

The Prison Dictionary

The Prison Dictionary

Eastern Reception, Diagnostic
and Correctional Center

Bonne Terre, Missouri

The Prison Dictionary

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Introduction

The making of a dictionary—any dictionary—is a relatively straightforward if laborious process. The dictionary writer begins by taking note of how words of interest are used, either in written or spoken form. Both the word and the sentence in which it occurs are then recorded. After several instances of a word have been collected, the dictionary writer then uses the contextual clues given by the sentences to construct a definition. The same basic process has been used to write Webster’s Dictionary, the Oxford English Dictionary, and the ERDCC Prison Dictionary that follows.

The dictionary-writing process unveils a common misconception: dictionaries do not decide what words mean. As S. I. Hayakawa puts it in *Language in Thought*

and Action, “The writer of a dictionary is a historian, not a lawgiver.” Dictionaries tell us how words have been used by a particular people, in a particular place, and at a particular time—no more and no less. As such, what a word means will often vary from one community or time to the next. Moreover, no particular usage is intrinsically “better” than any other. So-called “proper” or “standard” usages are more often decided on the basis of those who have the power in a community.

One of the main challenges faced in writing this particular dictionary was in deciding which words to include. A four-part set of criteria was developed. First, only words unique to the prison community were included. So *square*, meaning cigarette, was not included because that usage is common in communities outside prison. Second, words understood only by

a minority of the prison population were excluded. For example, the verb *to bink* was excluded because only two of the fourteen workshop participants were familiar with it. Third, after much discussion, we decided to exclude words that would jeopardize the dictionary's printing and distribution within the prison. Many racist, sexist, and scatological terms were excluded on this basis. Finally, a number of words were left out because it was decided that it was best not to divulge their meaning. Like many surveilled communities, prisoners have evolved a secret language to prevent outsiders from understanding what is said. We choose not to interrupt this process.

The question remains: Why a “prison dictionary”? Put simply, we feel that the uncommon grouping of people of various ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds within

the prison has created a unique and colorful linguistic culture worthy of being recorded.

We hope this dictionary will be an ongoing project. The editors invite feedback, revision suggestions, and words for inclusion in further editions. Please direct all such suggestions to David Rivera in the ERDCC library.

C. Gardner, M. Granger, T. McDermott

The Prison Dictionary Project

The dictionary you now hold in your hands is the work of many people and many months. It is the accomplishment of several students at the Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Bonne Terre, Missouri. (Their names are listed under “Contributors.”) The project ran from March to December, 2014.

Our task was simple: create a dictionary of words used at Bonne Terre prison, a *lexicon carceris*.

We started with a chapter from Simon Winchester’s *The Professor and the Madman*, which narrates the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary, the most authoritative dictionary in the English language. We decided to follow, at least roughly, the same process: I distributed note cards, and the students used them to record words,

their usage, and a rough definition. They brought these back to the workshop, where we sifted through them in order to cull the words we wanted. As the students note in their introduction, our basic criterion was that a word had to have a meaning particular to Bonne Terre. If a word were used on the street or elsewhere in the prison system, we threw it out.

Then the real work began. The men produced hundreds of index cards, and we argued over each and every one. Did a proposed word fit our basic criteria? Was the definition correct? Was the usage familiar? Was the word obsolete, or was it too new to warrant inclusion? This was difficult and painstaking labor. Some nights, we would make it through only two or three words in a two-hour session. As tedious as it sometimes may have seemed, our arguments revealed how

much our word choice shapes our identities and the meaning we ascribe to our experiences.

For me, the best part of this project has been how quickly the students took it over and directed it. I relearned a couple of lessons I thought I already knew. First, all communities—including and especially those living in difficult situations—will make meaning and reveal values through their language use. For example, the dictionary makes a distinction between a “convict” and an “inmate.” To be a “convict” is to have earned the respect of one’s fellow prisoners; to be an “inmate” is to be inexperienced in being incarcerated. Even in prison, there is a way to be and a way not to be, as suggested by entries such as *to cell*, *to jail*, *viking*, and *housemouse*. To learn these words is to learn a community’s ethics.

Second, I was reminded that all people are poets. The entries in this lexicon reveal the natural human gift for metaphor: *tailor* for a factory-made cigarette, *caveman* for a cellmate uninterested in hygiene, *brakepads* for an unappetizing meatloaf patty, and *cadillac*, for both (1) “an object which is used to fish items from one location to another, consisting of a long strand of thread obtained from whatever fabric is available (bed sheets, boxers, socks, etc.), attached to a small, dense object, such as a tube of toothpaste or comb, which serves as the ‘hook’” and (2) “coffee prepared with the full range of condiments.”

