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Cockney Dialect and Slang

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by

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This paper is the capstone of a personal project which I began three years ago only as a matter of personal interest. While the information the project divulges is not difficult to understand, it should be noted that the details of this subject are virtually inaccessible to Americans or any other person who is not a part of the subculture of the Cockney people. Very little substantial information has been documented on the subject of Cockney dialect and slang. Therefore, most of my knowledge was gained through research and personal interviews with key sources in the London area.

The word "Cockney" originally meant someone born and spending all his or her life in London, England, traditionally within the sound of Bow Bells; in other words, within about a quarter of a mile of the Church of St. Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside of east central London and not far from London Bridge. However, today this definition is not literally true because the district surrounding the church is not residential as it was before. Many Cockneys can now be found in scattered neighborhoods of London, therefore there is no longer a strict geographical boundary of Cockney residency.

The etymology of the term "cockney" is from Middle England "cokeney," which means "cock's egg." Originally it meant a small or misshapen egg and was probably a synonym for anything odd. It became a term of reproach and ridicule, meaning an effeminate silly person, probably first used by villagers living near the capitol to describe the Londoners they met. Even Chaucer, in his prologue to the Reeve's Tale, used "cokeney" in connection with "daffe," i.e., a fool.[1]

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[1]Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales.

For many years, "cockney" has remained an unkind term, and has even been linked with the modern word "cocky." Despite the negative connotations, most parishioners are proud of their Cockney heritage, feeling that this qualifies them as the true citizens of London. The term "Cockney" is now used rather vaguely for speech of the London area, and is generally applied to lower class speech. The term "London" refers to a more educated type of speech which more closely resembles Standard English.

The Cockney's speech has often been thought comical or colorful. Even during Shakespeare's time, spellings like "bylyffe" for bailiff proves Cockney was spoken in the sixteenth century. In fact, it is not unlikely that on Shakespeare's stage at the Globe Theatre near the south bank of the Thames, most of his low-life characters were played by Cockneys even when the setting was abroad in Rome, Messina, or elsewhere.*

At the summit of older Cockney writers stands Charles Dickens, who enjoyed tramping miles through London to gather the language and the atmosphere. Because of the many years spent reporting in the House of Commons and his untiring efforts to listen to and question people firsthand, Dickens' command of the Cockney idiom was certain.

One outstanding dramatist and portrayer of Cockney who cannot be forgotten is George Bernard Shaw. Shaw was a far more accurate and original observer of the dialect even than he had been acclaimed, although he had to exaggerate it a little for stage purposes. Shaw's own written attempts to record Cockney were as detailed as they could be without employing a phonetic alphabet, and he eventually devised a new alphabet of forty symbols to cope with all the sounds of Standard English.

* See Appendix for a clarification of this symbol.

The characteristic vocabulary of the Cockney is said to be slang, which consists of words used in a joking, rather flippant way. The Oxford English Dictionary defines slang as "language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense.*" Although the history of the word "slang" is obscure, there may have been an Anglo-Saxon verb "slingan" meaning "to creep, wind, or twist" with a past tense "slang" and a past participle "slungen";[2] and certainly slang is slung around the East End every minute of the day.

Current Cockney slang has arrived in various ways, some quite complicated. The terminology embodied in the Cockney slang spoken today has arrived from five major sources including boxing, the army, nautical language, thieves' language, and America. As usual with slang, most Cockney examples are names of visible things because these are the simplest ideas to grasp. By its very nature, the slang of the Cockney subculture is particularly difficult for outsiders to understand due to the rapid changes it undergoes even over a short period of time.

Some examples of ordinary Cockney slang follow. Writing Cockney speech as a Cockney would pronounce it presents a problem, therefore pronunciation will be restricted to approximate spellings in this and subsequent examples.

To the average Cockney, "'ave a beef" or "chew the rag" means

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[2]Peter Wright, Cockney Dialect and Slang (London: Batsford Ltd., 1981), p. 85.

to engage in an argument; whereas if a person is "in de snore," he is asleep. Cigarettes are fondly referred to as "coffin nails," and "give 'em de ol' G" means to "tell them a lie." A Cockney who commands you to "keep your fas' nin on," is asking you to keep your temper; while "kick the daisies," "peg aht," "snuff it," or "go west" all mean one thing--to die.

To try to explain every burst of slang to an ignorant listener would infuriate even the most patient Cockney; it just cannot be done. Fortunately most Cockneys reserve the great bulk of their slang for those who know the slang code. So thick is the tongue of a true Cockney that his speech habits have become the despair of his fellow Englishmen.

