English Learning for Curious Minds

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Transcript & Key Vocabulary

Episode #140
Cockney Rhyming Slang
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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Cockney Rhyming **Slang¹**, the **dialect²** or perhaps even language used in the East End of London.

[00:00:33] This is the second part of our mini-series on language invention, creation, and discovery.

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¹ a type of every day language that is spoken by a certain group of people

² a form of a language which is spoken only in one area by a certain group of people

[00:00:39] The first episode, which you can find exclusively on the website, leonardoenglish.com, was all about Invented Languages, and the people who **construct**[3] their own language.

[00:00:51] Today's episode is part two, on Cockney Rhyming **Slang**, and the third part will be all about the Rosetta Stone. Again, you will be able to find that on the website next week.

[00:01:02] Before we get right into today's episode, let me quickly remind you that you can follow along to this episode with the subtitles, the transcript and its key vocabulary, so you don't miss a word and build up your vocabulary as you go, over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:19] The website is also home to all of our bonus episodes, including the first and the last part of this mini-series, plus guides on how to improve your English in a more interesting way, and our amazing member-only community.

[00:01:33] So if you haven't yet checked that out, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:40] Ok, Cockney Rhyming **Slang**.

[00:01:43] Cockney Rhyming **Slang** is a particular type of **slang**, of informal language, that is used by some people in a very small part of East London.

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[3] create

[00:01:54] I'm not from East London, so I'll let some real East Londoners give you some examples of Cockney Rhyming **Slang**.

 [00:02:01] **Cockney Speakers:** [00:02:01] Dog and bone, Pony and trap, Ruby Murry, Plates of meat, I'm going for a Brad, Dickie Dirt, Cock and hen, Apples and pears. Rosie Lee, Doily cart, Worry and strife or trouble and strife, A Richard the Third.

[00:02:16] **Alastair Budge:** [00:02:16] So, to repeat a few of the things they said.

[00:02:21] Mince pies, Dog and bone, Apples and pears, Ruby Murry, Rosie Lee, Richard the Third, **Trouble**[4] and **strife**[5], Pigs Ear.

[00:02:32] Now, even if you might understand the literal meaning of these words and phrases, the actual meaning in Cockney Rhyming **Slang** is completely different.

[00:02:42] For example, '**trouble** and **strife**' means 'wife'.

[00:02:46] Dog and bone means 'phone'.

[00:02:48] Ruby Murry means '**curry**[6]'.

[00:02:51] And a pig's ear means 'beer'.

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[4] problems, difficulties

[5] intense disagreement, fighting

[6] a spicy Asian dish

[00:02:55] In Cockney Rhyming **Slang** you have a phrase, of normally two words, and the last word of that phrase **rhymes**[7] with the word it replaces.

[00:03:06] So, instead of saying "I am going up the stairs", you might say "I'm going up the apples and pears". Stairs has been replaced by "apples and pears".

[00:03:18] In most cases, the phrase used in Cockney Rhyming **Slang** has absolutely nothing to do with the actual meaning of the word.

[00:03:28] Pigs Ear has no connection to beer, right?

[00:03:32] A dog and bone has no connection to phone.

[00:03:36] And nor does apples and pears with stairs.

[00:03:40] There is, occasionally, a connection, and it's often a funny one, one that **pokes fun**[8] at the meaning.

[00:03:48] So, '**trouble** and **strife**' means 'wife'. Strife means '**conflict**[9]' or 'fighting'.

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[7] ends with the same sound

[8] makes fun of someone or something

[9] a serious, intense disagreement

[00:03:54] The fact that the expression for 'wife' in Cockney Rhyming **Slang** literally means difficulty and fighting is obviously a bit of a **stereotypical**[10] thing that some men might say jokingly about their wives.

[00:04:09] To make life even more difficult for someone trying to understand Cockney Rhyming **Slang**, the final word in the phrase, the one that **rhymes** with the true meaning of the word, is often **dropped**[11], it isn't said at all.

[00:04:25] For example, the expression 'barney rubble' is Cockney Rhyming **Slang** for **trouble**.

