

Diction Addiction

by JONATHON GREEN

This black diction has become America's addiction.
Kanye West 'Crack Music' 2005

Kanye West, whose rocketing status in the world of rap has in the last two years made him one of its best-known stars, should know. If Black America's primary contribution to the world is its music - its sportsmen tend to be found in America-only competitions, for all that some declare themselves 'world series' - then coming up fast is an equal predominance, at least in the world of slang, of black speech. Where he is less accurate, however, is in the suggestion that it is only in the era of hip-hop and its successor rap, in other words over the last two and a half decades, that such a linguistic invasion has taken place. It is true, undoubtedly so, that the extent of the crossover has never been so marked, and that it is not just an 'American addiction' but an international one: the world's anglophone white young certainly copy their black American peers, but the language is also adopted, and modified, by those for whom English is not a first language. And the phenomenon - working class black to middle class white - has been at the heart of the development of the slang vocabulary for at least three quarters of a century.

In many ways the moving out of black slang from the ghetto reflects the emergence of the wider slang lexicon from what, until the last few decades, and certainly since World War II, was far more of a hidden, generally secret and even subversive language than it can claim to be today. That said, slang, which might be termed a 'counter-language' has traditionally emerged from what might be seen as 'counter' cultures: criminals, whose language formed the first ever slang 'dictionaries' (properly glossaries) of the mid-16th century, sporting men and sporting women, to use one literal and one euphemistic description, those who took part in the culture of 'recreational' drugs (or at least those which are taken in non-pharmaceutical contexts), and the teenager, who existed as a passage of years, but not as a social phenomenon, until the word, and the styles, travelled round the world subsequent to 1945. And alongside all these: the language of America's working-class blacks. Neither egregiously criminal, drug-taking nor young, the role of blacks in US society ensured that their language, and certainly their slang, remained quite apart, even exotic. The first attempt at a dictionary of American slang, George Washington Matsell's *Vocabulum* (1859), has no

discernible black influences. In fairness, it was little more than a plagiarism of Pierce Egan's 1823 revision of Captain Grose's unassailably British slang collection of 1785. But the truly homegrown American efforts that began to emerge in the 20th century are barely better. Today's slang dictionary has thousands of terms marked 'US Black', and thousands more that have crossed over so successfully as to have become quite mainstream, i.e. white. But such lexicographers as Jackson and Hellyer (1914) or Maurice Wessen (1934) seem, deliberately or otherwise, to overlook this fecund source. As for Britain's own Eric Partridge, he had the excuse, at least in his early editions, the first of which was published in 1937, of dealing with English English only, and thus with a country in which the black population had yet, in any influential numbers, to arrive. But even in his last, posthumous, edition (1984) it might as well be that the country whose slang he aimed to codify had never gained its substantial West Indian population, nor indeed such writers as Sam Selvon or, albeit as an informed and friendly observer, Colin MacInnes.

Unsurprisingly, since it is the popularity of black music that begun the process of bringing the two cultures closer together, it is the music that drives the taking up of the language. The language that accrued to the new, all-black creation of jazz leads the way. Nonetheless, if the best of the music was undoubtedly black, the word itself seems not to have been. It appears that the origins of jazz do not in fact lie not in the French *_jaser_*, to gossip, as was sometime believed; nor indeed can one accept the suggestion of the *_American Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology_* which in 1927 revealed in deeply scandalised tones that not only was the word originally Black, but that it meant to fuck. The mavens of the American Dialect Society, led by Prof. Gerald Cohen, seem to have pinned it down to, unlikely though it may immediately appear, the language of baseball, where jazz was synonymous with *_vim_* and *_pep_* and first appears c. 1913 in the writing of the pleasingly named 'Scoop' Gleason, covering baseball for the *_San Francisco Bulletin_*. Even so, it would appear that there is a sexual underpinning: *_jazz_* links to *_jism_*, meaning semen and thus the 'pep/vim' use is cognate with another 'semen' word that can mean energy and 'go': *_spunk_*.

