A Note on Rhyming Slang in New Zealand English

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In a recent television advertisement for a car, the term *dog and bone* was used to refer to the telephone. This implies that, although it may not be part of the 'in' language of the urban young, rhyming slang must be sufficiently common in New Zealand for the advertiser to expect it to be understood, even if much of it has dated and become obsolete.

Rhyming slang is associated primarily with the East End of London. In the Cockney version, a phrase (usually a two or three-word phrase) which rhymes with a particular word is used to replace that word in speech, so that *dustbin lids* may replace the word *kids*, for example. However, the rhyming phrase is often abbreviated to the first word of the phrase, so the word meaning 'kids' becomes *dustbins* in the example above. Moreover, in the original Cockney version, while there are a number of expressions which are well-known and fixed, there is a certain amount of improvisation permitted, or indeed encouraged. This means that a particular rhyme can be replaced at any time, and that the association being made by the speaker may be entirely new to the listener. This improvisational use of rhyming slang demands great verbal dexterity on the part of the speaker, and also on the part of the listener, who may have to reconstitute the original phrase (*dustbin* can't mean 'dustbin' in the sentence I've just heard, so it must be short for something else, and something it might be short for is *dustbin lid*) and then work out the rhyme (*lids* rhymes with *kids*, which makes sense in the message). From the linguistic point of view, we can see rhyming slang as excellent affirmation of the importance of fixed collocations in everyday speech.

Rhyming slang was exported from London to Australia and — whether directly, or indirectly through Australia — to New Zealand. It is thus not surprising to find examples of rhyming slang in *the Dictionary of New Zealand English* (Orsman 1997). But even if rhyming slang became established here, it never seems to have been particularly strong. The *DNZE* records very little rhyming slang from New Zealand, and it does not seem to have been as well integrated into our speech as the original Cockney version was in London.

A list of rhyming slang found in the *DNZE* is given at the end of this article, along with the short form (or abbreviated phrase) when this is attested, and the date of first attestation according to the dictionary. It is striking that many of the first attestations of these expressions come from a single source — an article in *NZ Truth* published in 1963, overtly discussing the phenomenon. Moreover, many of the other words are first attested more recently than 1963. It seems that rhyming slang is simply not used in print, which makes it difficult to determine its history and present currency. It is genuinely a feature of vernacular language, and it may have a much more

colourful history than can be discovered from the pages of the *DNZE*. (See, for example, Looser, this volume.)

Presumably for the same reason, the short forms are relatively infrequently listed in the *DNZE*. I have myself heard *Septic* as the short form of *septic tank* (meaning 'Yank, American' when I heard it), but it is not mentioned in the *DNZE*. Such terms are not readily found in print.

There are also cases such as the now obsolete *scrum* for 'thrum' ('thruppenny bit') which, while motivated by rhyme, don't appear to work in the traditional way. One would expect to find, say *Rugby scrum* as the full form, not just *scrum*. Such breaks with the usual pattern may indicate that rhyming slang is not as firmly established in New Zealand speech patterns as it is in the East End of London, or that rhyming slang is changing in New Zealand. On the other hand, some of the examples suggest that the use of improvisation in rhyming slang is still alive: Allison Durbin was a singer in the 1970s, and her name was picked up as a good rhyme for 'bourbon'.

Some of New Zealand's rhyming slang is imported unchanged from overseas: *Pat Malone* 'own' (as in 'on your own') and *rub-a-dub* 'pub' would be as at home on the Mile End Road as in Lambton Quay, and *frog skin* 'sovereign, i.e. pound' (not a particularly good rhyme!) apparently came in from Australian English in the days before the advent of the dollar. Other examples appear to be genuine New Zealand innovations, showing that rhyming slang really is alive here: *Allison Durbin* and *slapsie maxie*, for instance.

All of this raises a number of questions about rhyming slang in New Zealand. Firstly, since rhyming slang is so rarely attested in print, how much more of it is there out there in the community? Is it used in rural areas but not in the big cities? Is its use restricted in terms of gender or social class, and if so, how? Are the short forms in current use as well as the long forms? How much rhyming slang in New Zealand is improvised and how much is standardised? And are there earlier examples in print which could be used as evidence in any future edition of the *DNZE*? Some of this is the kind of material which could make for a very interesting class project. Perhaps as part of a larger unit on the ephemeral nature of slang, students could ask their relatives from different generations what such words they have heard used, and which of these are still used, and pool their results. Is the use of rhyming slang dying out or gaining strength? If they are reading old copies of their local newspapers for social studies projects, students could keep a look-out for examples of rhyming slang. The *New Zealand English Journal* and the *Dictionary of New Zealand English* would be interested in their results.

Reference

Orsman, H.W. (ed.) 1997. The Dictionary of New Zealand English. A Dictionary of New Zealandisms on Historical Principles. Auckland, etc.: Oxford University Press.

Rhyming Slang from the *Dictionary of New Zealand English*

Full form	Short form	Meaning	First Found
Allison Durbin	Al(l)ison	'bourbon'	1988
aphrodite		'nightie'	1875
apples and spice	apple	'nice'	1947
apple pie		'cry'	1905
apple tart	apple	'heart'	1989
aristotle		'bottle'	1988
babbling brook	babbler	'cook'	1918
box/bowl of fruit		'suit'	1963
butcher's hook	butchers	'crook, angry'	1918
chunder loo	chunder	'spew'	1971
a bit on the cuff		'a bit of rough'	1942
deep sea diver		'five pound note'	1963
Donald Duck		'fuck'	1982
duck and geese		'police'	1963
fiddly-did	fiddley	'quid'	1964
frog skin	frog	'sovereign, pound'	1921
Gene Tunney		'money'	1963
ginger ale		'bail'	1963
Gordon Hutter		'butter'	1939
grundies		'(male) undies'	1971
hammer and tack	hammer	'back'	1974
jerryrumble		'tumble'	1906
Jessie's dream		'steam, meths as drink'	1984
Jimmy Grant	jimmy	'immigrant'	1845
Joe Hunt	Joe	'cunt, idiot'	1960
Joe Blake	Joe	'flaked out (through drink)'	1964
Joe Blakes		'shakes'	1942
Joe Burke		'Turk'	1917
Joe McNab		'stab'	1982
out the monk		'drunk'	1939
Oscar Ashe	Oscar	'cash'	1946
Pat Malone	Pat	'own'	1918
pen and ink		'drink'	1963
pork and cheese		'Portuguese'	1917
rub-a-dub	rub	'pub'	1906
rubbity-dub	rubbity	'pub'	1963
scrum		'thrum' (3d bit)	1905
septic tank		'bank'	1982
septic tank		'Yank'	1988
six and eight		'mate'	1966
slapsie maxie		'taxi'	1963
Tod Sloan	tod	'own'	1911
tomato sauce		'horse'	1963
Tommy Rook	tommy	'bookmaker'	1907