The Cockney is often accused of having "no grammar." What is meant is that the speaker's grammar disobeys the rules of Standard English, because every language and every dialect must have its grammar in order to link words and ideas. It is unusual that the grammar of the London Cockney has never been thoroughly investigated, since what intrigues some listeners most is not always Cockney pronunciation or even the special words utilized, but the grammar employed to connect those words. To hear, for example, "It ain't 'im what done it," can take a listener by surprise and distract from what is being said to merely how it is being said. This occurrence is important, because in language, grammar is considered to be the most unwavering social marker.[3]

A striking consonantal feature of the dialect is what is often known as "missing the t's," though in fact many k's and p's also

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[3]Ibid., p. 114.

disappear in Cockney speech. In place of these letters are substituted glottal stops, which are complete breaks in the stream of sound which seem rather like gentle coughs. This development is generally thought to be a recent one, but in fact was used in earlier Cockney. A glottal stop would be pronounced somewhat like this example: "A li''le bi' quie'er" (a little bit quieter). Younger Cockneys use even more of these glottal stops than do their elders, evidencing the fact that the future use of this feature shows no sign of dying.

Cockney English also has a predilection for dropping the h from words that should have it while tacking it on to words that should not. In the sentence, "How have his high hopes of Arthur fallen!", the Cockney might say, "'ow 'ave 'iz 'igh 'opes of Harthur fallen!"[4]

Word order is vital to Cockney grammar. Indeed word order is more important in English as a whole than it is in tone languages such as Chinese or German which depend a great deal on inflections.[5] Although Cockney speech generally obeys the rules of Standard English word order, these rules may be upset by special emphasis, causing the most important words to come first; for example, "A ree-u (real) beauty it was!"

Considering sentences as a whole, two general points need to be stressed. First, there are occasional redundancies such as "so therefore" where "so" would be enough. Secondly, and far more often, words are omitted; for example, "Out (Put out) that light!"

Any study of Cockney dialect must take into consideration the

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[4]Margaret M. Bryant, Modern English and Its Heritage (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 179.

[5]Wright, p. 114.

crudely vulgar side of Cockney which includes swear and sexual words that punctuate the speech of many individuals. These words have little variety. "Bloody" is still the most frequent; "bleedin'," "blinkin'," and "flamin'" are others. For example, "It's a bloody shame"; "Git orf yer bleedin' 'igh 'orse" (Don't try to be superior); "along the blinkin' alleyways"; "where've yer put the flamin' nails?"; all these examples have practically lost whatever meaning they once had and, as a rule, they convey only an air of mild irritation. "Bloody," for example, was originally a shortening of the old Christian oath, "By our lady!" Some Cockneys tend to include these terms and others which are more vulgar in every few words they say. These outbursts generally originate from people with rather limited vocabularies. Many listeners are shocked at their first encounter with such words, especially when they are used by Cockney children, who, if their words were taken literally, would seem obsessed with the crudest bodily functions.

However, the most proficient and witty of Cockney grammatical devices is that of rhyming slang, to which much of this study has been devoted. Julian Franklyn, in The Cockney (1953), gives this explanation of rhyming slang: "in place of a word, a phrase consisting of two or three words that rhyme with it, is used." Sometimes these "two or three words" are proper names, names of people or places familiar, or once familiar, to the Cockneys but now requiring some explanation, even to the users thereof. Here is a classic example of the rhyming slang technique:

> 'ullo Fred. Come in awf of de frog an' toad (road) an' 'ave a cuppa Rosie (cup of tea). It's on de Cain an' Abel (table). But wipe yer plates o' meat (feet) 'cos de ol' trouble an' strife

(wife)'s just scrubbed de Rosy O' More (floor). She's up de apples an' pears (upstairs) 'avin' a bo-peep (sleep). Get into that lion's lair (chair) and let's chew the fat (have a chat).

Such is Cockney rhyming slang and, although it does not usually break out into such splendid profusion, it has quite a long history in London. This elaborate system of oblique references by means of rhymes seems to have started in the period 1800-1850 and was becoming strongly established by 1851, when Mayhew called it "the new style of cadger's cant . . . all done on the rhyming principle."[6]

Rhyming slang is not limited to London, but is also found on the western seaboard of the United States and in Australia. Other British cities have a few examples of their own rhyming slang, however London is its ancestral home.

Most experts as well as the general public of London maintain that rhyming slang arose from the secret language of thieves and was then studied by the police. This explanation seems very plausible; after all, what normal law-abiding citizen would understand this code:

"The Grasses are keeping their mincees open for the babbling brook who half-inched the tomfoolery from Oishe the front wheel skid"?*

The preceding statement can be translated:

"The police are keeping their eyes open for the crook who pinched the jewelry from Moishe the Jew."

In this contest, "grasses" is from grasshopper which rhymes with "copper," one who cops or grabs you. "Mince pies" equals eyes, "babbling brook" (a touch of Tennyson here) is a crook, itself an American slang term, as in pinched, which gives "half-inched."

