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Lost between Hotten and Henley: Barrère and Leland's *Dictionary of Slang, Jargon & Cant*

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1. Background

John Camden Hotten's single-volume *A Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words* (DMS) was published in 1859. It was the first substantial new slang dictionary since Francis Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (CDVT) of 1785. Hotten's dictionary went through five editions and was republished for many years after his death, becoming the most frequently consulted dictionary of English slang for much of the second half of the nineteenth century. It was not superseded until the publication of John Farmer and William Henley's *Slang and Its Analogues Past and Present* (S&A). This appeared in seven volumes between 1890 and 1904, and remained the most authoritative treatment of English slang until the publication of Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* in 1937. Cast into the shade by these monsters of the slang dictionary tradition is the two-volume *Dictionary of Slang, Jargon and Cant* (DSJC) published by Albert Barrère and Charles Leland in 1889 and 1890. This paper explores the differences between the three nineteenth-century dictionaries and seeks to explain the relatively low profile of Barrère and Leland's DSJC.

2. Albert Barrère and Charles Leland

Neither Barrère nor Leland is listed in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The lives of Grose, Hotten, Henley and Partridge are all covered (but not Farmer's).¹ Partridge gives some information about Barrère in his "Modern Welcome" to the 1967 reprint of the dictionary: that he was born in about 1846, was an officier de la Legion d'Honneur and an officier de l'Institution Publique, became a professor of French at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich and the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, and that he had previously worked on dictionaries of French, of military terms in French and English and, most notably, on *Argot and Slang*, a comparative treatment of French and English slang terms. He died in 1921. For information on Leland, I had to turn to a less respectable source: Wikipedia, where he is described as an American humorist and folklorist. According to this source, Leland was born in Philadelphia in 1824. He studied Gypsy culture by living among Romany people, was an influential figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement and was also important in the development of modern neo-paganism.² Several profiles of Leland are available online, all motivated by his other interests. Only one makes passing reference to the DSJC.³

¹ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/>.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Godfrey_Leland.

³ For instance, he is listed as a witch (<http://www.controversial.com/Charles%20Godfrey%20Leland.htm>), as a minor humorist (<http://www.bartleby.com/227/0204.html>); as a neglected author

3. Assessing the dictionaries: external evidence

The relative esteem of the three dictionaries I am concerned with here can be assessed by their publication histories and availability in libraries, as shown in Table 1. It is clear that Barrère and Leland's work lags behind the other two dictionaries both in terms of its reprint history and its accession (and retention) by libraries.⁴

	DMS		DSJC		S&A	
	editions	copies held in libraries	editions	copies held in libraries	editions	copies held in libraries
original edition	1	29	1	127	1	185
revised editions	4	276	-	-	1 volume (of 7)	7
abridged edition	-	-	1	117	1	173
reprints	16	407	1	360	5	781
microfilms	3	8	1	1	1	1
total	24	720	4	605	9	1147

Table 1: The publication history of the three dictionaries (based on data available through FirstSearch)

It is possible to obtain a copy of the first edition of DMS for about £340. A complete set of S&A would cost between £360 and £430. The market value of a first edition of DSJC is lower than both of these: between £190 and £270, demonstrating that it is also less appealing to contemporary bibliophiles than SD or S&A.

Another way to evaluate the usefulness of the dictionaries is to compare their citation rate by the OED, as shown in Table 2.

	SD	DSJC	S&A
estimated number of entries	5595	10934	20312
OED citations	713	340	187
percentage of entries cited	12.7%	3.1%	0.9%

Table 2: Citation of the dictionaries by the *OED* ($p=0.01$).⁵

This provides a very different picture of the three dictionaries' influence. SD is the most cited, by a considerable margin, DSJC the next most, with S&A trailing behind. For the letters A and B this is easily explicable: only SD was available to Murray and

(<http://www.nndb.com/people/220/000048076/>); and as a forgotten scholar (<http://www.innominatesociety.com/Articles/Charles%20Godfrey%20%20Leland.htm>).

⁴ My own reprinted copy was withdrawn from a public library in Michigan, presumably because it was not felt to justify the shelf-space.

⁵ Hereafter I will be referring to the fifth edition of Hotten's dictionary, published under the title *The Slang Dictionary* (SD) in 1874. Not all OED citations are of this edition, but it does include the material found in earlier editions.

his team as they worked on these letters. However, from C onwards the publication of DSJC was complete and S&A was always further along in the alphabet than the OED. We have to turn to the contents of the dictionaries to determine why each is cited significantly less than the last.

