

**A VOCABULARY OF  
CRIMINAL SLANG:  
WITH SOME EXAMPLES  
OF COMMON USAGES**

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A Vocabulary of Criminal Slang: With Some Examples of Common Usages by Louis E. Jackson

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SOME EXAMPLES OF  
COMMON USAGES

BY

LOUIS E. JACKSON

Assisted by

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PORTLAND, OREGON

Price, \$1.50

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## *INTRODUCTION*

It is not with a view to sensationalism that this little work is undertaken, but with a sense of helpfulness, of social obligation. It is submitted for the perusal and study of all those public officers and professional servants whose responsibilities are such as to bring them into casual or constant contact with the confirmed criminal classes.

It may fall into the hands of some unfit subjects and thereby contribute to the propagation of its contents in undesirable quarters. On the other hand we may consider that publicity is the speediest agent for the destruction of cankerous moral growths. Perhaps the possession of such knowledge as is here presented argues a sordidness; but Gordian knots can be untied only by use of the sword; to have cherries in the winter a can opener must be used, or to stand eggs on end you must smash them.

By the very nature of crime its efficient vehicle of transmission is ephemeral, very ephemeral. The vernacular of twenty-five years ago is almost oblivion today. So with the future; provided, of course, that the idiom of the underworld surrender its meaning to the social layers superimposed upon it. This process can be made effective by investigation and publicity. When bench and bar, the press, custodians of law and order and private agencies devoted to the detection, repression and correction of crime are made familiar with the wiles and mode of communication of criminals, the latter are rendered less powerful insofar as the evolved system of guile and wrong-doing are concerned.



It is noticeably true that our average law officer or advocate is necessarily a specialist in one or perhaps a few, at most, of the many recognized branches of professional crime. The limitation is occasioned in part by prescribed capacity and in part by inexperience or unfamiliarity with criminals of all types and their methods. Efficiency in general correctional labor may undoubtedly be promoted by a fuller understanding of the linguistic acquirements of subjects to be dealt with in every day practice. It is hoped that the publication of this vocabulary of criminal terms will render material advantages to the conscientious workers in this large field.

We are conscious of many errors of omission in the work and we request the co-operation of all who are interested in its utility. Only the essential and most pertinent or purely criminal vernacular usages have been selected from the mysterious parlance of professional violators and their accomplices, for the reason that popular slang is so extensively comprehended as to make its publication of doubtful value as a new contribution to our literature.

An analysis of the four hundred and thirty terms included in the vocabulary reveals the interesting fact that criminal idiom is largely an ingenious combination of epithet suggested by similitude and a perverted construction of essential and accidental attributes of things and powers to imply or express the things and actions themselves. An occult jargon on its face, yet systematic enough when the key is acquired.

Some of the terms seem to have been derived by simple partition of legitimate English words, occasionally with the addition of euphonious prefix or suffix. As a prime example of the transposition of an attribute for the thing itself, consider what is perhaps the most popular slang term in use today in the unregenerate world—"dope," at present signifying "news," "intelligence," or "meaning." Originally this word was derived from opium by partition, with the disguising

consonant "d" prefixed to the accented syllable. Amongst narcotic habitués the most salient attribute of opium is stimulation of loquacity, or imaginativeness or of exaggeration. In process of time any of these powers came to characterize narcotic intoxication; thence information on any subject was designated "dope." The "dope sheet," a "line of dope," are natural offshoots of this tendency to transpose attribute into a new substantive. To philologists this noteworthy observation should infallibly point out the utter lack of scientific relation between an artificial sound—or visual—symbol and the thing, quality or quantity symbolized thereby.

Without previous instruction a person gifted with intuition might divine the signification of the majority of these terms in vogue by weighing the context of the sentences in which they are included. Yet a practical working knowledge of them should be made more available by frequent reference to a complete list. The sole excuse for criminal slang is the protection afforded by secrecy, which once destroyed the slang is forced to die of neglect, though it will naturally be superseded by evolutionary linguistic devices.

To fraternize with a secret order we must equip ourselves with a knowledge of the ceremonies and aims as well as the selective means of the secret fraternists. To combat criminals successfully it is necessary to understand their complete vehicles of intercommunication, else the investigator is unqualified to fraternize with them so as to gain a fuller insight both into their actions and the living motives concealed behind them. Unquestionably, every term in the vocabulary is known to some officer of the law; unquestionably, too, every term contained therein is understood by but very few individuals even amongst criminals themselves. Therefore it would seem a distinct gain to become familiar with them all.

Aided by a panoramic view of recorded crime in the last generation we may roughly divide criminal offenses into the

four great departments of crimes against self, or reflexive crimes against personal character, which have their fountain head in intemperance and gluttony; crimes against sex, which have their basis in the emotions flowing out of lust; crimes against property, fed by the sins of avarice or greed; and the crimes of violence, growing out of anger. Of these four, reflexive crimes and crimes of violence are distinctively psychological and must be left to the individual for corrective solution. Crimes against property and crimes of sexual depravity constitute the bulk of costly and troublesome cases which choke the machinery of our legal tribunals and necessitate a regrettable public tax for maintenance of penal and detentive institutions. The chronic defectives who most seriously menace the social body are comprised of prostitutes; gamblers; nondescriptively larcenous tramps; yeggs; burglars; sneak thieves; confidence men; dishonest solicitors; promoters and agents; forgers; merchandise thieves; pickpockets; highway robbers; and their accessories, the unscrupulous pawnbroker, the unrestrained liquor dealer, and the drug dispenser. It goes without saying that the volume and value of business transacted by these latter three attest the stupendous proportions of the direct losses sustained by the commonwealth through the misdirected energies of the principal professional criminal classes.

From an economical standpoint the traffic of professional crime is stupendous. We are mulcted some four hundred millions of dollars annually by reason of the criminal element in the nation. A conservative estimate of the number of active professional criminals of high and low degree is probably 100,000. We have one uniformed police officer for every thousand of population, and about one auxiliary officer per thousand of population in addition. Here are 200,000 more persons in the non-productive class. Criminal lawyers and criminal court functionaries contribute another ratio of one to the thousand of