet of which it plays a part, no-one has the right to mount a platform and dictate. Or if they do, no-one else sees any particular requirement to listen. One might call it the wisdom of the crowd. One might call it the country of the blind, without even a one-eyed man to be king.

Critics, traditionalists, deplore its lack of dependable authority — so many cooks that it is barely possible to see the broth, let alone ascertain whether it is appetizing or spoiled — and wonder, deluged by so great a plenitude of information, whether how much, if any, of what it offers can be qualified as slang.

Does that matter? Its users may offer widely varying definitions for a single word, but none questions the term's inclusion. Its creator has explained that he set up UD in 1999 because his generation, then around 20, could no longer tolerate traditional dictionaries attempting to set down what 'their' language meant. It is, perhaps, a generational standpoint that will influence whether one feels that this is a positive move, or otherwise. On one side, one has the slang dictionary's traditional role: laying down lexical law, a law that, however debatable, is as true of slang dictionaries as of standard. On the other, one has a genuine attempt to set down as much as possible of the non-standard language that people actually use as can be done. Given the boundlessness of cyberspace, this plan need have no end. Depending on one's viewpoint, one may judge this to be a featureless, untrustworthy maelstrom, fascinating, revelatory, amusing, but in no way of practical use; or one may see it as the way ahead.

What UD does, and this has not often been attempted before, and never, ever on this scale, is to hand the work of lexicography over to those who are involved hands-on with their subject. I all too well aware of the gulf that separates me from those whose language I attempt to corral. I am 67, slang, as it were, is 17. On my next birthday, I shall be a year older; slang is forever 17. And those who use the words have neither time nor desire to analyse them. Those who perform that task are more than likely to be observing from a distance. Ideally, the enthusiasm of the coiners could be coupled with the rigour of the collectors.

For professionals, setting aside any aesthetic critique of the UD's unmediated frenzy of self-assertion, there is one major lesson to be learned. It is present across the Internet and it is one that, at least for me, has represented the proverbial elephant in the room for some time now. What the Internet is about is niches, the ability of what would once have been invisible groups to promote and develop their own, albeit tiny, interests. This is true of languages, in my case of slang's vast range of variations. I have been aware of this, knowing that the coverage of a vast country such as America is beyond me, and that what I have labelled 'US' would more honestly be 'New York', with a few excursions to the West Coast. But I have had rarely been called on this. Or not until recently. If hitherto the lexicographer had been able to turn a wilfully blind eye, dragooned by print's restrictions of space and the economic dictates of a publishing house, such excuses no longer exist. The elephant is rampaging out from the shadows.

The question we face is simple but cuts to the heart of the craft: does slang truly exist as single, identifiable register and accompanying lexis. The questions as to its boundaries, whether one can properly isolate it from colloquial or standard, which have made it so problematic a concept for linguists, have now begun to bedevil the lexicographers who hitherto tended to sidestep them as they created what were cheerfully termed 'Dictionaries of Slang'. To an extent Eric Partridge, whose lexicon's full title, coined in 1937 and persisting until 1984, embraced not merely slang but 'unconventional English, colloquialisms and catchphrases, fossilized jokes and puns, general nicknames, vulgarisms and such Americanisms as have been naturalised', was the first to recognize the problem. But 'slang' was what his readers saw first: if he was, as some suggested, 'the word king', then it represented his unarguable kingdom.

Partridge, and his American contemporaries, like their predecessors, could still see 'slang' as a unit. The 'unconventional language' and the

rest was an appendage, not a variation nor alternative. Even if for all of Partridge's supposed rules of qualification (some 21 in all), 'slang' was ultimately something, to quote the US lexicologist Michael Adams, that one 'knew when one saw it'. It was assumed that Partridge and others did 'see it', and what they saw was therefore slang. One might dispute the details, typically his cavalier approach to etymology, but not the bigger picture.

The *Urban Dictionary*'s constant accretion of new material, even if quality is regularly outpaced by quantity, is probably the most 'real-time' approach to non-standard language possible: the print dictionary is out of date as soon as it is published; its digital successor has no such problems. And what it 'sees' wholly transcends the monocular vision of its print-bound predecessors.