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[6]H. Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor (Cass, 1967).

"Tomfoolery" contains some of the contempt of the poor Cockney for the jewelry of the rich and is useful in discussing thefts because it sounds like a matter of no significance. "Skid" suggests "yid," a low term for a Jew.

Sometimes a "car park," rhyming with "copper's mark," a police informer, will tip off the London police. As a matter of interest, these police were, and are called "bobbies" or "peelers," from the founder of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850). Cockney London was the first area to be policed and the first "cops" were called Bow Street Runners. As stated by Franklyn, "In this atmosphere, and under these conditions, the quick-witted Cockney created rhyming slang . . . as a means of having the last laugh."[7]

Another suggested origin is that rhyming slang began from gangs of Cockney navvies who were employed to build railroads and canals in the period from 1800 to 1850. Rhyming slang was allegedly used by them to confuse rival Irish construction gangs.

Costermongers, who sold fruit, vegetables, fish, etc. from a cart or stand in the street, were among the earliest users of rhyming slang; but sporting journals and music halls introduced it to a much wider public.

The British Music Hall stars were once as famous as any matinee idol or film star and their names were ideal raw material for rhyming slang. There was Edna May-now an "Edna" is a way, and Gertie Gitana,

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[7]Andrew Butcher, Linguistische Berichte, Language Abstracts, Volume 50, Article--"Cockney rhyming slang" (Heidelberg, West Germany, 1977), pp. 1-10.

so that a "Gertie" is now a banana. A Cockney may warn you, "E'll not 'ear yer, 'e's Mutton Jeff (deaf)," naming an early American cartoon character devised by Bud Fischer. A "Harry Randle" is a candle, naming a music hall comedian whose career was at its zenith about 1900. "'Obson's Choice" (voice), from the northern comedy and generally shortened to "'Obson's," is further theatrical rhyming slang. "Charles James Fox" is theatre box. Other entertainment names immortalized in rhyming slang are "Erroll Flynn"--chin, "Harry Tate"--late, "Tom Mix"--fix, "Naughton and Gold"--cold, and the Australian actor "Wee Georgie Wood"--good.

Formerly rhyming slang was very popular amongst East End pub-goers because the usual atmosphere in a typical English pub is light-hearted and flippant, much like rhyming slang itself. As a general rule, this type of slang is saved chiefly for very informal occasions. Luckily, if one loses his or her way in London, even the most enthusiastic Cockney will not give directions in rhyming slang. This is just as well, because an ordinary Cockney accent can itself be quite hard to follow.

Most exponents of rhyming slang use it deliberately, but in the speech of some Cockneys it is so engrained that they do not realize it is a special type of slang, or unusual language at all; to these people it is the ordinary word for the object about which they are talking. Undoubtedly Cockney rhyming slang was intended to be hard to decipher and today its origins are lost to many who use it extensively and frequently so that, to some extent, one cannot properly study its etymology merely by consulting what we might call native speakers.

People do not have to know etymologies to be able to speak a language fluently.

Sometimes, Cockney mothers do not care for rhyming slang, thinking that, like dialect, it may harm their children's career prospects; but grandfathers are especially fond of the speech, and it fascinates their grandchildren. Furthermore, Cockney rhyming slang has spread from the working class East End to well-educated dwellers in suburbia, who practice it to exercise their brains.

The best type of rhyming slang combines a rhyme with an appropriate or provocative social description, such as "artful dodger"--lodger, "hockey at the halt"--golf, "good an' bad" or "sorry an' sad"--dad, and "Gawd forbids"--kids, generally shortened to just "Gawdfers." After all, some lodgers are a little devious, golf can be tediously slow, and few families live in perpetual matrimonial bliss. Furthermore, what American would ever suspect that "trouble and strife" are not two things but one--a wife. Here again, Cockney humor and outlook are reflected in the slang created though it must be said that Cockneys are not usually unsentimental about their wives.

Other socially descriptive rhyming slang phrases that are particularly noteworthy include "pipe your eye"--cry, "I'm afloat"--boat, "days-a-dawning"--morning, "cuddle and kiss"--miss, "gay and frisky"--whiskey, "Robin Hood"--good, "heavens above"--love, and "Noah's Ark" --park (where many of the animals walk two by two).

Although an expression takes on a different meaning when used as rhyming slang, there is often an amusing link between the original and the rhyming slang meaning. Though less apt as general social

commentary than previous examples, there are others where the verbal connection needs no laboring; forexample, "Mae West"--chest, "bell ringers"--fingers, "tumble down the sink"--drink, and "total wreck"--check (for the person who signs it!).

Americans who flock to London's West End theatres must truly appreciate George Bernard Shaw's remark that the United States and Britain are "divided by a common language." No American would know many of the words that are used daily by Londoners. However, amazingly enough, several examples of rhyming slang have entered the language of Americans, who are quite ignorant as to the terms' origins. Such slang examples include "it's a breeze"--from "it's easy," and "brass tacks" --rhyming slang for "facts."

