

Baby got back slang

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
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As I approach the magical age of 40, I'm supposedly getting to the peak of my life (and then it's all downhill from there). What I didn't realize is what a rude awakening this would be for my newly aching body. My kids all still want to be held from time to time, which is killing my back. Now, before you recommend your favorite chiropractor, allow me to make a segue as weak as my back.

Today I want to introduce you to the idea of "back slang." Feel free to groan all you want, but I had to whet your appetite for a healthy dose of word nerdery.

For those of you who love wordplay, back slang is a way to play with language in which you speak or spell a word backward. Easy as "eip," right?

Originally conceived in Victorian-era London, back slang began as a clandestine way for costermongers (street merchants who sold produce) to talk to each other about things they wanted to keep secret. I know this sounds weird, but I'm guessing the sellers wanted to communicate freely to each other about things like problem customers, prices for cabbage and private theories about the identity of Jack the Ripper.

Imagine a loud, crowded street market where you needed to share trade secrets with your fellow carrot-seller across the way. If you shouted something about "storrac," you'd be talking about "carrots." As this secret way of communicating evolved, the sellers developed a fast way of talking that made no sense to their clientele. For instance, if you could get away with swindling an old man, you could tell your friend to "les eht delo nam mus deliops jabbac," which

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translates to, "Sell the old man some spoiled cabbage."

You'll notice the spelling in the back slang example above isn't truly backward. That's because back slang attempts to spell words as phonetically as possible once the words are reversed. It seems difficult to understand at first glance, but the costermongers were experts.

My favorite contemporary example of back slang comes from the world of combat robotics. Yes, Grammar Guy is part of a BattleBots team, and you can see me on TV competing with the 250-pound robot called Bloodsport. But, as it relates to back slang, you've got to go down to the 12-pound weight class.

At a smaller robotics tournament called Norwalk Havoc Robot Combat, builder Kris Rummel competes with a robot called Yob Gnol, pronounced "yob guh-nol." Yob Gnol placed second in the NHRL 12-pound finals in December, and I can't get enough of it.

You can have "snut fo nuf" with back slang, and now your assignment is to introduce it to a friend through a text conversation this week. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to apply some Icy Hot to my lower back.

Curtis Honeycutt is an award-winning syndicated humor columnist and author. Connect with him at curtishoneycutt.com.

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