

Romany Rise

by JONATHON GREEN

Slang, by its nature, is a tricky bastard. Just take the bases of any lemma: definition, spelling, date, etymology. Compared with standard English it's infuriatingly transient: last year's *cool!* is this year's *wicked!* is tomorrow's *word!* The orthography, so often as much guess as fact, is a nightmare: is the Yiddish-derived mid-19C word for thief spelt *gonnof*, *gonef*, *gonnoph*, *gonoph*, *gonnif*, *gonif* or *gonov*? Is it *OK*, or *okay*, or *okey* or *oke*? Dates, as ever, defy concrete attribution: the bulk of mass-culture language starts off spoken, but slang can take much longer than SE to gain justification in the lexicons. Can the language of the streets really get a 'first-use' citation if the lexicographer is, since all too often fieldwork is simply too lengthy a process, forced back on the inevitably filtered media. No matter how cutting edge the book, the sitcom, the movie, the rap tape: they're all going to be a little late on the true coinage. But of all the problems thrown up by this ever-burgeoning 'counter-language', the major contender has to be etymology.

Most of the major slang collectors – Francis Grose, John Camden Hotten, Eric Partridge, Jonathan Lighter – have essayed some form of etymologies to accompany their word lists. And many such words, at least the more recent, can be traced: synonymous or punning uses of standard English; some form of dialect origin; a proven anecdote ... thus the majority of etymologies. But once one moves into what one could term the *ur*-slang, the canting terms of the 16th and 17th centuries, there one finds greater obstacles. We know that such slang (actually cant – criminal terminology – but for my purposes here I shall conflate the two) existed; indeed we must assume that the standard language be it in Babylon, Egypt, classical Greece or Rome or Medieval and then Renaissance Europe, has *always* thrown up the oppositional vocabulary that is slang, whether criminal or 'mainstream'. The problem remains, what, in linguistic terms, are its origins?

Slang as initially collected was that of the wandering criminal beggars, the 'canting crew' (from Latin *cantare*, to sing and so called from their 'canting' or 'chanting' of their pleas for money). These beggars might be recruited from a variety of sources – typically discharged soldiers and unemployed servants, both groups desperate for cash – but at their heart lies a hardcore, peopled by what the magistrate Thomas Harman, whose *Caveat for Common Cursetours* appeared around 1560, termed, 'the wretched,

wily, wandering vagabonds calling and naming themselves Egyptians, deeply dissembling and long hiding and covering their deep, deceitful practices' a group whom he dismisses *en masse* as 'in short, all thieves and whores.' In other words, Harman's beloved alliteration aside, the gypsies.

Gypsies had appeared in England around 1500, the latest stop on a journey that had begun in India, perhaps five centuries earlier, and thence progressed across the Middle East, the Balkans and continental Europe. They reached Germany in 1417, France in 1419 and Rome in 1422. Almost invariably they were seen (then as now) as 'bad'. Their nomadic lifestyle threatened governments that required stability as a prerequisite of control; their features, their clothes, their occupations (fortune-telling, juggling, the selling of what Harman terms 'novelties, toys and new inventions') were seen as somehow 'dangerous'. They stood apart and apart, as ever, meant alien.

They also possessed one more attribute: their own language, Romani (from the Romani *Rom*, a man, thus a gypsy). A hybrid tongue, based ultimately on Sanskrit (the root form of the Indo-European group of languages), it had picked up a range of loanwords as the Gypsies moved West: some Hebrew, some Greek, some German, something from most of the Romance languages.

As Francis Grose noted in 1785, 'the Vulgar Tongue (i.e. slang) consists of two parts: the first is the Cant Language' and it is to this canting that he attributes a pair of synonyms: *Pedlar's French* and *St. Giles' Greek*. The first was known to 16th century England, drawing directly on the transient nature of gypsydom; the second is an 18th creation, reflecting the great criminal 'rookery' of St. Giles in London. (The use of 'French' and 'Greek' as generics for 'foreign' echoes that of *wälsh* in German's *Rotwälsh*, the beggars' jargon, where it means – as originally did England's *Welsh* – 'foreign').

As Grose adds, the second part of slang is based on 'Burlesque Phrases, Quaint Allusions and Nick-names . . .' but such coinages hardly impinge on the original canting. That, he is no doubt, is a creation of these immigrant 'Egyptian rogues', whose language is 'a speache compact ... of English and a great number of odd words of their own divising without all order or reason ... as none but

themselves are able to understand.’ He notes in addition that ‘the first deviser thereof was hanged by the neck, as a just reward no doubt.’ John Camden Hotten, writing sixty years later, is equally dubious of Gypsy morals, and equally definite as to the role of their unique, if hybrid language. ‘To the Gypsies beggars and thieves are undoubtedly indebted for their cant language.’ He notes such terms as ‘bamboozle’, ‘bosh’, ‘the cheese’, ‘daddy’, ‘sturabin’ (i.e. *stir*, a prison) and ‘slang’ itself as having gypsy roots. Canting itself is ‘a mixture of gypsy, Old English, newly coined words, and cribbings from any foreign and therefore secret language, mixed and jumbled together.’ That such etymologies had been generally overlooked was simple: Romani had been so rarely written down, let alone subjected to academic analysis. Nor are the etymologies the only gift of Romani: such typical slang formations such as ‘pig-Latin’ and ‘backslang’ can be disentangled from gypsy speech.

