

# Etymological Myths and Compound Etymologies in Rhyming Slang

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## ABSTRACT

Knowledge of how rhyming slang works has often led scholars and laypeople to assume, without a shred of evidence, that many words of unknown derivation have their origins in this form of slang. Some of these assumptions are based on the premise that, if two synonymous words or phrases rhyme, one of them must derive from the other, while others hinge on the supposed existence of a full form whose second element helps unravel the puzzle. This tendency to folk-etymologise by resorting to rhyme is also reflected in many terms resulting from a conflation of a non-rhyming slang word and an underlying rhyme, the former usually being regarded as an elliptical version of the full rhyming slang term, rather than one of its etymons. Drawing on data from a range of primary and secondary sources, this article examines the inner workings of a number of false but widely entertained rhyming slang etymologies and shows how some of the mechanisms that triggered them have long been used in the creation of genuine folk-etymological elaborations.

**Keywords:** rhyming slang; false etymology; folk etymology; word-formation

## 1. Introduction

Rhyming slang (henceforth RS) is a category of word-formation in which an expression, typically a double-stressed phrase, takes on the meaning of a word with which it rhymes. For example, *rabbit and pork* is used to mean ‘a conversation’ via the rhyme on *talk* and *Quentin Tarantino* comes to mean ‘wine’ by virtue of the rhyme on the slang *vino*. Frequently, however, only the first part of the phrase is used, as in “I wanted to have a rabbit with this Fingers”<sup>1</sup> and “Tanya luv, fancy a large glass of Quentin?”<sup>2</sup>, the original link with the target word becoming a mere technicality.

Although no one knows how RS came into being, what little evidence there is does suggest it originated in the East End of London in the early nineteenth century. Bearing in mind that the earliest instance of this form of slang is found in H. Brandon’s “Dictionary of the Flash or Cant Language”, published in 1839, and that in the first edition of his *Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words*, John Camden Hotten points out that “the rhyming slang” (note the definite article) started “about twelve or fifteen years ago”,<sup>3</sup> we may at least conclude that there was a recognisable

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<sup>1</sup>Norman, 39.

<sup>2</sup>Randall, 120.

<sup>3</sup>Hotten, *Dictionary of Modern Slang*.

body of rhymes doing the rounds in London in the 1840s. In all likelihood, it was the capital's centrality as a hub of subcultures and a source of linguistic innovations that made RS persist with remarkable vitality, travel around the English-speaking world and develop its own specific forms in a host of geographical and social dialects, as demonstrated most recently by the work of Antonio Lillo and Terry Victor.

Because of its inherently cryptic nature, it may be reasonably assumed that at least one of the original purposes of RS was to serve as a secret code, and a playful one at that, thus aiding private communication and reinforcing group membership among beggars, criminals and costermongers.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the playful secrecy of RS is still one of the reasons for its continued prevalence in the dialects of marginal groups, including criminals and drug addicts.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly enough, it is also precisely because of its cryptic nature that RS has often been used as a master key to unlocking etymological conundrums. The belief is widespread among scholars and laypeople alike that many words can be explained as originating in this type of slang. Some of the explanations they give are based on coincidental rhyming links between synonyms, while others rest upon the mistaken assumption that many etymologically puzzling words are in fact abbreviations, their presumed full forms providing the key to their meaning. Sometimes, in a twist of irony, a word may well be conjectured to be clipped RS even though its "original" full form and hence its hidden rhyme are unknown. Jonathon Green, for example, notes that the obsolete phrase *sling one's daniel* 'to leave' is of unknown derivation, but might be 'lost rhy[ming] sl[ang] referring to some form of pack'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Tony Thorne suggests that the mysterious *steamboats* 'drunk' "may have something to do with the use of a name such as 'Steamboat Bill', possibly in a lost rhyming-slang expression". Whether these guesses stand up to scrutiny or not does not seem to matter much to the non-linguist, who tends to find RS etymologies (real and fanciful) irresistibly charming.

Contrary to what one might expect, the myths and conjectures that have been tossed around about the origin of certain RS terms are also of interest to the linguist, for the mechanisms underlying them may provide significant insight into the processes involved in the genesis of new words. Nancy A. Niedzielski and Dennis R. Preston argue in a different context that what non-linguists believe about language does have a bearing on linguistic change.<sup>7</sup> "Folk linguistic beliefs," they claim, "may help determine the shape of language itself".<sup>8</sup> It is hard to disagree with them. As far as lexis is concerned, what people believe about words and their origins matters too.

Drawing on data from a number of primary and secondary sources, my purpose in this article is to offer a glimpse into two intertwined areas of lexical research which remain largely unexamined: the false etymologies (or "etymythologies", to borrow Laurence Horn's felicitous coinage) of RS words and the role that folk-etymology plays in the creation of RS. Besides shedding light on some little-known aspects of slang etymology, this study seeks to provide a better understanding of the nature of RS as a word-making device in contemporary English.

