since 1750 (plus selected others as well); often the word is assigned to the year of first attestation, but it can also be linked to the year of significant prominence. The explanatory paragraphs provide colorful vignettes of the social history of the American nation.

A new dimension has been added to the study of Americanisms with the debut of the CD-ROM (1994) and online (2000) versions of the *Oxford English Dictionary.* Their searching capabilities allow one to collect all the headwords and senses that include the labels "*U. S.*" or "*orig. U. S.*," in effect creating a new compilation of Americanisms. Other electronic databases, such as *The Making of America* (University of Michigan, 1996, and Cornell University, 1999) and the Library of Congress's *American Memory* (1998), have search capacities that invite one to start with known examples of Americanisms and search for antedatings. As the editors of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* have discovered, the results can be extremely rewarding.

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6 SLANG

Jonathan E. Lighter

Buckaroo and *megabuck*, *glitz* and *glam*, *tightwad* and *uptight* – all are slang. Since the days of the fast clippers, thousands of similar idioms have raced from home shores to be recognized everywhere as particularly "American slang." Thanks partly to the telegraphers of the Atlantic cable, the laconic *OK* (1839 *OED*) had reached England by 1866 and turned up as "an Americanism" in a subsequent edition of Hotten's British slang dictionary (*OED;* Hotten 1874); in the twentieth century it became probably the most widely recognized Americanism on earth. The common noun *guy* took two or three generations to overhaul the earlier *bloke* in Britain, Australia, and elsewhere, but the American term (ultimately traceable to the name of Guy Fawkes) is now familiar wherever English is spoken. American slang has circled and recircled the globe.

In spite of its worldwide influence, the significance of American slang has been long slighted. Except for Richard Bailey (1996), Gerald Cohen, Connie Eble, and Karl Sornig, trained linguists have rarely given slang more than a quick hello. Indeed, the word *slang* itself may be on the decline as a term of art; the four heavy volumes of the *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (Bright), for instance, do not offer an article on the subject and mention slang in passing only. Yet the increasing perspicuity of critical thought about language is what resulted in the recognition of slang in the first place, and slang's rise to prominence is a salient fact in the history of American English. The introduction to volume 1 of *The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (Lighter) amplifies a number of points in this discussion and provides further general information.

Word-lovers and journalists – Eric Partridge and H. L. Mencken being the best known – have shown more interest in slang than have linguists; diverting communiques on "the latest slang" – typically "GI jargon," "jazz (or rock or rap) chatter," "street lingo," "CB slanguage," "surfer talk," and uncongenial people – authority figures generally – and of their values as well (Drake).

Not surprisingly, slang flourishes in same-sex groups composed of peers of comparable age and social status. Controlled studies have yet to be done, but men have traditionally appeared to use more slang than women (Jespersen 1921, 248; Wentworth and Flexner xii; Lighter 1: xxxii). A study by de Klerk indicates that South African schoolgirls know about as many slang terms as the boys; but one cannot deduce from this that they *use* as many. Some awareness that one shares a slang vocabulary with peers must enhance, perhaps in a small way, a satisfying sense of group distinctiveness. That is unquestionably true for those sizable, loose-knit, often youthful groups whose members have most affected slang, especially over the past century: military personnel, lawbreakers, inner-city youngsters, and high school and university students. Youthful speakers especially may express irritation when they hear their most characteristic slang taken over or poorly imitated by the larger culture, which happened about 1970 to such now familiar Americanisms as to *freak out*, to *cop out*, to *do one's (own) thing*, and to *blow one's mind*, which are of varied origins but all were popularized through press coverage of the hippie movement of the sixties. Few speech situations in English are more ridiculous than the violation by adults (worse yet, parents) of role expectations and generational distance through using teen slang to impress teenagers.

Not violation but shortening of social distance accounts for the rise, over the past half century, of identifiable Black English in the general slang vocabulary. This rise of black slang came about through the interplay of several major factors. The most publicized was the big-band heyday of about 1935–50, which circulated a number of African-American slang terms like *cat* 'fellow, jazzman,' *dig* 'to understand,' *beat up your chops* 'to talk,' and *knock yourself out* 'to enjoy yourself' among young swing fans (*jitterbugs* and *alligators*) of all ethnic groups. Later developments in pop music, most recently the emergence of rap or hip-hop in the 1980s, have periodically reinforced the trend. *Hype* and *dope* 'wonderful' and *wack* 'no good' are examples.

The role played by American slang in what Bronislaw Malinowski (in Ogden and Richards 1923) called "phatic communion" is important. But the emotive and rhetorical features of slang are equally so. Indeed, as the definition of slang above suggests, all these contributory elements are intertwined. To recognize the often marked emotive and rhetorical (or, taken together, "tonal") difference between American slang and ordinary colloquialisms, fluent speakers have only to make some simple comparisons.

Compare colloquial *mess up* 'to make a mess or muddle of, botch' with the slang synonyms *bitch up*, *screw up*, and *fuck up*; colloquial (and mostly feminine) *goose* 'silly person' with the slang *dingaling* and *jerk*; colloquial *get mad* 'become angry' and *blow up* 'fly into a rage' with slang *get steamed* and *blow one's top*.

Slang impacts middle-class sensibilities as undignified or aggressive for a number of reasons. The sheer novelty of slang is often a source of comment. Examples include *spondulix* 'money,' *gizmo* 'peculiar object, contrivance, or mechanism,' *slugfest* 'boxing match in which many hard blows are exchanged, (hence) bitter debate,' *blizzard* 'gunshot, volley of shot' (hence the now-standard meaning 'violent snowstorm'), *humongous* 'gigantic,' *skag* 'heroin,' *nerd* 'socially inept person,' *skedaddle* 'to run away,' *barf* 'to vomit,' *goon* 'stupid person or thug,' *scuzzy* 'scruffy, grimy, unsavory,' *snafu* 'bungled or confused situation.'

The expressive, sometimes intriguing, figurative associations of much slang are also notable: *bones* 'dice,' *rotgut* 'vile liquor,' *dogs* 'feet,' *clink* 'jail or prison,' *broad* 'woman,' *wimp* 'weak or cowardly person,' *pot* 'marijuana,' *pissed off* 'angry,' *the Rust Belt* 'heavily industrial areas of the Ohio Valley,' *pass the buck* 'to shift responsibility,' *shoot the breeze* 'to chat or converse idly,' *fuzz* 'police,' *snow job* 'soothing, flattering, insincere talk,' *the Big Apple* 'New York City.' Slang is also witty in a playful or derisive way: *birdman* 'aviator,' *lamebrain* or *knucklehead* 'simpleton,' *suds* 'beer,' *wise-ass* 'impertinent individual, know-it-all,' *salt horse* 'pickled beef,' *tightwad* 'miser,' *snot-locker* 'nose,' *flatfoot* 'police patrolman,' *give the boot* 'to dismiss or discharge abruptly,' *hit the hay* 'to go to bed,' *slap-happy* 'dazed,' *knowledge box* 'head,' *shit on a shingle* 'creamed chipped beef on toast,' *do the bone dance* 'engage in sex.'

In the final analysis, however, the decisive factor in the emotive impact of slang rests in the cultural need to distinguish "proper" from "improper" diction. Certain expressions become "improper" chiefly through their association, real or imagined, with various disesteemed kinds of speakers, especially the young, the disreputable, the irreverent, the callously cynical – speakers, whatever their group membership, whose linguistic license exceeds their concern for dignity (some would call it pretentiousness) of either speech or self.

The matrix of sociolinguistic responses giving rise to this perception of slang comes in large part from the fundamental requirement among educated speakers for decorum in responsible speech. Much of the often cited "raciness" or "vitality" of slang comes, moreover, from this awareness of its social context: slang is most at home in face-to-face settings where decorum is at a discount, where subtle values of "social deference and reverence for the past," often conveyed by exclusive use of standard diction, are irrelevant (Sechrist). Slang must also occur in writing (fiction, drama, and reportage in particular) that seeks to evoke or recreate such settings.

Because the slang element in English is limited almost entirely to content words, and because few speakers seem to compartmentalize their active slang vocabulary as one might a foreign language, no one "talks in slang" for more than a phrase or two at a time. People who have most thoroughly internalized anti-establishment attitudes probably use the most slang, and it can take conscious effort to *kick the habit*, a phrase that entered colloquial use in the mid 1960s from the slang of drug addicts (Haertzen, Ross, and Hooks). Thus at the end of World War II (or so the story goes), Navy personnel were admonished before leaving the service:

> Now, when you get home, and you're a hero, and you're wearin' civvies again, and the whole family's gathered round the table – Mom and Dad and your brother and sister and all your aunts and uncles and cousins and maybe that cute little gal next door who's been waitin' for you all these years – and Mom's cooked up a turkey dinner in your special honor, and old Dad says grace and thanks the good Lord you're back home safe and you didn't get drowned or blown up by a big Jap torpedo, and everybody's smilin' and startin' to hoist in some of Mom's terrific home-cookin' – don't *you* say, "Hey, Baldy! Pass the fuckin' red lead!"
>
> [Related by a naval veteran in New York City in 1974. *Red lead*, an ingredient of weather-resistant paints used on shipboard, means 'ketchup.']

True or not, this anecdote implicitly identifies habit, socialization, social roles, and an antagonism of norms as bearing on the psychology and impact of slang usage.

