

# Mongrel Tongue

by JONATHON GREEN

Dr. Johnson, staunch supporter of the party espoused *de facto* by Miss Widdecombe, and *de jure* by Mr Straw that he may have been, was, as is often his case, right. Patriotism is indeed the last refuge of a scoundrel, and nationalism, patriotism's even lower common denominator, is more scoundrelly yet. (How apposite, *en passant*, are the names of those twin celebrants of insular prejudice: 'jackstraw', a man of no substance, worth, or consideration; 'widdecombe', reminiscent of the celebrated fair, the local peasantry all a-flocking, but equally alluring are overtones of the 'widow's combe', or valley, cognate, of course, with slang's favored synonym for the vagina). Not since the Moseleyite campaigns of the late 1950s have racial tensions been exacerbated with such wilful, determined malice: how long before that sick acronym 'KBW' (Keep Britain White) reappears on the inner city walls.

How successful this establishment-sponsored racism will be remains to be seen. And this column deals neither in politics nor prognostication. It deals in language, and in that context I can say without fear of contradiction that however hard these contemporary racists struggle, the English language, the very syllables with which they compose their xenophobic, fearful rants, will remain as open to immigrants and refugees as ever it has.

English, the tongue of Shakespeare, Dickens, Churchill and other of Britannia's favourite sons, and much touted as a nation-defining treasure by those who prefer to ignore Dr Johnson's definition, is actually a mongrelly kind of a mishmash. A dog's dinner of Celtic, Latin, the German dialects that accompanied the Anglo-Saxon invasions and the Scandinavian ones that came with the Danes, Norman French, and, among many others more recent, the reverse gift of American English, a creation that differs from its parent in much more than dropping the 'o' from 'colour' and calling Autumn 'Fall'. And behind them all is Sanskrit, the true 'mother tongue' of the entire Indo-European lexicon, and one which, given its origins in the Indian sub-continent, could doubtless be dismissed as 'Paki'. But thus its glory. When Johnson's friend and admirer the actor David Garrick wrote in 1755 that with his newly completed *Dictionary* the Great Cham had in a mere nine years 'beat forty French and would beat forty more', it was not simply to crow over the half century of toiling by the forty 'immortels' of the Académie Française to complete *their* Dictionary (published 1694).

It was an acknowledgement of Johnson's appreciation of the sheer illimitability of English. Following the agonisings of such as Swift (in his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* of 1712) for the establishment of an English Academy, and the effective setting in stone of a 'perfect' English, Johnson had been hired in 1746 to create a Dictionary that would perform just that task. It is to his undying credit that while he may have attempted it, he came to realise its impossibility, and admitted his error.

'Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, require that it should fix our language, and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition. With this consequence I will confess that I flattered myself for a while; but now begin to fear that I have indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience can justify. When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay [...]. With this hope, however, academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength.' As to the putative 'English Academy,' why, 'English liberty will hinder or destroy' it.

The upshot of which is that English, then and now, remains cherfully open to invasion. Not for us the agonising over *Franglais* as still deplored by the Académie, trying vainly to substitute 'la toile' (literally 'the canvas') for the much preferred 'l'oueb' (i.e. the Web) or 'jeunes pousses' ('young shoots') for what most French surfers term 'les start-up'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* includes words rooted in some 500 different languages, and English was and continues to be omnivorous.

Say it not in the Home Office, but the words we write and the way we speak owe much to our conquerors and more recently our refugees. Not just the metaphorical

ones, in alphabetical form, but the flesh and blood variety, bringing with them not merely their labour but their languages. Standard English is filled with alien forms: ‘refugee’, for instance, is French (and in turn Latin, although the root verb *re-fugio*, means literally flee *back* – hardly a modern refugee destination). The ever-popular ‘flood’ is German, as is ‘swamp’ (although the word was first used in the context of the then colony of Virginia) and as for ‘bogus’, well, that’s apparently an old American term for some kind of gadget used in counterfeiting (though there may be a link to the Devonian dialect ‘tantarabobs’, the Devil and thence to ‘bogey’ and ‘bogeyman’). Slang, my own purlieu and never one to stand on ceremony, has always welcomed the incomer. Before wandering further afield one cannot overlook the influence of what one might term ‘internal refugees’ – villagers and farmworkers driven off the land and into the new cities of the Industrial Revolution – whose local dialects, torn from the world of which they were an everyday form of communication, became the slang of their new urban existence. More than one thousand such usages remain integral to the slang vocabulary.