When the listener realizes that play as well as mystery lies behind slang, he will be well on his way to a fuller understanding of Cockney rhyming slang. The secrecy aspect--"the substitution of words and sentences which rhyme with other words intended to be kept secret," writes the anonymous author of The Slang Dictionary (1859)*, may well have been overstressed, since much of the pleasure of the rhyming slang user comes from his showing off his wit, which requires that the listener understand what he is doing with language.

Every orthodox example of rhyming slang has two, and only two, stressed syllables; examples are, "Nellie Blighs"--flies, "pot an' pan"--old man (meaning husband), and "daisy roots"--boots. Between and around the two stressed syllables there may be one or more unstressed syllables; for example, "potato pillin'"--shilling, "elephant's trunk" --drunk, "dig in the grave"--shave, and "black man kissed her"--sister.

As a Cockney utters each snatch of rhyming slang he feels subconsciously, as it pushes to escape, the tug of the vital two stressed syllables conveying the heart of the meaning.*

Looking back through literary history, one will find that the earliest minstrels, like those who recited the long Anglo-Saxon heroic poem "Beowulf," remembered their lines through stress and alliteration, not rhyme. This method continued into the Middle Ages, but it was supplanted by the poetic device of rhyme, a much better memory aid.[8] Cockney slang of the type now being considered falls into the general modern pattern by depending on stress and especially rhyme. Its rhyme is almost everything.

However, some of the so-called rhyming slang does not rhyme at all. One instance is "Jack Jones"--alone, which is sometimes shortened to "on his Jack"--on his own, where the gratuitous--s is treated as a plural ending as in bones or stones. A case of what poetry critics call imperfect rhyme is "nanny-goatin'" for courting, because nanny-goat and court do not quite rhyme even in Cockney articulation. Yet some of the apparently imperfect rhymes do rhyme to a Cockney due to pronunciation; an example is "burnt cinders" for windows.

Alternatives are allowed in Cockney speech. For example, it is not surprising to hear a gentleman standing in an East End pub ask for a "Charlie Freer" when most of the other customers are demanding "pig's ear" or its shortening "pig's"; all are ordering the same thing--beer. Beer can also be called "far an' near," "Oh, my dear," "never fear,"

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[8]Wright, p. 98.

"red steer," etc. Similarly, gin need not always be "Vera Lynn," after the World War II forces sweetheart, it may also be called "needle an' pin."

Rhyming slang is an art, not an exact science; the practitioner is to be permitted a certain latitude. It is not uncommon for any Cockney to affectionately refer to his or her head as either a "loaf of bread" (hence the phrase "use your loaf"), a "lump of lead," or just a "crust of bread." Shakespeare's old man with a "just as I feared" (beard), King Lear, can also mean ear or beer. Socks are referred to as "Tillery Docks," "Tommy Rocks," "Goldie Locks," "Chicken Pox," "Nervo and Knox," etc. Consequently, to argue whether tea is to be called "Rosy Lea," "Rosie O'Lee," or "Jenny Lea," is truly Westminster (short for "Westminster Abbey," equalling "shabby").

In contrast, different meanings may attach to the same expression, as with "Irish jig," which can stand for both cig (cigarette), and wig. To a Cockney, "Holy Ghost" is either post or toast, and "I'm afloat" can be a boat or coat, and "storm and strife" can refer to either a wife, life, or knife. However, the context makes all clear in Cockney speech.

Now comes a curious problem. Since "mince pies" are eyes, what are mince pies? If "pig's ear" is what a Cockney chooses to call beer, what does he call a real pig's ear? The solution is that mince pies and, without a doubt, pig's ear have to be referred to so rarely that, unless someone is feeling extraordinarily witty, he can safely be given his usual name.

When fanatics of rhyming are talking, their conversation can be full of the device. A Cockney might say:

> "I got up, put on mi east an' west (vest), fleas an' ants (pants), Dicky Dirt (shirt--sometimes shortened to "Dickie," where, in this context, it specifically means "a worn-out shirt," not a detachable shirt-front), fourth of July (tie), an' mi best whistle an' flute (suit). I 'ad a dig in the grave (shave) and went dahn the apples an' pears (stairs), grabbed some needles an' thread (bread) and bended knees (cheese). Then I left the ol' cat an' mahs (house), and went up the frog an' toad (road) to catch the swear an' cuss (bus)."

The enjoyment of listening to rhyming slang lies in quickly grasping the clues. The listener certainly has to be quick and witty to use and appreciate this type of slang.

