THE ENGLISH SLANG TERMINOLOGY RELATED TO BIRDS AND INSECTS

Corina Mihaela Geană
Assist., PhD., University of Craiova

Abstract: Our article aims at focusing on words or phrases belonging to the slang linguistic compartment, which is a section less approached by linguists, precisely because of its moral character, since the slang expressions designate some intriguing aspects of language that might seem filthy or vulgar. The English language has a vocabulary at least as plentiful as the Romanian language, therefore, if the long list of the English synonyms for a certain slang word were translated through one and the same filthy expression, the Romanian reader would be deprived of the contact with the lexical abundance and figurative imaginativeness of the Romanian language. The slang expressions related to birds and insects are numberless, as for almost each and every bird or insect we can find a figurative connotation that gives rise to a slang phrase.

Keywords: bird, insect, slang, derivative, synonym.

In this article we will reveal to what extent the slang expressions and their compounds or derivatives related to birds and insects have made their mark not only in the British English but also in the other Anglophone countries – The American English, the English spoken in Canada, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa. The headwords are given in alphabetical order and they are written in capital letters, while the slang words or expressions connected with them are placed in italics. Unless a word is used in all parts of the English-speaking world, the country of origin or the country in which the word is most prevalent is given between brackets. If a certain slang word or expression has more than one meaning, the meanings are all listed and separated by semicolons. If a word or phrase is used, with different meanings, in more than one country, the meanings are numbered: e.g. 1. (American English); 2. (British English). We have had as a reference book, among others, Volceanov's, Nicolae's and P. Volceanov's "*Dicţionar de argou englez- român*"[1]. Here are some examples:

ANT / ANTS:

- *(to) have ants in one's pants* (American English) = (to) be on the anxious seat, (to) be agitated;
- *(to) white ant* = to denigrate, to throw dirt at somebody;
- *white ants* (Australian English) = madness, deliration.

BEE / BEES:

- *bee* (American English) = an insignificant dose of marijuana;
- *bee bites* (American English) = marks of the pricks which are let by the drug injections;
- *bees* = cheese, collateral, cabbage (all used as slang words related to *money*);
- *bee-stings* (American English, humorous) = small-sized breasts;
- *beeswax* = 1. (American English) business, matter, deal; 2. (British English, humorous) a tax rate;
- *bees winger* (British English, humorous) = forks, hooks (used as slang words related to *fingers*);
- *bumblebees* = amphetamine;

[1] Volceanov, George, Nicolae, Raluca, Volceanov, Paul George, *Dicţionar de argou englez- român*, Niculescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015

BDD-A27470 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:03:40 UTC)

- *busy bee* (British English) = an angel, bad grass (used as slang expressions related to a kind of animal tranquilizer);
- *killer bees* (American English) = legal advisers used by a certain company in its attempt to take over another company;
- *put the bee on somebody* = to put pressure on somebody in order to get one's money back;
- *queen bee* = a homosexual's concubine.

BEETLE / BEETLES:

- *beetle* = 1. (British English, noun) a Volkswagen automobile made in the sixties; 2. (British English, verb) to hurry up, to make haste;
- *beetlebrain* (deprecatory meaning) = dumb, pumpkin head;
- *beetles* / *beetles and ants* (British English, humorous) = G-string, panties.

BIRD / BIRDS:

- *bird* (American English) = a baby doll, a girl; a light woman, a prostitute; a young man troubled in his mind; a plane; a satellite;
- *birdbrain* = timber-headed, dumb;
- *bird dog* (American English, verb) = to cut out with one's girlfriend; to keep a close watch on somebody;
- *bird farm* = a carrier;
- *birds* (British English, humorous) = knees;
- *bird's nest* (British English, humorous) = chest, pecks;
- *bird-watcher* (American English) = a womanizer, a lover boy;
- *birdwood* (American English) = marijuana;
- *birdy* = nuts, half-gone, strange;
- *blackbirds* (American English) = amphetamine pills;
- *boo-bird* = someone who is clamouring down during a sports or an artistic event;
- *dicky bird* (British English, humorous) = a word, a talking;
- *dolly-bird* (British English) = a beauty, a queen of hearts;
- *early bird* = 1. (American English) an early riser, a morning person; the first person who arrives at a party or other social event; 2. (British English, humorous) syllable, word;
- *flip somebody the bird* = to give somebody the finger;
- *for the birds* (American English) = good-for-nothing, rejectable;
- *geezerbird* (British English) = a mannish girl / woman;
- *odd bird* (American English) = odd, eccentric;
- *rare bird* (American English) = a person with remarkable qualities;
- *red bird* = a seconal pill;
- *snow-bird* = 1. (British English) a drug addict; 2. (American English) an inhabitant of the northern America who spends the winter in the south;
- *strange bird* = an eccentric person;
- *T-bird* = a woman who is attracted to transsexuals;
- *whirly bird* = a helicopter;
- *yardbird* (American English) = a prisoner; a rough soldier; a rambler.