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<sup>4</sup>See Partridge, *Words, Words, Words!*, 30–31. Costermongers were street sellers of fruit, vegetables, fish and meat. Hotten noted that the London costermongers, numbering over 30,000 at the time of his writing, formed 'a distinct class, occupying whole neighbourhoods' and were 'cut off from the rest of metropolitan society by their low habits'.

<sup>5</sup>Smith; Lillo, "Rhyming Slang of the Junkie"; Bronson, 204–205.

<sup>6</sup>Green, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*. See also Quinion, 231; Robert Allen, 386.

<sup>7</sup>Niedzielski and Preston, viii.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

## 2. RS myths and how they get started

It is striking to see, in dictionary after dictionary, how many non-RS words are widely thought to be RS. As with other etymological myths, these bits of misinformation have a funny habit of dying hard. Some of the usual suspects are *chew the fat* ‘to talk in an informal way’,<sup>9</sup> *honeypot* ‘the vagina’ (both originating as metaphors), *buckshee* ‘gratis’ (from the Persian *baksheesh* ‘a gift of money’) and *zubrick* ‘the penis’ (from the Arabic *zubrak* ‘the penis’), all four of which have made their way into RS dictionaries.<sup>10</sup> Granted, the perceptual salience of the stressed, rhyming elements (or “rhymemes”, as they are technically termed) of these expressions would seem to trigger an association with *chat*, *twat*, *free* and *prick* respectively. However, that is not to say that these terms were motivated by rhyme, rhyme-motivation being a *sine qua non* for a word to qualify as RS. Many synonyms simply rhyme by chance. Sometimes, as in the case of *buckshee* and *zubrick*, the connection with a rhyming synonym may just be an attempt to make sense of a word that might otherwise seem conspicuously foreign.<sup>11</sup> But how can we ascertain whether a rhyme is coincidental or not? How can we know if there really was an intention to rhyme at the time of coinage? This can only be determined with some (though not absolute) certainty by looking at three aspects: the context and period in which the word in question was coined, its semantic and morphological characteristics and the overall lexical structure of the dialect or dialects in which it is first recorded.

It is clear from what we know about the origins of RS that any supposed rhyming term that pre-dates the 1830s is to be regarded with suspicion. An interesting example is *Jane Shore*, from the name of the celebrated mistress of Edward IV and several prominent noblemen (*ca.* 1445–1527). To be sure, the story of the royal mistress (the merriest of the king’s concubines, according to Thomas More) must have inspired the early, pre-RS use of the name as an epithet, as in the following quotation from a letter from Horace Walpole to George Montagu, dated 28 January 1760:

He apostrophized the lost sheep, who sobbed and cried from their souls; so did my Lady Hertford and Fanny Pelham, till I believe the city dames took them both for Jane Shores.<sup>12</sup>

1760 was too early for RS. Anyone would know what a figurative *Jane Shore* was without necessarily resorting to the rhyme with *whore*. A similar example of the use of this epithet, superficially closer to RS because of the humorously rhyming form in which it is couched, is found in one of Richard Barham’s *Ingoldsby Legends*, originally published in 1840:

While Louis Quatorze  
Kept about him, in scores,  
What the Noblesse, in courtesy, term’d his “Jane Shores,”  
—They were call’d by a much coarser name out of doors.—<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Quinion, 69–70.

<sup>10</sup>*Chew the fat* (Puxley, *Fresh Rabbit*; Green, *Cassell’s Rhyming Slang*; Crozier; Tibballs; Finch), *honeypot* (Puxley, *Cockney Rabbit*; Tibballs), *buckshee* (Puxley, *Cockney Rabbit*), *zubrick* (Seal).

<sup>11</sup>Admittedly, the change from *-eesh* to *-ee* in *buckshee* and from *-ak* to *-ick* in *zubrick* was perhaps due to the influence of *free* and *prick*. Cf. *buck shee* (Connolly, 118), an uncommon spelling conforming to the usual bipartite structure of RS.

<sup>12</sup>Walpole, 39.

<sup>13</sup>Ingoldsby, 262.

However, the earliest unquestionable occurrence of the name as RS is in an article on London slang published in 1893. The immediate company the word keeps in the quotation below, especially the synonymous *twos and fours* and the self-explanatory *slap bang* (the latter a nonce-word or an idiolectalism), leaves no room for doubt:

Members of the unfortunate class are referred to as Jane Shores or twos and fours, so that Slap Bang is frequently an attempt at euphonism.<sup>14</sup>

Green's ever-growing database of anglophone slang, which in 2014 contained some 125,000 words (including derivatives, compounds and phrasal uses), shows that RS accounts for five per cent of the lexis.<sup>15</sup> In purely statistical terms, a slang usage is therefore quite unlikely to be a RS formation. In fact, according to Green's figures, it is just as likely to be an abbreviation and three times as likely to be a semantic extension or other type of manipulation of an existing standard English word. On the other hand, the database on which Lillo and Victor's dictionary is founded, which runs to in excess of 9,000 RS terms hailing from different corners of the English-speaking world, reveals another signature trait of this form of slang: rhyming terms occur in bunches; no dialect has just one item of RS. Thus, a word is likely to be RS if there are other words in that dialect that have been created as RS.

