

Use of Argot Among Calgary Punk Rockers*

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The use of argot by a specific group helps to keep them separate from society as a whole. Because only specific words are different or used differently, it is possible to see, through the use of argot, how language changes through time. Some words remain in fashion for a short time, others change meaning or form and new words keep cropping up.

I am interested here in the use of argot by a small group of Calgarians who, for lack of a better term, I'll call punks or punk rockers. It is important to note, however, that these people don't refer to themselves as punks; they all listen to so-called punk rock, but punk originated in England, and the scene is quite a bit different here.

This group is unusual in that there is a very wide range in ages—from 10 to 35 years old—and their backgrounds and interests vary a lot. They are solidary mainly because they listen to the same kind of music and they don't feel they have much in common with anyone outside the group. Punk implies a whole lifestyle which seems, on the surface at least, to reject most of society's values. It is much the same type of movement as the hippy movement in the sixties, but although punk has been around for almost ten years, it isn't popular with very many people, which I think intensifies the solidarity of the group.

Although the use of punk argot varies from person to person, and from subgroup to subgroup, everyone understands the meanings of the words and expressions used even if they don't use them themselves. A lot of terms used have been borrowed from "outside" and the meaning in some cases has changed in certain ways, but many terms have stayed the same, especially expressions relating to drugs and drug use. This is probably because there are other social groups that communicate at that level with the punks and there is no need to make up new words to hide the meaning. Also, the derogatory terms used by other people suit this group's attitudes and there is no reason not to use them along with their own terms. Although one of the uses of argot is to hide meaning from outsiders, there is a strictly creative side to it, and some words are just fun to use.

The methods used to research this paper were quite simple. I just talked with friends at the bar, at parties and hall gigs,¹ and used my memory. I had two informants who helped me with the definitions. In words where we had problems in agreeing on the definitions, I asked other people what they thought until we reached a consensus. Between first writing this paper and the present (approximately five months), many of the terms have changed or been lost and many new

terms have been introduced.

Basically, I found there to be five main categories:

1. intensifiers;
2. words used to describe what happens at social gatherings;
3. words dealing with drugs and drug use;
4. derogatory expressions; and,
5. words having to do with money and taking things.

The first group is quite large and I found it interesting that most of the expressions are quite close in meaning but must be used in different contexts.

The first four words are: *decent*, *bonus*, *deadly* and *wicked*. *Wicked* and *deadly* have evil or negative dictionary meanings, but in punk terminology they are usually positive. At the time this was written, *wicked* was the most widely used of the four. Presently it is losing ground. It can be an adjective as in

She's *wicked*. (meaning good looking)
Wicked car

as an adverb:

They're scrapping *wickedly*. (describing a fight)
We were *wickedly* jamming.²

Since it can also be negative as in

I've got a *wicked* hangover.

it seems to be an intensifier rather than a strictly positive or negative term. It can also be an exclamation describing almost anything.

Deadly has a more restricted meaning. It is only used as an adjective to modify things and as an interjection. *Deadly* is always used postnominally. For example, you could say

Those boots are *deadly*

but not **Deadly* boots.

If *deadly* were used before the noun it would have the same meaning as it has in the dictionary:

**Deadly* car (means a dangerous car)
That car is *deadly* (means that car is cool).

Decent means good as well but it is only used as a response to good news. If someone told you that he had found a job he liked, you could respond with

Decent or *That's decent.*

but you wouldn't say

*I'm glad you found a *decent* job.

because there it has the accepted meaning.

Bonus is used in the same way, but whereas *decent* is only a response, *bonus* can be used in conversation as an adjective to describe inanimate objects or abstract nouns. You could respond to the sentence

I found a cheap place to live.

with *Bonus!*

You can also say

I saw a *bonus* pair of boots today.

or, *That was a bonus high.* (describing a drug experience)

These are not hard and fast rules—there are exceptions—but this is basically how they work. Some examples are:

I saw some *wicked* boots today.

I saw a *bonus* pair of boots today.

Those boots are *deadly*.

but, **Deadly* boots

**I saw some decent boots today.*

If someone showed you his new boots, you could say

Decent! or

Bonus!

but not, **Wicked!* or

**Deadly!*

unless they were really spectacular.