The collection of slang, the lexis of 'loose talk', has always involved a number of loose ends. As soon as glossaries moved beyond cant, and took on aspects of 'civilian' slang, one can sense that what was offered was far from all of what existed. Research was not systematized, the collector offered what was found. Reading the manuscript notes that Captain Grose interleaved in his own copy of his 1785 dictionary, paving the way for its successor of 1788, one finds a wide range of material: the names of social clubs, a number of taboo terms (some of which would never be published, such as *A – e man*, defined punningly as 'an invader of the back settlements'), words launched by current events, the names of drinks, proverbial phrases, and more. One senses today that all ends are loose. To look no further than a single city, there are differences not merely as to area, but also as to the language of estates or housing projects.

There remain certain subsets for which boundaries can be drawn. These are the informal languages that develop within a certain occupation. Not technicalities, but job-specific slangs. There is still 'cant', the language of criminals, but that might equally be seen as a jargon, as might the 'slangs' of drug users, members of the forces, and others whose purpose-specific vocabularies have, at least in part, appeared in the slang dictionaries. Some slang lexicographers have chosen to include the language of major sports, others that of certain of the media. It is a slippery slope and one tips too easily into a dictionary of occupational languages. In any case, there exists enough 'mainstream' slang, the non-conventional language of everyday life, to fill any dictionary. But a fissiparous world,

offering a showcase to every niche thanks to the Internet and to social media, makes it increasingly hard to qualify slang as a bounded, single entity, as could (or certainly as believed) Francis Grose or Eric Partridge.

It is also up to the lexicographer to look at the task from new angles. Slang is traditionally a male preserve and assessing slang's traditional themes we encounter a predominantly male viewpoint. This may be changing. It is hard to pin down historical female slang usage: whores had slang, chorus girls presumably used it, flappers certainly did, some of the raunchiest blues singers were women. But use is not coinage and it is challenging to separate the two. The feisty British 'ladettes' of the 1990s were notably foul-mouthed, but used a male lexis. The Internet may well be offering a revolution here as elsewhere. Social media, where young women dominate communication, is changing the rules. Its language—*totes*, *adorbs*, *on fleek*—is a female construct. Nor is obscenity mandatory. Women can use it, as noted, but, as these samples suggest, social media's 'girl talk' looks in other directions, and, flouting another of slang's male conventions, appears generally positive.

So where, I ask, do we go from here? There must be a change, a revolution even, but I suggest that it will, as is true of much of our digital world, in form rather than in content. In ways of presentation, in breadth of exploration.

If one accepts that there is an innate desire to play with words, and to voice attitudes in an unfettered manner, however reprehensible that manner may sometimes be seen to be, then slang will continue to provide the means. Those who feel that its vast lists of synonyms have surely exhausted our inventiveness will be disappointed, or perhaps relieved: slang will continue on its path of self-invention. Each new generation will guarantee that.

On a lexical level, what we shall see is more of the same: the same themes, the same preoccupations, the same images. Sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Human feelings rather than artificially dictated ones. Slang, its hands full dealing with the concrete, is not likely to take on abstraction.

On a social level a qualification as 'slang' will be increasingly adjudicated by those who use it. The concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' no longer play a part. Not good, not bad, not 'standard', and not 'slang' but the strings of letters that when spoken or written serve us as communication. Of course, this has always been the underpinning reality of slang, but the extent of possibilities has never been so great.

If this is the situation, it is hard to see much justification for creating rules as regards what is or is not 'slang'. They seem artificial, desperate, a drive to control and thus defang. If 'slang' embodies our innate rebelliousness (the undying, if not always expressed, desire to say 'no') then how can it not reject the strait-jacket. If we must define, then I suggest that the words we term slang are seen simply as representatives of that subset of English spoken in the context of certain themes, by certain people, in certain circumstances. This is broad-brush, but such is the point: what can be shorthanded as 'slang' is simply one more form of the language. It is not mandatory and codes can and will be switched. That the themes, and our way of addressing them, are still considered 'improper' makes them even more alluring. This is the language we use to talk about the things that make us tick. If it is a thing apart then that exclusion comes with the territory that it has chosen and the walls are erected not by 'slang' and its speakers but by those who find that territory – for all that it represents so much that is so very human – problematic.

Jonathon Green's *Green's Dictionary of Slang Online* will be launched later this year.