[00:04:32] But, people don't always say 'barney rubble', they just say 'barney'.

[00:04:37] So, they'd say 'we had a bit of a barney', we had a bit of a fight. But given that the final words of the phrase, '**trouble**', has been dropped, it is very hard to understand if you didn't know the full phrase to begin with.

[00:04:52] And to make life even more complicated, in many cases the Cockney Rhyming **Slang** **rhymes** with a word that is **slang** itself, the word it is replacing isn't even an official, standard word in English.

[00:05:08] For example, battle **cruiser**[12].

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[10] a general opinion that people have about something without having confirmed if it is true

[11] thrown away, got rid of

[12] a large, fast war ship

[00:05:11] Now a battle **cruiser** is a war ship, right, it's a big **navy**[13] ship.

[00:05:17] If I asked you if you wanted to go to the battle **cruiser**, or even if you wanted to go to the battle, would you have any idea what I was talking about?

[00:05:27] Probably not.

[00:05:28] I'm talking about a pub, battle **cruiser** is pub.

[00:05:33] But, you will have no doubt noticed that **cruiser** does not rhyme with pub, so what's going on here?

[00:05:41] **Cruiser** does **rhyme**[14] with another **slang** word for pub, which is boozer, a place which sells booze, a **slang** term for alcohol.

[00:05:51] So, battle **cruiser**, boozer.

[00:05:54] Confusing, right?

[00:05:56] It's even confusing for native speakers. Sometimes you can figure out the meaning through context, but often the word is so far removed from the actual meaning that it's incredibly hard.

[00:06:11] And this brings us nicely on to the question of….why?

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[13] military forces operating at sea

[14] end with the same sounds

[00:06:15] Why is there this impossible-to-understand-unless-you-know version of English? It doesn't seem to serve any purpose - indeed, it's more confusing, the phrases often are longer than the original ones, so you aren't saving any time, there doesn't seem to be any logical, **linguistic**[15], reason for its **existence**[16].

[00:06:38] One of the mysteries about Cockney Rhyming **Slang** is that there isn't complete agreement about where it actually comes from, and why it was invented.

[00:06:49] We know it started in the mid 19th century, with the first evidence of it in the 1840s.

[00:06:57] It originated in, or very near to the East End of London, a small area about 2 km across, it's the historical centre of London that is now quite far to the east of where you might think the centre would be.

[00:07:12] One theory about why it was created is that it was as a way for people who lived there to have their own, secret language so that the police couldn't understand what they were saying.

[00:07:24] If you are **engaging in**[17] activities that the police would like to stop, well, it's quite a useful thing to be able to speak out loud in a language that your friends can

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[15] related to language

[16] the fact of living, of being real

[17] taking part in

understand but is completely **unintelligible**[18] to someone who doesn't know the secret code, the way to translate what you're saying.

[00:07:43] Now, this is one theory, but it doesn't **stand up to**[19] a huge amount of **scrutiny**[20], it doesn't make complete sense when you think about it.

[00:07:52] The policemen working in London's East End would have normally grown up in the area, and been part of the families living there.

[00:08:01] Cockney Rhyming **Slang** might be difficult to understand at the start, but once you figure out what different phrases mean, it's not so hard.

[00:08:11] Presumably even if it was created for this reason, so that criminals could talk without the police understanding them, then that wouldn't have lasted for long.

[00:08:22] There's another theory that it was created by Irish **dockworkers**[21], Immigrants who came over from Ireland to London to work on the **docks**[22] so that they could have a secret language to use between themselves.

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[18] not able to be understood

[19] hold a strong position against something

[20] very careful examination of something

[21] people working in a port

[22] an area of water in a port, used to transfer goods or repair ships

[00:08:35] But again it probably wouldn't have remained secret for long, and they could have just spoken Irish between each other - many would have spoken Irish, so why **bother**[23] creating your own version of English just so people in London couldn't understand you?

[00:08:51] And there's a final theory, which is normally considered the most **plausible**[24], the most believable, that the **town criers**[25], people who would stand on street corners and **recite**[26] news and tell stories might have started to use this type of **slang** for a bit of fun, to develop an audience, and it developed from there.