As surprising and delightful as particular usages might be, the lexicon also reveals the ways in which prison life is marked by surveillance, conflict, and ongoing punishment. Other prisoners,

moreover, might be surprised by the words left out as much as the words kept in. As the student introduction suggests, the dictionary creators thought many words were too sensitive to be included. Any dictionary will have social and political implications, and the students were acutely aware of these issues as they worked. Their choices grew out of the same set of community values now enshrined in the lexicon.

On a personal note: at times, I've worried that the project might come off as voyeuristic. Like many (though perhaps an ever-decreasing number) of Americans, I've learned everything I know about prison from watching movies. I've been fortunate—and I think that's the right word—to have no experience with the criminal justice system. Doing this project, I did not want to seem as though I

were peering into my students' lives as though they were mine to examine. Nor did I want this to be some kind of exercise in appropriating others' language for radically different contexts. For people in more comfortable circumstances to start peppering their speech with these words would be, I think, a misuse of the lexicon. My hope is that this dictionary causes people to reflect on what life must be like on the inside, and then to ask themselves if that best represents our culture's idea of justice.

Finally, I want to thank the men who made this dictionary for their diligence and care. It has been an honor to work on this project with them.

P. Lynch

The Prison Dictionary

12/12 *n.* The date at which all prison and parole requirements of a given sentence are completed: *What's your 12/12? What's the 12/12 on your sentence? What's your 12/12 date?* (formal usage). **12/12** *v.* To complete all requirements of a given sentence: *Q: When do you 12/12? A: I'm going to 12/12 tomorrow.*

bit *n.* Length of sentence: *I got a short bit.*

boat *n.* A makeshift bed placed on the floor and used when the prison is overcrowded. It resembles a canoe and is typically made from plastic. *Sleeping in the boat makes my back hurt.*

brakepads *n.* Another name for the meat-loaf patty served at ERDCC: *Q: What are they having for chow? A: Brakepads and gravy.*

bricks *n.* Synonym for being back in society: *I can't wait to hit the bricks.*

bubble *n.* The control center or “hub” of a housing unit: *The officer in the bubble just called you over the intercom.*

bubble officer *n.* An officer, stationed within the control center of every housing unit, who can unlock cell doors and release offenders from cells: *Tell the bubble officer to open my cell door.*

bust also **to keep bust** and **to stand bust**

v. To watch for guards or other prison staff
who might thwart contraband activity:

Keep bust while I smoke.

cadillac *n.* **1.** An object that is used to fish items from one location to another. Cadillacs typically consist of a long strand of thread obtained from whatever fabric is available, such as from bed sheets, boxers, socks, etc. A small, dense object, such as a tube of toothpaste or comb, serves as the “hook.” Cadillacs are typically used to transport goods from one cell to the next when other means of transport are unavailable. *Shoot me a cadillac and I'll send you a couple of rolls.* **2.** Coffee prepared with the full range of condiments: *I got some sand to make this mud a cadillac.*

caveman *n.* A prisoner who pays little attention to his personal hygiene or appearance: *It's tough to cell with a caveman.*

cell *v.* To live in a cell with someone: *I can't cell with Tom. He lives like a viking.*

celly also **cellie** *n.* Person with whom a prisoner shares personal living quarters; a cellmate: *Joe is a decent guy, but he's a terrible celly. He just doesn't understand how to jail.*

convict *n.* An incarcerated individual who adheres to the “criminal code” (e.g., minding one’s own business, not snitching, being willing to fight, and being willing to accept the consequences of the code, whatever they may be). Among the incarcerated, the label *convict* carries greater social esteem than **inmate** or **offender**: *That old head is a real convict.*

I wouldn’t call him an inmate.

crash dummy *n.* A prisoner who repeatedly intentionally defies rules and regulations in order to get himself or another placed in segregation, either because he is told to do so by another prisoner or because he doesn't learn from mistakes:
You've crashed out so often people are going to think you're a crash dummy.