Given these premises, it is easy to see why the American slang *eighty-six* 'to reject, veto or dispose of someone or something; to put an end to something; to murder', originally used by waiters and waitresses to mean that an item was out of stock,<sup>16</sup> is scarcely likely to have been coined as RS for *nix* (pace *OED2* and most current dictionaries).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, why should this be the one piece of American restaurant jargon that originated as RS? It is also telling that, although Barry Popik has traced the word back to 1933, the RS explanation of its origin first turns up in Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner's dictionary, published in 1960.

But one should also be careful when confronted with sets of RS items. RS being but a small part of the lexis of English, it cannot be the first resort of the etymologist in attempting to discover a word's origin. I am assured, for example, that *luscious glory* 'a person's hair', a nonce-word coined by Anthony Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange*,<sup>18</sup> is simply a playful variation of the standard English *crowning glory*; yet it was tentatively interpreted by Stanley Edgar Hyman and others after him as RS on *upper storey* (which, incidentally, is unheard of in the sense of 'hair')<sup>19</sup> simply, I think, because this kind of slang is conspicuously present in Burgess's novel. A similar case is the adjective and adverb *pan loaf*, as in "That Hannah Gordon's a bit pan loaf, is she no'?"<sup>20</sup> and "We don't huv tae talk pan loaf",<sup>21</sup> a figurative usage whose currency in Glasgow, one of the traditional spawning grounds of RS, has triggered the following suggestion:

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<sup>14</sup>*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 15 June 1893.

<sup>15</sup>Green, *Language!*, 18.

<sup>16</sup>See Bentley, 45; Adams, 61.

<sup>17</sup>See also Dundes, who does not buy that explanation either, although he accepts another popular myth.

<sup>18</sup>"Then I put my nogas into very comfy woolly toofles, combed my luscious glory, and was ready for P. R. Deltoid." Burgess, 37.

<sup>19</sup>Hyman, 23. As far as I can tell, the usual slang sense of *upper storey* is 'the head as the seat of reason and intelligence', as in 'He's a bit weak in the upper storey'.

<sup>20</sup>*Sunday Mail*, Glasgow, 8 September 2002.

<sup>21</sup>*Sunday Herald*, Glasgow, 22 March 2009.

A **pan-loaf accent** is a posh accent. There are two possible explanations for this usage known to me: the first being that a pan loaf was considered the kind of bread that posh people ate, the second being that pan loaf is rhyming slang for toff as pronounced locally.<sup>22</sup>

Rhyming coincidences between semantically related words are something of a minefield for the slang etymologist. And, for some odd reason, etymological guesswork based on them seldom fails to catch the public's fancy, regardless of its plausibility or the strength of the evidence. One prime example is the popular theory, perhaps originally propounded by Hugh Gray, that attributes the origin of *brass tacks* (as used in the phrase *get or come down to brass tacks*) to the rhyme on *facts*:

How many people realise, when they use the expression: "Let's get down to brass tacks," that this is a contribution to current speech taken from rhyming slang? The average Cockney pronounces the word "facts" to rhyme with "tacks," and the rhyming slang therefore for "facts" is "brass tacks."<sup>23</sup>

Based on nothing more than a rhyming link, this explanation ignores the fact that the expression has a far longer history in American English than in British English. Furthermore, it seems to imply that the rhyme *tacks-facts* is more common in Cockney than in other dialects of English, which is, of course, not true. Eric Partridge, who helped perpetuate this misetymology in his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*,<sup>24</sup> downplays the importance of the American evidence in the *OED Supplement*, while Julian Franklyn explicitly notes the phrase is "Cockney rhyming slang". The earliest citation for this idiom, posted by Fred Shapiro on the American Dialect Society mailing list, is from a Texan newspaper of 1863:

[W]hen you come down to "brass tacks"—if we may be allowed the expression—everybody is governed by selfishness[.]<sup>25</sup>

The date and place of publication are revealing: given that the first homegrown American specimen of RS did not surface until the 1880s<sup>26</sup> and the use of RS in America has always, in the main, been restricted to certain sporting and criminal subcultures on the West Coast, especially in San Francisco,<sup>27</sup> we may conclude from this evidence that the phrase is unlikely in the extreme to be based on rhyme.

Bogus rhyming etymologies may even arise by association with existing RS terms. Take, for instance, the British idiom *not a sausage* 'nothing at all', which is often claimed to derive from *sausage and mash*, rhyming on *cash*. Examination of the evidence clearly shows this does not hold water: *not a sausage* is first found (with

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<sup>22</sup>Munro, 53.

<sup>23</sup>Gray, 33.

<sup>24</sup>Partridge, *Dictionary of Slang*, 1st ed.

<sup>25</sup>*The Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, Houston, Texas, 21 January 1863, quoted by Fred Shapiro on ADS-L, 7 November 2006, <http://listserv.linguistlist.org>.

