'A labour so ungrateful': Report of a project to update Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of slang and unconventional English*

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Abstract

This paper offers a brief account of the current project to update Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, the last edition of which appeared in 1984. Much of Partridge's original effort was concerned with the slang of the years 1890 to 1945; the present editors aim to bring it up to the present day, concentrating on terms that have been current at any time since 1945. For the first time in a Partridge *DSUE*, American slang is being given equal coverage, and there will be significant inclusions from World English. At the level of individual entries, the spirit and tone of Partridge's original is conveyed mainly through the 'gloss', a discursive note covering anything from etymology, to synonyms, to examples of usage. The dictionary text is being held as a database of XML files, and an account of compiling procedures is given. A wide range of fictional, non-fictional, and audiovisual texts are being used as primary sources of new material. Entries from previous editions of the dictionary are being retained where appropriate.

Introduction

Eric Partridge, with his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, made a profound contribution to the study and understanding of non-standard English. His body of work, widely acknowledged scholarship and dignity of approach set the standard for every other English-language slang lexicographer of the 20th century. The first edition was published in 1937, with the eighth and latest edition (*DSUE8*) appearing in 1984. Work is now in progress on a substantial revision, to be entitled the *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (henceforth referred to as *New Partridge*). The dictionary will be published by Routledge (Taylor & Francis) and is scheduled to appear in 2005. This paper offers a brief account of the proposed content and methodology of the new dictionary.

The previous editions of the *DSUE* have recorded and defined the slang and unconventional English of Great Britain, and to a lesser extent her dominions, over a period of approximately 350 years from the 1600's through the 1970's. For the years up until 1890, Partridge was by his own admission quite reliant on Farmer and Henley's *Slang and its*

analogues, which he used as an "expansible framework". Most of Partridge's own original contributions are concerned with the slang of the years 1890 to 1945.

As Partridge himself observed:

> More than almost any other kind of book, a dictionary constantly needs to be revised; especially, of course, if it deals with the current form of a language and therefore has to be kept up to date. [Crystal 1980]

The current project aims to do just that, to pick up where Partridge left off and to record the slang and unconventional English of the English-speaking world since World War II with the same blend of wit and scholarship that characterized Partridge's work.

Content

In order to accommodate the vast number of new coinages since the 1970s, the previous edition of *DSUE* is having to be substantially cut, revised, and updated. The final text of *New Partridge* is expected to contain up to 80,000 headwords, in two 1000-page volumes. Approximately one third of the entries will be British, one third American, and the remaining third from the rest of the English-speaking world. Thus, there are two sets of inclusion criteria, one for the primary focus areas of the UK and the US (comprehensive and meticulous), and another for all the rest (representative and careful). The main text will be prefaced by an essay which takes it cue from Partridge's many writings on slang.

The stated intent of the *New Partridge* to record the slang and unconventional English of the English-speaking world since World War II determines the three factors for consideration as criteria for inclusion: 'what', 'where', and 'when'.

WHAT: Slang and unconventional English. Rather than focusing too intently on the precise definition of slang, colloquialism, etc, *New Partridge* will take full advantage of the wide net created by Eric Partridge with his term "unconventional English". Considered for inclusion will be all unconventional English that has been used with the purpose or effect of either:
a) lowering the formality of the communication, or
b) identifying status or group affiliation.
The terms might be slang, slangy jargon, colloquialisms, acronyms, initialisms, vulgarisms, catchphrases, or borrowings from other languages; but they all impart a message beyond the text or spoken word. The only real deviation from Eric Partridge's criteria is to exclude most nicknames, for very few nicknames fulfil the language function apparent in the United Kingdom of Partridge's day.

WHERE: The English-speaking world, in all its cultural variety. In *DSUE*, Partridge limited himself to the slang and unconventional English of Britain and her dominions. Although he did write about American slang in several of his works, Partridge explicitly excluded it from the *DSUE*, partly because his work built on the narrow focus of Farmer and Henley, partly because of time pressures and the sheer wealth of material available to him in his areas of primary interest. By contrast, *New Partridge* will give full coverage to US slang, not least for the sake of global sales. As Jonathon Green [1999] put it, "[n]o future edition [of

Partridge] could maintain the slightest authority were America's contribution to be overlooked". *New Partridge* will therefore be the first truly global collection of English slang.

WHEN: Since World War II. The great strength of Partridge's work was the slang of the late 19th century through to the end of the Second World War. *New Partridge* is focusing on slang and unconventional English heard since World War II. However, words or phrases coined prior to World War II but still heard after World War II will be included, as well as words or phrases not heard after World War II but possessing a core historical value which contributes significantly to the reader's appreciation and understanding of post-1945 slang.

