



Dr. Jon Lighter

Don't Be *Dissin'* This Dictionary

THE RANDOM HOUSE
HISTORICAL
DICTIONARY
OF
AMERICAN
SLANG
J. E. LIGHTER

VOLUME 1 8.32

THE ONLY HISTORICAL DICTIONARY
OF SLANG, SPANNING THREE HUNDRED
YEARS OF SLANG USE IN AMERICA

"I'm sorry, I can't get him to take calls," the exasperated publicist at Random House told us. It seemed the good Dr. J. E. Lighter was not giving interviews. Calls to the University of Tennessee

public relations office and the English Department where Dr. Lighter works also got us nowhere fast. Even good old directory assistance failed to come through. Why, yes, the operator sniffed, she did have a number for one J. E. Lighter in Knoxville. But, of course, it was unlisted.

Finally, we resorted to a crusty old form of communication, handed down to us by our grandparents, one predating phones, faxes,

and e-mail. "Dear Dr. Lighter," our letter read, "We think your connection to Tennessee and your work would be an intriguing story for readers of *Tennessee Living: People and Places*." Details followed of how and when the interview would be conducted if he agreed to it. "Incidentally," we added to our missive, "we recently heard a brand-new slang word, 'Elvisian,' used as 'the study of Elvis Presley culture.'"

A few days later, a soft-spoken voice on the other end of the line said, "This is Jon Lighter." Eureka! We finally *bagged* (to secure for oneself, esp. after repeated attempts) an interview with the elusive editor of the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (Random House, \$55).

Expecting a complete *fopdoodle* (blockhead), we were *dingswizzled*

(expression of surprise) to discover that our assumption was a *dry beef* (false charge). The UT word investigator was unfailingly polite and apologetic about his inaccessibility. Jon just *flat-out* (plainly) has to be stingy with his time these days. He is up to his neck in the complicated process of editing volume two (H through R, due out in 1996) and volume three (S through Z, set for 1997 publication), the sequels to volume one (covering A through G, which was published in 1994).

Some 1,080 pages, 8,000 sources, 20,000 definitions, and 90,000 citations fill the first volume. So Jon's concerns about time constraints are no *dreck* (rubbish). Nonetheless, the slang editor agreed to meet with us at his library study on the UT campus.

The tiny room looked as if it could use a good going over by a qualified *crumb boss* (janitor). Index cards with words like *foozle* (a fool) and *codswallop* (nonsense) engulfed his desk. The tidal spill of slang continued in boxes underneath. Jutting out of his coat pocket was a small spiral notebook, handy for those occasional bits of eavesdropped slang.

With his angular *frontispiece* (face), this *fox-in-the-bush* (man with a full beard) with flyaway dark hair and intelligent brown eyes, looked every bit the part of a professorial scholar—except for the running shoes. Jogging and a few inconvenient survival details like eating and sleeping may be the only time concessions the 46-year-old makes to the never-ending task of codifying slang.

The Knoxville teacher's interest in slang began in the 1960s when he was a teen in his native New York City (known as the *Dirtytown* in his dictionary; never let it be said that hometown pride prevents scholarly objectivity). What kid wouldn't have liked the jargon peppering the language at the time? We all remember those

Monthly magazine. She compares her colleague's slang dictionary to the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary*, the bible for dictionary editors (lexicographers).

So what does it take to edit such a *George* (in the know) project? "You have to never become overwhelmed by the amount of work that's required to put a dictionary together," Anne explains.

But Jon laughs and admits he often does become overwhelmed—say, several times a day. "But then I realize, I've just got to keep going." He pauses, then adds dryly, "Only two more volumes to go."

How does one sleuth slang? First, you read. And read and read and read. Everything from Civil War letters and diaries to modern-day novels on inner-city life to military books to Bart Simpson comics. "Basically I'm on duty 24 hours a day," the researcher says. But surely at the end of a long,

hard day, Jon Lighter kicks back like the rest of us, slumped in the recliner with the *boob tube* (television) on, a lock on the old *brain locker* (the head) and all its wearying thoughts of the *brary* (library) and slang.

Not!

"I am always on the alert for any interesting words or phrases that I might hear on TV or in a movie or just in everyday life," the word detective says. "Just last night, I was watching a rerun of *I Love Lucy* from the '50s." Lucy and Ricky hire a tutor so they'll be able to speak "perfect" English when their baby is born. "The tutor specifically warned them against using the word 'okay' because it was slang. But nowadays, the word is used universally in all but the most formal circumstances."

