

SLANG

An Interview With J. E. Lighter by Hugh Rawson

It's the poetry every American writes every day—a centuries-old epic of abuse, taunt, criminality, love, and bright, mocking beauty

THE BEST NEWS OF THE YEAR FOR WORD buffs, amateur etymologists, professional linguists, and all who respond to the incredible richness of the American language is that J. E. Lighter has found a home for his *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*.

When Random House published the first two volumes of this dictionary, covering letters A through O, in 1994 and 1997, critics reached for such terms as *definitive*, *absolutely outstanding*, and *landmark publication*. Nevertheless, the publisher abandoned the project when it was only half-completed, leaving the author and his dictionary in publishing limbo—and his many fans aghast.

Beginning with the letter A (as a somewhat euphemistic abbreviation for *ass*, illustrated by “In a pig’s A, we’re glad,” along with seven other quotations over a 50-year period from such diverse sources as *West Side Story*, *M*A*S*H*, and *Doonesbury*), and continuing through to *Ozzie*, a slang term of military origin for an Australian, the first two volumes of Lighter’s dictionary capture the American vernacular in all its vibrant glory. With meticulous scholarship, Lighter defines, illustrates, and, where possible, traces to their origins the common words and expressions of soldiers and sailors, cowboys and fishermen, criminals and cops, miners and musicians, doctors and drug addicts, students and athletes, and a host of other social and vocational groups. Almost every page contains revelations about the colorful terms that give the American language its distinctive personality but that by and large are not well covered in even the largest standard dictionaries.



J. E. Lighter in his office at the University of Tennessee.

Not to have completed this work beyond the letter O would have been a tremendous loss to American cultural history as well as to lexicography. But now Oxford University Press has come to the rescue; a contract has just been signed to carry the project right on through Z. Fortunately, J. (for Jonathan) E. Lighter, the research associate in the English Department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, had persevered, and currently he is deep into the S’s—a big letter, one that accounts for about 10 percent of the pages in most dictionaries. Oxford expects to bring out volume three of the *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* in 2006. A publication date for the fourth and last volume has not yet been set.

Aside from its comprehensiveness, authoritativeness, and sheer fun—it makes delightful browsing—the *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* is remarkable for being essentially a one-man project. Whereas most dictionaries are produced by large teams, Lighter has had only two assistants, and then for just part of the time. He also has had the help of a project editor at Random House, Jesse Sheidlower, who has since moved to Oxford, where he will collaborate again with Lighter. Still, the dictionary is mostly Lighter’s, just as Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1755, the first great English dictionary, was mostly his, though the original Dr. J. did have six assistants.

It has taken Lighter well over 30 years to get this far. His interest in words, particularly slang words, dates from 1968, when, as a high

school student in New York City, he acquired as a book-club premium a copy of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, a condensation of the greatest of all English-language dictionaries. Initially published in 10 volumes between 1884 and 1928, the *OED* is organized on historical principles, with definitions illustrated by dated examples of usage from books, plays, poems, and other printed sources.

The idea that words could be dated—that they have histories—came as a revelation to the high school student. Then it occurred to Lighter that as he says in the introduction to volume one, “It might

Lighter’s first major foray into the field was “The Slang of the American Expeditionary Force,” an A to Z collection of terms used by American soldiers in World War I, which took up most of the 1972 Spring–Summer issue of the American Dialect Society’s journal, *American Speech*.

From NYU he went to the University of Tennessee. There he began working in earnest on his slang dictionary. His doctoral thesis, published in 1980, was *A Historical Dictionary of American Slang: Volume I, the Letter A*. With some 1,800 definitions and 500 illustrative examples, it served as the model for the magnum opus now in progress.

where it had come from.

Many of Lighter’s notes spike common myths. An example is his note on *crap*, which he dates from 1846 in the form of *crappy*: “The verb probably derives from the noun, and, as the evidence demonstrates, no historical connection exists between this word and the name of the sanitary engineer Thomas Crapper (1837–1910).”

He also has gone to great effort to trace quotations to primary sources. A short note on *cowpoke* reveals the extent of his research: “Wentworth *American Dialect Dictionary* (1944), and hence all other standard sources, erroneously cites [*sic*] Croffutt *Grip-Sack Guide to Colorado* (1881); the word *cowpoke* is not to be found in that work.” Curiously, for what would seem to be an old Western word, the earliest example of the term comes from the 1920s.