6.2 Slang and poetry

A less hard-bitten impression of slang than that underlying the "red lead" story is now common among academic observers. S. I. Hayakawa (194–5) has characterized slang as "the poetry of everyday life"; another writer (Gaston) has called it "the poetry of group dynamics." Eble (1987) has compared the phonology, syntax, and lexicon of college slang with that of poetic language and finds that, though used for different purposes, the two share many lexical and phonological devices. In comparison with ordinary English, it might well be said that slang works at a heightened intensity, like a kind of negative poetry. Certainly slang employs many of the same figurative devices found in poetic language, as shown by the following examples:

ANTIPHRASIS: *bad* 'very pleasing; extremely impressive,' *winner* 'that which is disappointing or useless,' *son of a bitch* 'remarkable fellow'

ANTONOMASIA: *John Wayne* 'a foolishly daring fellow,' *Romeo* 'a man noted for his many love affairs,' *[Uncle] Tom* 'a black man who behaves subserviently toward whites'

BURLESQUE METAPHOR: *crowbait* 'an old or poor horse,' *sing* 'to turn informer,' *Arkansas toothpick* 'hunting knife,' *gasbag* 'boastful or loquacious speaker,' *apple* 'baseball,' *rock* 'basketball,' *doughnut* 'automobile tire,' *cowboy Cadillac* 'pickup truck,' *lung-duster* 'cigarette,' *Oreo* 'a black person aligned with white political interests'

HYPERBOLE: *super* 'quite pleasant or satisfactory,' *rotten* 'quite unpleasant or unsatisfactory,' *annihilated* 'very drunk,' *slaughter* '(in a game) to defeat decisively,' *slam* 'to criticize,' *chew someone's ass out* 'to rebuke or scold someone sharply,' *knock dead* 'to impress very favorably'

MEIOSIS: *kid* 'child,' *berry* 'dollar,' *lettuce* 'money,' *peanuts* 'a small or inadequate amount of money,' *pig* 'police officer,' *hide* 'racehorse,' *heap* 'automobile,' *crate* 'aircraft,' *tin can* 'naval destroyer'

METAPHOR: *bread* 'money,' *sconce* 'head,' *pill* 'a cannonball,' *hooks* 'fingers, clutches,' *grass* 'marijuana,' *paws* 'hands,' *chick* 'young woman,' *frost* 'a failure,' *peach* 'a very fine example,' *pegs* 'legs,' *gravy* 'profit,' *vines* 'clothing,' *spook* 'intelligence agent'

METONYMY: *skirt* 'young woman,' *kraut* 'German,' *macaroni* 'Italian,' *badge* 'police officer,' *flicker* 'motion picture,' *nose* 'a wine's bouquet,' *tube* 'television programming,' *suit* 'business executive,' *the Big Smoke* 'Pittsburgh'

ONOMATOPOEIA: *sock* or *biff* 'to hit hard,' *buzz* 'telephone call,' *zing* 'to pitch [a fastball],' *boomer* 'a heavy ocean billow; a thunderstorm,' *splash* 'to shoot down (an enemy aircraft) over water'

PERSONIFICATION: *Uncle Sam* 'US Government,' *Johnny Bull* 'the British Empire,' *Johnny Crapeau* 'the French,' *Johnny Reb* 'Southern Confederate forces,' *Jerry* or *Heinie* or *Fritz* 'German forces,' *Ivan* 'Soviet forces,' *GI Joe* 'an ordinary US soldier during and since the Second World War,' *Joe College* 'a typical male college student,' *Suzie Sorority* 'a typical member of a Greek-letter sorority'

SYNECDOCHE: *wheels* 'automotive transportation,' *southpaw* 'left-handed baseball pitcher,' *piece of ass* 'act of copulation,' *the tube* 'television set,' *fender-bender* 'minor automotive collision'

Some of the foregoing examples may be figuratively ambiguous, but the observation that slang resembles literary expression must be taken seriously. Both, for example, are highly connotative, and both are in the business of defamiliarizing the mundane. But their differences are also important. We expect poetic language (as opposed to Augustan poetic diction) to be original and unique to the poem; slang, on the other hand, must enjoy some degree of currency to be distinguishable from nonce terms and idiosyncracies. Poetic language strives for subtle emotional and conceptual effects; slang settles for the jocular and the startling. Like modern poetry in particular, slang implies the inadequacy of ordinary language to deal with new conditions of real life.

Yet even at its most radical, poetry celebrates continuity with the past; poets, after all, recognize poetry itself as a venerable artistic pursuit and place themselves somewhere within (or sometimes at the end of) that tradition. Slang, in contrast, rejects tradition: the lay public experiences slang idioms as novel (one of the chief reasons for using them) and thinks of slang as a twentieth-century phenomenon. When American college students are told that Dickens, for example, used slang in his novels, they are mildly surprised and cannot identify that slang; when it is pointed out to them, they express disappointment that Victorian slang is "so nothing." "It's just – I don't know – why is *governor* ['father'] slang if *'orse* and *'orrible* aren't?" Their disappointment reminds us that slang is expected to be entertaining and that "outsiders" have a hard time appreciating it. The South African schoolgirls and boys mentioned earlier reacted to de Klerk's questionnaire with "astounding enthusiasm . . . delight at being able to let go of linguistic inhibitions anonymously, and at the fact that some people are interested in the language of youth."

More tellingly, a central purpose of poetic language is to prompt introspective reflection; a central function of slang is to short-circuit reflection and to exalt snap judgments and habitual attitudes among social peers. Indeed, each time a slang term is repeated, unthinking evaluative norms are reinforced. Irrationalism has always had its voice in civilized life, and this frankly anti-rational function of slang is what underlies the objections so often expressed by educators and essayists.

6.3 Radiations of the meanings of the term *slang* and of attitudes toward slang

In 1987, a reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* endorsed American slang as "the one untrammelled glory" of the United States. Britons of other days had more than once assailed American slang, and neologisms of all kinds, as so much ignorant vulgarity; but from the postmodern landscape of the 1980s the *TLS* reviewer concluded that American slang was an asset to international English, a valuable rejuvenating force, "a gift to a greyer, older world" (H. Williams).

To critics of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, British or American, approbation of slang from a quarter so august as the *Times*

would have seemed incredible, a stinging insult to decent English speech. The critical aim, unattainable and often unexpressed, was steadily to evolve a cogent and civilizing diction suitable for all human purposes; slang, almost by definition, was antithetical to such an aim. From the days of Swift and Defoe, an article of faith for critics and grammarians alike was that unregulated, unstandardized speech served only to corrupt language, to undermine the human capacity for rational thought, and thus ultimately to hinder the wise exercise of free will. Slang was seen as both emerging from and sustaining an undisguised baseness of mind that must lead to the coarsening of both language and civilization.

Users of slang in this view might sometimes be persons of wit but never of merit. The English belletrist J. P. Thomas observed in 1825 that "men of discretion will not pervert language to [slang's] unprofitable purposes of conversational mimicry." "Slang," he wrote, "is the conversation of fools" (quoted in Partridge 1933, 7). Americans like the Harvard-educated Richard Henry Dana, Jr., shared this perspective. After expressing his admiration for the novels of Dickens, Dana confided to his journal in 1842 that Dickens' *American Notes* was another matter altogether, "careless, pretentious, & with a kind of off-hand, slang-ey [sic], defying tone, which a man with a well-balanced mind & the delicate perceptions & self respect of a gentleman could not fall into" (Dana 1968, I: 103). Already in 1828 Noah Webster had become the first lexicographer to enter the word *slang* in a standard dictionary, defining it unceremoniously as "low, vulgar unmeaning language."

The word *slang* itself is of uncertain origin and has had a curious history. Despite the evidence of the *OED*, its earliest recorded occurrences did not apply to language at all. Partridge demonstrates the existence of the word *slang* in several obscure senses as part of the argot of English vagabonds, swindlers, and thieves as early as 1740–1, more than a decade before the *OED*'s primary citation (Partridge 1949, s.v. *slang-madge*, *slang-mort play*, *slang upon the safe*, *slanging the gentry-mort rumly*, etc.). The early examples of usage allude uniformly to criminal deception. Earliest of all and especially curious is the appearance of the unexplained form *slango* in *The Amorous Gallant's Tongue* of 1740 (date according to Burke 68): "You, Fellow-traveller, what do you do for a living? *You, Cole, what Slango do you go upon?*"

The sense 'underworld occupation' in the 1740 citation recurs a half century later, now in the familiar form *slang*, in George Parker's invaluable description of English criminality, *Life's Painter of Variegated Characters* (140): "'How do you work now?' . . . 'O, upon the old *slang* [of impersonating a mute], and sometimes a little *lully-prigging* ['stealing wet linen off the hedges' (Parker's gloss)].'" Here the word *slang* clearly denotes a hoodwinking trick. It is tempting to fancy a connection between *slango/slang* and the name of the servant Slango, an important character in Henry Carey's comic opera *The Honest Yorkshire-Man*, first performed in 1735. Not only is the plot driven by Slango's strategy of disguise, he being described as "an arch fellow" among a cast that includes characters significantly named Gaylove, Muckworm, Sapscull, and Blunder, but also his speeches are identified throughout by the printed abbreviation *Slang*.

Merriam and Oxford are equally at a loss for an etymology of the word. A possibility – though no more than that – is that it may be a borrowing with transferred meaning of the Dutch *slang* 'snake, serpent,' a word known to have become the late eighteenth-century prisoners' *slang* 'a chain.' A connection with ideas of cheating and fraud may have come from an original association with the serpent of Genesis, a creature often cited as the first and most successful of deceivers. But intriguing as it may be, this is mere conjecture.