Okay. So what *is* slang? In the dictionary's introduction, Jon defines slang as "an informal,

nonstandard, nontechnical vocabulary composed chiefly of novel-sounding synonyms for standard words or phrases." Cant, jargon, dialect, and argot are a part of this nonstandard English. Just what their place is in the lexicon of slang is outlined in the dictionary as well, and we'd like to share that explanation with you. We gave it the old *college try* (plucky effort). But to *fact* (to speak frankly and truthfully), Jon's explanation was so *cocum* (clever), we *brainless wonders* (dolts) were *bedoozled* (confused) by it all.

We felt like real *gawnicuses* (blockheads) until we finally got a *clue* (an idea) when Jon said, "One of the things that leads people to consider a word slang is that it seems to convey more feeling than is considered appropriate for the context."

Oh, yeah, gotcha. Slang is the color on the black-and-white page, the punch in the old verbal one-two. Asking "How are you, likable fellow?" does not convey quite the same impact as "What's up, cool breeze?"

Slang is the language of attitude, often an attitude or identity of nonconformity—which can backfire. "If everybody is saying 'awesome' or 'cosmic' or 'slammin' or 'kickin,' then it's not so much individual nonconformity as it is wishing to associate yourself with a group that's seen as being nonconforming," Jon explains. Sort of like the Madonna imitators who say they dress like their heroine because they want to express their individuality. See *clueless* (stupid).

Words like *clueless* and *dork-brain* (blockhead) and others a lot more colorful (er, actually, off-color is probably a better description), have been used to disparage for centuries. Take the 16th-century Scottish literary genre of *flyting*. "Poets would write poems insulting their rivals in the grossest and most imaginative ways they could think of," says Jon. Puts a whole new twist on the phrase

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flower-power words—like *freak-out* (a nightmarish, hallucinatory experience) and *groovy* (splendid).

"I began to jot down slangy expressions that I had heard or came across in books simply to give myself some sort of reservoir of popular vocabulary," Jon remembers. He wanted to write the Great American Novel. "Originally, I wasn't thinking in terms of compiling this kind of dictionary at all."

But by the time Jon started college, he had filled *forty-one* (very many) notebooks with citations. By the time he was in graduate school at UT, he had enough material to write a complete dissertation solely on the letter "A." But when he had his doctorate in hand, and 25 more letters looming before him, he wondered about continuing his investigation.

"Certainly in 1980 and 1981, I thought the dictionary would be completed within about three years," Jon says, sighing. The reality was a *diffabitterance* (bit of difference). The first volume was completed 14 years after he became Dr. Lighter.

It takes a lot to edit any kind of dictionary. To *crowd the mourners* (add to the difficulties), tack on the word "historical." Editing a historical dictionary is enough to make anyone *beamy* (crazy).

"A historical dictionary shows the development of a word throughout history," explains Jesse Sheidlower, the Random House editor who works with Jon. "It gives not only a definition and other pronunciations but also citations, that is, examples of the word throughout its use in the language."

Anne H. Soukhanov praises the slang dictionary: "I think it's actually a national treasure in the making." No stranger to words herself, Anne was the executive editor of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Third Edition, and writes a column on words, as does Jon, for *Atlantic*



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TENNESSEE HISTORY
IN THE MAKING

"Dead Poets Society," doesn't it?

Jon, who rarely curses himself, can't quite keep the glee out of his voice when he describes another "remarkable" slang event: cowboy cussing matches. "Cowboys would entertain themselves by trying to outcuss each other, trying to dream up the most colorful, outrageous, offensive, laughable cuss words." Puts a whole new twist on the phrase "wild, wild West," doesn't it?

The modern descendant of this is the *dozens* (a provocative exchange of obscene, often rhymed insults concerning esp. the mothers of those participating). The first reference in the dictionary to this ritualized game was from 1915; the latest, 1990. Puts a whole new twist on the phrase "Yo mama," doesn't it?

One of the most interesting elements of the dictionary is that of learning how long some of what we consider contemporary slang has been around. For instance, tacking the word "not" onto the end of a phrase to discount it ("You're so pretty—not!") originated with the Wayne and Garth characters from the *Saturday Night Live* skit—not! Actually, it's been used with exactly the same in-your-face meaning since the turn of the century.

That's just one of the many intriguing footnotes Jon has found in his long years of word detecting. Recently, he learned of a more personal one. A friend had just read the book *Love Letters*. "One of the characters works in a bookstore," Jon explains. "In one passage, she leans her chin on a copy of the . . . *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*." He laughs, a bit *discombobberated* (confused) that his dictionary is now not only a *reference* (to supply with references), but a *referent* (one that refers or is referred to).

All we have to add to that is "Far out" (daringly creative, extraordinarily good or pleasing).

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