Lighter’s dictionary raises the study of slang to an entirely new level, and it will influence the making of other dictionaries for years to come. For the next generation at least, the basic answer for anyone who has any question about American slang will be “Look it up in Lighter.”

I spoke with Lighter in his office—a small room, jam-packed with books and boxes of filing cards—in the library of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

To begin at the beginning, how do you define slang?

One of the things—maybe the main thing—distinguishing slang from other kinds of vocabulary is that it tends to be intentionally undignified, startling, or amusing. It’s notably out of place in the realm of formal English.

Does this mean that unless you have some agreement on what constitutes Standard English, you can’t have slang?

Yes. Slang is a reaction to standard language. To have slang, I think you need to have a tradition of education to em-

K.O. or kayo *v.* 1. Orig. *Boxing*. to knock out; (*hence*) to knock unconscious. Now *colloq.*

1921 *Variety* (Mar. 25) 4: Jones...was lucky enough to K.O. a local boy in the first round. 1921 T.A. Dorgan, in *Zwilling TAD Lexicon* 51: Champion Has Two Sets To Kayo. 1928 in *Goodstone Pulp* 39: The quicker he’s K.O.’ed, the better. 1929 Burnett *Iron Man* 22: He couldn’t K.O. a good flyweight. 1930 Buck & Anthony *Bring ‘Em Back* 128: The orang, landing flat on his back, slent the sleep of the knood. 1935 Mackenzie



be fun to collect and document American slang for about as far back as it went.” Thus, he began recording, storing, and alphabetizing, sporadically at first, then, beginning in 1971, much more seriously, as an undergraduate at New York University. (He used, and still uses, filing cards in the classic, pre-computer method of compiling dictionaries.)

Lighter’s task is easier than Dr. Johnson’s, or that of the *OED*’s editors, in the sense that slang constitutes only a portion, a subset, of our entire vocabulary. But it is harder in the sense that slang is much more slippery than so-called Standard English. By definition, slang is informal, casual, and often objectionable to most members of society most of the time. Many slang words and expressions originate among fringe groups and may take years to appear in mainstream publications. The specialist in slang has to spend a lot of time off the usual literary paths, beating the bushes for evidence of usage.

Lighter’s dictionary constitutes an immense trove of Americana. For example, consider his etymological note on *goon*, meaning a stupid person:

“Apparently introduced as a nonce term by Frederick Lewis Allen [the social historian]. . . . Allen’s sense, ‘a stolid, usually unimaginative person, especially a writer or public figure,’ seems to have been evanescent: no independent examples are known. All later senses of the word appear to have been inspired by ‘Alice the Goon,’ a fantastic, dull-witted, muscular character who appeared in E. C. Segar’s popular comic strip ‘Thimble Theater, featuring Popeye,’ beginning in 1933.”

This sense of the term then is illustrated with 17 citations, beginning with one from Allen in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1921 and including a 1948 note by H. L. Mencken that the historian had told him that *goon* had been used in the Allen family for some time prior to 1921, though Allen himself wasn’t sure

phasize the importance of the standard language. You also need to have a stratified society with a certain amount of mobility in it, so very different kinds of people have opportunities to mingle. Finally, I think you have to have an established cultural tendency toward irreverence. You have to have the standard and at the same time a popular skepticism about it.

So existence of slang presumes a certain amount of development in society, right? When did the concept of slang arise in English-speaking countries?

The word *slang* started to come into general use in the 1750s, but it wasn't included in a standard dictionary until 1828, when Noah Webster published his *American Dictionary*. Webster defined *slang* simply as "low, vulgar unmeaning language," which, I think, is very significant. This tells us that he thought of *slang* as a blanket term for any sort of non-Standard English that the educated public, which was buying his dictionary, would regard as inelegant.

What made people start to become conscious of changes in language, of what was "low" and what wasn't "low"?

People generally seem to have begun noticing these changes in the eighteenth century. Scholars in the latter half of the seventeenth century started commenting on English usage more critically, and during the mid-eighteenth century questions of propriety of diction become a matter of academic and learned discussion.