At any event, the principle of etymological parsimony leads the *OED* to wonder whether its first citation, from 1756, really designates language; it could as well refer to deceptive practice: "Thomas Throw had been upon the town, knew the slang well." The earliest unequivocal application of *slang* to a kind of diction occurs two years later in a minor satirical pamphlet by the pseudonymous "Henry Humbug." In a Swiftian attack upon thoroughly corrupt London thief-takers (professional apprehenders of thieves), Humbug (lxxix) advises that their orphaned brats be fully instructed in the "Slang Patter" of malefactors so as better to prepare them for their own lives of crime. Humbug's referent is quite specific: *slang patter* means the obscure, exclusionary, and socially restricted jargon of a mostly itinerant criminal class.

First noted in the sixteenth century by Copland (1535–6, 24), who believed it to be of recent introduction into England, this mystifying jargon was often known as *pedlar's French* or *pedlyng Frenche* and later as *cant*, the designation favored throughout most of the eighteenth century by both the canters and the commentators. The *OED* favors a derivation of *cant* at some remove from Latin *cantare*, but does not dismiss the likelihood – recently reasserted by Hancock (1984, 385) and more appealing on sociolinguistic if not on phonological grounds – that it comes directly from Irish and Gaelic *caint*, *cainnt* 'speech.' *Patter* was long a generic cant synonym for 'talk' or 'speech,' so Humbug's *slang patter* literally means 'hoodwinking talk.' When Captain Grose defined *slang* in 1785 (its first appearance in a

dictionary of any kind), his definition was succinct and specific: "SLANG. Cant language."

Grose's practice throughout his humorously titled *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, edited by Pierce Egan for its fifth edition in 1823 and known in the United States by 1805 (*Port Folio* 261), shows that by "cant" he meant rogues' language specifically. Grose's definition of *canting* is "a kind of gibberish use by thieves and gypsies, likewise pedlar's French, the slang, &c. &c."

Once it had surfaced in the speech of relatively upright citizens, the word *slang* almost immediately took on a predictable extended sense, virtually the same secondary sense that decades earlier had attached itself to *cant*. In 1762, the playwright Samuel Foote (5) portrayed Oxford students using the noun *slang* as a new synonym for 'empty or deceptive language, rubbish,' a sense of the word which survived for several decades. Similarly, the *Britannica* in 1801 condemned "that sentimental slang of philanthropy" (cited in *OED*), and the American glossarist Pickering (159) in 1816 referred to "that sort of political or other cant ['insincerity'] which amuses the rabble, and is called by the vulgar name of *slang*." Washington Irving (216), the first significant American author to use the word, reports in the voice of "Pindar Cockloft" that his nieces "complain of that empty sarcastical slang / So common to all the coxcombical gang, / Who . . . boast of themselves, when they talk with proud air / Of man's mortal ascendancy over the fair."

Additional senses of *slang* had developed by the end of the eighteenth century, including one of the longest-lived, that of "abusive or vituperative language, offensive talk, invective." In 1786, the wry versifier William Woty (2) asked, "Did ever Cicero's harangue / Rival this flowing eloquence of slang?" A note explains the neologism as "A cant word for vulgar language." Washington Irving (364) also rhymed "slang" with "harangue." The anonymous biographer of Congressman David Crockett observed in 1832 that "Colonel Crockett . . . has been exposed to the wrath of the [press, couched in] every style, from the most chaste and sedate language, to the most violent slang of modern party spirit" (*Sketches* 129). An Irish-American music-hall song of the 1870s tells of a young tough who "told the old woman . . . to shut up her giving him . . . slang" (R. L. Wright 595). A derivative based on the sense in question is *slangwhanger*, employed by both Cooper and Irving (who may well have coined it), and meaning 'a carping journalist or politician given to invective or verbal abuse.' As late as 1927, former private Elisha Stockwell (156) recalled the reaction of a New Orleans woman to his Wisconsin comrades in arms during the Civil War:

> She swore like a man and called the soldiers nigger thieves and said if they touched those vegetables she would come over there. They . . . told her they didn't want her truck. But she kept on with slang, and told them to come up there two at a time and she would lick the whole bunch.

A trace of this sense of 'verbal abuse, offensive talk' lingers among the many Americans of the present day for whom the word *slang* means mainly profanity and "four-letter words" outside of any framework of standard versus nonstandard.

The next sense to develop, common in the United States between the 1830s and perhaps the 1920s, had a subliterary reference: 'an extravagant style of verbal humor employing grotesque comparisons, nonstandard or newly coined words, and often dialect or eccentric spellings.' The "Crockett almanacs" of 1833–60 typify the style, which also exploited (and largely invented) the "tall talk" vocabulary of "mouth-filling words" like *explaterate, killniferously*, and *exflunctify* (a list of which is given by Mathews 114–5). "Ben Harding," the fictive boatman-author of the 1839 *Almanac* (2), promised ironically to "keep all your low slang out of the book, and make it read as slick as a greasy bed-blanket, and as strait [sic] as a frozen nigger. All the stories will be as beautiful as a red eel or a painted monkey."

The works of Charles F. Browne ("Artemus Ward") were thus said to be "written in slang," as were those of the early dialect humorists Joe Strickland, Seba Smith, Thomas Haliburton, George Washington Harris, and others. After 1871 the best-known example of this limited genre was undoubtedly the episode of Buck Fanshaw's funeral in chapter 47 of Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (1872, 299): "Are you the duck that keeps the gospel-mill next door? . . . the head clerk of the doxology-works." The humor of such efforts turns chiefly on the pretense that the uneducated have their own funny language, chock-full of ludicrous wonders, which they speak incessantly. Writers could have fun experimenting with nonstandard English while their ironic sensibility simultaneously condemned it. No linguistic condemnation, however, is evident in the short stories of journalist Damon Runyon (1884–1946), written mostly in the 1930s and 1940s. Owing to the difficulty of collecting or manufacturing ad hoc an offbeat vocabulary sufficient to sustain interest for its own sake, most writing of the "slang" sort is mercifully brief. Ephemeral modern examples occur now and again, often thrown together to introduce newspaper fillers on the "latest" teen lingo.

Inspired by Harlem slang or "jive" and encouraged by the writers Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, the African-American editor Dan Burley (1944) hoped to foster a lexically contrived but culturally

authentic "jive literature" during World War II to reflect the innovative energy of the black urban vocabulary. As editor of the *New York Amsterdam News*, Burley sought to popularize jive both as a means of black self-expression and as an instrument of racial harmony, as its humor might appeal to anybody. Much of the vocabulary collected or coined by Burley eventually found its way into a tour de force of American biography, *Really the Blues* (Mezzrow and Wolfe 1946). A decade later the jive style was revived as parodic farce by the "beat" comedian Lord Buckley (15) as in his redaction of the Gettysburg Address:

> Four big hits and seven licks ago, our Before daddies Swung forth upon this sweet groovey Land, a jumpin', Swingin', stompin', wailin' NEW NATION! Hip to the cool sweet groove of Liberty and solid sent upon the Ace Lick that all Cats and Kitties, Red, White, or Blue! are created *LEVEL*, in *FRONT*.

Buckley's eccentric capitalization may reveal a debt to the canny satirist George Ade (1866–1944), the past master of "slang writing." Set beside Buckley's avalanche of figuration and lexical invention, however, Ade's many "fables in slang," still effective though written between 1897 and 1920, seem measured and muted in comparison.

Other important developments in the semantic career of the word *slang* also reach back 200 years. In the early nineteenth century, English writers extended the semantic range of the word considerably. Soon slang came to include any nonstandard idiom in popular, particularly in urban, use, which, to the fastidious ear of the intelligentsia, could mark an individual as ignorant, vulgar, or disreputable.

Next to the baffling (and thus especially degenerate) cant of criminals ("Flick me some panam and caffan," "Twig the cull, he is peery," from Grose 1785), the litterateurs of the late Georgian era and thereafter found catch phrases, vogue words, and the cliches of commerce to be the most pernicious of nonstandard idioms, and to these also they freely applied the scornful epithet of "slang." Doubtless speaking for many, Lady Louisa Stuart lamented early in the century, "Slang has superseded language" (quoted by McKnight 1923, 409). The youthful Carlyle (1: 53) in 1815 sought escape from "the cant & slang of the coxcombs, the bloods, the bucks, the boobies with which all earth is filled." His elder contemporary Coleridge (4: 359) in 1818 indiscriminately equated "what we now call *slang*" with "vulgarisms."

De Quincey (120) showed just how far the label could be stretched, when he confessed in 1821, "Reading is an accomplishment of mine; and, in the slang use of the word *accomplishment* as a superficial and ornamental attainment, almost the only one I possess." Here the adjective *slang* means something like '(of diction) fashionable though imprecise,' an attenuated usage which, owing to the later associations of the word, has now an eccentric or pedantic ring, at least in this case. But insofar as they were pretentious, unfamiliar, or obscure, even the jargons of the arts and professions might be stigmatized as slang. The *OED* cites Bentham's contemptuous allusion before 1813 to "lawyer's slang" (not just words, but the whole mystifying legalistic style). Later in the century Hotten freely categorized as slang the words *aesthetic*, *transcendental*, and *chiaroscuro*, fine arts terms just entering the mainstream of educated usage after mid century. Any specialized vocabulary, high, low, or nondescript, could thus be dismissed as slang. In America, the *Somerset* (NJ) *Messenger* reproved President elect Lincoln for humorously applying the "slang phrases" *free-love affair* and *passional attraction* to the state of the Union; these he drew from the idiom of the notorious "free-love" movement (Feb. 21, 1861, cited by Siegal 19).

