**Slang**

**(From “A Little Book of Language” by David Crystal)**

What do you make of this conversation?

*Bill: I’m gonna take the Porker down to the bakery for some rolls.*

*Ben: I’ll come with you, man. I need some juice for my Pug too.*

It sounds very odd. Somebody taking a pig to a shop to get it some bread? And buying fruit juice for a dog? But it’s only odd if we don’t realize that this is a special kind of ‘cool’ language used by some people who are mad keen on cars. To understand it, we need to translate the words like this:

Porker Porsche

bakery petrol/gas station

rolls petrol/gas

juice petrol/gas

Pug Peugeot

The world of cars is full of words like this. Here are some more:

shoes wheels

bug irritate

dig? understand?

fab fabulous, fantastic

far out excellent

funky neat, cool

groovy great, cool

pad house, home

You may know some of these words because you’ve heard older people use them, or perhaps you’ve seen a movie (such as *Grease*) where some of them turn up. And maybe you use one or two yourselves. But most of them belong to 40 years ago.

The further back in time we go, the more difficult it is to understand the slang people use. In Victorian England, people on the street would talk about a ‘billy’ (a handkerchief), a ‘dipper’ (a pickpocket), and ‘luggers’ (earrings). And what do you think the innkeeper means when he calls his friend a ‘bully rook’ in Shakespeare’s play *The Merry Wives of Windsor*? That was slang in the sixteenth century for a ‘fine fellow’.

Some linguists have been very daring, in tracking down slang. One scholar, Eric Partridge, used to go into the back streets of London and ask shady characters about the kind of slang they used.

A gun, for instance, might be called a ‘cannon’, a ‘rod’, a ‘heater’, or other less obvious names, such as a ‘biscuit’. I’m glad he lived to tell the tale!

It’s less dangerous to explore home-grown slang. Most households have made-up words that are known only by the members of the family, or their close friends and relatives. For instance, do you have a special name in your house for the remote control that changes the channels on your TV? Here are just a few of the pet names that people have used for this device:

bimmer pinger

blapper plinky

dibber podger

donker pringer

dooberry splonker

flicker woojit

A collection of these family words was published in 2008. The editors called their book *Kitchen Table Lingo*.

Slang is used by people who want to show, by the way they talk, that they belong together. It’s very informal, casual, colloquial. It’s like a secret language, known only to the people who are members of the group. It’s therefore very different from the standard use of a language, as I described it in Chapter 10. A standard language, like Standard English, uses words that are there for everyone to use. If we want our speech and writing to be understood by as many people as possible, we have to avoid slang.

When we learn a language, then, one of the things we need to do is learn which words are standard and which are slang. And we need to remember not to mix them up. It’s natural and normal to use slang when talking with our friends. If we didn’t, and used only standard English, they’d think us a bit weird. But equally, we should avoid slang when we’re talking to a general audience. We won’t hear BBC or CNN announcers using slang, for instance, because they need to have their language understood by all their listeners.

And it’s especially important not to use slang when writing something that’s going to be read by people who don’t belong to your own little group. If you forget this, you can get into trouble. If you put slang words into a school essay, for instance, don’t be surprised to get it back with the words corrected. This will be another reason (along with the one I mentioned on p.68) why you’ll get low marks.

We won’t find slang words in print – unless, of course, the writer is deliberately trying to show how people talk, as in a crime novel. Just occasionally, in this book, you’ll see me use a slang expression – and when I do, I put it in inverted commas, to show that it’s a special usage. You’ll see an example if you look back at the second paragraph of this chapter. And there’s another one coming up in the

middle of Chapter 25.