In its original sense the word *slang* appears to have referred to a special language or vocabulary employed by criminals. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, you see it used increasingly with various nuances, sometimes meaning vulgar language in the broadest sense, sometimes in the sense of nonsense, and sometimes referring specifically to verbal abuse. Even today it continues to be used very loosely. For most people, I think, *slang* simply means any word or phrase that some

English teacher might object to, for whatever reason.

Ain't right isn't slang, is it?

Ain't is in some ways a test case. Ninety-eight percent of the American public probably would say, "Yes, absolutely, *ain't* is slang," but I don't believe that *ain't* has been labeled as slang by any dictionary in this century. Sometimes it is described as "nonstandard" or "substandard" or possibly as "informal." If we knew the exact reasons for this, we might have more of an insight into where the boundary lies between slang and other sorts of English.

Vocabulary exists on a shifting spectrum, ranging from the completely standard and formal to the almost always objectionable. Precise boundaries between Standard or formal English on the one hand and slang and colloquialisms on the other just can't be identified. The situation reminds me of something Aristotle said: "The trained mind should not expect more precision than the subject matter allows."

Besides the criminals you mentioned, who used slang almost as a code language, what other groups have contributed the most to slang in America?

The largest group undoubtedly consists of people under the age of 25, regardless of occupation or interests or ethnicity.

Would that be true of all periods?

I suspect so.

Is it a case of each generation's rebelling against the formal language of its parents?

Possibly, but I'm not so sure it's simply a question of rebelling. I think young people have a natural tendency toward high spirits in speech, toward showing off and being verbally playful, and that the older one gets, the more one's attention is diverted elsewhere.

Of course, particular occupational groups have also contributed to our vocabulary of slang. And you get many

terms from sports.

In this century, though, probably the single most influential group has been the armed forces. This was especially true when the draft was in effect—during the First World War and then beginning again in 1940 and lasting right up until 1973—when young men from all over the country were brought into unfamiliar institutional circumstances and faced with all sorts of new challenges and difficulties.

The military experience quickly produced a lot of slang. Some of the terms have become well known, such as *snafu*, from the Second World War, and *GI*, from a little earlier. Now that we haven't had a draft in 30 years, the military influence on slang may be declining while the influence from high schools, colleges, and popular music is increasing.

Do a lot of slang words gradually rise to respectability? One thinks of baloney or—perhaps the most famous American expression of all—O.K., which I guess is standard now. Was O.K. slang in the beginning?

Yes, and certainly *O.K.* didn't seem at its inception to be a very promising candidate for survival. Allen Walker Reed, a great student of Americanisms, discovered the earliest-known examples of *O.K.* in a Boston newspaper of 1839.

During what must have been a very slow news period, there was something of a fad in the Boston paper for creating ridiculous acronyms, which were then explained at the bottom of the page. Reed found a good number of these. They must have been amusing at the time, although they seem awfully stupid today. One of these was *O.K.*—which was glossed as *all*, spelled *oll* to make it funnier, and *correct*, spelled with a *k*. By coincidence, the very next year Martin Van Buren ran for President. He was nicknamed Old Kinderhook because he came from Kinderhook, New York. His supporters formed an *O.K. Club*, where the audience would applaud speeches and yell, "O.K., O.K." For a

SLANG IS "INTENTIONALLY UNDIGNIFIED, STARTLING, OR AMUSING."

long time it was believed that the term itself came from *Old Kinderhook*, but it's quite clear now that this was simply an adaptation of the Boston *O.K.* And because it was a national campaign, *O.K.* eventually became quite well known. By the time of the Civil War people were writing *O.K.* without translation. By then most Americans seem to have known what it meant.

What are some of our other sources of slang? What about the various ethnic groups, like the waves of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants? What about African-Americans? What about Hispanics? I haven't noticed much Hispanic slang creeping into the language. Have you?

There has not been much of a detectable influence of Hispanic terms, or Spanish-language terms, on American slang. Of course, if you go back some decades, you will find a few terms. For example, *dinero*, the Spanish word for money, is occasionally used more or less humorously in an English context. *Savvy* may be from Spanish—or, most likely, a combination of French and Spanish.