That such etymologies continued to remain somewhat sidelined, did not, Hotten’s pointers notwithstanding, really alter. Indeed it has only been slang lexicographers who have really offered them house-room. Eric Partridge notes ‘Romany’ origins for a variety of terms, often when the OED has continued to straddle the fence with its ‘origin unknown’. (My own efforts cite 115 such terms). But if a lack of academic rigour had held a proper consideration of slang’s debt to Romani up till now, such lacunae can be safely dismissed. The analysis in question is nearly a decade old, but it is only recently that a translation has been essayed; a publisher remains at issue. The author, Alice Becker-Ho (widow, coincidentally, of the Situationist ideologue Guy Debord) wrote her essay-cum-glossary *Les Princes du Jargon* in 1990.

Becker-Ho makes it clear, with an exhaustive selection of quotations, backed by a substantial glossary, that not merely for English canting, but for the ‘language of those in the know’, as she terms it, of every variety of European canting vagabonds, there exists a substantial and logically ascertainable Romani base. As she puts it in the introduction to her second edition (1993) the ‘coming of Gypsies into fifteenth century Europe, which coincided with the emergence of a specific argot amongst the organised dangerous classes, had not been without influence on the latter phenomenon . . . Such a secretive and deliberately disguised language had been created initially with the help of that spoken by the Gypsies, instead of deriving, as had long been maintained, from various national *patois*.’ She adds that while French argot (like its English counterpart) had for centuries acknowledged no more than 20 Romani etymologies, she had now uncovered at least one hundred more. For her, as regards the study of slang, ‘The Gypsy language emerges here as a *mother tongue, as important to etymological studies as Latin or Greek*.’

It is impossible to encapsulate the text portion of her ground-breaking work, which in fairness is largely an aggregation of substantial extracts from histories of both language and of the gypsies, but the essential theory remains: irrespective of the national flavour, canting (and in time slang) came in great part from the movement of these Gypsy vagabonds. Drawing on the various local versions of Romani, whether in France, the UK, Italy, Spain or elsewhere, and noting the local varieties of ‘Pedlar’s French’, Germany’s *Rotwälsch*, Spain’s *Germania* or *Caló*, Italy’s *furbesco* and the specialised jargons of Venice, Naples, Turin and other Italian cities, she lays out her stall in an impressively convincing manner. For this compiler, whose own dictionary was forced, for instance, to link *bing*, a solitary confinement cell to the ‘image of one being thrown into a cell and landing ‘bing!’ it was both shame-making and exhilarating to find that a far more persuasive etymology exists in Romani *bengipen*, hell, or literally the ‘devil’s place. Or that *cove*, a person a ‘bloke’ comes from *gavekho*, a peasant, itself from *gav*, a village. Similarly *char*, a cleaner, is rooted in *charuvav*, to scratch, to scrape and *corker*, a big lie, comes not, as I have suggested, from the SE *cork* ‘topping up’ or ‘corking’ any other mendacious statement, but far more likely from *khokhav*, to deceive, to swindle, to lie, to mislead. *Racket*, for which the OED can only offer a figurative use of racket, a loud noise (itself possibly linked to the echoic Gaelic *rachaid*, is based in the Romani root *rakh*, to watch over, to cover, to protect. *Cushti*, beloved of *Only Fools and Horses*’ Del-Boy Trotter is not a variation of the synonymous *cushy*, but based directly on Romani *khusho*, good, itself from Hindi *khush*, pleasure. Thus a sample, there are many more, including the Romani roots of (or certainly influence on) such popular slang (and standard) terms as *busk*, *mafia*, *tramp*, *rogue*, *duff up* and so on.

All that acknowledged, there are undoubtedly times when Becker-Ho seems over zealous in her claims. (Thus carp her French critics, of whom she disposes with bracingly direct disdain.) As Hotten notes, writing of the Gypsy roots of such terms as *maund* (to beg), *dad* (father) and *jibb* (the tongue), it is sometimes impossible to make a definite ascription of such etymologies, however seductive, to Romani. For instance *tschib*, the tongue, which underpins *jabber*, fast talk can be overridden by the earlier Anglo-Saxon *gaeeban*, to talk; similarly I would suggest that her link of *bello*, testicle, to slang’s *bollocks*, is somewhat weakened by the pre-existence, in Abbot Aelfric’s Latin to Anglo-Saxon Glossary of c.1000, of the AS *beallucas*, used to translate *testiculae*. Again, one must wonder whether *rifle*, to have sexual intercourse, comes as she would have it from *xiv*, a hole (used invariably in reference to the vagina) or from the 15th century SE *rifle*, of a hawk, to tread a hen. (If the language of rural wanderers bears heavily on slang, so too does that of more settled communities, in other words local dialects). But all

roads in Indo-European lead to Sanskrit, and if such terms might not have entered canting via Romani, there remain substantial links to what George Borrow, the great 19th century populariser of Romani culture, has termed 'the despised denizens of the tents of Roma'.

But if Becker-Ho leaves herself open to criticism, or at least alternative etymologies, *The Princes of Jargon* remains an exemplary piece of research. English terminology is relatively insignificant; her primary slang terms are French, then follows the putative Romani root, and then the variations offered by up to ten different national slangs or cants. Her target, likewise, is primarily French lexicography; if anything England has been relatively

praiseworthy: George Borrow's books, notably *Romany Rye* (lit. 'The Gypsy Gentleman') and *Lavengro* ('Wordsmith'), and his Romani glossary have helped inform such slang collectors as Partridge.

Finally, while this is not a book review, nor am I a publisher's reader, let me suggest that *Les Princes du Jargon* deserves an English publication. Becker-Ho is a rarity among those who write on slang: she not only understands the language, she admits to appreciating it. Too much academic slang lexicology seems to admit the world that forms a background to the language with the utmost reluctance. Becker-Ho revels in her gypsy coiners: someone, soon, ought to allow those who enjoy slang and its stories to revel in her work.

[1999]