[00:09:14] From a **utility**[27] point of view, Cockney Rhyming **Slang** isn't hugely useful.

[00:09:19] But what it is a lot of fun, people like using it, it makes language more interesting, and creates a shared sense of community.

[00:09:28] One can imagine these **town criers** making their speeches more interesting by using these weird and wonderful phrases to describe something else, perhaps

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[23] try, make an effort

[24] likely to be true, convincing

[25] people whose job is to make public announcements in the streets

[26] say something aloud,

[27] the state of being useful

explaining it to their audience, who might think it was clever and **witty**[28], and then they would start using it themselves with friends and family.

[00:09:49] And this theory would explain how Cockney Rhyming **Slang** has developed over the years.

[00:09:55] Unlike the invented languages that we heard about in Part 1, Cockney Rhyming **Slang** wasn't the product of one or a small group of people, it was something that was developed by a wider group, and has been continually added to ever since, there are new Cockney Rhyming **Slang** phrases every year.

[00:10:15] Although this is one of the beauties of Cockney Rhyming **Slang**, it makes actually trying to study it, and to write it all down, very hard.

[00:10:25] It now exists in **pop culture**[29], you'll see it in films, TV series, on social media, but there is no single organisation that is responsible for it, nobody saying what is and isn't Cockney Rhyming Slang.

[00:10:40] It's in many ways a beautiful example of how languages develop, how different branches of languages **emerge**[30], why they do, and what this actually tells us about our own relationship with language.

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[28] smart

[29] music, films and other products that are popular with most people of a society

[30] appear

[00:10:54] Firstly, it shows us that there is just an **awful**[31] amount of fun that you can have with language.

[00:11:01] People don't speak Cockney Rhyming **Slang** instead of English, they replace certain English words with Cockney Rhyming **Slang**.

[00:11:09] So everyone who speaks Cockney Rhyming **Slang** can speak English, they might just choose to use Cockney Rhyming **Slang** to describe something because it's more fun, perhaps because it comes more naturally to them, and to create a shared sense of belonging, of community.

[00:11:26] This is of course not unique to Cockney Rhyming **Slang**, it's one of the reasons to continue to speak any **dialect** when there is another more **dominant**[32] language you could speak, but Cockney Rhyming **Slang** has the unique quality that it uses English words in a different way to **convey**[33] meanings in English.

[00:11:46] If you had to compare it to another type of **slang**, it's probably most similar to something like Verlan, the French **slang** where you **invert**[34] the French word, you take the last part of the word and put it at the front of the word.

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[31] very bad and unpleasant

[32] with stronger presence

[33] carry, express

[34] turn upside down

[00:12:03] So, to quickly explain to the non-French speakers out there, 'femme', the word for woman in French, becomes 'meuf', Francais, the word for 'French' becomes 'céfran'.

[00:12:17] In both the case of Cockney Rhyming **Slang** and Verlan, the **slang** uses the main language but changes it in a way that is hard to understand unless you know the code, you have the key to translate the meaning.

[00:12:32] In both cases, they are **exclusive**[35] languages, or rather **dialects**[36].

[00:12:37] If you know how to use them, and in Cockney Rhyming Slang's case if you are from the small area of London where Cockney Rhyming **Slang** is spoken, you are part of a small, **close**[37] **knit**[38] community brought closer together by a shared use of language.

[00:12:54] And if you don't know Cockney Rhyming **Slang** then you're **excluded**[39], you aren't part of this **exclusive gang**[40].

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[35] limited to a group of people

[36] forms of a language which are spoken only in one area by a certain group of people

[37] being very near to someone

[38] joined together

[39] left outside, not included

[40] an organised group of people who usually behave badly

[00:13:01] Now, if you are wondering whether you need to know Cockney Rhyming **Slang** if you go to London, and if you are worried because you have just found out about an entirely new part of English that you never knew existed, **fear not**[41].

[00:13:16] There is absolutely no need for you to learn it, most Brits wouldn't be able to understand most of it either.