The language of jazz musicians, and even more so of their successors who played swing, inevitably, or so it now appears, rubbed off on the increasing numbers of white fans. Such terms as *_daddy-o_*, *_jam_* or *_gutbucket_* may have started life in the relatively closed confines of a jazz or swing band, but moved out to colonise the wider world. In time it would even reach such as Princess Margaret, who managed, even if 20 years late, to use 'alligator', a swing fan, as in 'See you later...' (itself the basis of an eponymous pop song by the prototype rock 'n' roller, Bill Haley and in truth the most likely place that HRH had found it). Some had even existed before. 'Groovy' a jazz word long before it was taken up by the hippies of the 1960s, had, in the late 19th century, meant conservative, in other words 'stuck in a groove'. Its espousal by the hippies lends any attempt to use it today a pleasing irony: so irredeemably locked into the Sixties does it remain that for today's young, sneering at their parents' pleasures, 'groovy' is categorised once more as 'groovy', mode of 1895. Cool, which has lasted the course, and threatens never to disappear as one generation picks it up from the predecessor, had also existed outside the simple description of temperature. It referred to money, as early as 1728 in such phrases as a 'cool thousand'. And while cool was surely diffused through the prism of black music, it had been used as a congratulatory epithet long since.

As well as the music, the world of drugs, with its consciously and indeed necessarily secretive lexicon, was also a multicultural phenomenon. Heroin or cocaine performed their dangerously seductive magic irrespective of skin tone; even if like cannabis the 'major narcotics' were pilloried as a black drug, thus giving US anti-drug legislation of the 1920s and 1930s no small taint of racism (the same racism permeates Britain's contemporary lawmaking, even if the villain was yellow - the 'heathen Chinees' - rather than black). Targeted by the law, drug users were rendered de facto criminals, and as much as any *_yegg_* or *_peterman_*, they needed a closed terminology.

While the ages of its leaders - Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac (who may have become an early idol of the countercultural young but was always at pains both to deny his divinity and excoriate his acolytes) - hardly render the Beat movement a 'teen cult', the Beats' role as what Norman Mailer would later apostrophise as 'white negroes', made for a close identification with Black culture, or at least what was perceived as an innate alienation from 'whitebread', 'straight' America. Beat vocabulary took on board Black slang without mediation. Terms such as *_pad_*, *_hip_* and *_the scene_* were simply adopted wholesale and entered, if not mainstream slang, then a highly influential subsection of the white slang lexis. And as Beat widened its appeal, and became what the San Francisco columnist Herb Caen derided as the mass-market 'Beatniks' - in fairness, still the first popular example of alienated teens as counter-culturalists - the language spread yet further.

As Beatnik transmogrified into hippie, and the census of countercultural youth notched up ever higher numbers, so too did the users of what had once been exclusively Black slang. Whether the love 'n' peace generation of the Sixties realised that they were spouting a language that had once belonged to junkies and jazzers is debatable. Like the music they loved, plucked so often from black origins but all too rarely acknowledged as such, they didn't bother with the source. One need look no further than the origins of the word *_hippie_* itself. While by the later 1960s it had become indelibly associated with the world of beads and bells and psychedelic drugs, and all the popular marketing that went with the movement, hippie, to a cool 1950s black speaker was definitely a put-down. It was the antithesis of the desirable role of the hipster, and meant one was in fact *_not_* hip, however hard they were trying. Terry Southern's short story 'You're Too Hip, Baby' (1963) epitomises the type, even if not every hippie, desperate to make the grade, found themselves, like Southern's hapless academic, beaten to death even as they sought to ingratiate themselves with their newly acquired slang and ill-assimilated Ginsberg verses. That said, there was a parallel use even in the Fifties, and it was that use - a sophisticated, 'hip' person - that reached the forefront a decade later as the hippie became as cool as the hipster before him.

Since the Sixties the process has simply intensified. The basic difference being as much as anything the absolute primacy of rap slang and the culture that accompanies in both black and white youth culture. This was not so of previous versions of black slang, but it is so now. While Kanye West, tongue presumably in cheek, has suggested that the white middle classes ought to offer all new black terminology a grace period of twelve months before adopting it for their own uses, the speed of information flow renders any such pause impossible. Nor does it sound that strange any longer; even if the idea of some privileged public schoolboy calling his equally privileged girlfriend his 'ho', leaves one lost between tears and mocking hilarity. If it once took decades for a black term fully to permeate white culture, it now takes days, or certainly weeks. And while it would be foolish to equate drugs and rap, the drug culture, still a minority interest in the Sixties and then very much opposed to such 'hard' varieties such as heroin or cocaine, has exploded throughout society. Thus too the language that accompanies it. The proliferation of drugs, notably crack cocaine, resembles in its linguistic offshoots a lengthy war: one may not wish to see either war or crack addiction prolonged, and in either case there is no doubt of the grim cost in human life, but both are remarkably productive of new slang. Indeed the world of drugs is now one of the main creators of slang; at risk of cynicism, today's mini-wars seriously fail the slang lexicographer: with nary a trench or dugout between them, they're too brief to throw up the kind of wide-ranging language that emerged from the last century's two world wars. A certain sugaring of euphemistic jargon, but little else. As is so often

the case, one can only blame the selfish duumvirate of Bush and what the French call his *_caniche_*, his poodle, Blair.