4 Assessing the dictionaries: internal evidence

So how do the contents of the dictionaries compare? Why have they been bought, kept, and used so differently? My sample is all of the entries from SD and the first fifty entries for each letter of DSJC and S&A

	SD		DSJC		S&A	
sample	5595		1214		1264	
entries including ...						
usage labels	1663	29.7%	1042	85.8%	1111	87.9%
etymologies	1283	22.9%	327	26.9%	199	15.7%
related terms	636	11.4%	141	11.6%	86	6.8%
cross-references	356	6.4%	57	4.7%	507	40.1%
pronunciation guidance	75	1.3%	2	0.2%	6	0.5%
synonyms from other languages	n/a		58	4.8%	49	3.9%
anecdotal or encyclopedic material	160	2.9%	99	8.2%	23	1.8%
named authorities	424	7.6%	491	40.4%	729	57.7%
citations	1223	21.9%	460	37.9%	648	51.3%
percentage of named authorities quoted		n/a		93.7%		88.9%

Table 3: The contents of entries in the three dictionaries

4.1 Usage labels

Usage labels are one of the ways in which dictionaries define their contents. Bearing in mind that SD provided far fewer labels than the other dictionaries, the labels used most frequently are “slang” (6.0% of entries), “dialect” (3.1%), “archaic” or “dated” (2.8%), “cant” (2.7%), “naval” or “nautical” (1.9%) and “American” (1.8%). These labels account for 61.6% of all the usage information Hotten provided. The most frequently used labels in DSJC are “cant” or “thieves” (15.7% of entries), “American” (14.9%), “popular” (12.7%),⁶ “common” (10.0%), “old” (5.5%) and “tailors” (3.2%). These labels account for 72.4% of the usage information Barrère and Leland provided. S&A’s most frequently used labels are “old” (25.6% of entries), “common” (13.4%), “colloquial” (12.3%), “American” (9.7%), “cant” or “thieves” (4.7%) and “venery” (3.3%). These labels account for 70.2% of the usage information Farmer and Henley provided. If we take these labels on face value, DSJC appears to be the best authority for American English and cant and S&A the best for historical slang.

⁶ I am grateful to Noel Osselson for observing that this label is a translation of French dictionaries’ customary use of *populaire* “of the people” (*Harraps’ Shorter French and English Dictionary*). It probably corresponds with “colloquial” in S&A.

Although they are used much less frequently, two other usage labels are also worthy of note: “gypsies” and “tinkers”. SD labels ten entries as belonging to gypsies (0.6%), but Leland dismisses this, remarking that Hotten “knew nothing whatever of Romany”.⁷ In my sample of DSJC, there are eleven “gypsy” words and a further eleven “tinker” words (0.9% of entries each). Leland noted that Hotten “or his collaborateurs seem ... never to have heard of”⁸ the language of the tinkers, but it is odd that he regarded this as worthy of comment, because he mistakenly believed that he was himself the first describer of Shelta.⁹ The following examples from DSJC suggest that these *gypsy* and *tinker* terms were not integrated into English slang:

Jārifa, jārīka, jallico, &c. (gypsy), an apron. The variations of this word are numerous.

Mailyas, mailhas (tinker), fingers. Gaelic, *meirlach*, stealers, as “pickers and stealers,” hands. Possibly the real origin of “maulies,” influenced by “maul.”

Vāccasho (gypsy), a calf, also a lamb. [DSJC]

Another variety of English that Barrère and Leland laid claim to comprehensive coverage of was Australian English:

this being also the first Slang Dictionary to which the rich and racy slang of the fifth continent—the mighty Australian commonwealth of the future—has been contributed by one long resident in the country and familiar both with its life and literature.¹⁰

Their dictionary does include significantly more entries labelled as Australian: 21 (2.0%), as opposed to seven in SD (0.4%) and five in S&A (0.4%) (both $p=0.01$). A dictionary cannot be evaluated purely on the claims of its compilers, however. It is all very well to claim that one’s dictionary provides improved coverage of particular areas of slang, but what evidence is there to support it? Unfortunately, the “Australian” terms are too few in number to be amenable to statistical analysis, but “American” labels are frequent enough to allow scrutiny of Barrère’s comment that:

To show what a need there is of such a work, one only has to reflect that a vast number of more recent American slang phrases (not only old English provincialisms established *ab initio* in New England, but those chiefly of modern Western manufacture) have never been collected and published.¹¹

Table 4 compares senses labelled as “American” in DSJC with the treatment of the same terms in the OED and in Lighter’s *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (HDAS).

