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Dating slang on 'historical principles'

La datation constitue un des aspects les plus problématiques de la lexicographie argotique. Les mots sont, dans la plupart des cas, nés « dans la bouche », mais les éléments argotiques ont cette particularité d'y rester en général beaucoup plus longtemps que les mots de l'usage conventionnel. Le « sacré Graal » des lexicographes, une première attestation bien établie, est ainsi beaucoup plus difficile à trouver.

The concept of a dictionary 'on historical principles' is one in which each definition is underpinned by a chronological list of illustrative citations. These citations both show in detail the way in which the meanings and use of a given word have developed over time and simultaneously attempt to take the reader back, as far as is possible, to the 'first use'. As far as modern English lexicography is concerned, the formula was initiated in Sir James Murray's *New English Dictionary*, now known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *OED*. Murray did not of course invent citations: The great multilingual *Calepine* of 1502 had used them, quoting from the classical authors, and the Academicians of France and Italy would follow suit. In England John Florio's *A Worlde of Wordes* of 1598 included non-classical citations for the first time and in 1656 Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* was the first to give English cites, even if most were from earlier dictionaries. A century later Samuel Johnson larded his *Dictionary* with quotations, and in 1837 Charles Richardson, in his *New Dictionary of the English Language* forswore any definitions at all and illustrated his head words *only* by citatory examples. But Richardson's book remains something of a freak, while Johnson had no scruples in rewriting even Shakespeare's lines if the original text failed completely to satisfy his lexicographical or equally his moral and political needs.

In its use of citations as in so many other ways the *OED* set the trend for the highest standards of modern anglophone lexicography. However the concept of historical principles, like much else that underpins the dictionary, depended

primarily not on English scholarship but on the early-19th century revolution in German philology. Giving his 1857 lectures 'On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries', the womb from which in time the *OED* would emerge, Richard Chenevix-Trench turned for an example of excellence to the principles of dictionary-making proclaimed in 1823 by the German classical scholar and lexicographer Franz Passow. Passow stated that no word should ever be included in a dictionary without a proper authority and added that citations must always be listed in chronological order. Whether the earliest was the *best* was quite irrelevant. The point of the citations was to illustrate historical development: this could only be done by tracing the changes from earliest to latest. It was a rule that would be adopted whole-heartedly by the editors of the *OED*.

The *OED*, of course, offered some slang. But its citations used, primarily, the definitions of the small canon of slang dictionaries. To find slang citations that draw on wider ranging sources one must note a pair of slang dictionaries, both of which appeared during the forty-year gestation of the *OED*. The first, by Barrere and Leland, in 1889, the second, which almost immediately eclipsed it, by John Farmer and WE Henley, between 1890 and 1904. In both these works, and particularly in the latter, the slang vocabulary was backed up by citations, although they offered them more for illustration than to prove first use. Farmer & Henley's *Slang & Its Analogues* was, however, the last slang dictionary in which such a method would be offered for the next century. Not until Jonathan Lighter's *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* began appearing in 1994, would full scale slang citations again back up a list of headwords. And as far as I am aware, other than my own work in progress, again 'on historical principles', covering the UK, Ireland, US, Australasia, South Africa, and the anglophone West Indies, there has appeared no other cite-based dictionary of slang. (I must note, of course, Tom Dalzell's *New Partridge*, but that deals only with words from 1945.)

Of course theory and practice are never the same. That the earliest citation published in a given dictionary at a given headword will remain unchallenged as its proven first use is rarely to be depended upon. Even the *OED*, with its wide-ranging reading lists and its army of cite-gatherers, has been found less than perfect in many of its headwords. The late Jurgen Schaefer, for instance,

found at least 25,000 antedatings, and even I, as I have amassed the near half million cites that form the basis of my forthcoming dictionary, have been able to send in several hundred. Thus is not to belittle the mighty *OED*. The truth is that the gathering of citations is an imprecise science. In the simplest sense, how much can one read? And for that matter, how much has been published? The examples may well exist, but they may equally well be lying dormant. Only last week my partner, who researches with me, found an example of *shit!*, used as an exclamation of contempt or disgust, that extended our knowledge of that word's use – and by extension that of our peers – by more than half a century. But the book in which she found it, a collection of testimonies from soldiers fighting the US Civil War of the 1860s, had only been published in 1994. The quotations had existed, of course, but it took a specialist researcher to place them in the accessible public domain. Such dormant examples are legion.

Slang, by its very nature, makes dating, especially first-use dating, even more challenging. The bulk of language is born, as it were, 'in the mouth', but standard languages are far more quickly made concrete in some form of publication than is slang. The underlying nature of slang, its intentional marginality, even secrecy, especially as regards its primary coiners – teenagers, criminals, prisoners, drug users – means that it is consciously preserved from such easy access. For Farmer and Henley whose seven volumes were *the* slang dictionary for fifty years, and whose 'database' provided the basis for Eric Partridge's later, non-cited *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* in 1937, the citations must have been hard to disinter. Inevitably they were forced back, as one is when all else fails, to quoting their predecessors – the magistrate Thomas Harman, the anonymous 'gentleman' B.E., Francis Grose the militiaman and antiquary and John Camden Hotten, the part-time flagellant pornographer. Indeed for all that a century-plus has passed, I must still draw on some of those sources, certainly the earliest, 16th century ones. Other than the odd play or pamphlet, there simply do not exist any alternative examples of this kind of terminology, the vocabulary of the 16th century's 'canting crew', its wandering criminal beggars, to those that such as Thomas Harman and one or two contemporary glossarists laid out. The base widened, inevitably, but until America's far more demotic writers appeared in the 20th century, the slang bibliography still remained relatively small.

