

Rhyming Slang

by JONATHON GREEN

First we all take our pitch, and when a 'flounder' comes our way,
Each bloke backs 'is luck at guessin' and 'is pieces 'e will play
On the number of the 'flounder,' odd or even

'Odd or Even?' by Doss Chiderdoss in *Sporting Times* 4 September 1908

Would you adam an' eve it? Another bleedin' Richard Snary John Bull o' dicky-birds . . . Enough, enough, but yes, Julian Franklyn did one, Ray Puxley did two, I've tossed in my own ten pennorth and now the OUP, abandoning their core product for the lure of an ever-expanding database, have offered their own: the latest in what seems an undamnable stream of dictioanries of rhyming slang. What is it about this relatively tiny subset of the slang lexicon (barely 3,000 words - and many of those long obsolete - out of a vocabulary that exceeds 90,000) that continues to entrance? Because entrance it does. Ask that man in the flounder (and dab = cab), not to mention the tourist on his back seat: rhyming slang (and the effin' and blindin' stuff, of course) effectively *is* slang. Really?

For this author the centrality of rhyming slang in the greater slang vocabulary is as much a piece of socio-geographical bias as is the adoption, around 1450, of the dialect of Mercia as what would become 'standard' English. Mercia held London and London held the royal court, the law courts, the great merchants and the beau monde. Factor in the relatively proximate universities of Oxford and Cambridge and you had the national power base. Unsurprisingly the language such people talked was the one that would come to dominate. Rhyming slang, essentially a Cockney phenomenon, however widely it may have spread, is strictly a London dialect; but because London, once again, is so important, geography has ensured that this Cockney patois has become part of mainstream slang. Had it emerged from Newcastle, Liverpool or some other provincial centre, such an elevation would have been unlikely. But it did not.

What Is Rhyming Slang?

In the terse definition offered by the OED, rhyming slang is 'a variety of (orig. Cockney) slang in which a word is replaced by a phrase which rhymes with it.' Setting aside the unquestioning assumption of 'Cockney' origins

(see below), one need have no argument. There is nothing that mysterious - nothing, for instance, on the scale of the endlessly questionable etymologies of 'cant' or criminal slang - about rhyming slang. It can, of course, defeat the untutored listener - like all slangs it originated in the desire to create a 'secret' language - a secrecy that was helped by its generally 'clipped' form, i.e. 'Barnet' for hair (rather than the full-out 'Barnet Fair'), but the basic principle is an undaunting one. One takes a word one wishes to describe, and in its place provides a brief phrase, usually of two but often of three words, of which the last word rhymes with the word for which it is a synonym. *Round the houses*, trousers; *Alan Whickers*, knickers, *artful dodger*, lodger . . . thus the pattern. There are - this is slang, after all, and works on a seditious principle - greater complexities, usually originating from the layers of rhyme through which the 'translator' need pass. Thus *arris* meaning the buttocks, makes its way through *arris* which abbreviates *aristotle = bottle* which clips *bottle and glass* = standard slang *arse* = standard English buttocks. In the same, if slightly shorter way, *borassic* or *brassic*, meaning out of money, abbreviates *brassic lint* and hence the slang word *skint*. Nonetheless, despite the somewhat laborious trail, the basic rhyming scheme holds true. There are also examples that, to non-Cockney ears, seem devoid of rhyme: *Charing Cross* does not immediately offer 'horse', not until one recalls the Cockney pronunciation 'cross'; similarly, once 'Cocknified', *cold potato* ('pertater') is a waiter, *Max Miller* is a pillow ('piller'), *burnt cinder* a window ('winder') and so on. Sometimes the rhyme is less tenable, becoming what linguists would term an 'imperfect rhyme'. Examples include *bronze figures*, kippers; *Jack Jones*, alone (usually in the phrase 'on your Jack', by yourself) and *nanny-goating*, courting. In any case, given the usual clipping of all but the first element, the rhyme, it might be said, becomes a technicality. This clipping, it should be stressed, is not a product of familiarity, the full phrase has not, as it were, 'worn away': it has been intrinsic to rhyming slang since its creation. It is this clipping, suggests John Camden Hotten, one of the first to incorporate rhyming slang in a dictionary, that provides such 'secrecy' as rhyming slang

may project. As he puts it, 'if there is any secrecy about the rhyming slang it is this – the rhyme is left out.'

While the 'rule' of rhyming slang demands no more than the basic rhyme of the slang phrase and the word it defines, the best forms offer a greater depth. The 'perfect' example manages to use a rhyming phrase that has some amusing or satirical bearing on the word for which it operates. Thus *trouble and strife* for wife or *Gawd forbids* for kids suggest the miseries of domesticity; *Mae West* for the female breast recalls the voluptuous Hollywood star, and *Rosie Lea* or *Lee*, for tea brings back the once-famous Gypsy Rose Lee (the clairvoyant rather than the stripper) who studied tealeaves to enhance her prophecies. Sometimes pertinent, often not, are the common appearances of proper names, either of people or places, in rhyming slang. As Peter Wright has pointed out, such adoptions have offered many long-dead (and otherwise forgotten) stars a greater longevity than ever could their actual careers. It is unlikely, for instance, that many of those who use 'Harry Randle' for candle, 'Wilkie Bards' for cards or 'Wee Georgie Wood' for good, can actually link the name to the vintage music hall stars thus memorialized. As for *Jem Mace* (face), the 19th century bare-knuckle prizefighter can ring few associative bells today.

