

a classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue

a classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue is a seminal work in the study of English slang and colloquial language from the 18th century. This dictionary provides a comprehensive catalog of the slang, cant, and colloquial expressions used in England during that time, particularly focusing on the language of the lower classes, criminals, and the urban underworld. Its compilation offers valuable insights into the cultural and social dynamics of the period, as well as the evolution of informal English speech. The dictionary has not only served linguists and historians but also inspired subsequent works on slang and vernacular language. This article explores the origins, content, significance, and legacy of a classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue, highlighting its role in documenting the colorful and often hidden aspects of English language history. Below is an overview of the main sections covered in this article.

- Historical Background and Authorship
- Content and Structure of the Dictionary
- Importance in Linguistic and Cultural Studies
- Influence on Subsequent Slang Dictionaries
- Examples of Entries and Their Meanings

Historical Background and Authorship

The creation of a classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue dates back to the early 18th century, a period marked by rapid urbanization and social change in England. The dictionary was first compiled by Francis Grose, an antiquary and lexicographer known for his interest in English customs and language. Published in 1785, the dictionary aimed to capture the slang and cant used by the common people, particularly those involved in criminal activities or residing in London's street culture. Grose's work built on earlier, less extensive glossaries and was pioneering in its systematic approach to cataloging informal speech.

Francis Grose: The Compiler

Francis Grose was an English antiquarian and writer who specialized in the documentation of historical customs, language, and architecture. His interest in vernacular language led him to compile a dictionary that focused on the "vulgar" or common speech of his time. Grose's background in antiquarian studies enabled him to gather a wide range of expressions, many of which had not been recorded in mainstream dictionaries. His work reflected both scholarly rigor and an understanding of popular culture.

Context of 18th Century England

The 18th century was a time of significant social stratification, with clear divisions between the upper classes and the working or lower classes. The language of the streets and taverns often differed markedly from that of polite society. Slang and cant served as markers of identity and secrecy among groups such as thieves, beggars, and street vendors. Grose's dictionary was groundbreaking in that it documented these expressions systematically, providing a snapshot of the linguistic landscape of the time.

Content and Structure of the Dictionary

a classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue is organized alphabetically, containing thousands of entries that define various slang terms, cant phrases, and colloquial expressions. Each entry typically includes the term, its meaning, and often an example of usage or a brief explanation of its context. The dictionary covers terms related to crime, everyday life, trades, and social interactions, reflecting the diverse aspects of 18th-century popular culture.

Alphabetical Arrangement

The dictionary's alphabetical structure facilitates easy reference and mirrors the format of traditional dictionaries. This approach was innovative for the genre of slang dictionaries at the time, which often appeared as scattered glossaries or lists.

Types of Entries Included

The dictionary encompasses a broad range of vulgar and colloquial language, including:

- Thieves' cant and criminal slang
- Common swear words and insults
- Occupational jargon and tradesman slang
- Terms related to drinking, gambling, and social activities
- Obsolete words and phrases that were in decline even then

Importance in Linguistic and Cultural Studies

The dictionary holds considerable importance in both linguistic and cultural research. It provides a rare and detailed record of informal English speech during the late 18th century, serving as a primary source for the study of historical slang and vernacular language. Additionally, it reveals much about the social conditions, attitudes, and lifestyles of the lower classes during a transformative period in English history.

Contribution to Historical Linguistics

By documenting slang and cant, the dictionary offers valuable data for tracing the evolution of English vocabulary and usage. Linguists use it to understand how informal language develops, spreads, and sometimes enters mainstream usage. The dictionary also sheds light on the mechanisms of language change related to social class and subcultures.

Insights into 18th Century Society

Beyond language, the dictionary reflects the complex social fabric of 18th-century England. The terms included often hint at the daily lives, occupations, and social hierarchies of the period. This makes the dictionary a useful tool for historians and cultural scholars exploring class relations, crime, and urban life.

Influence on Subsequent Slang Dictionaries

a classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue has influenced many later works dedicated to slang and informal language. It established a framework for the systematic collection and presentation of nonstandard English vocabulary, inspiring lexicographers and writers interested in the vernacular.

Legacy in Lexicography

The dictionary's methodical approach paved the way for future slang dictionaries and linguistic studies. Subsequent lexicographers have drawn on Grose's work as a foundational reference, expanding and updating the catalog of slang to reflect changing times.

Popular Culture and Literary References

The colorful language preserved in the dictionary has found its way into literature, theater, and popular culture, enriching portrayals of 18th-century life and language. Writers and dramatists have used its entries to add authenticity and flavor to their works set in historical contexts.

Examples of Entries and Their Meanings

The richness of a classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue can be appreciated through sample entries that illustrate the variety and creativity of 18th-century slang. Below are some notable examples along with their meanings.