Of course this has changed in recent years. In the first century of publishing there were a mere 35,000 titles, very few, if any, would have offered language that in any sense represented the 'vulgar tongue'. Today the world adds a million titles to its libraries every year, and if one wants slang, one needs but look. In addition the Internet offers, among much else, the back catalogues of rock'n'roll lyrics, of the blues, of hip-hop, of country music and so on. Add to this TV and movie scripts, the scanned classic texts of such web sites as Project Gutenberg and the ever-expanding runs of newspapers, often starting life in the mid-19th century, and one is spoilt for choice. And now Google, among others, plans to expand even this vast source with further scanned texts. Where the slang lexicographer once starved for examples, his modern successors are bloated with plenitude. The problem is no longer where to look for slang, but at what stage one dare risk abandoning the search.

The lexicographer, who may indeed be Samuel Johnson's harmless drudge as he or she toils on their dictionary, becomes a minor deity when that dictionary is published. One may not buy a slang dictionary for exactly the same reasons as a standard one – spelling is of less interest, I would suggest, than etymologies, or the delight in vast list of synonyms for, say, the penis, that such a work can offer – but the reader still demands accuracy, in dating as much as any other aspect of a lemma. The reader chooses to trust the dictionary, and by default the person who created it. Thus, as I say, the role of minor deity. But as I have suggested, the development of sources, the inevitable serendipity that has to be admitted however scrupulous one's research, means that if we are honest, accuracy in dating, based as it is on citations, has to offer some aspects of a lottery. Or, to borrow from Henry Ford, is not just history, but also 'historical principles' bunk?

And, were one to take this to a pessimistic conclusion, if one cannot research everything, just how much of the slang vocabulary has resisted not merely first-use dating, but any dating and thus any codification at all? We trawl as best we may, but how much escapes even the finest of nets? This, I would suggest, *must* be true of the 16th and 17th centuries, not to mention earlier years. The first slang dictionaries, properly glossaries, are in the end lists not of slang but of jargon, in this case the occupational lexicon of criminal beggars. But if one accepts, as I

do, that slang is innately a 'counter-language', bred like any other form of counter cultural creation as a response to a standard, establishment world, there must surely have been some form of 'civilian', general slang in use at the same time and indeed long before. As the mid-nineteenth-century slang lexicographer John Camden Hotten suggested: 'the "fast" men of buried Nineveh, with their knotty and door-matty looking beards, may have cracked Slang jokes on the steps of Sennacherib's palace; and the stones of Ancient Egypt, and the bricks of venerable Babylon, may, for aught we know, be covered with slang hieroglyphics unknown to modern antiquarians...'

The problem for the lexicographer is that no-one seems to have bothered to have acknowledged the existence of such lexes, at least for the record, and slang's identification with the lower classes of society meant that such books that were published, eschewed it. It is frustrating, but it would seem that whether or not such slang existed, its vocabulary will remain a secret. And to pile on yet another negative, we may know some of these early terms, but given the absence of non-dictionary citations for them, how can we be sure that they existed outside the lexicographers' lists? Harman, in 1566, offers 'autem', a church. Following Harman I can offer fifteen further citations, stretching into the 19th century. But only one, and that a wholly synthetic illustrative sentence in Alexander Smith's 1719 *Lives of the Most Noted Highway-men* is anything but a simple dictionary definition. So did *autem* actually exist in speech? Can we, and thus our readers, do anything more than take it, and terms like it, on trust?

The question that all this provokes for the slang lexicographer, as it does for his and her peers compiling cited standard dictionaries, is are we, as regards dating, playing fair by our readers? I need look no further than the two editions, 1998 and 2005 of my own *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang*. Setting aside the new headwords that this year's edition offers, and the new definitions I have added to those already incorporated, the biggest change, indeed the biggest improvement, comes in the dating. Word after word has proved older than in 1998 I had suspected. And by extension many geographical labels have been altered. The national origin of words is often not as it once seemed. All this,

unsurprisingly comes from the research that I and others have since then put into citations. This is all to the good. But even as I promote the changes, and the benefits they offer the new book, I am wondering; does this invalidate the earlier edition? Inevitably I rationalize: language continually changes, none more so than slang – even if the tried and tested themes of sex and drink, money and insults, parts of the body and what we do with them – all remain the same. Each successive dictionary, however much it aims for some temporary omniscience, wipes out its ‘parent’ the day it is published and will, in its turn, be superseded. Perhaps in fairness we must issue a form of health warning or perhaps the sort of self-defense offered by inefficient public transport whose timetables are never as accurate as they seem: ‘some of these dates may be subject to alteration without warning.’ It lets us off the hook, but whether it satisfies our ‘customers’, who want quite understandably to put faith in their deities, remains debatable.

The reality for every lexicographer is that the field of play is constantly changing size and the goalposts continually move. The plenitude of sources increases almost daily; only last week Microsoft announced a partnership with the British Library to digitize vast chunks of its unique collection. Elsewhere in Europe national libraries have similar schemes in place. It may well be that we are living on a cusp, between pre- and post-digital research, if such is the case, while the research will remain demanding, and truly omnivorous search engines will be required to ensure that no example, however obscure, is missed, Jonathan Lighter’s dictionary and my own, and in the general sphere perhaps even the *OED* as it exists at the moment, may prove at best a starting point. Certainly as regards the dating of the words and phrases they contain.

But that is the future. My partner is sitting in the British Library truffling out cites even as I speak; some of them, inevitably and gratifyingly, will push back our dating even further. The search, however imperfectly, however humanly conducted, goes on. We offer our readers what we can, and hope that within our constraints, it passes useful muster. And in the meantime, to paraphrase the old line, we must simply publish and even if it makes us lexicographical devils and not deities, be damned.

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