crash out *v.* To intentionally defy rules and regulations in order to get oneself or another placed in segregation: *He crashed out to get out of his cell with that viking.*

door warrior *n.* A prisoner, in particular in segregation, who stands at the door, yelling and screaming threats and insults to others in the wing: *He's a real door warrior now that he's safely behind three-inches of steel.*

driver's license *n.* A prisoner's official prison identification card: “*Where is your driver's license?*” the C.O. asked when he could not see my ID properly displayed.

dun-dun *n. Mostly obsolete.* The prison segregation unit. Synonym for dungeon.
“How many days do I have to stay here?”
I asked as they took my clothes and walked me to the dun-dun.

flag *n.* **1.** The lowest or ground-floor tier of cells. Typically the place where there is the most noise and traffic: *My cell is on the flag.* **2.** The common area on the ground floor of the prison housing unit: *It's noisy down here on the flag.* **3.** A sign/marker on the outside of a cell door or its window, signifying that the toilet is in use: *A guy who knows how to jail knows to use a flag.* **flag** *v.* To make use of a flag as in **3.** *Please flag the door!*

housemouse *n.* One who lacks consideration for the personal space and/or time of his cellmate: *My **celly** is a housemouse. I can never get any cell time.*

inmate *n.* An incarcerated person who lacks experience and respect; contrasted with **convict** (synonyms: offender, resident). *Quit acting like an inmate.*

jail *v.* To get along well with others, especially as a **celly**; to possess a mature, responsible, respectful attitude: *John is a good celly; he knows how to jail.*

jigger *v.* To look out for a correctional officer (synonyms: to keep bust; lookout): *Would you jigger for me while I smoke?*

kite *n.* **1.** A method of correspondence used between any two or more parties within the institution—staff or prisoner: *Send a kite to your parole officer.* **2.** A means of covert snitching: *Careful, he will drop a kite on you.*

mainline *n.* The time at which and during which the institution serves meals:
It's time to go to mainline. It's mainline; let's go.

mud *n.* **1.** A slang term for coffee: *Let me get a shot of mud from you, old head.* **2.** A secret that one keeps in confidence: *That convict can hold his mud.*

old head *n.* A prisoner who has been incarcerated for many years: *That old head's been here forty years.*

partner *v.* To be a close friend, a co-worker, or cellmate; to be a confidant (also used in noun form): *Do ya want to partner with me? He's my partner. My partner has my back.*

pumpkin *n.* A term used to refer to prisoners being processed through Reception and Diagnostic; refers to the orange prison-issued uniforms. *Did you see how many pumpkins came through the gate?*

pumpkin patch *n.* The area that houses prisoners who are being processed through Reception and Diagnostic:
The pumpkin patch is always full no matter the season.

reroll *n.* **1.** Tobacco that remains from a previously smoked cigarette kept for the purpose of smoking a second time: *Save the butt for rerolls.* **2.** A lesser quality cigarette. **reroll** *adj.* Used to describe the tobacco within a cigarette: *That smells like reroll.*

rolled *v.* To be involuntarily transferred from one prison to another: *Both he and his celly got rolled yesterday.*

rolls *n.* A hand-rolled cigarette using any type of paper as cigarette paper, whether printed paper, toilet paper, or some other kind: *Do you have any rolls?*

sand *n.* Sugar: *Do you have any sand I can put in my mud? I want to make it a cadillac.*

screws *n. Obsolete.* A custody officer who applies unwarranted pressure or punitive measures. *Smith isn't like the rest of these screws; he seems to be fair.*

short *adv.* Near the end of a prison sentence: *He is three years short of his date.*
adj. Used to refer to a prison sentence less than ten years: *He has a short bit.*

shorts *n.* The last part of a lit cigarette or roll: *Save me shorts on that.*

shot *n.* A small amount or serving of a product: *Can I bum a shot of coffee?*

skate *v.* To be physically present in an unassigned location or area: *I will skate to your wing tonight. Let's skate out to the yard.*

skins *n.* Cigarette papers (synonym: sheets): *Let me bum some skins.*

skittles *n.* Psychotropic medications:
Prisoners are lined up for med-pass to get their skittles.

slide *v.* To challenge another prisoner to settle a dispute through fighting outside the presence or view of officials: *If we got a problem, we can slide.*

squareman *n.* A state employee who is not a correctional officer, including cooks, librarians, job site supervisors, etc. *I have to wait here for the squareman to unlock the door.*

sticker *n.* A postage stamp, commonly used as currency within the prison: *Let me borrow a couple of stickers.*

stinger *n.* An electric device used to heat the liquid in which it is immersed, usually for food or drink preparation. A stinger consists of a small tubular heating element attached to the end of an electric cord; also called an immersion heater. *500-watt stingers boil water faster than 350-watt stingers.*

storeman *n.* A prisoner-entrepreneur who keeps a supply of store-bought canteen items to loan and charge interest:
The storeman charged me three honeybuns for two honeybuns.