Any relation to Kemo Sabe?

Kemo Sabe was invented by the creators of the Lone Ranger. Compared with the size of the Spanish-speaking population, both now and in the past, the number of Spanish terms that have entered English as slang—as opposed to technical terms used by cowboys, such as *chaps*, from *chaparajos*, or *lasso*—is still small.

More slang terms seem to have come from Yiddish. Yiddish words were popularized by writers, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. S. J. Perelman, in particular, used a lot of them in *The New Yorker* week after week, month after month. They are easily recognizable, especially the ones that begin with an *sh* sound plus a consonant—*schmuck* and *schmo*, for instance—which is new in English.

But you would class these as slang rather than translations?

I think so because they're used by people who don't speak Yiddish, and they're used more for their evocative power, more for their amusing connotations, than for anything else.

What about black English?

It has contributed a very large number of terms, particularly since the period of the great migration of African-Americans from the South to the rest of the country. It is not always easy—in fact it's usually impossible—to determine precisely which ethnic group produced a specific slang term. Words don't have any essential ethnicity, but there are many words that were associated with jazz and with swing, and with ghetto life, that undoubtedly come from black English, and these have become more popular and more widespread over the years.

At the same time, hardly any slang terms can be confidently traced to African languages. *Juke* is one of the few. It almost certainly is derived from a Gullah word meaning “disorderly,” which in turn came from Wolof, a West African language. *Jazz* is sometimes said to come from some African language, but no one has produced a convincing etymology for it. Its origin is unknown.

Am I right in thinking that jazz originally referred to sexual intercourse?

That appears to be the case. In fact, in the 1963 revision of H. L. Mencken's *The American Language*, the great American dialectologist Raven McDavid, who came from South Carolina, included an amusing footnote about an announcement in a local newspaper in 1919 that a jazz band was on its way to town. McDavid's father couldn't believe his eyes. He knew the word only in its sexual sense. This was the first time he had seen it in print, and whatever might be meant by a “jazz band” was almost too much for him to absorb.

Do meanings, or connotations, change regularly? Negro is a polite word in one period, but it can become an insult—

an attack word—in another. Black is good at one time but not another. Do you find this happening often?

Well, one interesting thing about the words that you mention is that they are not even slang. This shows how, depending on various factors, even standard words can undergo unpredictable changes in terms of whether or not they are felt to be proper.

A classic example of this kind of change is the word *occupy*. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *occupy* was used so frequently as a euphemism for sexual intercourse that writers stopped using it in its primary sense. As a result, when the *Oxford English Dictionary* was being compiled, the editors had a hard time finding printed examples of the word from that period because of what they called its “vulgar employment.” Eventually the sexual connotation wore off, however, and *occupy* is a perfectly inoffensive word again, with the same meaning it originally had.

In general, though, the accepted meanings of established words change slowly. But no word is utterly stable.

Your example of occupy brings to mind the way in which new words are formed. For example, the word rooster appears to date from the eighteenth century. And it seems to have become popular because people didn't want to say cock. This led to a whole series of shifts—haycocks became haystacks—and Louisa May Alcott's father changed the family name from Alcox.

Yes. People were very jittery about these things in the nineteenth century.

So, would you call rooster slang when it came into the language?

No, I'd say it started out as a Standard English euphemism. It wasn't much of a semantic leap to take a word which literally means something that roosts and apply it to the male barnyard fowl. Slang doesn't usually have a euphemistic quality. When we think of euphemisms, we think of words that are substituted because their connotations are less distress-

AMBROSE BIERCE DESCRIBED SLANG AS “THE GRUNT OF THE HUMAN HOG.”

ing than the words they replace. In slang you frequently have the opposite phenomenon, dysphemism, where a relatively neutral word is replaced with a harsher, more offensive one.

Such as calling a cemetery a boneyard?

A great example. Another, maybe not quite as dramatic, is the use of *tin can* for naval destroyer. Even money was called *tin* more than a hundred years ago. Broadly speaking, each is an example of dysphemism.

Referring to electrocution as taking the hot seat would be another, I suppose. Right. Even more dysphemistic would be *to fry*.

