

# The History of the Colloquial Lexicon in Australian English

## Susan Butler

The reason we like slang is that it represents the youthful period of language, sometimes slick and sometimes crude, but always aiming at that moment of focused linguistic inspiration.

I don't mean to imply that slang is solely the province of the young, although there is a juxtaposition of creative urges that means that we often associate slang with the up-and-coming generation. But the old and the young can be equally confronted by the need to say things that are new, or to recycle the old ideas in a new and vivid way.

By comparison, standard and formal registers can be regarded as middle-aged respectability, the desire to shock replaced by the desire to conform, the linguistic equivalent of deciding that it is time to eat fibre for breakfast every day and take out private health insurance.

Slang is a response to a need to be innovative combined with the desire to live life dangerously, to flaunt the power of the word, to demonstrate a particular kind of style.

We worry about Australian English as a whole being swamped by American English, but when it comes to our slang that anxiety becomes acute. The old style slang of Barry Humphries and Paul Hogan seems somewhat dated these days but what do we have to replace it? The language of Bart and Homer Simpson?

It is easy to see how our slang is so derivative. Much of it happens first in American English and filters through to us from that society. What happens, happens there first. There's really not much left for us to do.

Except that there is still the experience of being an Australian, of being in this place, in this society, in this culture for which we have to find the right words. It is an Australia heavily influenced by America, but not wholly overrun. We have to own the words we use. Even the hand-me-downs have to become integrated into discourse that is distinctively Australian.

We follow, we copy, but every now and then we have to do our own thing because there is no one else who can name the names and set the style. Look at Aussie Rules, look at horseracing, look at the beach. Look at the following words recorded by children in Alice Springs, in which local colour is evident:

*An Alice Springs Dictionary* prepared by Class 421, Alice Springs High School, 1972.

<i>biggest mobs</i>	a lot
<i>Comical Railways</i>	Commonwealth Railways
<i>galah session</i>	a radio talkback session
<i>ju-ju lips</i>	lips that are protruding
<i>muchanic</i>	a person who is a bush mechanic who knows a lot about nothing and a little bit about something of engines
<i>snotty gobbles</i>	red, white and black fruit of some acacia bushes

*twin-stickin' her*

when the truckies let go of the steering wheel and grab for both gear sticks

*Charlie Queenie-Queenie*

a small bug, lives in soft sands (*ant-lion*)

*donkey beetles*

hard-shelled beetles common in Alice Springs district

Our whole history of slang has been a mixture of the derivative and the original. The first record of Australian English was an account of convict language, brought to the colony by the thieves of London and generally referred to as "the Flash Language". James Hardy Vaux, a convict himself, defined flash as the cant language used by the "family". To speak good flash is to be well versed in cant terms. Although there is no clear knowledge of the origin of the term *flash*, the suggestion is that it referred to a specific district between Buxton Leek and Macclesford in northern England.

A *flash-man*, to quote Vaux again, was "a favourite or *fancy-man*; but this term is generally applied to those dissolute characters upon the town, who subsist upon the liberality of unfortunate women; and who, in return, are generally at hand during their nocturnal perambulations, to protect them should any brawl occur, or should they be detected in robbing those whom they have *picked up*." A flash-man was a pimp, in other words.

Vaux (or his editor) italicises "picked up" to show that this is a flash term also. So we turn to the entry in Vaux's dictionary to discover that "to pick someone up" has a broader sense than we are used to and means "to accost, or enter into conversation with any person, for the purpose of executing some design upon his personal property; thus, among gamblers, it is called *picking up a flat* [honest man], or a *mouth* [foolish person]: sharpers [swindlers], who are daily on the look-out for some unwary country-man or stranger, use the same phrase; and among *drop-coves*, and others who act in concert, this task is allotted to one of the gang, duly qualified, who is thence termed *the picker-up*; and he having performed his part, his associates proceed systematically in *cleaning out the flat*. To *pick up a cull*, is a term used by *blowens* [prostitutes] in their vocation of street-walking. To *pick* a person *up*, in a general sense, is to impose upon, or take advantage of him, in a contract or bargain."

While we have lost that general sense of taking advantage, we are left with picking someone up for the purpose of sex. The phrase for us has become more limited in context.