⁷ Leland “A Brief History of English Slang”, DSJC, p. xxii.

⁸ Leland, “Brief History”, DSJC, p. xxvi.

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Godfrey_Leland.

¹⁰ Barrère, “Preface”, DSJC, p.x.

¹¹ Barrère, “Preface”, DSJC, p.ix.

	OED				HDAS
first citation date in OED/HDAS	listed, but not as US terms		listed as US terms		
1550-1599	4	100%			
1600-1649	4	100%			
1650-1669	1	100%			1
1700-1749	3	50%	3	50%	
1750-1799	4	67%	2	33%	2
1800-1849	7	32%	15	68%	8
1850-1899	1	3%	31	97%	11
1900-1949			2	100%	

Table 4: “American” entries from DSJC in the OED and HDAS

For this analysis, I excluded entries labelled as anything other than straightforwardly “American” (for instance, “also American”, “American and popular”). This left 132 entries, of which 77 (58%) were listed in the OED and 22 (16.7%) in HDAS. Many of the entries not listed in the OED and HDAS were for phrases. The OED agreed with DSJC on 97% of the late nineteenth-century entries that they labelled as “American”. In addition, DSJC predates the verb *back-track* “to return; to retrace one’s steps” by five years and predates by forty years the earliest example of *kerflop*, which is one of the various compounds listed to illustrate the use of *ker-* “The first element in numerous onomatopœic or echoic formations intended to imitate the sound or the effect of the fall of some heavy body” (OED). However, for earlier terms DSJC labelling is much more hit and miss: for terms first cited by the OED before 1850, Barrère and Leland appear to be mistaken in 53% of their “American” labels. An alternative explanation would be that the OED failed to note that these terms were restricted to US use in the later period, but the citation evidence generally demonstrates that this is not the case.

first citation date in OED	listed, but not as cant or slang		listed as cant		listed as slang	
1350-1399	1	100%				
1400-1449					1	100%
1450-1499	1	50%			1	50%
1500-1549	2	40%	2	40%	1	20%
1550-1599	5	50%	5	50%		
1600-1649	1	33%	1	33%	1	33%
1650-1699	6	46%	2	15%	5	38%
1700-1749	1	50%			1	50%
1750-1799	3	75%	1	25%		
1800-1849	10	59%	3	18%	4	24%
1850-1899	1	10%	2	20%	7	70%

Table 5: DSJC “cant” and “thieves” terms in the OED

The use of “cant” or “thieves” as usage labels in DSJC is also unreliable. As Table 5 shows, of the 146 senses labelled in this way in my sample, 68 (47%) are also listed in the OED. Of these, only 24% are labelled “cant”, 31% “slang”, and 46% have various

other labels or no usage label at all.¹² However, “slang” is a notoriously problematic usage label,¹³ to say nothing of the difficulty of distinguishing between slang and cant. What we do not see among these entries is an increase in accuracy for the more modern terms, suggesting that Barrère and Leland had limited first-hand knowledge in this area. At least 115 of the “cant” entries (79%) appear to be derived from earlier dictionaries, though this requires further study.

4.2 Quoted and cited authorities

As Table 3 indicates, DSJC provided significantly more cited and quoted authorities than SD, but significantly fewer than S&A (both $p=0.01$). Hotten tended to provide unattributed illustrations of use, in the manner of earlier slang dictionaries. For example:

Awake, or FLY, knowing, thoroughly understanding. “I’m awake,” *i.e.*, I know all. The phrase WIDE-AWAKE carries a similar meaning in ordinary conversation, but has a more general reference. [SD]

DSJC included fewer such quotations, and preferred to use attributed citations. In some cases the attribution is not particularly helpful:

Talking through one’s neck (Australian), talking foolishly. A young lady, who had been impressing the dangers of football upon her small brother with more ardour than discretion, wound up with, “If you were my son I wouldn’t let you go to a boarding-school at all without I had you safe home every night,” which was met with a contemptuous “Oh, you’re *talking through your neck*.” [DSJC]

The “small brother” of “a young lady” is not a verifiable source, but other citations are more useful:

Awake (general), on one’s guard, warned, put up to. “A common expression of the ‘family people;’ thus a thief will say to his accomplice on perceiving that the person they are about to rob is aware of their intention and upon his guard, ‘Stow it, the cove’s *awake*.’ To be *awake* to any scheme, deception, or design, means, generally, to see through or comprehend it.”—*From Vaux’s Memoirs*. [DSJC]

S&A went several steps further, and provided numerous citations, usually with full bibliographic details. For example:

AWAKE, *adv.* (old).—On the alert; vigilant; fully appreciative: *see* FLY.