In the UK, of course, there is an extra additive: the language of the second generation of immigrants from the West Indies. (There should, too, be some degree of linguistic input from the young Asian community, but while their music - Bhangra - has made some inroads - it would seem that there exists insufficient slang, at least in English, to make a real impression.) Like American blacks the first immigrants pretty much kept their slang to themselves, and in any case it is often hard to distinguish from island patois. The new generation is less constrained. The language of 'grime', most easily, if inaccurately, described as British hiphop (other names include one-step and esky - referring, inevitably, to 'cool') and of UK garage (definitely pronounced 'garridge' and another US import) blends West Indian patois, Cockney, and US Black slang to create its own subset. American West Indians have had less of an impact, even if baby-mother, the woman, to whom one is not married, who bears your child (there is also baby-father) seems to have made the leap.

Eric Partridge, publishing his first edition in 1937 could, as noted, offer nothing but English slang, and forget that of America. World War II put paid to that, and the ever accelerating Americanization of popular culture has merely accelerated the process. In the same way, if early American slang dictionaries could ignore the nation's black population, contemporary works, on either side of the Atlantic, would be foolish, and half-finished to follow suit. Purely English, purely white working class slang has been in decline for a while. Its Cockney rhyming version as much of a London tourist attraction, and as fading, as Routemaster buses and unarmed bobbies. The middle class, on the whole, don't create slang. The actual black ghetto, for all the rappers' material success, remains far more of a world apart. Slang has needed such 'alien' worlds for its finest, sustained production. The white assumption of such language may well be a form of linguistic voyeurism, but like the more traditional form, it's something the devotees can't resist.

Six months or so ago the press and media were touting a brand new linguistic phenomenon: *_Jafaikan_*. Jafaikan, it was claimed, was a blend of 'Jamaican', 'African' and 'Asian' and represented for popular consumption what its academic discoverers termed Multicultural London English (MLE), in other words the indigenous speech of young, often but not invariably black or brown Londoners. Close. Well close-ish . . .but definitely no dictionary entry. The actuality of jafaikan is that while it is indeed a blend, and one of the terms is certainly Jamaican, the other is 'fake'. Fake as in not Jamaican but wanting to pose as such. The black-on-black equivalent of rap's *_wigga_* (a white boy playing at ghetto black), or *_wanksta_*, (any boy playing at being a gangsta) Jafaikan is most usually applied to those whose Caribbean roots lie in one of the other islands, but it can equally be applied to anyone, black or Asian who wants to hide their middle-class trappings and come on like they stepped out of the gritty streets of Bob Marley's Trenchtown. But a subset of contemporary British slang? the language of young London? As MLE speakers have it, that's so *_bait_*. Or as everyone might say, 'bullshit'. Though MLE does exist. The first modern Black immigrants (Black Britons can be found in the early 18th century and indeed earlier) arrived in the 1950s and while they continued to speak patois (their hometown dialects and slang) among themselves, it remained essentially invisible. A decade later and things were changing as young whites started to dance to bluebeat and ska. But it was the reggae explosion of the Seventies that watered the first shoots of the future MLE. Anyone who knew Bob Marley's lyrics soon knew *_Babylon_*, the Rastaman term for the police in particular and the 'downpressing' Western society in general. Other terms would follow, even if they still sounded strange on white lips. The last decade, however, as the grandchildren of those first immigrants grew up, and London began producing its homegrown rivals to US rap, has seen MLE truly taken off. Words such as bait (absurd), bare (lots of), creps (trainers), murk (to beat or kill) and armshouse (a fight with guns) are up and running hard. If as yet the Asian constituent remains relatively minimal, that may change. However Caribbean patois remains based in English and the transfer to the streets of London is far simpler than that of Urdu or Hindi. Either way, there's plenty more to come.

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