The following are words which Vaux records as "Flash Language" which we would be familiar with today:

*awake to something*

aware of what's going on

*old chum/new chum*

fellow prisoners in a jail or hulk

*conk*

nose

*do the trick*

to carry out a robbery

*fence*

receiver of stolen goods

*frisk*

search

*gammon*

deceit, pretence, plausible language

*grub*

food

*kid*

young child, especially a boy who thieves at an early age, perhaps explaining the opprobrium in

<i>lark</i>	which this word is held by many
<i>lush</i>	fun
<i>plant</i>	beer or liquor; to drink such liquor
<i>queer</i>	to hide or conceal
<i>quod</i>	unwell
<i>racket</i>	jail
<i>scotty</i>	particular kind of fraud
<i>shake someone down</i>	irritable
<i>sharp</i>	to rob someone
<i>on the sly</i>	swindler
<i>snitch on someone</i>	secretly
<i>snooze</i>	tell on someone
<i>square</i>	to sleep
<i>on the square with someone</i>	honest, fair, upright
<i>stake</i>	dealing honestly with someone
<i>sting</i>	booty acquired by robbery
<i>swag</i>	swindle
<i>swell</i>	bundle
<i>toddler</i>	gentleman
<i>turn up trump</i>	small child
<i>wack</i>	be fortunate
<i>spinning a yarn</i>	share
	telling a story for amusement

It is not surprising that colonial society in Australia remained attuned to the colloquialism of British English throughout the 1800s. London was the centre of our colonial universe. British English was our model, our aspiration then, as American English is now, at least for the young.

It comes as a bit of a shock to realise that some of the key items of Australian English are hand-me-downs from elsewhere. Iconic terms such as *the bush* and *bushranger* are in fact borrowings from American English. And a colloquialism that we think of as being central to our culture – *fair dinkum* – is in fact a borrowing from British dialect.

The following are some common items in Australian English for which we have to acknowledge our debt to British English. It is true however that in some cases we have made more of these words than the British have done. Some of them are still limited to British dialect, the word *chook* (a chicken) being a notable case in point. Others have died out of British colloquialism while remaining strong here. *Mongrel* in the sense of ‘despicable’ was a colloquialism of the 1700s in British English but is alive and well in Australian English, particularly in the expression *a mongrel act*.

#### **British English hand-me-downs**

<i>bloke</i>	man
<i>boomer</i>	something large
<i>go for a burton</i>	to be missing
<i>chiack</i>	to tease

<i>chook</i>	a chicken
<i>chuffed</i>	pleased
<i>have a derry on someone</i>	to have a grudge against someone
<i>cobber</i>	friend
<i>dink</i>	double on a bicycle
<i>duffer</i>	cattle thief
<i>dunny</i>	toilet
<i>flummox</i>	to astonish
<i>a fluke</i>	a lucky success
<i>fossick</i>	to rummage around
<i>a geek</i>	a look
<i>give someone gip</i>	to annoy someone
<i>golly</i>	mucus
<i>josh</i>	tease
<i>mollydooker</i>	a left-hander
<i>mullygrubber</i>	a low ball in cricket
<i>nick</i>	steal
<i>nincompoop</i>	idiot
<i>ning-nong</i>	idiot
<i>purler</i>	an excellent one of its kind
<i>Rafferty's rules</i>	mayhem
<i>a punt</i>	a kick
<i>the rozzers</i>	the police
<i>shivoo</i>	a shivoo
<i>skerrick</i>	a trace
<i>skite</i>	to boast
<i>slummocky</i>	bedraggled
<i>smidgin</i>	a tiny amount
<i>smoodge</i>	to kiss and cuddle
<i>sook</i>	a coward
<i>sool</i>	to urge (a dog) on to attack
<i>little tackers</i>	small children
<i>tiddler</i>	a tiny fish
<i>tootsy</i>	a toe
<i>waffle</i>	talk at length
<i>wonky</i>	unstable

So what is the added value that Australia has given this rich heritage? Our special areas of creativity would seem to be sport, in particular Aussie Rules – *boundary rider* (the sports reporter who comments from the side of the football field), *desperation football* (extremely hard-fought football), *fresh air shot* (a kick that misses), *mongrel kick* (a very bad shot), *rainmaker* (a kick that goes up into the air).