You can say

She's *wicked*.

but, **She's deadly.*

**She's decent.*

**She's bonus.*

You can say

That was a *wicked scrap*.
or That *scrap* was *deadly*.
but, *That *scrap* was *decent*.
*That *scrap* was *bonus*.

You can say

I have a *wicked hangover*.
or This hangover is *deadly*.

but you wouldn't use *decent* or *bonus*.

In response to

I found a new apartment.
Decent!
Bonus!

but not *wicked* or *deadly* because that would be overreacting. *Bonus* and *decent* are milder words and I think the reason they can be used more often as responses is that unless what the person said is something fantastic, the person responding wants to "be cool."

That's max or *Max!* is an interjection which is derived from 'maximum' (although not everyone who knows the word knows its origin). It means 'good' but is not widely used.

Clean! is another interjection which means 'good.' I've only heard one person say it but he used to say it a lot. The same person also uses *Goodman!* in a certain tone of voice and saying it really fast to refer to males, females, or things when they've done something he likes. We heard him say it to the Pac-Man game he plays in the bar when he gets (or it gives him) a good score. *Churchwhanot* /čərčwənat/ (sure, why not?) is another expression he uses that has been picked up by many people, but you don't just say it: you grind it out fast. Like *Goodman* the tone and speed it's delivered have as much to do with it as the pronunciation.

No hag is an expression that means 'no problem.' Its spread shows how argot expressions get to be popular. *No hag* came to Calgary from Winnipeg in August 1981, with a friend of mine, Walter. Walter says he first heard *no hag* from the younger brother of a friend of his. He says *no hag* a lot, but when he first moved here, people at first asked him what it meant, and then they would laugh. The interesting thing was that there was complete rejection of *no hag* for about two months. People laughed or made some comment almost every time he said it. He lived at my house for a month so I saw and heard him all the time. Sometimes I found myself almost saying *no hag*, and a few others who saw him often were the same way. We were very aware of the expression and were consciously trying to avoid using it. In October, however, I started noticing people saying *no hag* but in a self-conscious kind of way. They would laugh or

explain themselves after they said it. By the end of November, about ten people were using *no hag* in regular conversation—no one laughed at it anymore and Walter's band had a new song called *No Hag*. It is still used in ordinary conversation by itself and has also widened its horizons by being used as part of a sentence

I don't see *no hag* in that.

Whereas before it was only used by itself:

You want that done tomorrow? *No hag*.

The second group of words describe social life which revolves mainly around music, at parties, the bar or hall gigs.

Fuckband is a word used to describe a group of people who have formed a band just to fool around (or fuck around). Usually, but not always, the people involved already belong to different bands but they can also be people who aren't in any band or a mixture of the two. A *fuckband* can last from a few hours jamming in the basement, one half hour set in the bar or any length of time and can include different people at different times.

Skanking or *slamdancing* is a kind of a dance, but it's not really dancing. The object is to slam into other people and avoid getting hurt yourself. Usually nobody gets hurt badly, mostly just bruised and broken noses, but people will *scrap* (or fight) if they think someone is picking on them. Both *skanking* and *slamdancing* are terms that originated in Los Angeles which has a big punk scene.

Cruise is a word that is used outside the punk world but it is used extensively in the group to describe females and males trying to pick each other up. Someone might say "Yoda's *cruisin'* Tanis bad" meaning that he's really trying to get her. *Cling* is a related expression that means to go steady with someone. "He wants to *cling* [with you]" and sometimes females are referred to as *clingons* by the male chauvinist pigs in the group.

Over the winter, expressions having to do with skiing became popular:

I'd like to *ski* her virgin slopes.
Did you go *skiing* last night?

but they aren't widely used now.

Sex is referred to as *groin damage* now as in

I got severely *groin damaged* last night.

To have sex is to get *groined*.

A *skinhead* or *skin* in its Calgary meaning is someone with very short hair or no hair—usually a punk.

If a person is too drunk or too stoned, or both, he is *bitin'* it, after which it's time to *cook* (or leave).

There are quite a few words dealing with drugs, but most of them are used by other groups as well.

