

THE WORD FROM THE BIRD

By Fred Hobbs

From A to Z, Awadhi to Zulu and more than one hundred in between, comes the list of languages. Right at this moment somewhere on Earth, someone is communicating in one of those languages.

From the standpoint of pure communication, dialects and accents are often a kind of “language inside a language.” One does not have to stray far from home base to some strange or distant land where Awadhi or Zulu are spoken to consider another example of this linguistic phenomenon. Let us explore a form of the English language known familiarly as “American slang.” We are now, for better or worse, in the hip-hop age with phrases such as “that’s whack” (presumably meaning “wrong”, though in the wacky world of hip hop it could mean anything.)

Language experts more in tune with contemporary street talk are better suited to comment on hip hop and its consequences. For this exercise, we will offer examples of slang from the early to mid-20th century. Back in 1909, a philandering man about town with a roving eye might say to a pretty girl: “I love my wife, but oh, you kid.” If the wife discovered the infidelity, the guilty gent may brush off the potential affair with a “23 Skidoo” meaning “get out while the getting’s good.” The phrase supposedly referred to New York’s 23rd street intersection with 5th Avenue and Broadway, where the arrangement of buildings created a wind tunnel capable of lifting a girl’s skirt above the ankle and curious men and boys could sneak a quick peek before moving on.

The years of the late 1940s and through the 50s, though, were noted for the time in which American slang seemed to be a particularly colorful and expressive contribution to the discussion of language.

Many of the slang terms of that era centered around the subject of transportation, especially “hot rod cars”. Pop culture captured that mood on the big screen in films including “American Graffiti” and on TV through the characters on “Happy Days.” Archie and Jughead and girlfriends Betty and Veronica were immortalized in the famous “Archie” comic books.

As Archie was cruisin’ in his “rod”, “laying rubber” and “popping wheelies”. a sample of 50s conversation with Jughead could have gone this way if they were “super cool”: “Yeah, me and Betty are jacketed; I’m really on the hook. She wants to get circled someday, but I’m not hep to that right now. Anyway we are going to the passion pit to make out tonight if she can get out of taking care of the ankle-biters next door. Or maybe we will go over to her house and listen to some sides. I’m supposed to do that homework the warden dumped on me, so don’t be a fream. il you really are a scouch you’d do it for me.

Translation: Archie was driving his vehicle in a reckless manner. He told Jughead that he and Betty were dating each other exclusively. Betty wanted to get married in the future, but Archie didn’t want to talk about it. They are going to the drive-in movie tonight provided Betty doesn’t have to baby sit. Instead of seeing a movie they may just play some records. Archie complained that his least favorite teacher gave him too much homework. He’s trying to convince Jughead that if he really is a friend and not someone who just doesn’t fit in with the crowd, he would help him with his studies.

In real life and in fiction the use of American slang, while causing heartburn to English teachers and diction coaches, underlies a certain fundamental honesty of expression.

That is, as Archie and his friends might say “The word from the bird”—truth!