From sport it is a short distance to politics where older colloquialisms like *dorothy dixer* (a question asked in parliament specifically to allow a propagandist reply by a minister) and

*donkey vote* (in a compulsory preferential system of voting, a vote in which the voter's apparent order of preference among the candidates listed on the ballot paper corresponds with the order in which the names appear in the list, so that the voter is probably not expressing any preference at all) have now become standard terms. Others are: *duchess* to treat as if a duchess, lavish largesse on; *free kick* transfer from the football use to mean "an easy opportunity to score off the opposition"; *rort* as in "rorting or stacking the branches".

A nice definition of *slang* has appeared in Jonathon Green's latest dictionary, *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang*. He gives the origin of the word as "the Scandinavian `sleng', which also renders standard English's `sling', and means `a slinging', `a device', `a strategy'". Thus *slang* is both literally and figuratively a "slung" or "thrown" language, tossed cunningly, as it were, into the hearer's face and ears.

Green also maintains that slang is above all "the language of the city – urgent, pointed, witty, cruel, capable of both excluding and including, of mocking and confirming." This may be true of this day and age but slang is an aspect of a fully- functioning variety of English wherever it occurs, flourishing perhaps where the centre of gravity of a community might be and therefore as often as not flourishing in the city. But in colonial times where the city/bush equation was more equally balanced slang was as much a part of bush life as of city life. It is also true to say the city slang is more often recorded, and the slang of marginal communities more often than not ignored.

But this leads us to some of the defining features of Australian slang which in popular belief is recognised for two attributes, the first being its black humour and pervasive irony, its constant downplaying of events and downsizing of people. The second is its reportedly huge range and vast lexicon.

The black humour comes from its colonial origins where grim humour was a strategy for coping with grim situations. It is particularly evident in phrases allowing for an allusive surprise such as the following found at the headword *useful* in the *Macquarie Book of Slang*:

*useful as a bucket under a bull*  
*useful as a dead dingo's donger*  
*useful as a dry thunderstorm*  
*useful as a glass door on a dunny*  
*useful as an arsehole on a broom*  
*useful as an ashtray on a motorbike*  
*useful as a piss in a shower*  
*useful as a pocket on a singlet*  
*useful as a roo-bar on a skateboard*  
*useful as a sore arse to a boundary rider*  
*useful as a spare dick at a wedding*  
*useful as a submarine with screen doors*  
*useful as a third armpit*  
*useful as a wart on the hip*  
*useful as a wether at a ram sale*  
*useful as a witch's tit*  
*useful as the bottom half of a mermaid*  
*useful as tits on a bull*

*useful as two knobs of billy-goat poop*

The belief that Australians have more slang at their disposal than any other English language community I think springs from the Australian habit of using slang in situations where other cultures would stick to a formal register. This has the effect of making Australian slang more notable and noted. A moment's reflection on the wealth of American slang would make one query the pre-eminence of Aussie slang. There is no scientific measurement of language varieties in these terms, but it would seem that we are all equally gifted in all the registers of our variety.

There is plenty of evidence in the *Macquarie Book of Slang* of our reliance on American slang, as for example in such catchphrases as *He-LLO* with a heavy emphasis on the second syllable, and *Don't go there!* as an attempt to avoid an undesirable topic of conversation. But there is still an awful lot of American slang that we don't touch, because it doesn't come our way or it seems irrelevant to our circumstances or it just doesn't take our fancy.

Australian English is still building on its heritage, with, for example, *tucker fucker*, a term used initially for a cook, particularly the kind of second-rate cook who churned out meals in institutions and economy-run boarding schools, anywhere where cheap food in bulk was required and no one asked too many questions about the standard of cooking. The meaning has been extended in two directions. It has become another name for tomato sauce, and it is now another term for the microwave. Both for obvious reasons.

We borrow, we adapt, we interpret, we bend things to our use. It's a skill that we should be proud of. It's probably Australian culture. The end result is still a unique Australian blend and a unique Australian view.