Crank means to inject drugs with a needle. A *fit* is a hypodermic needle and also the drug in solution on a spoon. *Gear* is the paraphernalia for *cranking*. *Caine* is an abbreviation of 'cocaine.' *Haish* /heš/ is a word meaning 'hashish.' *Quaifs* /kweifs/ (from the word 'quaff') are smoke (marijuana, hashish, hash oil). "Got any *quaifs*?" *Steam* means the same. *Leafs* are cigarettes. Lately *daygoes* /degoz/ has become another word for cigarettes because everywhere you go, day go. *Sid* (also *snid*) is an abbreviation of acid or LSD, but *Sid* is also the name of the bass player of the Sex Pistols, Sid Vicious, so *sid*, the drug, is often referred to as a person. For example, if you were talking on the phone you might ask, "Have you seen *sid* lately?" For obvious reasons, *vicious* has also gained currency as a term for LSD.

The biggest group of words are derogatory expressions. There are at least ten expressions used by other people as well but I'll concentrate on the ones that are only used by the group.

A *pencil-neck*, *pencil-necked geek*, *geek* or *cou stylo* /kustilo/ *geek* is a loser. *Cou stylo* is the loan-shift used originally by a friend from Montreal. Although *stylo* means 'pen,' *cou stylo* sounded better than *cou crayon* which would be the more literal translation. The meaning of *pencil-neck* and all the other related words has broadened to include anyone punks don't like. A *quif* /kwif/ is an idiot. "You *quif*!"

A *calgon* is someone from somewhere else who is here in Calgary to make some money and then leave. The puns on 'gone from Calgary' and 'Calgon' as a brand name have been lost; the term has now narrowed to mean someone who goes to the punk bar at the Calgarian Hotel. This is probably because the first meaning was invented by a *Calgon* that no one likes, so they kept the term but changed the meaning.

A *rocker* is someone who listens to rock and roll music. A *longhair* is almost the same but it also means a left-over hippy or someone with long hair who listens to folk music. There is a lot of animosity between *rockers* and punks.

A *polyester boy* is a lower echelon business man. A *three piece suit* is higher up in the business world. Most punks don't make a distinction between the two, but *three piece suits* are usually older than *polyester boys*.

A *poser* is someone who acts a part, a weekend punk, or someone who doesn't seem real.

Bogus means just that—not real. "He's *bogus*" or "That was a *bogus* party" (meaning there were a lot of *posers* there).

Min or *that's min* is an abbreviation of minimum, it means 'bad.'

Zero means 'I don't care' or 'So what?'

Slag means to put someone down, usually behind that person's back. It's like gossip but all negative.

For about a month, *scumder* meant someone or something that was sick and disgusting, but it is not used anymore.

A *nomind* is a stupid or ignorant person. "That *rocker* is a real *nomind*."

The last group has to do with money and taking *bones* and *payola* mean money; they aren't exclusive to punks but are widely used in the group.

Sook /suk/ originally meant 'suck' as in "suck that joint," but the meaning has broadened and it now means 'to take.' "He *sooked* it" or to take a certain direction. An example of this would be if two people were walking somewhere and one wanted to go in a different direction, he might say *sook* as he turned, which would be a verbal signal for the other to follow. *Zeek* /zik/ comes from *sook* (/s/ → /z/, /u/ → /i/) and means 'to take' as well.

Different people in the group use argot in different ways. One subgroup, who all live in the same house almost have their own dialect. They are trying to get their whole vocabulary down to eleven words. The words they use aren't widely used by the rest of the group. These expressions are either abbreviation (as in *max* and *min*), have consonants added (as in /sɪd/ → /sɪnɪd/), vowels raised (as in /hæʃ/ → /heʃ/, /sək/ → /suk/, or fronted /suk/ → /zik/, /kwɒf/ → /kwef/.

The other words used by the whole group usually come from existing words that have had their meaning broadened or narrowed or made opposite.

Some expressions have become widely used in a short period of time (like *no hag*) while others are the property of one or two people (like *clean*). Some people are very possessive of the words they use. I've heard people say "Hey, that's my word!" People, although they use argot unselfconsciously, are very conscious of how it is used. Someone might say, "That's a good one, I'll add it to my list," or "That's a Bruno word" or "so is that your new word for the day?"

The expressions having to do with drugs are mainly the only ones that use argot to hide meaning so even though, in some cases, argot can be used to disguise, in most of the categories of words and expressions that I looked at, argot is used to show another function of language—playing with words and meaning.

Footnotes

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¹Hall gigs - a dance at a hall with bands playing.

²Jamming, to jam - when a band is practicing or just playing for the fun of it.