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 last car of the train.”

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—Beatniks.

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: “Waan’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, a bird is a woman. Some of us add the suffix -ville to another word and, if we have a headache, describe ourselves as being in illville.

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To many of these people, the words and phrases borrowed from them by beatniks or other white Americans are hopelessly out of date.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 lip.

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 duck 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. For many Negroes use this idiom. Per-

haps it began with, and at the same time as, spirituals, which were sung by

slaves. "Down by the Riverside" could possibly have been a signal that some-

one was going to attempt escape; "Another Man Done Gone" that the escape was successful. My mother used to say, in the 30s or 40s, a word for a white man, was "foe" in pig Latin. This would mean that the language was used essentially for secrecy, exclusion and protection. If your master did not know what you were talking about, or planning, he could not under-

stand you, and you could main-

tain your innocence and igno-

rance.

But exclusion, secrecy and protection are in many cases unnecessary today. To use these idiosyncrasies can introduce paradoxes that cannot be re-

solved. First of all, jazz musi-

cians, who originate many of the terms used in this language, are

not among the language non-musici-

ans. They are disdainful of the "shabbily dressed beatnik."

They use a slum as a

marker in a subdued manner than anyone else in the night-

clubs, they work, they want to be accepted by the middle class.

Nor is the language con-

sistent with present aims and goals of the Negro. He wants to be accepted com-

pletely 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 wants to know every thing which sets him apart will help to keep him apart.

The three most likely rea-

sons for the idiom are an in-

ability, bears no signifi-

ce, to learn to speak dif-

ferently; security, and a pride in something that belongs completely to Negro life.

For many Negroes, this is the only way of speaking they have heard. It is the same with the Chinese born and raised in America who cannot pronounce "r;" or the Italian-American, child who speaks English with an Itali-

ian accent. The point 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 North Italians spoke with a Southern accent.

AS for security, James Baldwin has explored more the development of the psycholog-

ical "double-think" a 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 fa-

tically to the white stero-
types of himself. I can re-

member being at a gathering with a very repre-

sented Negroes. One of them was having trouble explaining something to another who 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 a man who watches someone else do in-

credible things is not only permitted but encouraged. The Negro laughs at white people who try to use his lan-

guage. He follows the same glee when he witnesses a white audience at a jazz concert clapping on the first and clapping better on the second. Negro musician stop playing in the middle of a number and ask the audience that he was not paid, much like the playing jazz, and to please clap on two and four.

The same is true for the idioms. When a Negro feels he can, on the spur of the moment, create the most appropriate thing to say in any English-speaking coun-

try today. I asked someone what they felt about white people trying to use "hijp" language. He said: "Man, they blew the gig just by being gray."

One idiom is always chang-

ing. The origins of these con-

stant modifications and amplifications are hazy. Some may come from the Negro musi-

cians, 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 think, "Oh, they have the "seasons," when you were a child. One day everybody on the block is playing marbles. There is a word for that word having been spoken, every-

body has a rubber-band gun or a chewstuck 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 "give" were all good; now they are bad, or at least ques-

tionable. The other way is to change the word completely. The word "boy" for example, has been at various times, an ofay, a lay, a paddy, a gravvy, 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 about new words and how they are being used. When, once again, I make a run, I will probably find that to vine no longer means to press magnificently, but rather to be vague and the man is no longer the po-

lice. It will not be long before they are blowing out of an altitude better language bag.