The Origins

Dictionaries, especially those of slang, are by their nature behind the times. Lexicographers as 'Ducange Anglicus' and John Camden Hotten began putting rhyming slang between hard covers by the late 1850s, but the language itself had been around for some time longer. It seems that this novel variety of slang emerged in the first two decades of the 19th century. As to its creation myth, there seem to be a number, none of them, in the end, capable of incontrovertible proof. In a lengthy (and pioneering) discussion of the topic Hotten suggests that the language was deliberately covert and was created by street patterers to confuse the police. An anonymous 'patterer' (a street-seller of ballads, dying speeches and melodramatic reports of major events), speaking to the social commentator Henry Mayhew sometime in the 1840s seems to underline the point: it was a matter of finding a new way of deceiving the 'flats' [policemen] who had, by now, decoded the older slang of the 18th century villain. For the costermongers, the market traders, the job was achieved by creating backslang (a far less hardy survivor than its rhyming cousin, though some few examples are still to be found); for the patterer it was, logically given the ballads that formed the basis of their profession, in rhyme. Another theory ascribes the original rhyming slang to thieves, whose varieties of slang had by necessity always been at the cutting edge of 'counter-language' coinage. Julian Franklyn, in his *Dictionary of Rhyming Slang* (1960, 1984), notes the criminal input, but

suggests that the villains, while proficient in the new slang, were not its creators. They picked it up from the roving vagabonds. As ever, what had initially been restricted to the criminal classes (street sellers being charter members of that group), spread into the wider 'respectable' working class and thence, once the slang collectors sniffed it out, to the dictionaries. Peter Wright, in *Cockney Dialect and Slang* (1981) adds bricklayer's slang (quoting a source who notes it to have been 'the most picturesque, involved and unintelligible' of all rhyming slangs); in addition he suggests a large input from the Irish navvies, recently imported to England to build railways and canals. According to Franklyn it was the linguistic rivalry between these navvies, and similarly recruited Cockneys, who worked alongside them and like them revelled in language, that created rhyming slang. Wright too accepts this theory, but one must wonder, given the almost total absence of rhyming slang from modern Irish usage (or at least as collected in Bernard Share's dictionary of Irish slang *Slanguage* [1997]) whether this can be the case. If this type of slang has survived (and indeed expanded) so fluently in Cockney mouths, why, if the Irish were so central to its origins, did they apparently abandon its use?

Why rhyming slang has survived is as debatable as why any form of language, slang, standard or whatever, survives. The role of its London origins obviously plays a major part; even the belief by tourists that this rhyming version *is* slang. Simply being en-dictionaried is insufficient. More important is sheer accessibility. Julian Franklyn has suggested that it is much more humorous than its predecessor, the slang of the villains of the pre-Victorian era: 'The former is grim, harsh and humourless; the latter gay, frolicsome and amusing.' Perhaps, but the slang amassed by Francis Grose or another dictionary-maker 'Jon Bee' (in 1823) is far from unamusing, especially to those whose sense of humour runs to the cynical and ironic. Nor is rhyming slang invariably funny. The best may indeed be admirable and witty, the worst is but laboured and banal. And the primary reason for its longevity is probably its adoption by the world of entertainment and popular media. This adoption has been carried out to a greater extent than that of any other slang (at least until recent books, movies and television 'cop shows' brought us much nearer to the real language of villainy). Few people read (rather than consult) the slang dictionaries, and certainly not on the basis of ferretting out and memorizing every rhyming headword, but many enjoyed the music-hall or the popular press, especially its sporting variety. It was not only Cockneys, already versed in the vocabulary, who appreciated hearing its use on stage. Both the cheap 'penny gaffs' and their more expensive peers, the grand music halls, paraded artistes who thrived on rhyming slang; in the 1930s the music hall star Lupino Lane brought the vocabulary to tens of thousands with his hit show *Me and My Gal*. Later still Frank Norman's *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be* (1959), another Cockney

saga (albeit set in a Soho 'shpieler') carried on the good work. More recently TV series such as *Till Death Us Do Part*, *Minder* and *Only Fools and Horses* have been similarly revelatory. In the modern literary world rhyming slang is a sine qua non if 'colour' is required.