At one time the label *slang* connoted the general style and content of a discourse about as often as it did specific words and phrases. The appearance in 1823 of a duodecimo volume called *Slang*, compiled by "Jon Bee" (a pen name for the Englishman John Badcock), helped tip the scales further in the direction of words and phrases. As the first publication to carry the word *slang* in its title, Badcock's catchpenny production justified itself as "a dictionary of the turf, the ring, the chase, the pit, of bon-ton, and the varieties of life." It meant to elucidate "words and phrases that are necessarily, or purposely, cramp, mutative, and unintelligible, outside their respective spheres." These chiefly urban spheres were markedly undignified: pugilism, sports betting, crime, street life, and the habits of dandies and their university epigones. For Badcock, the chief devotees of slang were those we would today call "street people." The natural habitat of slang was very much the teeming city, an idea emphasized by the American philologist G. P. Krapp nearly a century later (quoted by I. Allen 1994). Many others have shown a similar orientation: nonstandard urban vocabulary is "slang" and vulgar; country ("dialect") words of unusual formation or use may be inelegant, but are in contrast felt to be earthy, provincial, redolent of quiet, old-time ways.

In 1848, the American John Russell Bartlett drew a sharp, if implicit, distinction between "slang" and "provincialisms" on the one hand and, on the other, "words found in the dictionaries of Drs. Johnson and Webster," with the remark that slang and provincialisms "are low, or vulgar, or only to be heard in familiar conversation." Bartlett, whose *Americanisms* was preeminent

in its field for fifty years, did not specify what he meant by "slang words" except to say that he had included those "not noticed by lexicographers, yet so much employed as to deserve a place in a glossary" (iv). One infers that he meant "low," "vulgar," and "familiar" expressions unnoticed by the great lexicographers, plus new items not obviously "provincial" or regional, and of varying degrees of respectability.

Before the 1850s the word *slang*, as applied to language, was fraught with negative connotations, but during that decade a benchmark was reached in the amelioration of the word. In 1853 came the appearance in *Household Words* of an approving article, written anonymously by the English journalist George Augustus Sala, which commended the expressiveness and utility of many recent idioms not yet, or not likely to be, recognized by standard dictionaries. The *Living Age* of New York reprinted the piece later that year. Sala urged the creation of a new "slang" dictionary to replace the outdated collections of Francis Grose, Pierce Egan, and "Jon Bee." In 1859 it appeared, reportedly put together largely by Sala and others, but edited, introduced, and published by John Camden Hotten (Burke 21).

A Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words, commonly referred to simply as *The Slang Dictionary*, was in its way a British counterpart to Bartlett, but its vocabulary was more extensive and more decidedly urban. Hotten, the editor, was twenty-seven years old in 1859 and a keen publisher of popular literature. He had come to America at the age of sixteen and lived eight years with American English; his book quotes on occasion from Bartlett. Hotten took a favorable view of what he called for convenience "slang," defining it epigrammatically as "the language of street humour, of high, low, and fast life." Hotten's relatively limited conception of slang has directly and indirectly influenced most serious collectors since.

But in practice Hotten still welcomed material of a very general nature. As the contents of his book show, Hotten wished to treat as slang those vernacular expressions unrecorded in standard dictionaries, informal neologisms, and notable figurative meanings of every kind that did not originate in the works of established authors and which did not develop to fill clear-cut technical needs of the learned professions. There was also a generous amount of underworld lingo, as there had been in Grose, and, of course, there were those words of the street, the alehouse, the prize ring, the music hall, and the university, as well as some of the affected diction of high society, that Hotten had chosen as the real core of slang.

Nevertheless, any current word or phrase that had ever undergone a notable change or extension of meaning was likely to be called slang or "formerly slang," regardless of the circumstances surrounding the change.

Hotten's dictionary did not effect a revolution in the meaning of the label *slang*; but, by extending the word's range to include the usefully colloquial or figurative as well as the substandard, Hotten mitigated some of the word's unfavorable connotations and encouraged scholars to show greater tolerance of the phenomenon. Slang was no longer a simple pejorative term specific to the lexicon of human foibles and discreditable pursuits. Hotten's eighty-six page history of slang and criminal cant, the roughly 5,000 entries in the first edition (which grew to more than 10,000 in the fourth), and the closely printed thirteen-page bibliography made Hotten's the most substantive book on slang that had yet appeared. The third edition received an extended favorable review in the American *Harper's Monthly* (Nordhoff) in 1865.

Enthusiasts like Hotten were discussing the nature of "slang" at a time when academic scholars had yet to rationalize the category. The associations of the word itself were beginning to improve. The change, however, was still incipient. In 1877, nearly thirty years after his brief allusion to "slang" in the first edition of his *Dictionary of Americanisms*, and eighteen years after the first appearance of Hotten's slang dictionary, Bartlett (4th ed., iii–iv) turned to the subject in greater detail:

> The vocabulary of slang . . . may be divided into several classes. First are the terms used by bankers and stock-brokers. . . . These may be classed among the more respectable slang. . . . Next we have "College Slang," or words and expressions in common use among the students in our colleges and pupils in our higher schools. . . . Then there is the slang of politicians, of the stage, of sportsmen, of Western boatmen, of pugilists, of the police, of rowdies and "roughs," of thieves, of workshops, of the circus, of shop-keepers, workmen, &c., which taken together form a rich mine from whence new words are derived; some of which, after a struggle, . . . finally obtain places in "Webster's Unabridged."

Bartlett's listing of the social classes most likely to use and create slang suggests one trait in common: all were more or less unrefined and undignified in an age when dignity of manner was a centrally held value among upstanding citizens. Richard Meade Bache (128) had succinctly stated this social fact in 1869: "Familiarity is insulting and all slang is familiar." Whereas Hotten (47) had tried to distinguish "slang" from criminal "cant" and subscribed to the concept of "learned slang" (jargonesque terms of art used by lawyers, critics, and theologians), Bartlett more cogently subsumed the vocabularies of rowdies, roughs, and thieves under the more general heading of slang, which he then confined to the

unlearned classes. Bartlett also recognized that there could be degrees of slanginess, the limited slang of investment and finance being more respectable (because closer to mainstream values and closer to being a technical vocabulary) than that of socially less accepted pursuits.

Meanwhile, Hotten's fourth edition of 1874 had occasioned a substantial and generally favorable discussion of "The Philology of Slang" by the great English anthropologist E. B. Tylor. Probably the first academic to publicly acknowledge the subject as worthy of study, Tylor emphasized the fact that semantic change in English and other languages was generally unpredictable, and that figurative usage, unbound by formal rules and not confined to poets, was of great importance in semantic evolution. His examples of "slang" chosen from Hotten, Grose, and others, as usual, comprehend idioms from all levels of diction and from all social strata. Tylor's ambivalence toward the subject makes itself felt in his concluding paragraph: he has deliberately omitted some of slang's "proper topics" as being "too repulsive. Much of the slang-maker's skill is spent on foul ideas, which make the Slang Dictionary, at its best, an unpresentable book; while short of this limit, there is an ugly air about lists of words so largely coined by vagabonds and criminals." Yet more significant than these reservations are Tylor's opening words:

> Slang, despised and ignored until lately by the lexicographers, is a genuine and influential branch of speech. It is one of the feeders of what may be called standard language, which with little scruple adopts and adapts the words it happens to want, whether from the technical terms of shopmen and artisans, or out of the quainter vocabularies of costermongers and prize-fighters, schoolboys and fops. This practical importance entitles it to be treated linguistically, like any other working dialect.

Slang was now being taken seriously by a few scholars of greater note than Hotten. In 1875, Yale's William Dwight Whitney expressed his cautiously favorable opinion of slang in the broad context of metaphor and simile. Whitney (112–13) acknowledged:

> The mind not only has a wonderful facility in catching resemblances and turning them to account, but it takes a real creative pleasure in the exercise, and derives from it desirable variety and liveliness of style. . . . So far as this is odd or undignified, it forms the largest element of what we call "slang," and we frown upon it; and properly enough, but yet it is only the excess and abuse of a tendency which is wholly legitimate, and of the highest value, in the history of speech. . . . [I]n the . . . natural

> delight of language-making, slang is a necessary evil, and there are grades and uses of slang whose charm no one need be ashamed to feel and confess; it is like reading a narrative in a series of rude but telling pictures, instead of in words.

For Whitney, slang was chiefly "odd or undignified" metaphor, but, once seen from the perspective of rhetoric rather than that of pathology, it could please us as a "charming" entity going directly to some prelinguistic level of the mind. In Whitney's view, slang was not decay: it was instead a catalyst for the growth of language.

One might even call it poetry, which is essentially what Walt Whitman did just a decade later. In his paean to "Slang in America," Whitman rhapsodizes over a mode of speech he defines only as "indirection." Whitman moreover regards the creation of slang as a liberating process, "an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism and express itself illimitably," a universal tendency of mind which "in highest walks produces poets and poems, and doubtless in pre-historic times gave the start to, and perfected, the whole immense tangle of the old mythologies." Still widely regarded in 1885 as little more than an eccentric, Whitman was unlikely to persuade his learned contemporaries that slang was beneficial to anything at all, but his literary apotheosis a generation later lent credibility to his extravagant praise of the virtues of American slang. And Whitman had held this opinion for a long time. Even before the Civil War he had written, "Many of the slang words among fighting men, gamblers, thieves, prostitutes, are powerful words. These words ought to be collected – the bad words as well as the good; – Many of these bad words are fine" (1856–?, 735–6).

