



Kiwi slang has moved from the underworld to the mainstream



RECENTLY there has been interest in the way Kiwi slang eludes new migrants and travellers to our shore: despite the number of specialist immigration websites which provide definitions.

Just as elusive as new slang is the definition of slang itself. Professor Julie Coleman, a Leicester University specialist who has published several texts and dictionaries of slang, finds it as difficult as other linguists and lexicographers to provide a succinct definition.

To her, slang is characteristic of informal conversation and/or writing within social sub-groups, is inappropriate or humorous if it's introduced into formal conversation and/or writing, and is in opposition to a standard form of English.

To Coleman, slang does not include colloquial language, jargon, dialect, or features used in text messages, with the exception of LOL. For her, swearing is not slang, though it may be.

Abandoning the pursuit of a definition, what is known about the history of this alternative vocabulary? Slang, however we define it, was usually associated with the underworld or dishonesty until the 19th century and was known as cant, argot, antilanguage, or flash language.

In Victorian times, it began to be used more widely to substitute for taboo anatomical terms, especially sexual organs, for alcohol, and for drugs.

Slang has several functions, and in 1933 New Zealand-born linguist and lexicographer Eric Partridge described several,

including to have fun and be creative, to be different or exclusive, to surprise, to avoid clichés and longwindedness, to reduce pain or solemnity, to induce intimacy, etc. Victoria University students of 2012 also suggest that slang gives them street cred, it enables them to be ironic and to combine words and feelings.

Although New Zealanders have often claimed it is slang that has made New Zealand English distinctive from other English varieties, it is in fact our borrowings from te reo that have made our vocabulary unique.

All the same, we have a long history in slang usage, beginning with the 18th century southern whalers, who introduced a form known as "whalers' Maori".

Of the whalers, Edward J Wakefield wrote in 1845 "their whole language is in fact an argot, or slang, almost unintelligible to a stranger . . . every article of trade with the natives has its slang term, in order that they may converse with each other respecting a purchase without initiating the native into their calculations".

Thus pigs and potatoes were respectively represented by "grunters" and "spuds".

Slang became synonymous with verbal vulgarity, contributing to class consciousness and a cultural cringe. Colonial dialect, colonial colloquialism, or colonial slang became the subject of letters to editors of early newspapers, and in 1879 an *Otago Daily Times* column stated "That the dirty cesspools of slang should empty themselves into the clear river of

classical English is much to be deplored".

Although our history of rhyming slang does not equal that of other varieties it still features in the nation's criminal domain. Wacky baccy is widely known, but prisoners have used a more exclusive rhyming slang, including currant cake (homebake), babe ruth (the truth), cheese and kisses (the Missus), four by two (screw), hairy ape or sour grape (rape), tealeaf (thief), and septic tank (Yank).

In 2001 Diana Looser of Canterbury University completed a study of boobslang (prison slang) and found animal slang terms featured highly among prisoners, most used dysphemistically or in a derogatory fashion. A prison scab, for example, is termed a fly, a gannet, a hyena, a leech, a magpie, a seagull, a piranha, or a vulture. Terms from Maori were codified similarly: wharekuri (dog house) being a gang member's cell, oma rapiti (run rabbit) meaning to/an escape, while kupenga (net) and hinaki (eel trap) are terms for punishment cells.

Slang has traversed former concepts of formality, formulaic writing, and propriety. Death notices now read that he was a "ratbag cousin", a "really great old bugger", and he will be missed by "cockies, rousies and gangers". Bring it on, Helen Clark would say.

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