As you've worked on your dictionary, have you found anything distinctive about American slang as opposed to the slang of other countries. Can American slang be compared to jazz as a contribution of the United States to world culture? Slang certainly seems to be an artistic creation in many ways. It certainly is. Slang can be very close to poetry, as George Eliot observed more than a century ago. S. I. Hayakawa, the semanticist and, later, senator from California, called slang "the poetry of everyday life." On the other hand, Ambrose Bierce defined slang as "the grunt of the human hog, *Pignoramus intolerabilis*." That was in 1911.

But to answer your question, one distinctive thing about American slang is that there is so much of it. The slang vocabulary has increased manyfold since the time of the first census in 1790, when there were about 3 million Americans. Now we are approaching 300 million, so you have more people, more minds at work, more minds networking with one another. I think this partially accounts for the growth of all sorts of language in all sorts of ways. At the same time, if you look through a dictionary of British slang, you come away with the feeling that a

great number of the entries not only are unfamiliar but seem to be very different in inspiration from American slang. In some intangible way, British slang is different from American slang.

It may not be fair to ask you about words that come at the end of the alphabet, but I wonder if you have found out anything about the origin of Yankee.

Many theories have been suggested—that it comes from the Dutch *Jan Kees*, a diminutive of John Cornelius, for example—but none have been proved. The latest edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* has several citations that show

moo juice *n.* milk or cream; COW JUICE; MOO, 2.

1942 *ATS* 105: Milk or cream...*cow, cow* or *moo juice*. 1945 *Calif. Folk. Qly.* IV 52: Occasionally a waggish hasher demands "Moo juice!" or "Cat beer!" 1946 Mezzrow & Wolfe *Really Blues* 109: Leave the milkman a note telling him to nix out the moo-juice. 1970 E. Thompson *Garden of Sand* 299: Get the kid a horsecock and cheese sandwich and some moo juice. 1976 *N.Y. Folklore* II 239: Milk is called *moo juice* by many. 1991 *Simpsons* (Fox-TV): Pass the moo juice.



Yankee being used apparently as the name or nickname of at least one pirate in the 1680s. This suggests a new avenue of approach, that the term may come from a surname.

In the eighteenth century, when *Yankee* was first applied to New Englanders, they adopted the term with a certain degree of pride. Eventually it was extended to all Northerners and then, of course, during the Civil War, *Yankee* became a strongly derogatory term in the South. In Britain, today *Yankee* or *Yank* refers to any American. The connotations, and sometimes the meanings, of words—and *Yankee* is a good example—change more as a result of changing social attitudes more than because of anything that is intrinsic to the word itself.

In our time would it be fair to say that queer in a sexual sense is traveling a similar trajectory from hostile to positive?

It depends on the person you're talking

to. The resurgence of *queer* has been deliberately promoted by some gay rights groups, which thought that they would make a point more forcefully if they adopted this word in preference to *gay*. However, I really wonder how many homosexual Americans react positively to the word *queer* even today. On the other hand, in academia, we even have . . .

Queer studies, right?

Which is the only term for that phenomenon, and I suppose *queer* in that particular context really is Standard English, because we have no other term for it, and it is the name chosen by those

undertaking many of those studies.

Are there differences between men's language and women's language?

That's very difficult to say. Stuart Flexner, in the 1960 edition of the *Dictionary of American Slang*, suggested that men use more slang than women, and the linguist Otto Jespersen said something similar in the 1940s. My own impression from collecting is that novels by men are more likely to have more—and more varied—slang than novels by women. But this is just an impression. Researchers should get busy trying to answer questions about the distribution of slang, its frequency of use, and who uses slang and why. Studies of this sort are difficult to do, and very few of them have been carried out. Part of the problem is that language does not much resemble anything else. It is very difficult to prove things about language, because language is an abstraction; words are extremely

fluid, and everybody has his own take on the nuances of words. We need more real data as distinguished from simple impressions.

How do you gather words yourself?

I do my primary research in the library, but I also read a lot of books and listen to a lot of TV—old movies, CNN, FOX News, “The Simpsons”—and, of course, if I hear anything in everyday speech that’s of interest, I’ll make a note of it.

