**LEMON MERINGUE OR L.O.L? DESPITE THE DEATH NOTICES ONE LINGUIST THINKS COCKNEY RHYMING SLANG IS ALIVE AND FAIRLY WELL**

**Tony Thorne**

The Museum of London announced this week that Cockney rhyming slang is dying out, no longer understood by a majority of Londoners, let alone people elsewhere across the country. The Museum’s research suggests, they say, that youth slang, rap and hip-hop lyrics and textspeak have ousted what they call the ‘traditional dialect’ of working class Londoners. A majority of the 2000 people who took part in their survey failed to recognise phrases like ‘brown bread’ for ‘dead’ and hadn’t heard ‘apples and pears’ used for ‘stairs’ in the last six months. 50 per cent on the other hand had heard the words ‘wicked’ and ‘innit’, while 40 per cent were familiar with the phrases ‘OMG’ and ‘LOL’ – the abbreviations of ‘Oh My God’ and ‘Laugh Out Loud’ often used in texting.

Intriguingly, two thirds of those questioned still think rhyming slang is a key part of Londoners’ identity and a third said they would be sad if it disappeared for good. I’d like to reassure them that, although it may be going through something of a linguistic recession at the moment, it’s far too soon to toll the bell for rhyming slang. In several interesting ways the Museum has got it wrong.

Nobody actually talks in ‘Cockney dialect’ any more, and strictly speaking they probably never did. In connection with a style of speech the word was only recorded in 1859 and after that was used to refer to a distinctive accent, a few colourful turns of phrase and a feisty, jaunty sense of humour. The habit of using rhymes to create slang probably developed in the 19th century, too, but like other quirks of speech which don’t get written down until years later, its origins are quite obscure. Historians assume that street traders, hucksters and hustlers invented the rhymes as a secret language to hide their activities from outsiders and the authorities, but this, too is unproven. If stallholders call their customers ‘Billies’ (from ‘Billy Bunter’ –‘punter’) or refer to the till as the ‘Benny Hill’ or ‘Buffalo Bill’ they are using harmless nicknames not sinister code-words. What is sure is that by the 1950s many working-class Londoners, fond of a bit of wordplay, were trading these phrases among themselves, often leaving off the rhyming part so that ‘taking the mickey’ is trimmed from the original ‘Mickey Bliss’, ‘telling porkies’ is cut down from ‘porky pies’, and ‘boat race’ for ‘face’ becomes simply, ‘nice boat, shame about the fried eggs’.

By the 1970s non-Cockneys were getting in on the game of ‘Chitty Chitty Bang Bang’ or ‘Lemon Meringue’: musicians picked up the lingo from their roadies and electricians, advertising executives and journalists from messengers and drivers, Mockneys everywhere from TV shows like the Sweeney and Minder. From the 1980s students, too, took up the cause, updating the cultural references with terms like ‘Ayrton Senna’ for a ‘tenner’, ‘Melvin Bragg’, a ‘fag’ (and sometimes another rhyme beginning with sh-‘) or ‘Chicken Jalfrezi for ‘crazy’. In college circles the old ‘Turkish bath’ or ‘bubble bath) for ‘(having) a laugh’ was replaced by ‘bobble (hat and scarf)’, trainers became ‘Claire Rayners’ or ‘Claires’ and ‘Tony Blairs’ were the flared trousers flapping above their ankles. ‘Posh ‘n Becks’ could stand either for sex or for the decks – turntables - used by DJs. Typical exchanges include ‘furry muff’ for ‘fair enough’, in shorter rhymes oriental students are ‘ornamentals’, cash dispensers ‘drink-links’. In the same spirit a drink of Stella (Artois lager) has mutated through Yuri (Geller) and Nelson (Mandela) to Paul (Weller). Conversations end with ‘baked potato’ –‘see you later’.

Language naturally evolves and adapts to the times and rhyming slang is no exception. That’s why the hoary old expressions chosen by the Museum of London – ‘dog and bone’ (phone), ‘trouble and strife’ (wife), sound as charmingly and hopelessly dated as Donald McGill postcards: I somehow doubt, too, that anyone ever really called their cupboard ‘Mother Hubbard’ or used ‘custard and jelly’ for ‘telly’. Listen out today and you do stand a chance of coming across ‘Andy (McNab)’ for a kebab, ‘Johnny (Vaughan)’ for yawn – and porn. ‘Britneys’ is the universal code for beers. Being on the dole used to be ‘(on the) rock n’ roll’, now it’s ‘on the Cheryl Cole.’

The other key point that the survey misses out on is that rhyming slang is not necessarily meant to be understood, at least not immediately or by everyone who hears it. It isn’t a shared dialect, it’s an ever-changing dynamic word–game, improvising references and puns and challenging listeners to make sense of them. The technique now belongs to everybody and anybody and lots of current rhyming slang occurs inside the home, with family members competing to declare that they ‘haven’t a Scooby’ (Doo – clue), drying themselves not with a towel but a ‘Simon (Cowell)’ before putting on their ‘Baracks’ (pyjamas of course).

There are some indicators, though, that the Museum of London’s fears for the future of rhyming slang may be justified. It’s certainly the case that at the moment it isn’t at the forefront of cool. Members of the white working class, if that term still means anything – ‘white van man’, taxi-drivers, builders and decorators, sparks and chippies - may still invent new rhymes, but white working class pop culture is far from fashionable. Chavdom has given it a bad name and the heyday of the ‘Geezer chic’ of London gangster movies like Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels is a thing of the fast-receding past. The cliques who occupy the high ground of cool these days – at least in their own minds, are the urban hipsters of Shoreditch and Hackney, the patois-speaking street gangs and their imitators, Lady Gaga and Nicky Minaj fixated teens, and their gloomy EMO counterparts. These social groups all have one thing in common: they completely lack humour, and rhyming slang is of course above all a joke, a feature of a mind-set for which cheerful irony, back-and-forth banter and self-mockery are mainstays. Texting abbreviations, fashionista jargon and pseudo-afrocaribbean ‘Jafaican’ may be in the ascendant now but will make way for other language fads in due course. Maybe when and if the terminally hip and the genuinely pubescent grow up, stop posing and acquire a sense of fun, they too will embrace the enduring rhyming game.

Multiethnicity and diversity is another challenge to London’s former folk-culture. Up to now the rhyming technique has been recorded only among native speakers of English – it has also flourished in Australia (where ‘Noah’s Arks’ are sharks) and there are a very few examples from the USA (‘Skin and blister’ for ‘sister’ is said to be North American) – so we might assume that members of New Britain’s multicultural population whose ‘heritage language’ is not English will be immune to rhyming slang or incapable of mastering it. I live in hope nevertheless. There’s no such thing as a native speaker nowadays; many people, especially in the cities are bi- or multilingual, and adept at ‘code-switching’ between languages even in mid-sentence. Why shouldn’t British Asians, Somalis and Poles begin to experiment in the year of the Olympics with this special form of verbal gymnastics, become virtuosos in their own right? I haven’t any hard evidence yet that they are, but I’m listening carefully.

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