Microstructure

Each entry will typically consist of headword, word class, definition, 'gloss' (of which more below), followed, where necessary, by a broad geographical indication and an approximate dating or earliest recorded use. Some sample draft entries are shown in Appendix 1.

The definition style is neutral in tone, and adopts the usual forms and wordings for native-speaker dictionaries. When appropriate the definitions will be those written by Partridge or Beale for *DSUE8*. But it is in the discursive 'glosses' that the voice and tone of *New Partridge* will be most obviously established. The gloss may include any or all of the following:
a) the main users of the term or phrase, on a cultural, demographic, and/or geographical basis;
b) etymology, including false or folk etymologies which should be dispelled;
c) illustrative examples of usage, drawn from a wide range of written, musical, and audiovisual sources;
d) information concerning the tone of voice or gestures used when uttering the word or phrase;
e) degree of stigmatization or taboo;
f) synonyms, antonyms, and collocates;
g) identification of the entry by figure of speech or rhetorical device (such as metaphor, metonym, synecdoche, euphemism, dysphemism, reduplication, rhyme, clipping, etc).

The glosses afford the compilers a degree of flexibility in presenting the information and developing a personal tone, which could be scholarly or amusing by turns. Partridge noted that he was invited to 'write - not merely compile' [Crystal 1980] a dictionary of slang and unconventional English, and he was attuned to the element of creativity in the lexicographer's task:

> Unless one is a hack adapting someone else's dictionary, lexicography is hard work; the conscientious lexicographer, if he has a passion for his subject, adds to the strain by doing more than, strictly, he needs to do, not so much because he wishes to perpetuate a supererogation as because he must. We hear of the compulsions of the creative writer – the poet and the dramatist, the novelist or the short-story practitioner.

Those are genuine compulsions; the results genuinely creative. Yet the true scholar also has his compulsions: and his results may, in a different mode, be almost as creative as those of other wielders of words. [Crystal 1980]

The editors of the new dictionary are attempting to maintain the spirit and essence of Partridge's original commentaries, adjusting the tone where necessary to embrace the full range of new material. Partridge was, after all, a man of his time, and this occasionally shows through in his preferences and prejudices. As Jonathon Green [1999] points out:

The language of the sturdy beggars of the 16th century or the rakes and whores of the 18th offers no difficulties; that of modern youth seems to engender something of a 'Disgusted of Tonbridge' treatment.

What will be retained from this remark, however, is Partridge's diligent and fair-minded approach to the language of the socially marginalized, which the editors of New Partridge will seek to extend into the present day.

Working methods

Every entry will be either compiled or reviewed by at least one of the two principal editors, Terry Victor (UK) and Tom Dalzell (US). For material beyond the UK and the US, a number of 'worldwide contributors' have been engaged; the latest addition to the team is a specialist in Canadian English. A website has recently come online (www.partridge-slang.com) , which, among other things, is being used to solicit voluntary contributions from the general public (which are being subjected to rigorous review by the principal editors).

The first stage of the project involves collecting and compiling the new material and storing the entries in an online database. The database is implemented as a collection of XML files, with each file corresponding to an individual sense of a headword. A sample XML file is shown in Appendix 2. A user-friendly interface is provided (see Appendix 3) so that the editors do not have to engage directly with the XML coding. The user interface has been integrated with a dedicated browser so that the editors can inspect the database online, select files for downloading, work on them in the user interface, then upload them back to the database. The interface also allows for a 'triage' system, ie. pre-selecting (or excluding) entries for inclusion in any of the proposed works to be extracted from the database. The browser incorporates a bulletin board, or Forum, designed for ease of communication between the principal editors, the worldwide contributors, and the editorial team at Routledge.

The one-file/one-sense correspondence is adapted to the working methods of the lexicographers. Rather than proceeding alphabetically, they are recording and investigating slang terms as they crop up in the course of a systematic programme of reading and citation, which is used to generate an initial headword list. Thus, like the original Partridge, New Partridge will be drawn almost exclusively from written (or otherwise recorded) sources. While the value of fieldwork, such as that conducted by David Maurer [1940, 1954, 1981] or Tony Thorne [1999], is entirely recognized, the associated costs would in this case have been prohibitive. At times the editors may be concentrating on a particular subject area - such as

drugs, automobiles, or military slang; at other times they may be working through selected fictional or non-fictional texts (which might include movie scripts, novelizations, and song lyrics). Among the authors (and *auteurs*) featuring in the bibliographic database are Armistead Maupin, Richard Farina, Quentin Tarantino, Naomi Klein, Alan Bleasdale, Guy Ritchie, and Sacha Baron-Cohen ('Ali G').

