***The Fourth Edition of Tony Thorne’s* Dictionary of Contemporary Slang *was published by Bloomsbury in February 2014. This light piece introduces some of the themes featured in the new edition.***

**WHY WE ALL LOVE LEMON MERINGUE**

Slang is by definition the most disreputable aspect of our language, but at the same time the most inventive and most colourful, deriving its power from its novelty and revelling in disapproval. Traditionally associated with the enclosed communities of the prison, the army barracks, the factory floor and the older public schools, more recently slang has escaped its boundaries and is running wild.

There are signs everywhere that ordinary people are claiming ownership of language, no longer abiding by the conventions of standard English, but inventing or borrowing their own exotic expressions to add humour, spice and shock-value to conversations. In a society reflecting what academics call ‘superdiversity’, where social classes, ethnicities and regional loyalties are all mixed up, we are all, even traditionally monoglot Brits, in danger of becoming multilingual.

Anyone unfortunate enough to have a teen in the house will know that today’s yoof prefer to communicate in a foreign tongue. Or rather a number of different private languages: there’s the gushing over-dramatising favoured by younger females, whereby slightly inconvenienced translates as ‘totes devz’ (from ‘totally devastated’), moderately interesting is ‘amazeballs’ and really rather good is ‘like, just the nipples.’ Other things the young ones say (and write) are not words at all, just noises: ‘nim-nim-nim’ mocks the boring background sound of adult conversation, ‘meh’ is a verbal shrug of indifference, ‘woop-woop’ a cry of joy.

And then there are the hundreds of abbreviations, used typically for communicating in social media and also creeping, alarmingly, into the classroom. YOLO – ‘you only live once’ was last year’s most irritating slogan, LOL has mutated into LMAO – ‘laughing my ass off’ and TL:DR ‘too long, didn’t read’ into TB: DL, ‘too boring, didn’t listen.’ Abbreviations are spoken, too: when asked to tidy the bedroom, the defiant retort ‘ceebs!’ is a version of ‘CBA’ –‘can’t be arsed.’

The older generation is no longer immune, as postings on social media sites testify. On the Mumsnet website shorthand terms like ‘boyf’, ‘hubz’ and ‘soz’ for sorry are exchanged, while Twitter users in particular vie with one another to coin the most picturesque insults, ‘twatbadger’, ‘arsebiscuit’ and ‘fudgenugget’ being some of the more printable examples. Linguists have only recently uncovered a whole new category of informal speech consisting of the nicknames, in-jokes and witticisms used inside the home. Known as family slang or ‘kitchen-table lingo’ it injects a note of silliness into the domestic routine and names things that otherwise go unnamed. Examples are the dozens of words (‘blabber’, ‘zapper’, ‘melly’, ‘dawicki’) for the TV remote control, ‘trunklements’ meaning grandad’s personal possessions or bits and pieces and ‘Blenkinsop’, the sliding plastic tab on a self-sealing freezer bag.

‘Lemon meringue’ or rhyming slang, whose death has often been announced, is actually still around, though now in the mouths of non-Cockneys, students, journalists and in the home, too where you dry yourself with a ‘Simon (Cowell)’ before putting on your ‘Baracks (Obamas)’.

For linguists the new sound of the street which they call ‘multiethnic urban vernacular’ or MLE (multi-ethnic London English), and others deride as ‘Jafaican’ or ‘ghetto-speak,’ is an interesting and important phenomenon. Its edgy vocabulary; ‘bare’ (lots), ‘blad’ (friend), ‘choong’ (attractive), ‘merk’ (kill or humiliate), ‘inna’ (nosey or intrusive) may not survive into middle age, but its rhythm and accent show signs of influencing mainstream English.

Of course slang’s traditional users haven’t abandoned it. Criminals still need a secret code (‘stralley’ is a firearm, the police are ‘stabz’) with which to keep the outside world at bay; the police, the army, taxi-drivers, market traders, plumbers, techies, gamers and fashionistas, in fact any group with a special interest, will develop a set of words and phrases with which to baffle outsiders and admit insiders to the group. What has changed is that this kind of language is no longer clandestine, no longer automatically avoided or excluded by the media or shunned by ‘respectable’ people, even if conservatives lament its effect on literacy and traditionalists are, quite understandably, unsettled by it. Irreverent, silly, sometimes disturbing, ‘Chitty Chitty Bang Bang’ is, as one linguist called it, ‘the people’s poetry’ (technically it operates just like poetry or literature but is more flexible and creative than either) and at the same time, serves important functions in our day-to-day interactions. It now belongs to everyone and anyone and it’s not going to go away.

**SOME EXAMPLES OF RECENT SLANG**

**Adorkable** meaning: clumsy but cute. The blend of ‘adorable’ and ‘dorky’ is currently a term of affection and admiration among teenagers.

**BONGO** meaning: a lazy, inert colleague. In UK police slang the term uses the initials of ‘books on, never goes out.’

**Jinnelz** meaning: a swindler or fraud. This exotic-looking word is originally from Caribbean speech where it referred to a ladies-man or conman who was overly ‘congenial.’

**Stabby** meaning: irritated to the point of violence. A favourite of harassed housewives and mothers, seen increasingly on Mumsnet.

**Wasteman** meaning: a worthless individual. This all-purpose criticism or insult, based on the notion of ‘a waste of time/space’, is used as a taunt by street-gang members as well as schoolkids.

**Fatboy Slim** meaning: the gym. ‘I’m off down the Fatboy,’ says hubz. ‘Don’t fall on your Mylene (Klass)’ says his better half.

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