One of the interesting things you notice when monitoring current usage this way is how many words you encounter that you might have thought were long dead. Take *twenty-three skiddoo*. This had something of a vogue around 1905, and it is frequently cited as an example of utterly obsolete slang. Well, almost nobody still uses it, but almost everybody is familiar with it, and every so often I’ll come across a *twenty-three skiddoo*. It’s nearly always used humorously and with the knowledge that it’s archaic, but that is not quite the same as being completely obsolete and forgotten. Any word or phrase that has had the popularity of *twenty-three skiddoo* will tend to stay around for a long time before it fades away completely. And some words can make a comeback. I think most people first heard the phrase *out of sight* in the 1960s. It was associated with hippies, and it continued to crop up frequently in the 1970s. Since then it has faded away, but what’s remarkable to me is that *out of sight* also appears frequently in Stephen Crane’s first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, which was published in 1893. The book is about life on the Bowery in New York, and various characters use *out of sight*, with essentially the same meaning that we’re familiar with.

Could it be that out of sight was an independent invention—or reinvention? Is there a paper trail from Crane to the hippies?

All we really know is that Stephen Crane

used it in the 1890s. This certainly doesn’t mean he invented the phrase. The examples from *Maggie* just happen to be the oldest anybody has found. And this is not a great deal of information. It doesn’t tell you what you really want to know.

There is almost always a lag time between the first use of a word and its first discovered appearance, and the lag may be anywhere from days to decades. Nowadays, thanks to radio, television, and the Internet, someone can make up a new word on the air, and if the circumstances are right, millions of people will be using it tomorrow. There wasn’t much lag time, for example, for *shock jock* to become common. Or after the first space flight in 1961, when Alan Shepard used the expression *A-O.K.* Except for the seven Mercury astronauts and some of their associates, nobody had heard *A-O.K.* before. Overnight it became a part



necktie party *n.* Orig. *West.* a public hanging; lynching. Now *bist.*

1882 D.J. Cook *Hand Up* 40: The results were numerous warnings to offenders to leave these places, and many “neck-tie parties” as well, at which no “duly elected” judge sat for days in weighing the evidence, but where justice was seldom, as in other courts, blind. 1882 in *D&E*: If Found within the Limits of this City after Ten O’Clock p.m. this Night, You will be Invited to attend a Grand Neck-tie Party. 1884 in H. Hurton, *Evilness—Dose* 88: We trust that there will be no necktie

of the general vocabulary. More than 40 years later it is still around at some low level of currency.

You mentioned the Internet. What sort of effect is it having on slang?

I think the medium is still too new to try to quantify its impact on language. In the long run, I suspect, it will prove to be more influential than radio and television in circulating and popularizing new words. With the Internet anybody can be published, and practically everything that is written can be accessed by anyone. The Internet preserves new vocabulary permanently.

It may also speed up the rate at which new words and meanings are incorpo-

rated into Standard English. An example is *spam*, which surfaced only a decade or so ago as slang meaning to cause a computer program to crash by overloading it with data. The term appears to have been inspired by a Monty Python sketch involving a restaurant whose menu was overloaded with dishes featuring the canned meat product—not, as is sometimes said, from the mess that it makes when hurled against a wall or as an acronym for “stupid pointless annoying messages.” Within a short time, though, *spamming* has become standard for flooding the Internet with the electronic equivalent of junk mail. It seems to have filled a vacuum. A simple word was needed to describe a new phenomenon in a new medium.

Are there many slang words that can be attributed to one person in particular?

Slang tends to rise from the anonymous public rather than from identifiable individuals. One exception may be *nerd*. Dr. Seuss used *nerd*—a word that he apparently made up—as the name of an imaginary creature in his book *If I Ran the Zoo*, published in 1950. Then, some years later, you find it being used by teenagers to refer to a person whom they once would have called a drip or jerk. Had the teenagers read the book when they were children? Did *nerd* stick in their minds, or was the word independently reinvented? The odds are that it came from Dr. Seuss, but we’ll probably never know that for certain.

Insults and slang certainly do seem to go

together. What topics do you think have inspired the most slang terms?