Other recent dictionaries of slang are being consulted for the sake of completeness, but it is hoped that every item included in *New Partridge* can be attested with reference to at least one primary source. Each item as it occurs is cross-checked against *DSUE8*, to see whether there is an existing entry that is suitable to be carried over to the new edition. After this initial pass, each entry from *DSUE8* that has not been included so far will be reviewed and considered for inclusion in *New Partridge*.

Once the database is more or less complete, further editorial passes will be necessary in order to clean up the database – there is bound to be a certain amount of duplication, misplaced entries, etc – and then to consolidate the individual files into (often multi-sense) dictionary entries.

Concluding remarks

Slang is inherently short-lived and ephemeral; most of the slang collected by Partridge has not been heard since World War II, and most of the slang first heard since World II was not recorded by Partridge. This makes the enterprise of updating a slang dictionary somewhat paradoxical; the time and effort needed to sift through an ever-growing body of new material (which itself will need to be updated again before many years have passed) seems in inverse proportion to the nature of the material under study. Partridge himself recognized the strenuous and tiring nature of the undertaking:

> I should like to glance at a rather special sort of lexicography, a sort admittedly ancillary and minor: that in which one is invited to bring up to date a dictionary written by someone else; someone either dead or no longer able to attempt the work. I say "invited to bring up to date", because no lexicographer, however experienced or however fatuous, would, of himself, propose to engage in labour so ungrateful. [Partridge 1963, p.78]

Ancillary and minor though it may be, 'to write – not merely to compile' such a dictionary is a labour which the present editors are honoured to undertake, if it means being able to celebrate the achievements of Eric Partridge, and give him fresh voice in the 21st century.

References

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[Farmer & Henley 1903] Farmer, J. S. & W. E. Henley, 1903. *Slang and its Analogues past and present*, London.
[Green 1999] Green, J., 1999. Private correspondence with Routledge publishers.
[Maurer 1940] Maurer, D., 1940. *The big con*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis.

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[Partridge 1963] Partridge, E., 1963. *The gentle art of lexicography*, André Deutsch, London.

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[Thorne 1997] Thorne, T., 1997. *Dictionary of contemporary slang*, Bloomsbury, London.

Appendix 1: Sample draft entries from the database

adbusting *noun* in anticorporate activism, the act of subverting brand advertising, usually by parody or mockery   ['He believes that adbusting will eventually spark a "paradigm shift" in public consciousness.' Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, p.286. 2001.] Canada. since late 1980s

-core *suffix* used in combination with a style to create a rock or hip-hop music genre [On the **hardcore** model. 'Spook-core punks AFI have just inked a deal with DreamWorks[.]' *Rock Sound*, p.11. March 2002. '[T]he briefly popular [in 2001] horror-core rap genre.' *The Source*, p.121. March 2002.]

Jack Straw *noun* marijuana [Jack Straw MP, UK Home Secretary 1997 -2001, responsible for strengthening anti-drug legislation, was embarrassed when his son was **busted** for marijuana. 'SOMETHING POSITIVE MUST COME OUT OF THE SAGA OF JACK STRAW AND HIS SON WILLIAM'S INVOLVEMENT WITH DRUGS' 'Voice of the People' in *The People* newspaper, 4th January 1998. Within days the rhyming slang Jack Straw, **draw** (marijuana) had been added to the lexicon.] UK. Since 1998

juke *verb* to dance in a boisterous fashion [It is theorized that the word, today only recognized in the formation **juke box**, was derived from the African Wolof, Banut, or Bambara languages. The term spread through southern blacks from the Gullah, and then into wider slang usage, although with a distinctly southern flavour: 'Now the big black guy said something, grinning, and the whores laughed and started juking around, feeling something about to happen.' Elmore Leonard, *Switch*, 1978.] US. 1930s

postal *adjective* extremely angry, furious to the point of violence [From a series of highly publicised workplace shootings by frustrated and furious employees of the US Postal Service. 'Like Josh thinking I was mean was making me postal.' *Clueless*, 1995. 'If another one of these chairs hits me in the nuts, I'm gonna go postal.' *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, 1999.] US.

Appendix 2: XML representation of a dictionary file

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<offensive>no</offensive>
<dummy>no</dummy>
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<definition>
<p>in anticorporate activism, the act of subverting brand advertising,
usually by parody or mockery,</p>
</definition>
<keyword />
<glossary>
<gloss />
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<quotation>He believes that adbusting will eventually spark a 2paradigm
shift" in public conciousness.</quotation>
</citation>
</citationgrp>
</glossary>
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</subjectgrp>
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</status>
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</entry>
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Appendix 3: Screen shots of the user interface