It was the lexicographer Whitney, who as editor-in-chief of the great *Century Dictionary* (1889–91) prepared what is perhaps the first modern, specialized definition of slang as a narrow subclass of nonstandard English:

> *Slang* . . . In present use, colloquial words and phrases which have originated in the cant or rude speech of the vagabond or unlettered classes or, belonging in form to standard speech, have acquired or have had given them restricted, capricious, or extravagantly metaphorical meanings, and are regarded as vulgar or inelegant.

With its etymological discussion combined with illuminating citations and an extended descriptive note, the *Century*'s article on *slang* runs to about a thousand words. As the preceding discussion of the historical context makes clear, the *Century*'s superior treatment comes not from greater

insight into the nature of an empirically existing "slang" but from a professional awareness of how such commentators as Hotten, Bartlett, Tylor, Whitman, and Whitney himself had employed the term.

Thus, before the end of the nineteenth century, the modern lexicographical understanding of slang had emerged. Yet to the ordinary user of English, the word remained useful primarily as a wonderfully flexible term of dispraise. The Boston surgeon Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., had unforgettably warned that "the use of *slang*, or cheap generic terms, as a substitute for differentiated specific expressions, is at once a sign and a cause of mental atrophy" (1870, 275). Even Greenough and Kittredge of Harvard, the first American academics to address the place of a broadly defined slang in the overall development of English, echoed Holmes's warning in 1901 (73), admonishing that "the unchecked and habitual use of slang (even polite slang) is deleterious to the mind."

In their condescension toward the subject, Greenough and Kittredge call to mind a past when academics could avoid much exposure to Whitman's "blab of the pave." Finding "nothing abnormal about slang," the Harvard professors nonetheless advise, "The prejudice against this form of speech is to be encouraged" (55). Part of the reason for their distaste is that, since

> . . . it is not the accepted medium of communication, [slang] has a taint of impropriety about it which makes it offensive. Again, the very currency of slang depends on its allusions to things which are not supposed to be universally familiar or generally respectable; and hence it is vulgar, since it brings in associations with what is for the moment regarded as unknown or in bad repute. [72]

Slang words, too, "are evanescent, counting their duration by days instead of decades, and becoming obsolete even while one is speaking them." Indeed, because "slang . . . has no fixed meaning" and "tends to level all those nice distinctions of meaning . . . which the consensus of the language has been at so much pains to build up," its use "must gradually reduce one's thought to the same ignorant level from which most slang proceeds" (73).

6.4 Twentieth-century scholarship on slang

Evanescent or not, slang was becoming ever more prominent. In response to the increasing amount of slang in mainstream print, H. L. Mencken's thoughts on the subject ballooned from fewer than ten pages in *The*

American Language of 1919 to well over 150 by 1948. Less straitlaced than most earlier observers, Mencken keenly appreciated the amusement afforded by transitory slang expressions; moreover, he became especially careful in his 1936 revision to discriminate between *slang*, occupational and professional *cant* (in the sense of a vocabulary of any kind – technical or otherwise – limited to a professional or vocational group), and criminal *argot* (a word covering the various heterodox vocabularies associated with habitual criminals). In terms of the material Mencken actually chose to address, his distinction between "slang" and "cant," at least, became rather moot: copious but uncritical lists of subcultural vocabularies appear in the 1948 *Supplement*, ranging alphabetically from "Actors" to "Union men in general."

Mencken's wry but superficial essay, with its theoretical and historical overview and its colorful word lists, remained the standard reference on American slang until 1960, the year that saw the appearance of Harold Wentworth and Stuart Flexner's ambitious *Dictionary of American Slang*. This was the first painstaking lexicographical attempt to do justice to American varieties of slang. Though it suffered from the inevitable shortcomings of a pioneering work (including a definition of *slang* that was as broad as any from the nineteenth century), Wentworth and Flexner greatly surpassed in coverage and sophistication the few earlier general dictionaries of American slang (Maitland 1891; Weseen 1934; Weingarten 1954). Still partially expurgated but unusually frank for its day, *DAS* was the first American dictionary of any kind to deal forthrightly with sexual and scatological slang, though later research shows that such terms exist in even bawdier profusion than *DAS* might suggest. The collections of Partridge and of Farmer and Henley indicate that the production of coarse vocabulary is equally vigorous elsewhere in the English-speaking world.

Flexner's extensive analytic comments stress the various social and psychological aspects as fully as the formal features of the slang vocabulary. Echoing the impression of Jespersen earlier in the century, Flexner also observed that "most American slang is created and used by males," for the primary reason that American men belong to more identifiable subgroups than do women and because American culture has encouraged men to be coarser and more hyperbolic in informal speech (xii; Jespersen 1921, 248; Lighter 1: xxxii; but cf. Risch). Wentworth and Flexner's dictionary was twice revised before being thoroughly revamped and retitled by Robert L. Chapman in 1986.

Solid specialized studies in an area where careful scholarship has been a rarity must not go unmentioned. All of these significant works on

American slang have been published since the 1930s, the earliest of them soon after Mencken in America and Partridge in Britain had revealed something of the extent and importance of slang in the English lexicon. All demonstrate a serious interest in the subject, an interest that would have been seen as morbid and improper in the days of Dr. Holmes.

W. J. Burke's meticulous annotated bibliography, *The Literature of Slang* (1939), covered informal vocabulary of all kinds, but its great scope only enhances its value. Surveying the entire history of English from the sixteenth century, Burke's annotated inventory of sources remains a primary reference work in the field, and it is unfortunate (if entirely understandable) that no scholar has taken up the challenge of providing a sequel to cover the years since its publication. Many additional sources are listed in the bibliographies of the "Second Supplemented [i.e., third] Edition" of *DAS* (Wentworth and Flexner 1975).

Col. Elbridge Colby's necessarily discreet *Army Talk* of 1942 has been importantly supplemented by the equally informal but larger and quite unexpurgated *Dictionary of Soldier Talk* (1984) by John R. Elting, Dan Cragg, and Ernest Deal. The prodigious *American Thesaurus of Slang*, edited by Lester Berrey and Melvin Van den Bark, appeared in 1942 and was revised twice in the next ten years. A later thesaurus, organized alphabetically, has been compiled by Lewin and Lewin (1988, 1994). Both works have been fattened by the assiduous inclusion of very uncommon terms.

The prison chaplain Hyman Goldin, along with Frank O'Leary and Morris Lipsius, compiled a *Dictionary of American Underworld Lingo* in the early 1940s (but not published till 1950), a work especially notable for the clarity and precision of its definitions. David Maurer's sociolinguistically oriented *The Big Con* (1940), *Whiz Mob* (1955), and *The American Confidence Man* (1974) will not soon be surpassed as discursive studies of the language and livelihood of American swindlers and pickpockets; his collected shorter articles, augmented by new introductions, were ably edited in 1981 as *Language of the Underworld*.

Edith Folb's in-depth examination of street vocabulary among African-American teens and gang members in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s, called *Runnin' Down Some Lines*, is likewise a landmark in slang study. Robert S. Gold's *A Jazz Lexicon* (1964, revised as *Jazz Talk* in 1975) applies historical lexicography to the slang of jazz musicians. Thomas L. Clark of Las Vegas has done much the same thing for gamblers' lingo in his *Dictionary of Gambling and Gaming*. Popular word-collector Paul Dickson has compiled a useful *Baseball Dictionary*, which gains authority from drawing on the unpublished collections of the indefatigable word-collector Peter Tamony.

The journal *American Speech* has long been the chief outlet for well-informed articles on American slang. Rooted in meticulous documentary research, the contributions of Gerald L. Cohen (1982, 1985–97, 1991), Barry Popik and Cohen (1995, 1997), and David Shulman (1986) have been especially enlightening concerning such salient terms as *shyster* 'an unethical attorney,' *dude*, *hot dog*, *jazz*, and *the Big Apple*.

6.5 The historical development of American slang

Although it has stimulated great curiosity in the twentieth century, American slang, for reasons that should now be apparent, scarcely drew notice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The earliest slangy Americanism that we have good evidence for is undoubtedly the New England word *netop*. This was a borrowing from the native Algonquian languages of the northeast coast that persisted in New England for 250 years. In his description of Algonquian speech written in 1643, Roger Williams included the phrase "*Netop machage*," which he translated as "Friend, not so." This was hardly English language slang. But later citations (*DAE*, *DA*) show that some of the English settlers picked up the word, perhaps via pidgin, and began using it in contexts that had nothing to do with Indians. As late as 1898, New York State novelist David Westcott wrote in his contemporary novel, *David Harum*, that "Mr. Harum and I are great 'neetups,' as he says . . . It means, 'cronies,' I believe, in his dictionary" (cited in *DA*).

Clearly there was no urgent need for the seventeenth-century settlers of Massachusetts and Connecticut to adopt a Native word for 'friend' and then pass it on for two centuries and more; their own English had perfectly good equivalents, including *friend*, *companion*, and *brother*. Similarly there was no obvious need for the undergraduates of Cambridge to coin *crony* at roughly the same time, or for Westerners to coin the synonymous *sidekick* late in the 1800s. The word *netop*, serving no purpose in English but to add a little pioneer swash to one's image and a breezy sense of place to conversation, presumably carried similar emotive associations. A parallel adaptation, transforming Choctaw *itibapishili* 'my brother' into regional English *bobbasheely*, occurred later on the Alabama frontier (*DARE*). *Kid* 'a child or young person,' was often applied in the colonies to the generally youthful indentured servants who had frequently been enticed or stolen (in thieves' lingo, *napped* or *nabbed*) from their homes in Britain; hence *kid-napper* and, via back-formation, to *kidnap*, words accepted into formal English only after their employment in condemning the activities of His Majesty's press gangs in the latter 1700s.