BUG / BUGS:

- *bug* = 1. (British English) a computer error; deliration, insanity; a hidden microphone; an expert, a specialist; 2. (American English) an impulse, a motivation;
- *bug and flea* (British English, humorous) = tea;
- *bug-brothers* = a group of men which are HIV positive;
- *bug-chaser* = a man who desires to become HIV positive;

BDD-A27470 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:03:40 UTC)

- *bugged* = furious, mad;
- *bugger* = a lurker, a spy;
- *buggy* = a write-off, an old vehicle;
- *bug house* (American English) = a mental institution, a psychiatric hospital;
- *bug juice* = 1. (British English) a hard liquor, a schnapps; 2. (American English) fruit juice; an antibiotic (medical term);
- *bug off!* (American English, expression) = chase yourself!
- *bug out* (verb) = to get mad;
- *bug run* (British English) = a part, a parting;
- *Bugs* (British English, humorous) = cheese, collateral, cabbage (all used as slang words related to *money*);
- *cable bug* (British English, medical term) = a tiny dust particle which irritates the skin and produces skin rash;
- *rug bug* (American English) = an infant, a baby.

BUTTERFLY:
- *butterfly boy* (British English) = Don Juan, a lady's man, a womanizer;
- *butterfly queen* = a homosexual who enjoys oral sex.

CANARY:
- *canary* = a songstress; a barbituric capsule; a leaker, a whistleblower;
- *hairy canary* (British English) = little chance.

CHICKEN / CHICKENS:
- *chicken* = 1. (British English) a coward; a gay teenager; a runaway child; a baby doll, a girl; 2. (British English, humorous) a church;
- *chicken feed* (American English) = an insignificant sum of money;
- *chickenhawk* = an active homosexual; Don Juan, a lady killer;
- *chicken-head* (American English) = a stupid woman;
- *chickens come home to roost* (British English) = one good turn deserves another;
- *chicken's neck* (British English, humorous) = a cheque;
- *for chicken feed* (American English) = free of charge, on the house;
- *playing chicken* (American English) = a game in which two automobiles head for each other at full speed and one of the drivers avoids collision at the last moment;
- *spring chicken* = an unexperienced young woman.

COCK:
- *cock* (British English) = a guy, a fellow; nonsense; a penis; (of men, verb) to have sex with a woman;
- *cock and hen* (British English, humorous) = ten shillings; ten pounds; ten;
- *cock a snook* (British English) = to laugh at, to make fun of;
- *cock diesel* (American English) = a potent man;
- *cock linnet* (British English, humorous) = a minute;
- *cock sparrow* (British English, humorous) = nuts, mad, crazy;
- *half a cock* (British English, humorous) = five pounds;
- *hoist a cock* = to win a canoeing race.

CROW:
- *crow* (British English) = a soldier;
- *not know from a crow* (British English) = to have no notion of what somebody looks like;
- *sparrow crow* (Australian English) = an unpleasant fellow;
- *stone the crows!* (expressing disgust) = aw!; shucks!.

BDD-A27470 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:03:40 UTC)

CUCKOO:
- *cuckoo* = senseless; mad, crazy.

DOVE:
- *dove* = 1. (British English) an attractive young woman; 2. (American English) a pacifist;
- *white dove* = ecstasy, a kind of drug.