As for the press, few papers could equal the late 19th century *Sporting Times*, best known from the colour of its newsprint as 'The Pink 'Un' and perhaps best celebrated as the creator of test cricket's Ashes. In roseate pages bringing news of the Metropolitan demi-monde, larded with gossip, risqué humour and horse-racing information, readers would find the products of their much loved poet: 'Doss Chiderdoss'. Chiderdoss, the name allegedly means 'sleep, gently sleep' and refers to the slang *doss*, a bed or a sleep, was the pen-name of A.R. Marshall. Marshall, wrote, as Franklyn puts it, 'as though rhyming slang was the only language in the world' and his explorations of the rhyming lexicon appeared as the mainstay of the weekly 'Pome' which adorned the journal's cover. The lines quoted above are typical. Writing not only for the Pink 'Un, but for the *Daily News*, the *Referee* and other London papers, was George R. Sims (1847-1922). Sims, who wrote under the pseudonym 'Dagonet' and as such penned the 'Dagonet Ballads', which contain the gloriously mawkish 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse', undertook serious studies of urban, notably East End poverty, the most successful published as *How the Poor Live* (1883). His espousal of rhyming slang was a spin-off from a professional career which was immersed in London life and language; his take on the language (he was similarly devoted to backslang) was that it was dying, and as such should be celebrated.

Rhyming Slang Abroad

For all its justifiable identification with the East End, rhyming slang has long since moved far beyond earshot of the Bow Bells. Whether Franklyn is quite correct in stating that 'no other slang has travelled so far both socially and geographically' is debatable, but rhyming slang has certainly moved on from its original arena. There was, as noted above, the natural popularization of the form via the media, but an equally important factor can be found in the intermingling of soldiers from all over Britain in two world wars. Such major conflicts seem the most fertile of seedbeds for the production and proliferation of slang in general; it is hardly surprising that the rhyming version gained from the general mood. But rhyming slang, while rooted in England, is not the province of native English-speakers. Two countries have taken it on board, neither as extensively nor as enthusiastically as the UK, but a survey of both Australian and American slang will unearth examples.

Setting aside its social spread, its geographical departure led first to Australia where it must have been transported along with the criminals who, from the late

18th century to the mid-19th, were regularly transported to the penal colonies that formed the first white Australian settlements. The transportees came from all over the country, but there were many Cockney villains and they doubtless imported their homegrown language. Voluntary immigration from England continued throughout the 20th century and once again, people undoubtedly brought along their slang. And while in his authoritative *Australian Language* (1945) the great Australian slang expert Sidney Baker may have dismissed the style as 'dull, unimaginative [and] foolish' in comparison with the wider world of general Australian slang, its importance cannot be wholly denied. Indeed, for all his carping, Baker notes the popularity of the form in Australia, and quotes a passage from the *Sydney Bulletin* of 18 January 1902: 'Me mother's away, as I was swiftly-flowing up the field of wheat in the bread-and jam, a heavenly plan with a big charming mottle of o-my-dear sticking out of his sky-rocket fancy-sashed the girl-abductor on his bundle-of-socks with it cos he wouldn't let him have a virgin-bride for nothing.' Like the Pink Un's contemporary efforts, this was more an example of using the slang for amusement than offering proper analysis of current usage, but whatever the background, it made clear the existence and popularity of the form.

Rhyming slang's arrival in the US came not too long after its appearance in the UK, and its first example was found in an issue of the *National Police Gazette* in 1859. In a move that seems bizarre in hindsight, rhyming slang was known then and for many decades as 'Australian slang'. That this was patently untrue does not diminish the belief, which seems to have originated in the arrival, especially on the West Coast of a number of Australian criminals, the 'Sydney Ducks'. keen to enjoy the rich pickings of the Gold Rush of 1849. With them came rhyming slang and while they would leave, it stayed. At the same time or soon afterwards, rhyming slang began to be seen in Chicago and in New York. In these two cities it was more likely that the use was among native American criminals (although some of era most successful confidence tricksters were Australians – not to mention the occasional Britisher), although the regular visits of British sailors to New York must have left its linguistic legacy. Criminals and sailors undoubtedly had their role to play but according to a source quoted by the slang collector David Maurer in his 1941 essay on 'Australian Rhyming Argot in the American Underworld', 'The roving British and Australian thief have played their part in bringing the lingo to the racketlands of America, but the ones who have really brought the Australian lingo into our stream of speech have been the roving American thief and the good-time bims (chorus girls and fortune hunters) who have played between Frisco, Shanghai, and Sydney for the past fifty years.' In Maurer's opinion, rhyming slang was not that widespread, being more of a prison jargon and 'predominantly an 'institutional argot' (an argot of prisons)' although, he acknowledged, 'on the West Coast and especially in San Francisco it is

current among many non-criminal groups.’ Baker, who collaborated on the essay, was unimpressed. Writing in the *Australian Language* he termed the assumption ‘an odd myth’ and looked at a list of some 352 allegedly ‘Australian’

terms forwarded to him by his co-author. Of these he could find only 3% that were ‘definitely Australian’, 49% that were coined in America and 48% that had come from the UK; 88% had never been recorded in Australia.

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