Other durable expressions in use in America as well as in Britain in the eighteenth century and probably deserving the name of slang were *bones* 'dice' and *booze* 'liquor,' both having declined in acceptability from Middle and early Modern English, *grub* or *belly-timber* 'food, victuals,' *widgeon* or *gudgeon* 'a simpleton,' *kill-devil* 'rum,' *blackcoat* 'a clergyman,' *flam* 'a hoax,' *pins* 'the legs,' *phiz* 'the face,' *sconce* 'the head,' *save one's bacon* 'to save oneself,' *Adam's ale* 'water,' *give the bag* 'to escape from or evade,' *roger* 'to copulate with,' *punk* 'a prostitute,' and *scab* 'a contemptible fellow.' In addition to formerly offensive oaths like *zounds!* and *blood and wounds!* most of our current vulgar epithets were in use among the less decorous population long before the Revolution, particularly the plosive set *bitch*, *bastard*, *bugger*, and *son of a bitch*. The epithet *bloody*, extended unremarkably from its seventeenth-century sense of 'bloody-minded, cruel,' developed its offensive modern use as a mere epithet during the eighteenth century. Redcoats were jeered at in the streets of Boston as *bloodybacks*, *lobsters*, and *lobsterbacks*, insults that helped precipitate the "Massacre" of March 5, 1770.

Of more than passing interest is the fact that the first American known to have commented on slang as we would understand it today was Benjamin Franklin, inventor, philosopher, statesman, and, at the age of sixteen, collector of slang synonyms for being drunk. In Boston in 1722, the teenaged Franklin (writing as "Silence Dogood," 37) published an essay on the virtues of temperance that included the following interesting passage:

> It argues some Shame in the Drunkards themselves, in that they have invented numberless Words and Phrases to cover their Folly, whose proper Significations are harmless, or have no Signification at all. They are seldom known to be *drunk*, tho they are very often *boozey*, *cogey*, *tipsey*, *fox'd*, *merry*, *mellow*, *fuddl'd*, *groatable*, *Confoundedly cut*, *See two moons*, are *Among the Philistines*, *In a very good humour*, *See the Sun*, or, *The Sun has shone upon them*; they *Clip the King's English*, are *Almost froze*, *feavourish*, *In their Altitudes*, *pretty well enter'd*, &c. In short, every Day produces some new Word or Phrase which might be added to the Vocabulary of the *Tiplers*.

Richard Steele had complained in issue no. 12 of *The Tatler* (1709) that the vocabulary of London chocolate-house loungers changed every "half year." Noteworthy in the light of this and of countless later, similar comments on slang are Franklin's observations that new words and phrases concerning drunkenness are invented "every day" and his imaginative inference that tavern habitues deliberately created new locutions so as to screen from others their conversations about drink. Fifteen years later, in his own paper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin published an expanded list running to 228 items. Not all the items Franklin assembled can equally be called "slang," a word and, to some extent, a concept he did not know: in large part they are allusive descriptions of the effects of alcohol. Some are probably idiosyncratic, though Edward Seeber (104) claims to have discovered 138 expressions from the later list independently entered in various dictionaries. Nevertheless Franklin's lists prove that intoxication and its effects have been domains unusually productive of slang for a long time. As might be expected, few of Franklin's terms for being drunk have survived into the twentieth century; exceptions, from the list of 1737 (1), are *stew'd, jagg'd, boozy, cock'd*, and *cock-ey'd*.

The Rev. John Witherspoon's essays on the state of British and American English in 1781 mention a few slang items, all long established in Britain and America; of special interest for us are *bamboozle, bilk, bite* 'to cheat,' and *sham Abraham* 'to malinger.' Witherspoon calls these "*cant* phrases, introduced into public speaking or composition." But, as we should expect, Witherspoon includes "under the head of cant phrases" not just slang in a narrow sense but "all proverbial or common sayings introduced into the language, as well as trite and beaten allusions" (Mathews 1931, 27–8), in other words, all cliches that might blunt the effectiveness of formal diction. Witherspoon comments that most such idioms are "in their nature temporary and sometimes local." Yet he also makes the important observation that "a cant phrase" may ultimately establish itself as "an idiom of the [standard] language." *Mob*, he finds, though despised and condemned by Swift decades earlier, is now "established for ever" (29).

A second American slang glossary, very different from Franklin's and the only other extended list known to have appeared during the eighteenth century, is a valuable list of criminal cant appended to William Smith's *The Confession of Thomas Mount*, dated May 20, 1791, at Newport, Rhode Island. Mount, born in Middletown, East (i.e., New) Jersey, about 1764, had been a criminal for nearly fifteen years at the time of his execution for burglary. The Rev. Smith, who actually wrote the as-told-to confession, was primarily concerned with the salvation of Mount's soul; nevertheless, in the days before the execution, he secured from the unrepentant Mount and his condemned cell mate James Williams a list of well over a hundred words and phrases of thieves' cant, which the two thugs themselves referred to as "the flash language" (W. Miller 1929). Among the most typical and longest-lived examples on the list are *cove* 'a man,' *blowen* 'a woman,' *peepers* 'eyes,' *quod* 'jail,' *wheel* 'a dollar,' *doss* (spelled *dause* by Smith) 'a bed,' *pops* 'pistols,' *prad* 'a horse,' and *bit* 'money.' Several of these survived into the twentieth century in the United States or elsewhere.

The vocabulary of the *Confession* is doubly valuable for its authenticity; most of the terms are recorded earlier (and later) in British use, but a goodly number would seem to be Americanisms (Partridge 1949, passim). A similar list, less valuable only because less extensive, appears in Henry Tufts's probably ghost-written *Narrative* of 1807, listing about eighty cant words learned by Tufts from "flashmen as they termed themselves" (316–17) in a Massachusetts prison in 1794. A humorous anecdote of "Lord Mansfield" and "a jail bird," containing seven cant or "flash" phrases, identified as slang, appeared in *Father Tammany's Almanac for . . . 1792* (19).

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, "slang" of one kind or another had existed in American English for nearly 200 years. Owing to the dearth in early America of the breezy kind of humorous and picaresque writing commonly associated with slang, satisfactory knowledge of its complexion during this period is difficult to come by. The American slang glossaries of Franklin, Smith, and Tufts are the only ones known for the period before 1820, encompassing altogether about 400 terms. We do not know how wide a distribution many of these expressions enjoyed. Though Partridge's extensive research has shown the durability of many items of criminal cant, surely most of the flash lingo of Mount, Williams, and Tufts was unfamiliar outside of jails and the *flash kens* "underworld hangouts" of the "canting crew."

Much of the slang vocabulary included by Captain Grose, however, was indeed known in America along, inevitably, with other unrecorded terms and terms not recorded in print until the nineteenth century. If the records relied on by Craigie and Hulbert for the *DAE*, Mathews for the *DA*, and others paint a trustworthy picture of early slang in the United States, this slang did not become markedly "American" until the 1830s or 1840s. That "if" is a big one, however; the newly liberated pop culture of Jacksonian America, fueled by the explosion of newspapers (including W. T. Porter's influential *Spirit of the Times*, devoted to theatrical and sporting matters), may well have unearthed and broadcast as much slang as it actually created. Indeed, as late as 1858, Dr. Holmes could still score American slang as "commonly the dish-water from the washings of English dandyism, school-boy or full-grown, wrung out of a three-volume novel which had sopped it up" (247). But Holmes's upper-crust Boston was hardly the nation in miniature.

As we conjecture the overall state of American slang before 1800 and try to put it in perspective, we cannot overlook some basic demographic factors. In 1760 the thirteen colonies held a thinly spread population of 1.7 million persons, a number slightly smaller than the population of

Cleveland, Ohio, at the end of the twentieth century. At the time of the first federal census in 1790, the American population had boomed to 3.9 million, the size of today's Washington, DC, metro area but less than one-third that of Greater Los Angeles. Virtually everywhere in the colonies, population density was low. In an overwhelmingly agrarian society, 95 percent of Americans were living in places of fewer than 2,500 population in 1790. Only twenty-four communities identified as "cities" stood on American soil during the Washington administration as opposed to well over 7,000 in 1990. Moreover, no city in 1790 – not New York, Boston, or Philadelphia – held more than 50,000 citizens.

Today more than 330 cities and towns have populations greater than that. For every settler in the English colonies of 1700 (about 250,000) there were 1,000 American citizens in the final decade of the twentieth century (Porter 169; *Statistical Abstracts* 27; Welland 137). The voluminous increase in the size and density of the American population has brought about an even greater exponential rise in the number of social networks that encourage the production and establishment of slang, as they do of other new, nonslang, terminologies.

Associated with the increase in population, changes in the technology of communication – the development of genuinely mass-oriented, mass-circulation newspapers and magazines by 1900 and of instantaneous mass communication in the 1920s – guaranteed the national spread of slang that in earlier times must have remained of local currency only. The light fiction appearing in mass-oriented periodicals like *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post* and in innumerable pulp adventure magazines before and between the World Wars frequently exploited slang as a stylistic resource, as did, even more pervasively, nationally syndicated comic strips, a phenomenon of American life dating only from the 1890s.

The twentieth-century revolution in communications dramatically abbreviated the time required for neologisms of all kinds, including slang, to gain national currency. During the few minutes of Commander Alan B. Shepard's suborbital flight on May 5, 1961, the astronauts' *A-OK* simultaneously entered millions of vocabularies, the direct result of live radio and television coverage; a generation later it retains a less conspicuous currency. The communications explosion has also indirectly stimulated the production and dispersal of slang.