The admittedly extremely flexible rules for the creation of rhyming slang can easily be deduced from the numerous examples which form the basis of this paper. There is no hard and fast rule, as might be expected, governing when one uses a whole rhyme or only part of it. For example, "apples" is used as rhyming slang for stairs instead of the entire rhyme, "apples and pears." As long as the entire rhyme is given, even if the expression has never been heard before, there is a chance that one can decipher it, provided he realizes that it is indeed rhyming slang that he is encountering.

This form of shortened rhyming slang arises from a need for economy. But its very nature, though it is often amusing, rhyming slang is unnecessarily long, and there is no need to use a whole phrase such as "three piece whistle and flute" for suit, where just one word, such as "whistle," will do. The spread of industry has also helped to destroy some of the longer expressions. There is no time at work to shout, "shut yer box of toys (noise)!" when "Shut yer box!" is enough.

When two Cockneys are conversing, using an entire rhyme is a matter of offense, and the Cockney listener considers the use of full

forms as a means of talking down to him. Full rhyming slang, however, seems to be preferred when the speaker wants to stress what is being said.

Shortened rhyming slang is no new development. Written records show that abbreviations have been used in Cockney rhyming slang for over 120 years. Some of the more popular shortenings commonly used include "almonds" equaling "almond rocks"--socks, "Dora" for "Dora Grey"--tray, "Aprils" for "April fools"--tools, "hearts" for "heart of oak"--broke, and "turtles" for "turtle doves"--gloves. Nowadays a Cockney will not go to the trouble of saying that his friend is "elephant's trunk"--drunk; he's just "elephants." A Cockney no longer takes a "butcher's 'ook"--look, at a "dickery dock"--clock; he just takes a "butcher's" at the "'ickery." Before leaving for work, a Cockney puts on his "daisies" and "titfer," short for "daisy roots"--boots, and "tit fer tat"--hat.

This device of shortened rhyming slang has led to another source of bafflement. That is, the problem of distinguishing between which rhyme is being referred to when several rhymes have the same first word. For example, when one just hears "battle," and not "battle of Waterloo," he can hardly be expected to guess that "stew" is meant when "battle" could be a shortening of "battle of the Nile," which is rhyming slang for "tile" meaning "hat." Also, the shortening "Uncle" could refer to "Uncle Dick"--sick, "Uncle Fred"--bread, or "Uncle Ned" --bed. "Ginger" could mean "ginger beer"--queer or engineer, or "ginger ale"--jail. "Bushel" is either "bushel and peck"--neck, or "bushel of coke"--bloke.

The vocabulary of rhyming slang is concocted from many ingredients, foremost among these are names of real or fictional people. For example, Dickens' works have supplied, "Artful Dodger"--lodger, "Barnaby Rudge"--judge, and "Dolly Varden"--garden. However, the connection in meaning between the names of people and the objects they represent is usually a matter of pure chance. A "Mrs. Thatcher" for a "matcher" (in soccer, a point which makes two teams' scores equal) is not her responsibility. Therefore, sometimes the use of names is arbitrary--"and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof" suggests that this method is among the oldest so-called rules of naming.

Place-names have also performed a new linguistic task in rhyming slang and have produced such examples as "Botany Bay"--hit the hay, e.g., sleep, "Burton on Trent"--rent, "Dover"--give over, "Bushey Park"--lark (the whim, not the bird), "France and Spain"--rain, "Gates of Rome"--home, and "Melbourne"--smell burn.

Companies and department stores incorporated into rhyming slang include "Army and Navy"--gravy, "Harvey Nickol"--pickle (a predicament, not a condiment), "Lilley and Skinner"--dinner (from the shoemaker established in 1825), and "Robertson and Moffat"--profit. Surely names like Harrods, Chipping Sodbury, Lloyd George, and Harold Wilson, to cite a few, would have entered rhyming slang if only anyone had ever been able to get them even vaguely to rhyme with something.[9]

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[9]Leonard R. N. Ashley, Names: Journal of the American Name Society, Article--"Rhyme and Reason: The Methods and Meanings of Cockney Rhyming Slang, Illustrated with Some Proper Names and Some Improper Phrases" (Potsdam, New York, 1977).

Rhyming slang snatched from nursery rhymes, as "dickery dock"--clock, "Movver 'Ubbard"--cupboard, and "three blind mice"--rice, is yet another type and one which seems most odd when suddenly ejected into adult conversation.

Entire families clothed in rhyming slang often include the "bahf bun"--son, "bricks an' mortar" or "soap and water"--daughter, "baker's dozen"--cousin, "pot an' pan"--old man, "trouble an' strife" or "fork an' knife"--wife, "gooseberry puddin'"--old woman, "skin an' blister"--sister, "slide an' sluther"--brother, "good an' bad" or "sorry an' sad"--dad, "one anovver"--mother, and the "Gawd forbids" (Godfers) or "saucepan lids"--kids.