¹² In several cases OED definitions imply that the terms were cant, but they are not explicitly labelled as such. For example, “James” is defined as “a burglar’s crow-bar”, and is clearly a term for which burglars would have more use than anyone else, but the OED does not label it as “cant”. Excluding these terms from the “listed as cant” column, as I have done, probably underestimates DSJC’s success in identifying them as such.

¹³ See, for example, Dumas and Lighter, “Is Slang a Word for Linguists?” and Connor Martin, “Gender Aspects of Lexicographic Labeling”.

1785. GROSE, *Vulg. Tongue*, s.v. AWAKE ... A thief will say to his accomplice on perceiving the person they are about to rob is aware of their intention, and upon his guard, *stow it*, the cove's AWAKE. To be awake to any scheme, deception, or design, means generally to see through or comprehend it.¹⁴

1813. AUSTEN, *Pride and Prejudice*, xi. As much AWAKE to the novelty of attention in that quarter as Elizabeth herself.

1821. MONCRIEFF, *Tom and Jerry* (DICKS), 6. *Jerry*. Yes, he's up, *he's* AWAKE, *he's fly*—Ha! ha! [S&A]¹⁵

The inclusion of detailed bibliographic information in S&A explains its relative absence from the OED. If evidence were found there for the use of a term, OED editors would have gone to the source rather than cited the dictionary. This is impractical with DSJC; impossible with SD. The reason those dictionaries are cited more often is that they are less useful.

It should be noted that DSJC does not always give due credit to its sources. Nor does it always use them with sufficient care. This requires further research, but two examples will suffice:

Varnisher, an utterer of false sovereigns. [SD]

Varnister (thieves), an utterer of false sovereigns. [DSJC]

AMERACE Very near; don't go far; be within call. [Matsell's *Vocabulum*]

Amerace (American thieves' slang), very near, within call. [DSJC]

The first example is straightforward carelessness on the part of Barrère and Leland. In the second instance, DSJC reproduces its unreliable source's misrepresentation of an entry from the *Lexicon Balatronicum*, a pirated version of Grose's CDVT:

AMES ACE. With ames ace; nearly, very near.¹⁶

4.3 Etymology

Leland was unimpressed by pre-philological attempts at etymology:

The day has gone by when it sufficed to show something like a resemblance in sound and meaning between a dozen Choctaw and as many Hebrew words, to prove positively that the Red Indians are Jews. But "wild guess-work" is still current even in very learned works, and though "in a pioneer way" it is useful in affording hints to true philologists, it should never claim to be more than mere conjecture.¹⁷

Having asserted his superiority in this respect, it is no surprise that Leland included significantly more etymologies in DSJC than are found in either SD or S&A (p=0.01. See Table 3). In fact, if Hotten had discriminated among his etymologies, he would have provided even fewer than he did. The five editions of Hotten's dictionary see layer upon layer added to the etymological discussions in his entries. He rarely

¹⁴ Note that this is the citation correctly accredited to Vaux in DSJC. It is not in Grose's CDVT.

¹⁵ I have omitted two further citations.

¹⁶ For more information on Matsell's use of his sources, see Coleman, *History*, pp. 90-100.

¹⁷ Leland, "Brief History" in the *Dictionary*, p. xix.

deletes, but freely adds, and gives his readers no guidance about which of several competing etymologies is to be preferred. For example:

Beak, originally a magistrate, judge, or policeman; now a magistrate only; “to baffle the BEAK,” to get remanded. *Ancient Cant*, BECK. *Saxon*, BEAG, a necklace or gold collar—emblem of authority. Sir John Fielding was called the BLIND-BEAK in the last century. Maybe connected with the Italian BECCO, which means a (bird’s) *beak*, and also a *blockhead*.—See WALKER. [SD]¹⁸

DSJC offers similarly exotic etymologies, but usually only one. For instance:

Argol-bargol. According to Hotten this is a Scotch phrase signifying “to bandy words.” It is possible that it has a Hebrew derivation. *Bar-len* in Yiddish is, “to talk or speak in any way,” and *bargolis* is one who goes about in misery and poverty, perhaps a fluent beggar. *Argol* is the popular pronunciation of *ergo*—as given by Dame Quickly—a word which of old was continually used in argumentative conversation. [DSJC]¹⁹