In the first three or four decades of the century especially, nationally syndicated cartoonists like T. A. "TAD" Dorgan (1877–1929) and gossip columnists like Walter Winchell (1897–1972) popularized slang expressions that might otherwise have remained restricted to Broadway and sporting

and gambling circles (Zwilling; Mencken 1936). Through magazine stories written mainly for *Collier's* from about 1929, Damon Runyon introduced underworld lingo to millions of readers and writers. Significantly, few of the self-conscious coinages of such popular writers ever achieved more than nonce status. Winchell's *Reno-vate* 'to travel to Reno, Nevada, for a quick divorce,' and *infanticipating* 'expecting a child' are occasionally cited as "American slang" but had no independent currency.

On the other hand, *making whoopee* 'having a good time, esp. making love,' coined by Winchell about 1929, has outlived its creator, largely because of its early adoption as the title of a popular song. Later items that gained general currency from their appearance in the media include *to be toast* 'to be doomed or done for,' introduced in the script of the film *Ghostbusters* (1984), and *babelicious* '(of a young woman) sexy,' created by comedian Mike Myers for NBC-TV's *Saturday Night Live* in the early 1990s.

Certain semantic domains have been especially productive of slang idioms. But without the enthusiasm, derision, or callous disregard that accompany those domains, the idioms would not be regarded as slang. By far the most productive of these domains are physical sexuality; intoxication by liquor or drugs; sudden, energetic, or violent action; death; deception; and weakness of mind or character. The slang-producing vitality of these domains seems to be nearly the same throughout the English-speaking world. Indeed, the continual creation of fresh slang synonyms within these domains implies that, for many speakers, no level of language adequately expresses the affective content of their ideas.

Furthermore, unconscious notions permeate certain slang metaphors. Flexner (in the preface to Wentworth and Flexner) has called attention to the way American slang often expresses a cultural-psychological association of sexual acts with victimization and contempt; the chief such idiom, *to fuck (somebody) out of (something)* 'to cheat (somebody) of (something),' is recorded as long ago as 1866 in the United States and, in the broader sense of 'to ruin or undo,' some decades earlier in the United Kingdom (Lighter 1: 834). A survey of Civil War court-martial records indicates, in the words of one historian, that "the swearing of [Union soldiers] did not differ greatly from that of [their] descendants in World Wars I and II. . . . [T]he age-old array of smutty, four-letter words, used singly and in combination, also had frequent usage" (Wiley 249, also 199, 201, 213, 248; Lighter; Lowry passim).

In a multiethnic society whose ethnic groups tend to preserve and even exalt their own distinctiveness while frequently viewing "outsiders" dubiously or with contempt, pejorative names for ethnic groups inevitably occur. In the United States these epithets multiplied in the wake of succeeding waves of immigrants, especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among the earliest, reflective of social and political circumstances in the late Colonial and early National periods, were *(John) Bull* 'Englishman,' *bog-trotter* or *Paddy* 'Irishman,' *Sawney* 'Scotsman,' *blackie* 'African,' *redskin* 'American Indian,' *frog-eater*, *frog*, or *(Johnny) Crapaud* 'Frenchman,' and, of course, *Yankee*, of obscure origin but first applied derisively to New Englanders.

As sociopolitical conditions have changed, many of these terms have either fallen from use or else lost their contemptuous force. Some have been replaced with more contemporary terms, and ethnic groups coming to prominence in the past century and a half, notably Hispanics, Germans, Jews, Italians, Slavs, and, most recently, Asians, have come in for their own share of verbal abuse, a linguistic upshot of the American tendency to xenophobia. Country people too have long been ridiculed with abusive epithets intended to reflect on their presumed gullibility and lack of cultivation: *hick* (from the seventeenth century), *hoosier* (now a neutral or affectionate nickname for an Indianan), *hayseed*, *rube*, *redneck*, *ridge-runner*, *hillbilly*, *shitkicker*, *plow jockey*, etc.

Popular interest in the exploits of outlaws has lasted since the Middle Ages. In the Prohibition era of the 1920s, modern lingo like *gat* and *rod* 'firearm,' *bigshot* 'ringleader, (hence) important or influential person,' and *flatfoot* 'police officer' became familiar to the general public through newspaper features, films, and pop fiction. The 1950s and especially the late 1960s similarly popularized the slang of narcotics addicts (*horse* 'heroin,' *reefer*, *pot*, and *grass* 'marijuana'). New illicit drugs get slang names almost immediately; *crack* 'free-base cocaine,' quickly moved via the news media from street slang to standard English during the mid 1980s.

American military slang (*boot*, *rookie* or *rook* 'recruit; trainee,' *topkick* 'first sergeant, senior sergeant,' *leatherneck* or *jarhead* 'marine,' *dogface* 'common soldier,' *swabby* or *squid* 'common sailor,' *brass* 'commissioned, esp. senior, officers,' *zoomie* 'member of the air force,' *grunt* 'enlisted combat soldier' and hence in civilian life 'low-level, hard-working employee') has proliferated since 1917 to match the tremendous growth in size and influence of the military itself. World War II undoubtedly created and broadcast more slang than any other short-term historical event. More than sixteen million Americans served under arms in World War II, over four times the population of the entire country in 1790, and probably ten or twelve times that of the limited "English-speaking world" (England) of 1066.

Coming into familiar civilian use during and after the war were such typically military expressions as *GI* 'an army enlisted man, (broadly) any serviceman,' *brass* '(in civilian use) police officials, top corporate executives,' *snafu* 'a bungled, badly confused situation,' to *hit the sack* 'to go to bed,' *grounded* '(of an airman or an aircraft) removed from flight status, (hence, of a teenager) denied the use of a car, punished by being forbidden to date,' *boondocks* 'wild, remote, or rural areas' (from Tagalog *bundok*, *bondok* 'mountain,' recorded in the Philippines as early as 1909 and eventually shortened to *boonies*), and the originally scatological *sad sack* 'an inept, unlucky, or unpromising person.' Unnoticed by prewar dictionaries, *sweat it out* 'to put up with anxiety, hardship or danger until it has passed' had been Midland slang for generations: "After this failure we were too closely watched to get any chance to escape, and so had to 'sweat it out' as long as the rebels could keep us in that jail" (Pike 368) and "All right, though; she'd like to see me in just such a fix – let her sweat it out!" (Twain 1876, 155).

World War II introduced this phrase to millions of Americans, often with a concretized direct object in the senses 'to endure grimly or anxiously, to worry about, to wait for anxiously or expectantly.' Kay Boyle describes the wives of servicemen in Colorado "talking G. I. talk as if they had learned it not this year, / Not here . . . 'Sweating out three weeks of maneuvers, or sweating the weekend pass, / Or sweating him out night after night,' they'll say" (6).

The contribution of sports, primarily baseball and prizefighting, to general American slang was not strongly felt until the first explosion of sports journalism before World War I (a second explosion, still in progress, began in the 1970s). Gambling, on the other hand, with cards, dice, bouncing balls, and fighting cocks has been a primarily masculine concern from the early days of settlement and has generated a good deal of slang, particularly since the mid nineteenth century when poker (formerly "brag"), euchre, and faro became the card games of choice, especially on the Western frontier. To American gambling we owe such terms as *pass the buck* 'to shift or abandon responsibility,' *buck the tiger* 'play at faro,' *snake eyes* 'a throw of two on the dice,' *boxcars* 'a throw of twelve,' the recent *crapshoot* 'a situation offering a highly uncertain outcome,' and many others.

The vaudeville stage exploited and popularized a certain amount of slang around the turn of the century. "Probably nine-tenths of this country's popular slang expressions . . . have come out of vaudeville," said the *New York Times* in 1917 ("Argot"), and the show business paper *Variety*, founded in 1905, eventually developed a characteristic style that was part slang and part wild idiosyncrasy (much of it associated at first with staffers Jack Conway and Jack Lait) that became internationally celebrated in the late 1920s. Two of *Variety*'s headlines have earned a permanent place in the history of American journalism as well as that of American English: "Wall St. Lays an Egg," announcing the stock market crash of 1929, and, later in the 1930s, the memorable "Stix Nix Hick Pix," that is, "Rural audiences reject films about country life" (Stoddart; Conway).

The slang of teenagers, high-school and college students, has exerted a special influence on national slang. The reason is simple: students are the slang-using group nearest the mainstream of American society and the largest in number. Indeed, once out of school, they themselves go to make up that mainstream. The slang of American college students received book-length treatment as early as 1851, when there were few colleges, in *A Collection of College Words and Customs*, by Benjamin H. Hall, a Harvard senior. Numerous local collections have appeared since then (for example, Babbitt 1900), particularly since the 1920s, and especially in the pages of *American Speech*. Connie Eble has published a number of interesting studies on the subject (1984, 1985, 1989, 1996), based on her research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Munro (1989) has compiled material from students at UCLA.

The influence of languages other than English on American slang has been relatively small. Spanish is often cited as the chief contributor to the new-word stock of American English, primarily through the nineteenth-century Southwest. Yet, other than some familiar exceptions like *calaboose*, *gringo*, *savvy*, *vamoose*, *buckaroo*, *hoosegow*, and *nada*, Spanish has given little to American slang, at least so far.

David Dalby has suggested that a number of slang terms connected with swing music, namely *hip*, *hipster*, *hipcat*, *dig*, and *jitterbug*, might have come from West African languages like Wolof and Mandingo, but the historical record makes such an origin most unlikely. The words appear far too late and, based as it is on superficial resemblances, their connection to West African cultures and vocabularies is too tenuous to be taken as any more than conjecture. American English itself is more likely to have given rise to these particular words. Nor is the word *jazz* especially likely to be of African origin: no convincing African etymon has yet been suggested, nor has the known history of the word in English been fully reviewed by proponents of an African origin (R. Gold; Tamony; Holbrook; Merriam and Garner; Lighter 1: xxxi, 2: 258–62). The *juke* of *juke joint* and *jukebox*, however, once a Gullah word of restricted currency, may well stem from West Africa.