People of course have their peculiarities. Some, from their unwashed appearance clearly hate the "Cape of Good Hope" or "Bob Hope" (soap). Others are forever complaining, "'Enni tayters in the mould?" (Isn't it cold?), and at the slightest chance will go on the "Pat and Mick" (sick). Some like "teapot liddin'" (kidding or teasing), while others of an opposite disposition say not a "Richard III" or "dicky bird" (word), almost as if they were "curran' bread" (dead). This type of person does need a lot of attention.

The charge is sometimes brought that rhyming slang, called by some of its speakers "Matheson Lang" (Scottish-Canadian actor, 1879-1948), is far too contrived. Be that as it may, the words of the dialect are not invented by compilers of Cockney dictionaries; they have first to be on people's lips and not even be a particular fad of one speaker. A few of the current terms may have been coined by music-hall comedians, but in a very large measure, the entertainers turn into professional fun what they have already heard, otherwise their stage conversations

would be unrealistic.[10]

It appears that Cockney has moved closer to Standard English than have its neighboring rural dialects. Yet it cannot be assumed that Cockney will be quickly swallowed into Standard English. Some elderly Cockneys grumble that their type of speech is alive "only in pockets," that is, in small areas of inner London; but by this they mean that only there is it unaltered. Even where Cockney is altering it still survives, often quite strongly, throughout London.

How Cockney children speak their dialect is especially significant because by the frequency of its use an estimation can be made as to how strongly the local speech is likely to survive. By such a yardstick Cockney still has a long future. Cockney schoolchildren speak with very dark l's, or actually vocalize them (as when they say that they walk up hioos--hills, and drink school miook--milk). These children are extremely fond of glottal stops and their tongues slip unerringly around special Cockney vowels. Also, East End children play havoc with acceptable English, as when they return from school reporting, "They're learnin' us to read" or "Remember (remind) me to get that comic." Learn and remember in these senses have at least the historical support of Shakespeare and the Bible. The fact that Cockney pronunciation is so strong in many young people argues solidly that the dialect, and doubtless the special words that often accompany it, will have an active future. After all, the Cockney schoolchildren are the adult speakers of tomorrow.*

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[10]Wright, p. 97.

Some writers are more pessimistic about Cockney's future. This attitude does have some justification, for Cockney is certainly under pressure. Americanisms are affecting the speech via the mass media; the music-halls, which did so much to foster the dialect, have been replaced by the television; and some of the older industries with their special terms are dead or dying.[11] Furthermore, older Cockneys are much less isolated today. These people have better transportation and have had the opportunity of meeting a wide cross-section of people in city jobs. Cockneys who have improved their status from the traditional "working-class" stereotype tend to not acknowledge their origin or have a hazy notion about it altogether.

Yet countless thousands of London's citizens are still fiercely and proudly Cockney in speech and, when excited, those with a milder dialect drop immediately into a broader version.

A dialect continues to live so long as the community speaking it possesses a cohesiveness and a sense of tradition. These qualities Cockney does have, and thus it appears that, although like all British city dialects Cockney will be further modified by Standard English, varieties of Cockney are here to stay.

Sociology has never been far from the subject being discussed, for Cockney dialect is one spoken in a particular society. In fact, sociology looms large in matters such as coarse language and rhyming slang. Also, as has been displayed, social class is an important factor in pronunciation, e.g., in whether the Londoner says the word "name,"

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[11]Ibid., p. 167.

as it would be said on BBC-TV, or approaching "nime," as pronounced like a true Cockney, or something in-between such as "neym."

Cockney, like other forms of language is a social medium, and Cockney people speak like those around them. To talk differently from their neighbors would set the Cockney off as strange. The "telly" and "wireless" may broadcast prestige English[12], but audiences do not generally talk back to them, and furthermore, for a Cockney child, five hours a day in school is very little compared with all the time spent with friends and family.

A great social gulf has long existed between London's West and East Ends. East End life was and is, to a degree, harsh. The language of this region confirms this with its many words for "exhausted," "slatternly," etc., along with many names for ordinary things like parts of the body and everyday food and clothing. Furthermore, very few words can be found for philosophic ideas, which only the leisured class have time to ponder. The picture emerges of a Cockney community caught in a poverty trap, leaving little time for anything except work or sleep.