<sup>26</sup>The earliest recorded item I am aware of is *Little Joe* 'a roll of four in craps', which first surfaced in print in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* of 12 June 1886: "Four was the throw. 'Shake dies, niggah, shake dies!' spoke a man about ten shades blacker than the man he addressed as 'niggah.' 'Wetcher throw, coon?' 'Little Jo.[']" The term relies on a mock dialect pronunciation of *Joe* as *Jaw*, thus rhyming on *four*. The word *rhubarbs* 'the suburbs' is recorded much earlier (1854), but does not conform to the canonical pattern of RS.

<sup>27</sup>See Maurer; Blumberg.

reference to lack of money)<sup>28</sup> in Philip Allingham's 1934 autobiography *Cheapjack*,<sup>29</sup> whereas the earliest evidence we have for the noun *sausage* 'cash', shortened from *sausage and mash*, is from a 1948 article by English novelist James Curtis. Curtis himself, it so happens, was also probably the first to come up with the hypothesis that *not a sausage* is RS:

There are all sorts of colloquialisms used in English today which are based on a piece of rhyming slang of which the rhyme has long since been forgotten. An excellent example of this is that word 'sausage.' Frequently one hears people say 'not a sausage,' meaning a complete lack of something or another. Without knowing it, they are emulating M. Jourdain, by using rhyming slang. 'Sausage,' as we already know, means cash and when anyone wished to convey that he had no cash he would explain that he 'hadn't a sausage'.<sup>30</sup>

The same kind of anachronism explains why the long-cherished popular explanation of the word *weasel* in the nursery rhyme "Pop Goes the Weasel" cannot be right. In this explanation, the song is about pawning (*popping* in slang) either one's coat or one's suit in order to pay for drinks at the local pub, a reflection of the tough times faced by the English drinking classes in the olden days:

Up and down the City Road,  
In and out the Eagle,  
That's the way the money goes,  
Pop goes the weasel.

Whether the "popped" article is a coat or a suit depends on the interpretation of *weasel* as an elliptical form of *weasel and stoat*<sup>31</sup> or an alteration of the first element of *whistle and flute*.<sup>32</sup> An apparent snag with both these interpretations is that *weasel and stoat* and *whistle and flute* are first recorded, respectively, in 1946 and 1931,<sup>33</sup> whereas the origins of the song can be traced to mid-nineteenth century America.<sup>34</sup>

A different hypothesis suggests that *weasel* is Cockney RS for *bezel* 'a rim which holds a watch-glass in position'.<sup>35</sup> This is untenable on several counts, though, not least because half rhymes are extremely uncommon in RS – Cockney or otherwise.

Another manifestation of this penchant for RS etymologies is to be found in the hypothetical full forms that have been concocted to explain the origin of certain words. Popular myth has it, for example, that *kettle* 'a wristwatch' is an elliptical form of *kettle*

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<sup>28</sup>Hence Partridge's definition of *sausage* as 'any trifling sum of money' (Partridge, *Dictionary of the Underworld*). This is a slight development from the figurative sense the word has in the phrase *not worth a sausage*, whose use can be traced back to at least the early 1910s: "Nobody knows better than M'Clain that there isn't a white man in sight at present 'worth a sausage'[".]” *The Barrier Miner*, Broken Hill, NSW, 24 November 1911.

<sup>29</sup>“Of all the bloomin' carsies I've ever struck this 'ere takes some beating. They ain't got a sausage, son, not a sausage. I've taken more in a couple of hours on a Sunday in the rag-market than I'd take here in a couple of weeks.” Allingham, 37.

<sup>30</sup>Curtis, 282.

<sup>31</sup>Irving Lewis Allen, 159; Holder, s.v. *pop*<sup>3</sup>; Foster, 97; Jack, 159–60; cf. Opie and Opie, 218.

<sup>32</sup>Foster, 97; Barry Hill, 25.

<sup>33</sup>The first appearance of *weasel and stoat* 'a coat' that I can trace is in an article on British slang published in the *New York Times Magazine* of 17 February 1946: “[T]he outrageous price of a 'whistle and flute' (suit) or a 'weasel and stoat' (overcoat) is a subject much discussed over a glass of 'pig ears' (beer).” *Whistle and flute* is first found in Brophy and Partridge.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Raph, 131.

<sup>35</sup>Nettel, 232.

*on the hob*, rhyming on *fob*.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, *frail* has been derived from *frail frame*, rhyming on *dame*;<sup>37</sup> *onions*, as used in the phrase *know one's onions*, has been etymologised as a shortening of *onion rings*, rhyming on *things*;<sup>38</sup> the Mancunian slang *bobbins* 'rubbish' has been taken to be short for *bobbins of cotton*, rhyming on *rotten*;<sup>39</sup> the South African English word *bowl* 'to steal', recorded in use among speakers of Indian descent, has been tentatively derived from *bat and bowl* 'stole';<sup>40</sup> and *tanner* 'a sixpence' has been claimed to be the reduced version of *tanner and skin*,<sup>41</sup> a phrase which, according to Partridge, could be RS for *thin*, another term for a sixpence.<sup>42</sup> Try as I might, I have been unable to find any of these supposed full forms in any of the sources available to me.