[00:13:22] If you were to go into a pub in London's East End and ask for Two King Lears and a Philharmonic, which is two beers and a gin and tonic by the way, I imagine the person behind the bar would look at you with a slightly **strange**[42] face. And they might not even know what you were talking about either.

[00:13:41] But if you do want to learn more about Cockney Rhyming **Slang**, then you will find a load of fun resources if you just google Cockney Rhyming **Slang**. From dictionaries to video clips, it is a lot of fun to learn, and it is a **veritable**[43] **rabbit hole**[44], it's easy to **waste**[45] hours learning Cockney Rhyming **Slang**.

[00:14:01] And this really is one of the great things about learning any language - that it will be easier and you'll progress faster if it's fun and interesting.

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[41] do not worry

[42] unusual

[43] true, convincing

[44] so interesting that you cannot stop trying to find out more about it

[45] unnecessary use of something

[00:14:11] Even if you have a particular goal in mind, getting a new job, getting a particular score in the IELTS, or just being able to speak with your next-door neighbour, sometimes it is a lot of fun to just get **caught up**[46] in the magic of fun parts of language.

[00:14:28] And although Cockney Rhyming **Slang** really isn't very useful for your day-to-day life, it is a huge amount of fun.

[00:14:35] And if that isn't a reason to learn some Cockney Rhyming **Slang**, then I don't know what is.

[00:14:42] OK then, that is it for today's episode on Cockney Rhyming **Slang**, part 2 of our three part series on **unorthodox**[47] language invention, creation, and discovery

[00:14:54] As a quick reminder, part one was on invented languages, and part three is going to be on The Rosetta Stone. You can listen to both of those exclusively on the website, leonardoenglish.com.

[00:15:07] And on that subject, here's your quick final reminder that you can become a member of Leonardo English, listen to all of our bonus episodes, plus get the transcripts, the subtitles, and all of the key vocabulary over on the website.

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[46] involved, mixed

[47] different from what is usually expected

[00:15:21] You'll be joining a community of curious minds from over 40 countries now, doing meetups, exchanging ideas, and generally improving their English in a more interesting way.

[00:15:32] So, the place for that is leonardoenglish.com

[00:15:36] And if you are already a member of Leonardo English, thank you - you're amazing. I'd love to know what you think of this episode, and I'm going to share a little quiz on Cockney Rhyming **Slang** over in our community.

[00:15:48] So, see you there, at community.leonardoenglish.com.

[00:15:52] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:15:58] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Slang	a type of everyday language that is spoken by a certain group of people
Dialect	a form of a language which is spoken only in one area by a certain group of people
Construct	create
Trouble	problems, difficulties
Strife	intense disagreement, fighting
Curry	a spicy Asian dish
Rhymes	ends with the same sound
Pokes fun	makes fun of someone or something
Conflict	a serious, intense disagreement
Stereotypical	a general opinion that people have about something without having confirmed if it is true
Dropped	thrown away, got rid of

Cruiser   a large, fast war ship

Navy   military forces operating at sea

Rhyme   end with the same sounds

Linguistic   related to language

Existence   the fact of living, of being real

Engaging in   taking part in

Unintelligible   not able to be understood

Stand up to   hold a strong position against something

Scrutiny   very careful examination of something

Dockworkers   people working in a port

Docks   an area of water in a port, used to transfer goods or repair ships

Bother   try, make an effort

Plausible   likely to be true, convincing

Town criers   people whose job is to make public announcements in the streets

Recite   say something aloud

Utility	the state of being useful
Witty	smart
Pop culture	music, films and other products that are popular with most people of a society
Emerge	appear
Awful	very bad and unpleasant
Dominant	with stronger presence
Convey	carry, express
Invert	turn upside down
Exclusive	limited to a group of people
Dialects	forms of a language which are spoken only in one area by a certain group of people
Close	being very near to someone
Knit	joined together
Excluded	left outside, not included
Gang	an organised group of people who usually behave badly

Fear not   do not worry

Strange   unusual

Veritable   true, convincing

Rabbit hole   so interesting that you cannot stop trying to find out more about it

Waste   unnecessary use of something

Caught up   involved, mixed

Unorthodox   different from what is usually expected

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com