Many people, not only the upper class of the West End, have violent objections to the Cockney and their speech. The dialect has been labeled as "monotonous, ugly, harsh, confused, and weak," and seemingly has been equated the dreadful sameness of the housing projects and towering office blocks of London. Attacks of this kind are not new. This attitude is surely a very biased one. Such judgments are based on instinct or snobbery, not scientific accuracy. In my opinion, which, incidentally, is an opinion open to suggestions and criticism, sounds are just sounds, words are meaningful collections of sounds, and grammar

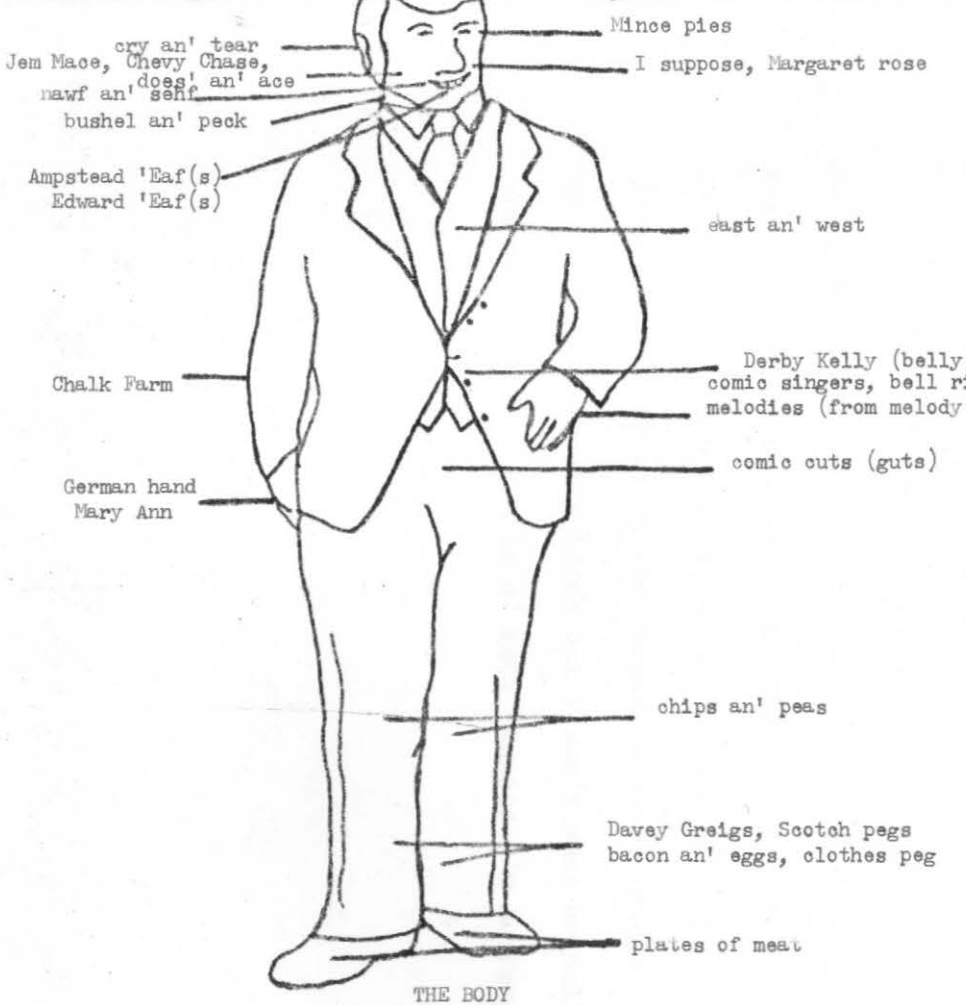
12 Footnote: The equivalent of "prestige" English or Standard dialect in this sense, is referred to as Received Pronunciation.

is the necessary way to link words in sentences. Another dialect or language should never be deemed "uncouth" just because it cannot be immediately understood. To brand all Cockneys as laughable and nothing else is a great mistake. When contemplating this matter, I often feel that the most important element to be considered is not pronunciation, words, or grammar, but the culture they ultimately portray.

A more reasoned view was that of Edwin Pugh in Harry the Cockney (1902):