### 3. The “rhyming slangification” of ordinary slang words

The explanations of the origins of some slang terms bear witness to the folk tendency to create unsubstantiated associative links between words. However historically false these links may be, once they become strong enough through repetition, they can have an effect on the shape of existing non-RS words, which may be elongated to rhyme with a synonym and hence achieve RS status. A case in point is *bob* 'a shilling; thus, in the plural, money', which has been rhyming slanged as *Bob Dylan* (courtesy of the Bard of Minnesota):

Sorry I can't, unless u can sort me with some bob dylans until Friday.<sup>43</sup>

I'm absolutely boracic lint. I was out with a lemon last night in the pub, so I thought you might gi' us a rub-a-dub-dub [*sc.* a sub]. A Bob Dylan.<sup>44</sup>

Given that the logical line of development of RS is FULL FORM > ELLIPTICAL FORM, as in *Quentin Tarantino* > *Quentin*, a predictable consequence of this transmutation is that *Bob Dylan* is bound to be misinterpreted as the immediate etymon of the 'elliptical' form *bob*. This is in fact the etymology given for *a few bob* on *Slang.ie*, a popular crowdsourced dictionary of Irish slang:

**A Few Bob** n. A bit of cash. from rhyming slang; Bob Dylan = shillin' (currency pre-1970) a shilling was worth 12 pence (d); 20 shillings made £1.<sup>45</sup>

There is no doubt that the primary reason for the coining of *Bob Dylan* was a wish to establish a (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) connection between *bob* and *shilling*. Whereas the usual type of RS phrase simply relies on the existence of a target word or “underlying etymon” (*shilling*, for example, is the “underlying etymon” of *Thomas Tilling*), *Bob*

<sup>36</sup>See Alexandrowicz and Wilson, 107; Sanger, 55.

<sup>37</sup>Spears.

<sup>38</sup>See Siefring; Baker, 63.

<sup>39</sup>“And gobby Liam couldn't resist sticking the knife in, telling him: 'Your cooking is bobbins.' The word is Manchester rhyming slang for lousy, as in bobbins o' cotton ... rotten.” *Daily Star*, London, 3 June 2008.

<sup>40</sup>Mesthrie.

<sup>41</sup>Hotten, *Slang Dictionary*, 68.

<sup>42</sup>Partridge, *Slang To-day and Yesterday*, 162.

<sup>43</sup>*Urban Dictionary*, entry posted on 3 May 2006, <https://www.urbandictionary.com>.

<sup>44</sup>Bill Hill.

<sup>45</sup>*Slang.ie*, accessed on 1 March 2013, <http://www.slang.ie>.

*Dylan* hinges on two existing words, a “nested etymon” (*bob*), which is embedded within the word itself, and an “underlying etymon” (*shillin*’), both of them conveying the same meaning:

| NESTED ETYMON    | UNDERLYING ETYMON |
|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>bob</i>       | <i>shillin</i> ’  |
| NEW RS TERM      |                   |
| <i>Bob Dylan</i> |                   |

One of the earliest examples of this form of compound etymology is *Tommy O’Rann* ‘*scran* (i.e. food)’. The word, which is first found in Hotten’s *Dictionary of Modern Slang*, probably came about from a desire to make sense of the earlier slang *tommy* ‘food’ (originally ‘bread’), whose original motivation, still not fully elucidated,<sup>46</sup> had long become obscured. Another, perhaps more familiar example which can be explained as the result of a double derivation is *Duchess of Fife* ‘a wife’, a term first attested in the early 1930s. Though formed as RS, the expression is likely to have arisen as an elaboration of the earlier slang *dutch* ‘a wife’,<sup>47</sup> itself the origin of *my old dutch* ‘one’s wife or mother’, a Cockney usage first recorded in 1882 in J. F. Mitchell’s ballad ‘Jimmy Johnson’s Holiday’,<sup>48</sup> and later used as the title of a popular music hall song by Albert Chevalier. Not surprisingly, the seemingly logical but unsupported assumption that *dutch* derives from *Duchess of Fife* is well-entrenched in the literature.<sup>49</sup>

English slang abounds in such compound etymologies. Yet, except in a few obvious cases, their identification is far from straightforward, for it requires demonstrating, on the one hand, that the RS phrase postdates its presumed nested etymon (this is no easy task, since most words are older than their first attestation in print) and, on the other, that both were used in the same dialect or dialects at around the same time. Thus, at first blush, one might think that *apples and rice* ‘nice’, first recorded by Partridge in 1943,<sup>50</sup> could well have been based on the slang *apples* (as used in the phrase *she’s apples* ‘everything is fine’), whose earliest attestation in the *Australian National Dictionary* is from 1929.<sup>51</sup> It is a tempting etymology, but the geographical distribution of each of these forms militates against it: the RS expression has not been encountered outside of British English, whilst the non-RS *apples* is confined to Australian and New Zealand usage. For the same reason, the widely held hypothesis that the direction of development could have been *apples and rice* > *apples* is at odds with the evidence.<sup>52</sup>

Fortunately, some expressions give the etymologist much less trouble. Any competent speaker of English intuitively knows that the slang words *pins* and *pegs* ‘the legs’ have been hanging around the language long enough to be the source of the British

<sup>46</sup> See Green, *Green’s Dictionary of Slang*.

