

LINGUISTIC PECULIARITIES OF COCKNEY RHYMING SLANG

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Abstract:

The article deals with linguistic intricacies of Cockney rhyming slang, a unique form of language originating from the Cockney community in London. The study examines the structural features, historical development, and sociolinguistic implications of Cockney rhyming slang. The findings highlight the role of Cockney rhyming slang as a marker of social identity and its impact on the broader linguistic landscape.

Key words: Cockney rhyming slang, linguistics, sociolinguistics, dialect, language variation

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Cockney rhyming slang, originating from London's Cockney community, is a unique linguistic phenomenon renowned for its playful wordplay and cryptic nature. Cockney rhyming slang substitutes ordinary words with rhyming phrases, reflecting the social dynamics and cultural heritage of London's East End. Despite its regional origins, it has permeated mainstream English vernacular, highlighting its enduring appeal and linguistic resilience.

According to Matthews [5; 132], rhyming slang was originally developed by the Cockneys in the 1840s as a secret language. It was first used by ballad-sellers and costermongers. Wright [6; 94], on the other hand, suggests that rhyming slang originates from several different sources; beggars, bricklayers and Cockney navies who worked at the East End Docks.

According to Antonio Lillo, rhyming slang in its basic form is quite straightforward: "the target word that conveys the intended meaning is replaced by another word or phrase rhyming with it, the rhyming element being sometimes dropped" [4; 146].

Cockney rhyming slang is characterized by the substitution of ordinary words with rhyming phrases. These phrases often follow a two-part structure, with the rhyming word omitted, creating a cryptic and playful language form.

Rhyming slang expressions are formed of two or more rarely, of one or three words, of which the last one rhymes or nearly rhymes with the target word; for example, China Plate means mate. A rhyme consists of two words and only contains two stressed syllables, for example Daisy Roots (boots).

Most of the rhymes are associated with drink, parts of the body and its function, clothing and some general household objects and pets.

One particular area of rhyming slang expressions are rhymes referring to

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Money: Abraham's willing – shilling, Arthur Ashe- cash, Big Ben- ten, Bugs Bunny - money, Charlie Core - score (£20), Hole in the Ground one pound, Oxford Scholar - a dollar.

There are various sources behind the rhymes. The list comprises of music hall songs and performers (Jenny Hills –pills), theatre, cinema (Beattie & Babs – crabs, from the 1930s entertainers) and musicals (Vera Lynn –gin). Place names (Barnet Fair – hair, Isle of France – dance) and proper nouns, both real (Conan Doyle –boil) and invented (Charlie Howard – coward, Jerry McGin –chin, Mrs. Chant – aunt) have produced many long-lived rhymes. We can mention products (Gordon and Scotch – watch) and trade names (Oxo Cube – tube, the underground). The following expressions are taken from the Bible and literature - Adam and Eve (believe) and Cain and Abel (table), *Oliver Twist* (fist) and *Robinson Crusoe* (do so), Annie Laurie (three-ton lorry of the Royal Army Service Corps in World War I), Bo-Peep (sleep), Goddess Diana (tanner-the coin), Gunga Din (chin), jack Sprat (fat), Jack Horner (corner-corner pub), Noah's Ark (nark-from the Romany nak, nose; Spoonerism gives us “ore's nark”), Old King Cole (dole-welfare, while beggar my neighbour takes the name of a card game for on the Labour [Exchange] , for unemployment), Robin Hood (good), *Robinson Crusoe* (do so), Rob Roy (boy), Simple Simon (diamond), Tommy Tucker (supper).

Some rhymes denote numerals. The rhymes fell into the patterns as follows (examples of each pattern and the number of forms following the pattern are given in brackets): noun and noun (bed and breakfast-26), compound nouns (chop sticks –six), proper nouns (Harry Tate – eight), adjective + noun (dirty whore – four), constructions with of (bottle of glue – two), three lexemes (dirty old jew – two).

Some English adjectives have more than one equivalent in Cockney. For example, bald, chilly, knackered and rotten all have two rhymes: Cyril Lord and Oh my God meaning bald, Uncle Billy or Uncle Willy for chilly, Christmas Crakered and Kerry Packer for knackered and for rotten, Needle and Cotton or Nick Cotton. The adjective dead had three different rhymes in the list analysed: Brown Bread, Father Ted and Gone to Bed. A person, who is sick, has four different ways of expressing his or her state in Cockney: Tom and Dick, Tom, Harry and Dick, Spotted Dick or Uncle Dick.

Two adjectives in the list have five equivalent rhymes; silly (Daffadown Dilly, Harry and Billy, Piccadilly and Uncle Willy) and the synonyms for being out of money, skint and broke (Boracic Lint, Larry Flint, Murray Mint, Pink Lint and Coals and Coke). Perhaps due to the climate in London, the adjective cold has inspired seven different rhymes, Brave and Bold, Warrior Bold and Potatoes in the Mold among them.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Cockney rhyming slang serves as a marker of social identity and group solidarity within the Cockney community. Its informal usage reflects the cultural heritage and close-knit nature of the community, shaping social interactions and linguistic practices.

Exploring the historical and cultural context of Cockney rhyming slang provided a deeper understanding of its evolution and cultural significance. As linguist John Smith notes [1;5], Cockney rhyming slang emerged as a form of linguistic code among working-class communities in the East End of London during the 19th century, reflecting the socioeconomic conditions of the time. Smith's historical analysis contextualizes Cockney rhyming slang within broader historical narratives, enriching our understanding of its cultural roots.

Cockney rhyming slang enriches language diversity, reflects cultural heritage, and merits continued examination in both academic and practical contexts.

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