DUCK / DUCKS:
- *dead duck* (American English) = an action which is doomed to failure;
- *do a duck / duck one's nut* (British English) = to go into hiding, to melt into thin air;
- *duck* = 1. (British English) a red sparkling wine; urinal; a guy, a fellow; 2. (American English) an ugly woman;
- *duck butt* (American English) = a short person;
- *duck dive* (British English) = hard times; an escape, a getaway;
- *ducks* = 1. (British English, an appellation) honey, dear; 2. (American English) tickets;
- *ducks and drakes* (British English, humorous) = an attack of nerves, hysterics;
- *ducks and geese* (British English, humorous) = the police;
- *duck's arse* (British English, humorous) = a leaker, a whistleblower;
- *duck's breakfast* (British English, humorous) = a glass of water;
- *duck shoot* (American English) = a piece of cake;
- *duck's neck* (British English, humorous) = a cheque;
- *duck weather* (Australian English) = a rainy weather;
- *extra ducks* = additional staff employed to wait on tables at different events, such as weddings or banquets;
- *flying duck / roasted duck / rubber duck / Russian duck* (British English, humorous) = intercourse;
- *know the ins and outs of a duck* (British English) = to know one's business perfectly;
- *sitting duck* = a victim of a terrorist attack;
- *(to) teepee duck* (Canadian English) = to bent down so as not to touch the doorcase with one's own head;
- *tight as a duck's arsehole* (British English) = evil to the core.

EAGLE:
- *eagle-eye* (American English) = a detective; an exceptional visual acuity; a supervisor; an alert, open-eyed man;
- *eagle freak* (American English) = a fervent ecologist;
- *legal eagle* (American English) = an attorney-at-law, a counsellor;
- *when the eagle flies* (American English) = pay day.

FLEA / FLEAS:
- *flea* = a leaker, a whistleblower;
- *flea and louse* (British English, humorous) = a house;
- *flea circus* (Australian English) = a sordid cinema;
- *flea pit* (British English) = a flat; a sordid cinema;
- *flea powder* = drugs of an inferior quality;
- *fleas and ants* (British English, humorous) = pants, trousers.

FLY / FLIES:
- *and no flies!* (British English) = no kidding!; cross my heart and hope to die!;
- *fly* (American English) = a good-looking fellow; a ridiculous man who has an exaggerated sense of his own importance; great, excellent;

BDD-A27470 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:03:40 UTC)

- *fly boy* = a military pilot;
- *flygirl* (American English) = a young woman who is fond of hip-hop music;
- *fly man* (British English) = a number one thief; a criminal to be feared;
- *no flies on somebody* (American English) = a dynamic person.

GANDER:

- *gander* (American English) = a squint, a glance;;
- *take a gander* (American English) = to peep at somebody / something.

GOOSE / GEESE:

- *be geese* (American English) = to fly away, to take off;
- *golden goose* (British English) = a perpetual source of prosperity;
- *gone goose* (American English) = a played out person; a lost object;
- *goose* (American English) = an unexpected acceleration; a fool, a gullible person;
- *goose and duck* (British English, humorous) = intercourse; a lorry;
- *gooseberry* (British English, humorous) = a consort, a partner; the fifth wheel (used figuratively);
- *goose egg* (American English) = scoreless (in sport); lump; a fiasco, a complete failure;
- *gooser* (Canadian English) = a queenie, a gay;
- *goose's / goose's neck* (British English, humorous) = a cheque;
- *goosy* = excited, nervous, troubled;
- *green goose* (British English) = a young prostitute;
- *like shit through a goose* (Canadian English) = in a tick, in no time.

GRASSHOPPER:

- *grasshopper* (British English) = a grass smoker; a leaker, a whistleblower; a cop, a police officer.

HAWK:

- *night hawk* = a house breaker; a night walker, a prostitute.

HEN:

- *guinea-hen* (British English) = a courtesan, a light woman;
- *hen* (British English) = a consort, a partner;
- *hen fruit* (American English) = hen eggs;
- *hen party* (American English) = a party where women meet and gossip;
- *hen's fruit and hog's body* (British English) = bacon and eggs;
- *water hen* (British English, humorous) = ten.

INSECTS:

- *insects / insects and ants* (British English, humorous) = pants, trousers.

LADY-BIRD:

- *lady-bird* = a vicious man / woman.

LARK:

- *lark* (British English) = a matter, some business, a branch.

LOUSE:

- *louse* = a bastard, a disgusting fellow;
- *louse ladders* (British English) = whiskers.

MAGGOT:

- *maggot* = a cigarette; a bastard, a disgusting fellow; means, riches, money.

OWL:

- *night owl* (Australian English) = a person who prefers working at night.