<sup>47</sup> This is probably an elliptical form of the slang *Dutch clock* ‘a wife’ (see Green, *Green’s Dictionary of Slang*), rather than, as generally thought, a clipping of *duchess*.

<sup>48</sup> “He made a vow he’d never row / With his old Dutch again”, quoted in Green, *Green’s Dictionary of Slang*, s.v. *Dutch* n.<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Koopman.

<sup>50</sup> Partridge, *Dictionary of Slang*, 3rd ed.

<sup>51</sup> Moore, ed.

<sup>52</sup> See Lillo, “Etymology of Australian Slang.” Most authorities claim that *apples* may derive from *apples and rice* or *apples and spice*. To my knowledge, the latter phrase is unrecorded.



RS *pin pegs* and *pins and pegs*, both of which can be traced back to the early 2000s.<sup>53</sup> The direction of development is clear and requires no hard evidence other than our own language competence and etymological awareness.

All too often, nonetheless, as with other areas of etymological research, here we can only discuss a word's origin in terms of probabilities rather than certainties, especially because the exact influence of a lexeme on the creation of a synonymous RS phrase is hard to ascertain in hindsight. The fact that *tommy* and *dutch*, mentioned above, were in common use in Cockney when *Tommy O'Rann* and *Duchess of Fife* were first found seems to suggest the latter derive from the former. It would be surprising to discover that they are etymologically unrelated, but linguistic accidents do happen – and they happen a lot in slang.

The same chronologically based analysis may apply to many other expressions. *Twist and twirl* 'a girl', for example, is commonly thought to be the source of the slang *twist* 'a girl', yet the earliest known use of the RS phrase is found in 1898,<sup>54</sup> while the monolexemic *twist* is first recorded in 1662<sup>55</sup> and was probably still in use in the late nineteenth century; if determining when a word was first used is often difficult, determining when it went out of use is far trickier, if not impossible, especially in slang.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, unless it can be proved that, in its modern use, *twist* does derive from *twist and twirl* and the existence of the earlier *twist* is simply a coincidence (it is not unusual for two superficially identical lexemes to have quite distinct genetic histories), we may conclude that *twist* > *twist and twirl* is more likely than *twist and twirl* > *twist*.

It will be clear by now that we are faced here with one of the major problems of slang research: how to date a part of a non-standard lexis which is essentially oral, often ephemeral by nature and whose written record is generally scant and unreliable, especially for earlier periods. The difficulty varies from one word to another, depending on the amount of evidence available. For instance, the narrow one-year gap between the earliest attested use of *sugar and honey* (1859)<sup>57</sup> and *sugar* (1858),<sup>58</sup> both used to mean 'money', does not allow us to determine with any degree of certainty which of these forms was coined first. However, we can be almost certain, *pace* the *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, that the Scottish gangland slang *Malky Fraser* 'a cut-throat razor', first recorded in an etymological note in Michael Munro's *The Patter*,<sup>59</sup> originated as an elaboration of *malky*, which made its first appearance in print in *Cut and Run* by Bill McGhee.<sup>60</sup>

Below are some other words resulting from the combination of a nested etymon (identified as ETYM.1) and an underlying etymon (identified as ETYM.2). The dates of their first recorded use, enclosed in square brackets, and the varieties of English where they have been found are taken from Lillo and Victor's dictionary, which provides dated citations and further details. Unless otherwise stated, the dates of first use of the nested etymons are extracted from *Green's Dictionary of Slang*:

*Charlie Britt*. [1984] A fit of temper. Australian use.

< *charlie*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1941, in the phrase *chuck a charlie* 'to have a fit'] + *fit*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>See Lillo and Victor.

<sup>54</sup>Haydon, 132.

<sup>55</sup>*Rump*, 15.

<sup>56</sup>See Gold, 59–60.

<sup>57</sup>Hotten, *Dictionary of Modern Slang*.

<sup>58</sup>Mayhew, 379.

<sup>59</sup>Munro, 44.

<sup>60</sup>McGhee, 30. See Lillo, "Nae Barr's Irn-Bru," 87; Lillo and Victor.