Drinking has inspired a huge number, but sex has inspired even more. Mainly because we are so interested, I think. When people begin to feel that existing terms, slang or otherwise, do not adequately express the emotional aspects of an idea, they seem to create new words almost spontaneously. Another category that has generated a vast number of slang terms is money. We have lots of synonyms for particular denominations, such as *fin* for a five-dollar bill.

Sawbuck.

For a ten.

C-note.

For a hundred-dollar bill, the *C* of course being the Roman numeral *C*, which appeared on hundred-dollar bills in the nineteenth century. And there have been strange words, like *moola* and *spondulix*.

Spondulix is a new one on me. What does it come from?

It may derive from a Greek word meaning shells, although I don't know if that connection has been proved either. And *moola* is anybody's guess.

And what about Dixie? Different dictionaries give different explanations of the origin of this name for the South.

Did it really come from the French *dix*, ten, on a bank note?

That seems unlikely to me, although prior to the Civil War at least one bank, the Citizens Bank of Louisiana, issued notes that had *dix* on them. The difficulty in deriving *Dixie* from *dix* is that as far as anybody knows, the word on the notes was never used to refer specifically to Louisiana, or to New Orleans, or even to money itself.

As it happens, the earliest example of *Dixie* that anybody has been able to find is in the name of the song, originally entitled "Dixie's Land." Dan Emmett, the minstrel showman who composed it in 1859, said that he'd heard show peo-

ple refer to the South as Dixie when he was performing in the 1850s or before.

Of all the theories that have been proposed, the most likely one, I think, is that *Dixie* has something to do with the Mason-Dixon Line—that "Dixie's Land" was south of the line. But *Dixon* and *Dixie* may be just a coincidental resemblance. We're simply not sure where *Dixie* comes from, and that, of course, makes it another example of a word that started out as slang of anonymous origin but is pretty much Standard English now.

Do Americans use relatively more slang today than in the past? Is our language loosening up as time goes on?

I think you have a greater acceptance of—let's say, for lack of a better phrase—linguistic wit in places that once were bastions of Standard English. If you compare the diction of any of today's news-magazines with that of newspapers of the nineteenth century or even the early part of the twentieth century, I think you'll see that the writing nowadays is much breezier. Writers now, even when they're discussing fairly serious subjects, seem more likely to use informal terms and slang terms than would have been considered acceptable 75 years ago. We have become more open to using neologisms—to the coining of new and amusing words. And this, I think, implies that many of these slangy words are going to become Standard English a lot faster than they might have in the past.

Does the use of slang increase constantly or in spurts? You spoke earlier about O.K. and the newspapers of the 1830s, when writers went through a period of playing with language. Do you see waves or cycles in the formation of slang?

The difference is that when the nineteenth-century newspapers played with words, they did it in their humor columns. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884, was a watershed in American fiction. Here for the first time a recognized author, a serious author, produced a serious novel that was purportedly written

by an illiterate protagonist in an illiterate way. Davy Crockett's autobiography, written in 1834, did something similar for nonfiction, though that autobiographical style never became customary.

And what of the future?

It is impossible to predict with any accuracy what particular changes will take place in language. The fact is that usage is changing all the time, frequently in subtle ways that we don't notice. Every once in a while a particular usage attracts attention and is condemned and avoided by some people. Most people, however, just go ahead and use language however they want, unless they are writing themes for a college class or doing some other special writing that they know will be judged on fine points of usage.

All we can say about English is that we're going to have more new words—and not just slang but words at all levels of speech.

Many old words will change their meanings and eventually become unfamiliar. Don't forget that Shakespeare's plays generally are published with all sorts of glosses and footnotes for words that were perfectly familiar to his audiences when he wrote them. Their meanings have changed, or they have fallen out of use. We can expect the same processes to continue. Ordinary speakers of language will continue to speak in a way that they find natural and which they feel expresses their thoughts.

There are going to be innovations. There are going to be changes. There are going to be new words and meanings. Certain aspects of grammar will fall by the wayside. But the essential continuity of English, which goes all the way back to the sixth century, is assured for as long as people speak it. ★

Hugh Rawson is author of Devious Derivations, Rawson's Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk, and many other books, including, with Margaret Miner, the American Heritage Dictionary of American Quotations.

SPAM IS NOT AN ACRONYM FOR "STUPID POINTLESS ANNOYING MESSAGES."