



The First English Dictionary of Slang, 1699

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It's a shame that so many very apt words fall out of common use over time, like “blobber-lipd,” which means having lips that are very thick, hanging down, or turning over; and “chounter”, which is to talk pertly, and sometimes angrily. Both words can be found in *The First English Dictionary of Slang*, originally published in 1699 as *A New Dictionary of Terms, Ancient and Modern, of the Canting Crew* by B. E. Gentleman. Though a number of early texts, beginning in the sixteenth century, codified forms of cant—the slang language of the criminal underworld—in word lists which appeared as appendices or parts of larger volumes, the dictionary of 1699 was the first work dedicated to slang words and their meanings. It aimed to educate the more polite classes in the language and, consequently, the methods of thieves and vagabonds, protecting the innocent from cant speakers and their activities.

This dictionary is also the first that attempts to show the overlap and integration between canting words and common slang words. Refusing to distinguish between criminal vocabulary and the more ordinary everyday English of the period, it sets canting words side by side with terms used in domestic culture and those used by sailors and laborers. With such a democratic attitude toward words, this text is genuinely a modern dictionary, as well as the first attempt by dictionary makers to catalog the ever-changing world of English slang.

Reproduced here with an introduction by John Simpson, chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, describing the history and culture of canting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as the evolution of English slang, this is a fascinating volume for all who marvel at words and may wish to reclaim a few—say, to dabble in the parlance of a seventeenth-century sailor one day and that of a vagabond the next.

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