*Charlie Hunt*. [1961] An obnoxious person; an idiot. British use.  
 < *charlie*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1946] + *cunt*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*Ching Wang Louis*. [2006] A five-pound note. British use.  
 < *ching*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [2000] + *bluey*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*dickory dock*. [1960] The penis. British and Australian use.  
 < *dick*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1836] + *cock*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*dog and bark*. [1977] A police informer. Australian use.  
 < *dog*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1856] + *nark*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*dog's meat*. [2001] The feet. British use.  
 < *dogs*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1916, *OED3*; the singular *dog* is recorded in 1913] + *feet*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*hubba, I am back*. [1994] Crack cocaine. American use.  
 < *hubba*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1986] + *crack*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*Jack Dash*. [2012] Money. British use.  
 < *jack*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1807, an originally American term recorded in British usage from the 1940s] + *cash*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*Karsey Moilet*. [2005] A lavatory. British use.  
 < *karsey*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup>, variously spelt [1932] + *toilet*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*old fruit gum*. [2011] Used as an affectionate form of address between men. British use.  
 < *old fruit*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1920] + *chum*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*Peter Bell*. [1992] A prison cell. South African use.  
 < *peter*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1949; recorded in the form *pete* in 1934] + *cell*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*poppy red*. [2006] Money. British use.  
 < *poppy*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1943] + *bread*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*rat and mouse*. [1961] A despicable person; a police informer.  
 < *rat*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1818] + *louse*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*Scapa Flow*. [ante 1945] To go; to run away; to leave quickly. British use.  
 < *scarper*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1844] + *go*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*Sprazey Anna*. [1969] A sixpence. Also spelt *Sprazy Anna*, *Sprazi Anna* and *Sprarsy Anna*. British use.  
 < *sprarzy*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup>, variously spelt [1906] + *tanner*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*squiddly did*. [2008] One pound sterling. British use.  
 < *squid*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1902] + *quid*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*Susie Anna*. [1974] A sixpence. Also spelt *Susy Anna* and *Suzianna*. British use.  
 < *susy*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup>, also spelt *suzie* [1934]; probably an alteration of the dialect form *suse* 'six' + *tanner*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

*Thomas More; Thomas Moore*. [2003; 2007] A female prostitute. British use.  
 < *tom*<sup>[ETYM.1]</sup> [1941] + *whore*<sup>[ETYM.2]</sup>

As might be expected, the original motives for these coinages are not always easy to pinpoint. Most of them are consciously artificial and may be regarded as instances of intentionally playful folk etymology, simply prompted by a desire to juggle with words, to combine and recombine them in exciting new ways. The purpose of such play may be to remotivate an otherwise arbitrary-looking lexeme or to euphemise a word in a somewhat mischievous manner. The slang *susie* for a sixpence probably derives from the dialect form *suse* 'six', but it makes more sense if transformed into *Susie Anna*, rhyming on *tanner*. A similarly obscure word is the Lingua Franca and Polari verb *scarper* 'to escape', ultimately from the Italian *scappare*, which becomes more transparent when disguised as *Scapa Flow*, rhyming on *go*. The euphemistic quality of this kind of RS may be seen, for example, in *dickory dock* 'the penis' and *Karsey Moilet* 'a toilet', the jocular versions of *dick* and *karsey*.

Occasionally, elaborations may arise unintentionally too, and their origin can be pinned down precisely. One such expression is *dog's meat* 'the feet', a folk-etymological reconstruction of the Americanism *dogs*, often used in the phrase *my dogs*

are barking ‘my feet are sore’. So far as I can tell, the earliest occurrence of this expression is in *OED2*’s definition of *dog* (n.<sup>1</sup>, sense 14), which is accompanied by a brief etymological note: ‘*pl.* Short for *dog’s meat*; feet. *Rhyming slang*’. It is reasonable to presume that it was this etymology that had some authors believe that *dog’s meat* was a genuine usage; its consequent inclusion in a number of RS dictionaries, including Betty Kirkpatrick’s, Ray Puxley’s and Geoff Tibballs’s,<sup>61</sup> must have helped the expression take on a life of its own. Indeed, by the time the etymology of the relevant sense of *dog* was revised in the online *OED3* (“It has been suggested that this is short for *dog’s meat*, used as RS for *feet*, but there is very little evidence for such a use”), the term had already entered the RS lexicon as a modern substitute for the traditional and still commonly used term *plates of meat* (or *plates* for short):

So I’m going to find a clean dickie dirt, get on my dog’s meat and I think today  
I’ll need me quaker oat.<sup>62</sup>

#### 4. Some variations

RS is an ongoing game whose rules are there to be, if not broken, at least bent to suit the speaker’s needs and folk-etymological assumptions. This ludic nature of RS accounts for a vast array of variations on, or deviations from, the general formative patterns we are familiar with. While some of these variations may neatly fit into one or other of the conventional categories of RS,<sup>63</sup> the tangled web of word and sound associations underpinning them may be hard to unravel. One such variation is illustrated by *Charlie Smirke*. First recorded by Partridge in 1980,<sup>64</sup> the expression tautologically combines *charlie* and *berk*, its nested and underlying etymon respectively, but the latter happens to be a sanitised version of the more overtly dysphemistic RS term *Berkeley Hunt* or *Berkshire Hunt*.

This form of lexical recycling may be seen at work in other terms in which a shortened RS form is embedded in the word itself. Such is the case of the British slang *Bristol bits*, rhyming on *tits*, whose nested etymon is the singular form of *bristols*, a clipping of *Bristol Cities*, rhyming on *titties*. Likewise, *rabbit*, the short form of *rabbit and pork* ‘to talk’, has been recreated as *rabbit’s paw*, rhyming on *jaw*:

This minger turned her back on her homeland and got to be famous just by shaking her Bristol bits on the telly.<sup>65</sup>

‘Bunny’ for them, first of all, meant ‘slag’ or ‘whore’ after the eponymous heroines of *Playboy* magazine. It also signified someone who was ‘all mouth’ and rabbits on (rhyming slang: rabbit’s paw = jaw): shades of the cockney singing duo, Chas and Dave.<sup>66</sup>

Taken to an extreme, this process can create a proliferation of synonyms for the same concept, a phenomenon that has been dubbed “overlexicalisation”<sup>67</sup> and which, in the case of RS, may reveal a desire to brighten up one’s language and cause a chuckle or

<sup>61</sup>Kirkpatrick; Puxley, *BritSlang*; Tibballs.