The foreign language that has given most to American slang (and its limited contribution is about fifty words out of many thousands) is Yiddish. *Kibitzer*, which surfaced in the early 1920s, was one of the earliest, though German influence is possible here as well. Many others, *schlep*, *schlemiel*, and *megilla*, for example, were communicated directly to the upper middle class during the 1940s and 1950s by the humorist S. J. Perelman, whose writings for the *New Yorker* over four decades are a treasury of slang of all kinds.

6.6 The role of slang in American life

No brisk summary can do justice to the entire subject of American slang. But one additional question demands consideration here: why Americans should revel in this style of expression, even as many of them decry it as frivolous, offensive, or corrupting.

As is well known, American society in the past century or more has become increasingly urban, mobile, stratified, and industrialized; it has also become more competitive and impersonal. Sociologists have long held that the rapid pace of societal change, as well as the attendant weakening of confidence in other people and in the stability of one's own life, has led to increasing alienation among individuals within American society. For many decades the exigencies of a mass society have made Americans increasingly skeptical, not to say cynical, about the dependability of the social structures that are supposed to make life tolerable, not to mention the good faith and competence of the functionaries, from the President and Congress on down to the neighborhood banker and physician, on whom society depends for its stability. (Goldfarb in *The Cynical Society* discusses these phenomena in detail.)

The everyday penalties incurred by bad decisions, personal and impersonal, and by ordinary ill luck are often severe, even as the ubiquitous voice of advertising insists that all problems have quick and easy solutions and that conspicuous consumption will banish all woes. In such circumstances a markedly slangy style is a kind of whistling in the dark. It allows one to assert, with a display of self-assurance, a real or playful rejection (it is often hard to tell which) of such values as reason, tolerance, and restraint, which are essential to the maintenance of society but whose practice is less than fully evident in everyday life.

In the middle of the twentieth century, in his critical survey of American civilization, the social historian Max Lerner (626) offered the following germane and penetrating insight:

> Americans can be as sentimental as any people in the world. Yet the pressures of the culture run the other way. A market economy means a market society, in which the great crime is to be taken in and the great virtue to be tough and illusionless. The nightmare of American life is to be left dependent and helpless – a greater nightmare than failing to help others when they need help. The result is the desensitized man whose language is the wisecrack and whose armor is cynicism.

In America it was the gadfly satirists Mark Twain, Finley Peter Dunne, George Ade, and Ring Lardner who, in the generation between 1884 and 1917, first exploited the potential of slang and nonstandard speech as an illuminator of character and a lance against pretense and illusion. It was Dunne's Chicago-Irish *barkeep* "Mr. Dooley" who predicted after the turn of the century, "Whin we Americans are through with th' English language, it will look as if it's been run over be a musical comedy" (quoted by E. Ellis 306). Literary maverick Jack London, writing in the first decade of this century about sailors, sourdoughs, and prizefighters, was the first bestselling American novelist to regularly present slangy characters as sympathetic protagonists. His works, published between 1898 and 1916, contain more than 600 slang expressions; his *Martin Eden* (1909) even features a coddled young woman who punctiliously corrects her working-class suitor's "slang" and cannot comprehend the word *booze*. "O. Henry" (the pen name of William Sydney Porter) gained a huge following in the same period with his slang-filled but reassuringly saccharine short stories, as did George Ade with his mordantly humorous slang fables.

Not till the 1920s, however, in the disillusioned aftermath of World War I, did very much slang appear in serious American fiction. And the fiction was *tough-guy* fiction, from Hemingway, Hammett, Farrell, and others. The war-weathered *vet*, the *wisecracking roughneck*, the *hardboiled dick*, the *cool customer* – the aggressive rather than the merely courageous and resourceful hero gradually claimed center stage as the beau ideal of American pop culture, ousting the more polite and cerebral heroes of prewar days. *Tough guy* alone was a common phrase by 1916: "I used to think everybody was a sissy who wasn't a tough guy. I was a tough guy all right, an' mighty proud of it" (Burroughs 38); *he-man* was earlier (1832, *OED*), but comparatively rare before the twentieth century.

American movies, blander than prose fiction, still paid homage to the warm heart beneath the hard-bitten exterior, but the tough style was established nonetheless. In the 1920s and 1930s, America's imagined heroes were increasingly loners, cool and cynical, who could survive no man's land and urban jungles alike, whereas the soft civilized chap could not; their

character had been honed in the World War or in the badlands of Prohibition. Soon Virginia Woolf could write approvingly of Lardner's facility with America's "expressive ugly vigorous slang" (quoted by Douglas 356, with insightful comments on the role of slang passim). Louis MacNiece (102) recommended that "the American wisecrack" was "something with which the poet should stay in communion."

In 1939, innocent viewers of the film *Gone with the Wind* were shocked, then impressed, that romantic Rhett Butler really didn't "give a damn." Since the appearance of Mike Hammer in 1947 (Spillane), angrier and more brutal than any previous American popular icon, the tough-guy role model of pop culture has, if anything, become even harder, *cooler*, more alienated, more violent, and more ubiquitous (as some of the rap lyrics reprinted by Stanley 1993 show). We have a "bastard hero" to match and humiliate the "bitch heroine." (K. White 1993 provides a valuable complementary sociological perspective on some of these points.) Perhaps such fantasies (when they are fantasies) reassure writer and audience alike that, like A. E. Housman's Mithridates, they too can *take it* – and, like Edward G. Robinson in the 1931 film *Little Caesar*, presumably *dish it out* as well. (Wilkinson has examined "toughness" as an American popular ideal, though with limited reference to language.)

The conscious use of slang may mark for many speakers their wished-for, possibly media-inspired identity; it may be a rhetorical pose, an element in what Goffman calls their "presentation of self." It is no coincidence that the period beginning with Prohibition, which saw the ascendancy of the tough and illusionless fictional hero, also saw the emergence of slang as a characteristically American style of speech, recognized and often emulated around the world. The conscious use of slang may mark for many speakers their wished-for identity, may be a semantic pose, a key factor in how they present themselves to the world. For slang, owing to its associations of irreverence and cynicism, often communicates a shrewdness, real or feigned, a level of *savvy* that defends against being seen as a *wimp*, of being *ripped off*, of not being *hip* to what's really *going down*. "A *sucker* is born every minute" and "Never give a *sucker* an even break" are familiar modern adages; even more recent but just as proverbial are "Money talks, *bullshit* walks," "What have you done for me lately?" "That and a nickel [now more like $1.25] will get you a cup of coffee," and the mostly military "If you're looking for sympathy, try the dictionary between *shit* and *syphilis*."

In such proverbs, as in the use of slang, one senses exactly the kind of linguistic armor that Lerner discerned in the 1950s and earlier – the armor of the cynic, the *wiseguy*, the *cool cat*, the tough *broad*, the *bad dude*. Far more than from some mystical determination to "express group identity," the attraction of the slang style for many Americans springs from the stresses of life in a depersonalizing society, where there is plenty to be irreverent, cynical, and angry about. The startling associations of much slang warrant its value, for more than ever stridency, ridicule, and hyperbole appear to be the verbal strategies most likely to win popular attention or, indeed, to be taken seriously at all.

FURTHER READING

Partly because of the not very distinct nature of the subject, little that has been written about American slang offers significant analysis, cultural context, or theory; slang dictionaries, unless scrupulously edited, can be quite misleading as to the meaning and currency of many entries. Though now outdated, Mencken (1936, 535–89; 1948, 643–786) has long been a starting point for students. Flexner (Wentworth and Flexner 1960) provides an influential general discussion, whereas the Introduction to Lighter (1994) attempts to clarify the place of slang in American linguistic history. In the context of world English, R. Bailey (1996) treats many of the issues addressed in the present chapter. Illuminating book-length works from various perspectives include those by Dalzell (1996), Eble (1996), Folb (1980), and, for colloquial innovation in general, Sornig (1981).

7 DIALECTS

Lee Pederson

7.1 Introduction

American dialects record the contents of the English language as social facts realized in a geographic framework. As complete linguistic systems, all dialects report speech within the context of larger constructs – a language or a national variety of a language at a given point in the history of its development. American dialects transmit a national variety of Modern English in a distinctive pattern of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

The first speakers of American English received the language in a plastic state and shaped it according to their experience. Current regional and social dialects of American speech reflect the experiences of explorers and settlers on the Atlantic seaboard, of Western pioneers who followed them, and of later immigrants who energized the society as it moved across the continent. The dialects echo developments in the English language at critical historical junctures. They mirror cultural interaction – distinguishing Northern, Southern, Midland, and Western divisions of American geography, stratified according to the racial caste, sex, age, and education of American society. And they unite in the formation of American English, unmistakable to any speaker of the English language today.

The sounds, syntactic structures, and lexicon of American English unite in an integrated system. The phonology provides a system of contrastive sets (phonemes) that distinguish consonants, vowels, and units of intonation (stress, pitch, and juncture). The grammar outlines the arrangement, selection, and inflection of speech parts. And the vocabulary records a cultural index through distinctive words that identify the artifacts, ideas, and behavior of the American people. Each regional and social variety forms a contrastive set within the national pattern. Because word study lends itself most easily to written description, dialect study traditionally concentrates on vocabulary, rather than pronunciation or grammar, as