This is exactly the type of etymology that Leland dismissed in his introductory notes, based purely upon similarity of form. Barrère attempts to justify this approach, however:

Taking as a starting point that slang and cant are of an essentially conventional and consequently metaphoric and figurative nature, it may safely be asserted that the origin of slang and cant terms must certainly be sought for in those old dialect words which bear a resemblance in form; not however in words which bear an approximately identical meaning, but rather in such as allow of the supposed offsprings having a figurative connection of sense.

The reader will probably best understand what is meant if he will, for the sake of argument, suppose the modern English language to have become a dead language known only to scholars. Then let him take the slang word “top-lights,” meaning eyes. He is seeking the origin of *top-lights*. If he were to find in the old language a word having some resemblance in form and bearing the identical meaning of eyes he would have to reject it. But when he finds the *same* word signifying *the upper lantern of a ship*, he may adopt it without hesitation, because the metaphor forms a connection link and furnishes a safe clue.²⁰

I have already discussed changing practice in the provision of etymologies in S&A,²¹ but it is worth quoting again Henley’s admonition in a letter to Farmer of 1902: “the question of origins ... should in no case be mooted in our work” (Atkinson 2003: 73). This is a sensible response to the difficulty of documenting the history of words which are largely restricted to the spoken language. The provision of more etymologies by Barrère and Leland does not make DSJC a better dictionary.

4.4 Other lexicographic features

¹⁸ OED settles for “etymology unknown”.

¹⁹ OED: “prob. a popular perversion of *argue*, or confusion of that word with *haggle*.”

²⁰ Barrère, “Preface”, DSJC, p.viii.

²¹ Coleman, “Expediency and Experience”, forthcoming (page numbers not available).

There are other, less important, differences between the types of information provided by the dictionaries, all summarized in Table 3. Significantly more entries in S&A include cross-references ($p=0.01$), for instance. This facilitated the production of Cary's more or less excerpted work, *The Slang of Venery* and is probably not unrelated to the fact that S&A is also distinctive in providing fewer entries including related terms (synonyms, antonyms, etc.). Where SD and DSJC included this type of material within an entry, S&A tended to cross-refer to it ($p=0.01$).

SD stands out in its relative failure to provide comparative material (synonyms from other languages). There is no significant difference between the number of entries including this information in the other two dictionaries, but S&A provided many more per entry.²²

DSJC provides considerably less pronunciation guidance than the other two dictionaries ($p=0.01$ in comparison with SD; $p=0.05$ in comparison with S&A). This may be because neither Barrère nor Leland was a native-born speaker of British English. What they do offer, in abundance, is anecdotal and encyclopaedic material ($p=0.01$). For example:

Rags (American), bank-bills. Before the war, when there was no uniform currency, the bills of the innumerable banks of the "wild cat," "blue pup," and "ees' dog" description often circulated at a discount of 50 or 60 per cent., and in a very dirty and tattered condition. These were familiarly called *rags*, a word still used now and then as a synonym for paper-money. ... [DSJC]

Walker, a vulgar exclamation to express incredulity ...

It was reported recently that the Prince of Wales, on calling to see Lord Tennyson at Freshwater, was denied admittance by the small page who answered the bell until he had given his name. When the Prince gave his name accordingly, the same little boy, disbelieving him, "took a sight" (*q.v.*), and crying "*Walker!*" shut the door ... [DSJC]

While this material might make DSJC the most entertaining and diverting of the dictionaries for a casual reader, it is not likely to appeal to those whose primary interest is the historical development of the language.

5 Conclusions

Any paper seeking to answer the question of which of a selection of comparable dictionaries is the best inevitably ends with the conclusion that it depends on the dictionary-user's needs. SD was always the most accessible dictionary: in written style, price and availability. S&A is the most reliable and thorough for students of the history of English slang. DSJC falls between the two on most counts. Its apparent strengths, in the dubious inclusion of Shelta and Romany terms, in its detailed but unreliable etymologies, and in its inclusion of encyclopaedic and anecdotal material, all tend to undermine its value. Its claims to improved coverage of cant, American and Australian terms, moreover, do not bear close scrutiny. I can only conclude that the relative obscurity of DSJC is fully deserved.

²² See Coleman, "Expediency and Experience".

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