<sup>62</sup>*BritMovie* (forum), entry posted on 16 July 2010, <https://www.britmovie.co.uk/forum>.

<sup>63</sup>See Lillo and Victor, xiii–xv.

<sup>64</sup>Partridge, *Dictionary of Slang*, 8th ed.

<sup>65</sup>*FCBA History* (wiki), entry posted on 31 July 2015, <http://fcbahistory.pbworks.com>.

<sup>66</sup>Cohen, 26.

<sup>67</sup>Halliday, 571.

two (slang, like poetry, abhors dullness), thus enhancing group bonding and, consequently, baffling, misleading and annoying outsiders. A notable example is *brass*, a common British slang term for a prostitute. Originally an abridged form of the RS *brass nail* ‘tail (i.e. a prostitute)’,<sup>68</sup> the word not only has yielded several derivatives, compounds and blends, like *brasser*, *brasshouse* and *brasstitute* (this last a delightful nonce-word coined by Brendan Behan in his 1958 play *The Hostage*),<sup>69</sup> but has also undergone such mutations as *brass door*, *brass dart*, *brass flute* and *brass rubber*, all of them based on a different underlying etymon (*whore*, *tart*, *prostitute* and *scrubber*):

Bonus Brass Door (= whore, get with my non-cockney muckers) points for her boudoir attire, all lacey and marabou feathers.<sup>70</sup>

I’ve been told ‘brass’ is rhyming slang; brass dart for tart.<sup>71</sup>

[A] binman won £9.7 million in the lotto, spent it all on drugs, Argos bling and brass flutes.<sup>72</sup>

There’s a bunch of old brass rubbers hanging around the car park.<sup>73</sup>

In still another variation of this process, a new RS phrase may result from a semantic development of an existing word. *Lollipop* ‘money given as a gratuity or bribe’ is a good case in point. The word, first recorded by Julian Franklyn, takes on its specific meaning from the rhyme on *drop*, its underlying etymon, but its nested etymon is *lolly*, a common slang term for money dating from the 1940s:

When he’s a waiter Fred does well on lollipops.<sup>74</sup>

The same kind of double motivation can be seen at work in *Dicky Dirt* ‘a shirt’, a word coined in the 1890s as an elaborated version of the earlier *dicky* ‘a worn-out shirt; a false shirt front’:<sup>75</sup>

Right, out come the old cutters, and with a quick snip his money and the tail of his Dicky Dirt were gone.<sup>76</sup>

## 5. Concluding remarks

From a strictly lexicological perspective, RS does not differ from most other subsets of English lexis (slang and otherwise): it is based on the attachment of new meanings to old forms. What makes it unique and sets it apart from other types of words is the use of rhyme as a disguise mechanism. Yet a close look at the RS lexicon will show that rhyme is often but one of several layers of associations upon which this type of slang is

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<sup>68</sup>See Lillo and Victor.

<sup>69</sup>“Call down that brasstitute.” Behan, act I.

<sup>70</sup>*Le Blow* (blog), entry posted on 8 June 2011, <http://leblow.co.uk>.

<sup>71</sup>*The Guardian* (website), comment posted on 30 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com>.

<sup>72</sup>*Reddit* (social news website), entry posted on 7 August 2016, <https://www.reddit.com>.

<sup>73</sup>Thom Bulter, pers. comm., 14 September 2017.

<sup>74</sup>Wilkes.

<sup>75</sup>See Lillo, “Origin of Cockney Slang.”

<sup>76</sup>Barnes, 75.

built. The connection between a phrase and its target word may be based on a clever combination of rhyme and figurative language, as in *cough and drag* ‘a fag (i.e. a cigarette)’, or may rely partly on sociocultural knowledge, as in *Stuart Diver* ‘a survivor’, the eponymous Stuart Diver (b. 1970) being the sole survivor of the 1997 landslide in Thredbo, New South Wales.<sup>77</sup>

Sometimes, however, the very make-up of the word happens to be the result of a combination of two etymons. The technique of merging two etymons together to form a composite is in many ways comparable to that used in many false but widely believed etymologies of non-RS words, some of which have often been unquestioningly repeated in dictionaries and other literature. In fact, it would not be too far a stretch to venture that most rhyming slang terms, like those discussed here, began life as pseudo-etymological explanations. Rhyming slang forms and spurious etymologies are therefore not to be seen as completely different animals, but simply as two different manifestations of our urge (call it natural if you will) to make sense of words that do not seem to make sense.

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<sup>77</sup>For more examples, see Wright, 97–98.

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