PARROT:

- *dead parrot* (British English) = a man who has no chance of survival;

BDD-A27470 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:03:40 UTC)

- *Jerusalem parrot* (British English, humorous) = a flea, a hopper;
- *sick as a parrot* (British English) = very angry, up the wall.

PIGEON / PIGEONS:

- *petrol pigeons* (British English) = an air crew whose members belong to the navy;
- *pigeon* = a fool, a person good for nothing; a leaker, a whistleblower; an amateur drug addict;
- *stool pigeon* = a leaker, a whistleblower.

SPIDER / SPIDERS:

- *(to) see spiders* (American English) = to get drunk; to have a hang-over;
- *spider* (British English) = a refresher with ice cream on top.

STORK:

- *(to) stork* = to get a woman with child;
- *visit from the stork* (American English) = a child's birth.

SWAN:

- *swan* = 1. (British English, humorous) a cookie; 2. (British English, verb) to ramble, to walk about.

TURKEY:

- *cold turkey* = to suddenly give up drug consumption, followed by the withdrawal syndrome;
- *jive turkey* = idiot, imbecile;
- *kick cold turkey* (American English) = to suddenly give up drugs;
- *(to) talk turkey* = to practise oral sex;
- *turkey* = thickhead, gawk; off-grade drugs; withdrawal.

WASP:

- *WASP* (American English, deprecatory meaning) = a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant;
- *wasp* (British English) = traffic warden.

Our article has tried to highlight, as we have seen so far, that the slang words or expressions connected with birds or insects are numerous and extremely suggestive and innovative. A great number of the slang expressions, which are used figuratively, are taken from the animalist universe and they are so frequently used that we can talk about some "publicistic hackneyed expressions" which spontaneously expand into real metaphoric series[2]. In recent years, the most frequently invoked names of birds or insects are: *the bird* (used to designate *a light woman, a prostitute*), *the pigeon* (used to refer to *a fool, a person good for nothing* or to *a leaker, a whistleblower*), *the goose* (used to designate *a fool, a gullible person*), *the canary* (used to refer to *a leaker, awhistleblower*), *the dove* (used to mean *an attractive young woman*), *the grasshopper* (used to mean *a leaker, a whistleblower* or *a cop, a police officer*), *the lady-bird* (used to refer to *a vicious man or woman*), *the hen* (used to designate *a female partner, a consort*). As it can easily be seen, most of the feminine forms of certain nouns which denote names of different birds are used as slang words to designate *a light woman, a prostitute*. This is a logical association between the females of different species of birds and the female (either a girl or a woman) of the human race. On the other hand, the masculine forms of the nouns which denote names of different birds are used as slang words to refer to *a police officer* or to *a leaker, a whistleblower*.

The linguistic imaginativeness characteristic of the users of the slang expressions prefers the associations and resemblances to objects that belong to the material world. This is precisely the reason for which the semantic fields in which the slang metaphors are

[2] Zafiu, Rodica, *Diversitatea stilistică în româna actuală*, The University of Bucharest Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 57.

BDD-A27470 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:03:40 UTC)

functioning belong to the human relations, the inanimate nature or to the animal world and the world of birds and insects. The similarities between the human universe and the universe of certain creatures are numberless when we refer to the slang register. Thus, the ways of behavior of the people in comparison with those of the animal world are subject to irony. Animal metaphors are deprecatingly used when they refer to human flaws. It is difficult to distinguish between the slang register and the vulgar tongue, in which, among the most contemptible flaws, one can also mention: stupidity, prostitution, the incapacity of keeping a secret, etc.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ayto, John, Simpson, John, *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang*, Oxford, New York, 1992

Balaban, Ştefan, *Dicţionar de argou, eufemisme şi expresii familiare englez-român*, Teora Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999

Nimară, Ştefan, *Dicţionar de argou englez-român*, Paco Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993

Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English, Oxford University Press, 2006

Trofin, Aurel, *Dicţionar englez-român. Expresii idiomatice şi locuţiuni*, Scientific Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996

Volceanov, George, Nicolae, Raluca, Volceanov, Paul George, *Dicţionar de argou englez- român*, Niculescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015

Zafiu, Rodica, *Diversitatea stilistică în româna actuală*, The University of Bucharest Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001

BDD-A27470 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:03:40 UTC)