

"That was *my* fox, man,
and you were copping
my taste and grit!"

"Don't jump
salty on me."

NOAH
WEBSTER

PETER
ROGET



Drawings by Carl Folie.

MEMBER'S THESAURUS—The lexicographers of old would be hard put to assemble a dictionary of today's idiom. For definitions not found in Webster or Roget, see box at right.

If You're Woke You Dig It

No mickey mouse can be expected to follow today's Negro idiom without a hip assist.

By **WILLIAM MELVIN KELLEY**

ON the subway the other day, aimlessly reading advertisements (a New Yorker's pastime), I found, along with those posters insisting that I use a new twelve-inch cigarette and frequent a certain "friendly" bank, a sign which had been pasted up by the New York Transit Authority. It told me, in twenty-one real or fancied languages: "This is your train, take care of it."

Of the twenty-one languages on the sign, number eighteen most attracted my attention: "Hey cats this is your swinging-wheels, so *dig it* and keep it boss!" They called that—Beatnik.

The appearance on the Transit Authority's sign of this so-called language raises all types of intriguing ideas which would certainly give a sociologist hours of glee. To put it into terms of sociology — which someone once called "philosophy masquerading as science"—it is an indication of the impact that the beatnik subculture has made on the mainstream of American life.

This is probably true. No one would be shocked to hear the chairman of the board of a large automobile company say to his chief accountant: "Yes, Bigelow, I dig what you're saying, but we could probably cut costs if we . . ." And a friend of mine swears he overheard a Boston dowager, in black, high-necked lace blouse and button shoes emerge from a Boston Symphony concert and exclaim to her companion: "Wasn't it, like, exhilarating, Agatha!"

Most Americans know the verb *to dig* means to understand. A great many

of us use *like* as verbal punctuation. We know, too, that *cool* means good. that a *cat* is a man and a *chick* a woman. Some of us add the suffix *-ville* to another word and, if we have a headache, describe ourselves as being in *illsville*.

But the above samples, now part of the common vocabulary of Americans, are not original with the beatnik. It is true that many a big, slick-paper, weekly magazine would tell us that. But if beatniks do exist (beatniks maintain they do not exist) they would certainly explain that their language is a borrowed one. If it belongs to anyone, it is the language of the people who live in that area of New York referred to in "No Strings" as "uptown, way uptown," or on Chicago's South Side, or any place where two Negroes pass the time of day.

TO many of these people, the words and phrases borrowed from them by beatniks or other white Americans are hopelessly out of date. By the time these terms get into the mainstream, new ones have already appeared, although some (such as *to dig* or *cool*) remain staples of the idiom despite wide non-Negro use. **A few Negroes guard the idiom so fervently they will consciously invent a new term as soon as they hear the existing one coming from a white's lips.**

The language is not formalized. It varies from year to year, day to day, city to city, group to group, individual to individual. It is not only a language of vocabulary, but of context and inflection. For example, the verb *to duke* can mean to argue, to fight, to talk, to party. What it means depends on who and what (Continued on Page 50)

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a person is talking to or about.

No one can be certain why Negroes use this idiom. Perhaps it began with, and at the same time as, spirituals, which were often used as a code between slaves. "Down by the Riverside" could possibly have been a signal that someone was going to attempt escape; "Another Man Done Gone" that the escape was successful. My grandmother told me that *ofay*, a word for a white man, was "foe" in pig Latin. This would mean that the language was used primarily for secrecy, exclusion and protection. If your master did not know what you were talking about, or planning, he could not punish you, and you could maintain your innocence and ignorance.

BUT exclusion, secrecy and protection are in many cases unnecessary today. To use these explanations introduces paradoxes that cannot be resolved. First of all, jazz musicians, who originate many of the terms tend not to use the language around non-musicians. They are disdainful of the shabbily dressed beatnik. They speak and act and dress in a more subdued manner than anyone else in the night-clubs they work. They want to be accepted by the middle class.

Nor is the language consistent with the present aims and goals of the Negro. He wants to be accepted completely in American life. He dreams of living in a good neighborhood, driving a nice car, sending his children to a good school, making a decent living. He realizes that anything which sets him apart will help to keep him apart.

The three most likely reasons for the idiom are an inability, because of environment, to learn to speak differently; security, and a pride in something that belongs completely to the Negro.

For many Negroes, this is the only way of speaking they have heard. It is the same with the Chinese child born and raised in America who cannot pronounce "r," or the Italian-American child who speaks English with an Italian accent because it is the only English he has heard in his Bronx neighborhood. At least, this is one reason I gave a friend who asked why even many Northern Negroes spoke with a Southern accent.

AS for security, James Baldwin has explored more than adequately the psychological "double-think" the Negro endures. The only time a Negro can forget he is a Negro is when he is with Negroes, and he seems to accomplish this by conforming almost fanatically to the white stereo-

types of himself. I can remember being at a gathering with several very well-educated Negroes. One of them was having trouble explaining something and another put a hand on his arm and said: "Cool it, man. You ain't with grays now." Everyone laughed and felt better.

THE Negro's pride in this idiom is that of a man who watches someone else do ineptly what he can do well. The Negro laughs at white people who try to use his language. He experiences the same glee when he witnesses a white audience at a jazz concert clapping on the first and third beat. I once saw a Negro musician stop playing in the middle of a number and tell the audience that he was not playing a march, he was playing jazz, and to please clap on two and four.

The same is true for the idiom. The American Negro feels he can, on the spur of the moment, create the most exciting language that exists in any English-speaking country today. I asked someone what they felt about white people trying to use "hip" language. He said: "Man, they blew the gig just by being gray."

The idiom is always changing. The origins of these constant modifications and amplifications are hazy. Some say it starts with the musicians, others that it starts with the teen-agers. In the final analysis, it is a chicken-egg proposition. The origins are not even important. You just hear a new word one day and use it, much like the "seasons," when you were a child. One day everybody on the block is playing marbles. The next day, without a word having been spoken, everybody has a rubber-band gun or a chestnut on a shoestring.

THE language seems to be modified in two ways. The first is to give a word, already in use, its opposite meaning. At one time, the connotations of "jive" were all good; now they are bad, or at least questionable. The other way is to change the word completely. Thus, the word for a white man has been at various times, an *ofay*, a *fay*, a *paddy*, a *gravy*, and a *gray*.

The changes go on even as I write. By some mysterious route that, unlike the above lexicon, cannot be defined or explained, the Negro knows that part of his code is being broken. When, once again, I make a run, I will probably find that *to vine* no longer means to dress magnificently, but rather to dress badly, and *the man* is no longer the police. It will not be long before they are blowing out of an altogether different linguistic bag.