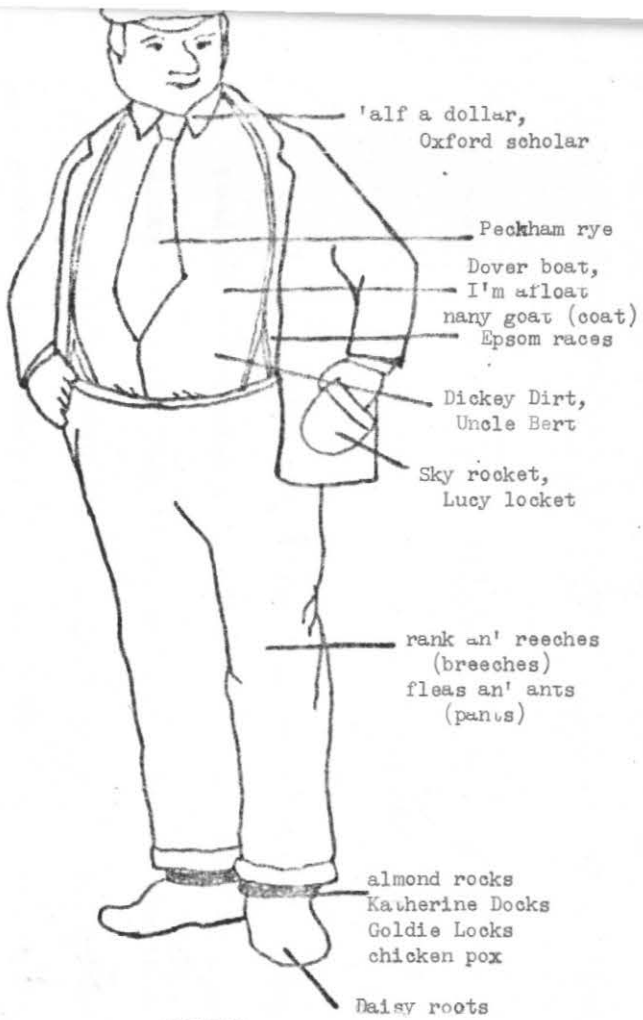
> The average Cockney is not articulate. He is often witty; he is sometimes eloquent; he has a notable gift of phrase-making and nicknaming. Every day he is enriching the English tongue with new forms of speech, new clichés, new slang, new catchwords. The new thing and the new word to describe the new thing are never far apart in London.

In conclusion, language ranks highest which goes farthest in the art of accomplishing much with little means, and is therefore able to express the greatest amount of meaning with the simplest mechanisms. All that can be done with Cockney slang is to admire its vigor and wonder at its rhymes. Sometimes there are more or less obscure reasons behind the selection, origins, and nuances of Cockney slang, of which even the user of the language himself remains blissfully ignorant. And behind it all lie clues to the nature and concerns, the psychology and sociology, and the history of the Cockney Londoners and the Island Race of which they are a colorful part.



THE BODY

ALSO:
'ammer an' tack--back
brovvers an' sisters--whiskers
Rolls Royce, 'obson's Choice--voice
West 'Am Reserves--nerves
whiplash--rash
once a week--cheek
dig in the grave, ocean wave--shave
Swanee (River)--liver
just as I feared--beard
Erroll Flynn--chin
Mae West--chest
Lancashire lasses--glasses



CLOTHES

ALSO:
Irish jig--wig
Jack the Ripper--slippers
steam packet--jacket
these an' those--clothes
turtle doves--gloves
watercressed--dressed
whistle an' flute--suit
Yorkshire blues--shoes
tug an' stickers--knickers
Alan Whickers
Tomfoolery--jewelry

I was taking the cherry 'og for a ball o' chalk up the frog and toad the other night when I met a China plate o' mine. We 'ad a few dicky birds an' then 'e suggested we 'ave a tumble dahn the sink together.

Well, instead of going into the Red Lion, we went into the first rub-a-dub we comes to. I sez', "What are you going to 'ave?" 'E sez', "I'll 'ave a drop o' pig's ear." So I gets a pint o' pig's ear for 'im an' I 'ad a drop of needle and pin, just for a start.

We got chatting an' one fing led to anuvver when we 'ears the Guv'nor calling, "Time, gents, please!"

I could 'ardly Adam and Eve it that we 'ad bin at it so long. So I gets an Aristotle of In-and-Out for the plates and dishes, picks up the cherry 'og, an' 'orf we Scarpa Flow.

As it's so 'arry Tate I gets on a trouble an' 'fuss, an' when I gets 'ome, I find the plates 'n dishes is out 'avin a butcher's 'ook round the rub-a-dubs for me and the cherry 'og. So I gets up the apples and pears an' into the ol' Uncle Ned and when she comes in, there I am wiv me loaf o' bread on the weeping willow, readin' the linen draper. She starts a few early birds but I don't want no bull and cow, so I turn over an' in a couple o' cock linnets I'm Bo-Peep.

I was taking the dog for a walk up the road the other night, when I met a mate of mine. We had a few words and then he suggested we had a drink together.

Well, instead of going into the Red Lion, we went into the first pub we came to.

I said, "What are you going to have?" He said, "I'll have a drop of beer." So I got a pint of beer for him and I had a drop of gin, for a start.

We got chatting and one thing led to another, when we hear the landlord calling, "Time, Gents, please!"

I could hardly believe that we had been at it for so long, so I got a bottle of stout for the missus, picked up the dog and off we go.

As it's so late I got on a bus and when I got home, I found the missus is out having a look round the pubs for me and the dog. So I got upstairs and into bed, and when she came in, there I was with my head on the pillow, reading the paper.

She started having a few words, but I didn't want a row, so I turned over, and in a couple of minutes I was asleep.

Appendix

* This symbol (asterisk), denotes information gathered in the British Museum and Library, and from personal interviews with informants in the London area during the summers of 1981 and 1983.

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