But true refugees come from elsewhere, and for as long slang has been collected, one can see ‘foreign’ influences. None more so than that of the gypsies, whose Romany speech can be found in the secret language of the 16<sup>th</sup> century ‘canting crew’ of wandering, criminal beggars, and in much besides. Gypsies arrived here around 1510 and their language is still among us. ‘Rum’, for instance meaning first good and then, since it was used by the outcasts, turned into ‘bad’ or ‘odd’, started life as ‘Rom’, a gypsy man. (As such, in its bad = good formation it predates by five centuries our world of ‘wicked’, ‘evil’ and ‘bad’ itself). Other Romany imports include ‘bloke’, ‘cushy’ (from *kusho*, good), ‘gaff’ (from *gav*, a market town), ‘mush’ (from *moosh*, a man), ‘rozzer’ (from *roozlo*, strong) and ‘stir’ (from *sturiben*, a prison). Romany can also be found in this interpretation of the nursery rhyme ‘Hickory Dickory Dock’, as offered by the Romany expert Gerald Denley: ‘Hickory is derived from the Romany “Ek Ore” meaning one o’clock. The word for one in Romany varies according to the tribe, so it is either “ek”, “yek” or “ik”. The stress is on the first vowel, so that “ek ore” is pronounced as one word. Dickory Dock is often described as London rhyming slang. But it could mean the *dock* where the *dick* puts you when you are caught *choring* or stealing.’ As regards the fearful ‘mouse’: ‘The word for a Gypsyman is either a *rom* or a *mush*. This last word derives from the Sanskrit and means a mouse or a thief.’

The canting tongue, as one might expect given the robbers who made up its users, was never loathe to ‘borrow’. ‘Palliard’, a professional beggar, comes from French *paille*, the straw upon which they often slept; ‘quarrom’, the body, from Italian *carogna* or French *charogne*, both meaning ‘flesh; ‘kinchen’, a child from the

synonymous German *kindchen*; ‘doxy’, a slattern from the Dutch *docke*, a doll. ‘Cheat’, meaning a thing (and euphemistically ‘the gallows’), is a rare Anglo-Saxonism.

French, an arrival along with William the Conqueror, but boosted in slang usage by the Huguenot weavers who flooded into London around 1700, is well represented. Indeed, a *refugee* is defined by the OED as ‘one who, owing to religious persecution or political troubles, seeks refuge in a foreign country; orig. applied to the French Huguenots who came to England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.’ ‘Apple-pie order’ is based on ‘nappe-plier’, folded linen (thence perhaps the joker’s ‘apple-pie bed’); ‘bully beef’ is ‘boeuf bouilli’, i.e. boiled; ‘fogeys’, whether young or old, are linked to ‘fourgeaux’, fierce, while ‘gaga’ simply pinches the French word, meaning senile. ‘Gendarme’ for policeman is another straight theft, while ‘mackerel’ or ‘mack-man’, meaning pimp, comes directly from the synonymous French slang *maquereau*. ‘Pimp’ itself has roots in *pimpreneau*, a scoundrel. Language aside, combinations with the word ‘French’ itself offer a frenzy of nationalisms – usually sexual, rarely complimentary.