1. **Bumfodder:** A term used to describe inferior or worthless paper, often associated with writing bills or documents.
2. **Gammon:** To deceive or trick someone; also used to describe nonsense or humbug.

3. **Pigwigin:** A small cake or bun, often used in street vendors' slang.
4. **Swag:** Stolen goods or loot, commonly used in thieves' cant.
5. **Tommy:** A term for a common soldier or a man of low status.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue'?

'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue' is a historical dictionary first published in 1785 by Francis Grose, compiling English slang and colloquial expressions of the 18th century.

Who authored 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue'?

The dictionary was authored by Francis Grose, an English antiquary and lexicographer known for his works on English slang and customs.

When was 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue' first published?

It was first published in the year 1785.

What is the significance of 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue' in linguistic history?

The dictionary is significant for documenting the slang, idioms, and colloquialisms of 18th-century England, providing insight into the social language and culture of that period.

How does 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue' differ from regular dictionaries?

Unlike standard dictionaries, it focuses exclusively on vulgar, slang, and non-standard English expressions rather than formal language.

Is 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue' still relevant today?

Yes, it remains relevant for historians, linguists, and enthusiasts interested in the evolution of English slang and 18th-century culture.

Can 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue' be accessed online?

Yes, many versions of the dictionary are available online through digital archives and libraries, often as free public domain texts.

What are some examples of slang terms found in 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue'?

Examples include terms like 'bagnio' (a brothel), 'coxcomb' (a vain man), and 'gammon' (nonsense).

Did Francis Grose update 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue' after its first edition?

Yes, Grose released several revised editions with additional entries, reflecting changes and expansions in slang usage.

How has 'A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue' influenced modern slang dictionaries?

It set a precedent for documenting non-standard language and inspired future lexicographers to compile slang dictionaries with cultural and historical context.

Additional Resources

1. *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* by Francis Grose

This seminal work, first published in 1785, offers a comprehensive glossary of English slang and colloquial expressions of the 18th century. It provides insight into the colorful and often bawdy language used by common folk, criminals, and the urban underworld. The dictionary serves as an important historical document for linguists and social historians alike, capturing the vernacular of a bygone era.

2. *The Slang Dictionary: Etymological, Historical, and Anecdotal* by John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley

Published in 1890, this dictionary traces the origins and development of English slang from the 16th century onwards. It includes a wealth of examples and anecdotes that illustrate how slang has evolved and influenced everyday speech. The book is a valuable resource for understanding the cultural context behind various colloquialisms.

3. *Green's Dictionary of Slang* by Jonathon Green

A modern and exhaustive slang dictionary, first released in 1998, which covers slang from the medieval period to contemporary times. It compiles over 100,000 slang words and phrases from English-speaking countries around the world. This authoritative reference is indispensable for anyone studying the evolution and diversity of English slang.

4. *Slang and Its Analogues Past and Present* by John S. Farmer

This multi-volume work, published in the late 19th century, offers an extensive collection of slang terms from English and other languages. It compares slang usage across different times and cultures,

providing a broad perspective on informal language. The book remains a foundational text for scholars interested in the history of colloquial speech.

5. *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* by Bernard Mandeville

Although not a dictionary, this 18th-century work explores the social dynamics and language of vice, including the vulgar and profane. Mandeville's analysis sheds light on the moral and linguistic underpinnings of the vulgar tongue. It complements the study of slang by contextualizing its role in society.

6. *The Vulgar Tongue: Green's History of Slang* by Jonathon Green

This book provides a historical narrative of English slang, detailing its origins, development, and social significance. It draws on extensive research and numerous examples to show how slang reflects cultural shifts and attitudes. The work is both informative and entertaining, making the study of vulgar language accessible.

7. *Rogue's Lexicon: The Swearwords, Curses, and Slang of Old England* by Mark Forsyth

Forsyth's engaging book delves into the colorful and often humorous world of English swearing and slang from historical periods. It explains the origins and meanings of various vulgar terms, revealing the linguistic creativity of past generations. The book is a lively companion to classical dictionaries of the vulgar tongue.

8. *English Slang and Colloquial Speech* by Eric Partridge

A classic reference book, first published in the early 20th century, that catalogues English slang and informal speech. Partridge's work bridges the gap between historical slang dictionaries and contemporary usage. It remains a key text for understanding the nuances and variations of English colloquial language.

9. *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* by Geoffrey Hughes

This book examines the social and linguistic aspects of swearing in English, tracing its development from medieval times to the present. Hughes explores how vulgar language functions in society and its impact on culture and communication. The study complements traditional vulgar tongue dictionaries by focusing on profanity's role and perception.

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