



TRUNKY WANTS A BUN

Do you know your bangin' from your slammin', your Desmond from your Douglas? Student slang is now the subject of serious academic attention.

Tony Thorne, the former Head of the Language Centre at King's and compiler of the Dictionary of Contemporary Slang, has made a special study of the language of students, and King's students in particular. *The Archive of Slang and New Language at King's* brings together printed publications from the 17th century to the present day, and includes an electronic database of new usage

from across the English-speaking world. With all the Americanisms, Australianisms, and South Africanisms taken out, the database now numbers over 10,000 separate items of contemporary usage and student vernacular. It's not always easy to carry out a survey of authentic, non-standard usage. Eavesdropping is problematic, and the mere presence of a stranger in a group, especially one armed with a tape recorder, is likely to inhibit the use of slang, or lead to slang-users playing to the gallery. So for several years now, students at King's have been asked simply to make a note of the phrases that they use or hear, and to contribute them as part of an ongoing project. But why is it so important to study slang?



‘Among linguists, this area is not quite as neglected as it was,’ says Tony. ‘Thirty or forty years ago slang was barely discussed. But there’s a realisation now that youth language may be more important than previously thought.’

Historically, key student slang words have tended to be taken-up by a much wider range of users. For several centuries the jargon of Oxford and Cambridge, in particular, has found its way into mainstream English. ‘Mob’, ‘bus’, ‘toff’ and ‘posh’ (which does not after all derive from ‘Port Out, Starboard Home’) all probably originated as student slang.

And if anything, 'future generations may be less likely to abandon slang as they get older. There's less social pressure now to do so. Slang will probably have more of an influence on mainstream English than it does now.' So there's a social reason to take slang more seriously. 'And looking at it nonjudgementally, as a linguist, you can also see that it's technically very interesting. This is a highly inventive style of language.' Like other forms of cant used by specific groups in society, student slang is both a prestige way of speaking (conferring status within a particular sub-culture), and one that is stigmatised by the mainstream. It is a highly specialised, exclusive form of language, which strengthens the sense of belonging within a group, while being – deliberately – barely intelligible to outsiders.

But is King's slang different from other types of student jargon? Some phrases are specific to the College – if a student says *Trunky wants a bun*, for example, they're probably accusing one of their peers of sucking-up to their tutors, the modern equivalent of saying *apple for teacher*. Apparently the original Trunky was an elephant, who would perform tricks for a confectionery reward.

According to Tony, 'King's slang is often quite theatrical, with a number of different terms for hissy-fits and stropmy behaviour. It's generally very creative and articulate. And a large amount of King's slang celebrates living in London.' There's a strong liking for rhyming slang, for example, including the College's principal gift to the world of student slang, through one of our most illustrious alumni – *Desmond* (Tutu; a 2:2 degree).

Given the nature of slang, new words have a constant habit of appearing, to take the place of older ones. With new influences – currently from the Caribbean and Asia in particular, as well as from things like texting – come new ways of saying things. And as with other types of slang, student cant seems to be able to generate an endless number of

words that mean pretty much the same thing. For ‘very good,’ yesterday’s *ace*, *brill* and *fab* become today’s *standard* and *solid*. There are hundreds of words for being drunk (*mullered*, *gurning*), and dozens of synonyms for ‘exciting’, such as (*kicking*, *slamming*). The ruder ones you’ll have to look up in the *Dictionary*.

Should we be worried that our favourite in-phrases when we were at College probably won’t impress today’s students? For Tony Thorne, ‘even conservative commentators like Johnson and Swift spoke about the generation of new expressions, and acknowledged that it’s inevitable and enriching. Language can’t stand still – you can’t legislate for it.’

And it’s still crucial to fit language to its social context. ‘Maybe in years to come it will be acceptable for you to use slang words in a job interview, but for that to happen slang itself would have to change radically. It’s not true that the language is degenerating, or that anything goes. I think we can relax about slang, and enjoy it for what it is.’

To help you understand the youth of today, we’ve given you a short glossary of contemporary terms that are currently popular with King’s students. But be warned – using slang in the wrong context, or trying to sound like you’re *down with the kids* when you aren’t, can make you sound like a real *spanner*.

Were there unusual slang words and phrases that had a particular meaning for you when you were at College? Send your examples to tony.thorne@kcl.ac.uk – contributors are acknowledged by name in publications.

Glossary

Catalogue man – someone who is unfashionable, who buys their clothes from a catalogue

Desmond (Tutu, a 2:2 degree, one class above a *Douglas Hurd*)

Down with the kids – in touch with the younger generation

Ledge – a conceited student (from ‘legend in his own lunchtime’)

Pants – disappointingly poor or low quality

Pukka – excellent

Spanner – a foolish or contemptible person

Standard, solid, molly – very good

Throw a bennie – lose one’s temper

Tonk – physically attractive

Tough, uggers – very unattractive

Trust, squids – money

Vamping, flexing – showing off