Jews have been in (and occasionally tossed out) of England for centuries, but their linguistic influence followed the Jewish immigrants of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. With them came Yiddish, in fact a south German dialect but indissolubly linked with Judaism. Jewish terms are sprinkled through slang, many of them having been reimported from America, home to more Jews, after all, than Israel. Myths notwithstanding, the Inuits have not have a dozen words for snow, but the Jews do for fool – among them ‘schlemiel’, ‘schmendrick’, ‘schnook’, ‘schlemazel’, ‘schmo’, ‘schmuck’ and ‘schlub’, plus ‘klutz’, ‘putz’ and ‘yutz’ – and they’ve entered English without need for translation. Other loanwords include ‘schlep’, ‘ferschlugginer’, and, of course, ‘kosher’. Less obvious are the ‘bottom line’, a direct translation of Yiddish’s *untershte sture*, literally the ‘bottom line’ of a profit and loss account; Australia’s cobbler, which may be linked to the Yiddish ‘caver’, a pal; ‘cozzer’, meaning policeman and transmuted from *chaser*, a pig; ‘gazump’, from *gazumph*, to overcharge, ‘gilt’, money, from *gilt*, gold; and ‘put the mockers on’ from *makbes*, plagues or evil visitations.

While the linguistic influence of the immigrant West Indians of the Fifties and after them the Asians of the Sixties and Seventies is harder to ascertain, the cultural significance of these new arrivals, and thus the linguistic one, is all around us. The man behind ‘Ali G.’ may be Jewish but the character reflects the enormous importance of Black culture, and thus Black language to modern Britain, and especially modern Britain’s young. Some, most even, of that language originated in America, but its espousal by Black British consumers, the first to pick up on hip-hop and rap (two notable language imports themselves), is undeniable. Terms like ‘boo-ya’, ‘fly’,

'ill' and 'mad' (all meaning wonderful), the acronym C.R.E.A.M. ('cash rules everything around me), 'b-boy', 'blatant', 'chill', 'cold' (as an adjective), and 'wigga' (i.e. Ali G. himself). Less noticeable, but still relevant are Black Britons' introduction of 'black man's wheels' (i.e. a BMW), the 'front line', 'spar' (a friend), the modern use of 'raggamuffin' (once the proper name of a demon) and of course 'reggae'. Indo-Pak, i.e. primarily Hindi and Urdu, input is less obvious; the Anglo-Indianisms of the Raj have long since entered the language – pyjama, kedgerie, Blighty, bazaar and the rest – but modern immigration has been less fruitful. The best-known loan is the catchphrase 'Kiss my chuddies' from TV's *Goodness Gracious Me*.

But the influence of Afro-British and even more so Afro-American usage represents a linguistic immigration that requires no physical movement. Black Americanism is at the heart of slang, especially the slang of the young of the last half century. A mix of jazz jargon (e.g., *hep*, *cool*, *dig*, *jive*, *scene* and of course *jazz*, originally meaning sexual intercourse – as does the late 19<sup>th</sup> century French *jaser/ jazer* – itself) and the terminology of recreational drug use from opium to Ecstasy (*stoned*, *busted*, *pot*, *mary-jane* and so many more) such Black coinages have underpinned the vocabularies of a succession of Western 'youth cults', from beats to the po-mo simulacra of Mailer's Fifties' 'White Negro', the real-life equivalents of Ali G's 'Staines massive'.

Whether those Black terms were in turn the products of immigration, in this case of the involuntary victims of the slave trade to America, remains debatable. Traditional research offers other origins, but the etymologists of Ebonics would link much of this slang to a variety of West African terms: 'give (me) some skin' from the Mandingo *i golo don m bolo*, place your hand in my hand; 'ofay', a white man, from Yoruba *ofé*, 'a charm that lets one jump so high as to disappear' (the vanishing act, of course, caused by the hostility of the white); 'jive', from Wolof *jev*, gossip or trickery. 'OK' has been linked to a variety of West African languages and according to Clarence Major "'Oh ki" was being used by Blacks in the South by the 1770s and in Jamaica at least twenty years before the evidence of "okay" in the speech of New England.' However the recognised authorities have failed to discover the Jamaica reference, nor do they offer any US citation prior to 1839.

'Slang,' observed the dictionary-maker John Camden Hotten in 1859, 'represents that evanescent, vulgar language, ever changing with fashion and taste,...spoken by persons in every grade of life, rich and poor, honest and dishonest...' He didn't say it, but that means people of every racial grouping too. Refugees and immigrants, from the Romans on, have helped make English, as well as England, and standard English as well as slang, what it is. We should be grateful.

[2000]