tailor *n.* A factory-made, brand-name cigarette, such as Marlboros, Kools, etc.
*I only smoke tailors. I'll trade you three **rolls** for a tailor.*

tip-to-tip *n.* The monthly state pay period for prison wages: *The storeman will float you **two for three** tip-to-tip.*

two for three *n.* A surcharge of price-and-a-half on items borrowed between prisoners (i.e., 50% interest); for example, a prisoner might acquire two sodas by promising to pay three back. *He only charges two for three; the storeman charges two for three tip-to-tip.* **two for three** *adj.* Price-and-a-half interest rate: *Is your store two for three, or two for one?*

Etymological note: “two for three” really should be said three for two, since the larger amount is being promised in exchange for the smaller. However, the phrase “two for three” takes that form because it imitates the phrase “two for one,” a form of 100% interest. Because the two comes first in “two for one,” the two has traditionally been placed first in “two for three.”

viking *n.* A person who chooses not to shower or clean up after himself: *That man is a viking. You can smell him stinking from twenty feet away.*

walkman *n.* A person assigned the duties of porter (and other various responsibilities) for the housing unit: *I need to ask the walkman for some cleaning supplies.*

website *n.* An envelope with the D.O.C. website stamp on the return address area: *Send me a website* (as used by Administrative Segregation, or Adseg).

westside *n.* A cigarette lighter; a light for a cigarette: *My cigarette went out. Can I get a westside from you?*

wick *n.* A strand of tightly braided or twisted toilet paper that burns slowly when lit: *I got that roll. Is your wick still lit?*

window *n.* An interval of time, usually ten minutes, during which prisoner movement among various areas of the prison is allowed: *ERDCC has two windows to yard during each two-and-a-half hour recreation period.*

wobble head *n.* A prisoner who takes psych meds and exhibits robot-like actions: *Man, did you see those wobble heads go by doing the thorazine shuffle? The wobble heads are lined up for their skittles.*

yard *n.* Activities outside the housing unit (but within the prison) utilizing the gym or the outdoor area to exercise: *I wish my housemouse of a celly would go get some yard once and awhile.*

yard book *n.* *Obsolete.* Item which holds notes of monetary value: *Bring your yard book to the yard shack.*

yard dog *n.* A CO-1 who is posted to observe activity through the fenced-in area: *The yard dog called out “yards are closed” over the P.A.*

yard shack *n. Obsolete.* A satellite canteen outlet with limited items: *Did you get you some **zoo zoos** from the yard shack?*

zoo zoos *n.* Sugary snacks: *I went to the yard shack to score some zoo zoos.*

Reflections on the Prison Dictionary

A dictionary, what is it? How and why was the dictionary created? These were some of the questions I went into the workshop with. When the workshop was completed, not only were these questions answered, the project also grew beyond any expectations I had.

This workshop transformed my pre-conceived acceptance of a word as an inanimate form of communication into an understanding that a word is more than that. A language is like a living entity that constantly changes and adapts to the communication needs of an evolving society or culture. A word has a beginning or birth, but if a word is unable to evolve and adapt to the current environment of the language the word lives in, then it will die.

The creation of this lexicon not only opens a window into an invisible culture, it also records the existence of a forgotten and resented society that is also in constant flux. The language within this lexicon continues to evolve as words survive, thrive, and die over time.

D. Rivera

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Coming from a more academic background, I thought I'd have a different attitude or perspective approaching this exercise. But it has only made me realize how limited my vocabulary is.

Looking back over our list of sixty words to which we pared down in only five two-hour sessions, I feel that we made a good effort at what's out there, even at ERDCC. It's only too bad we couldn't have pulled from a larger audience, but perhaps

this in its final form will be a catalyst for additional input.

While in St. Louis County Jail, I took the opportunity to use the *Black's Law Dictionary* that was available to us for doing research on our own cases. There are so many different dictionaries including one for my own profession, architecture.

If I had never been charged with a crime, if my choice of paths had differed, I would never have had this opportunity or experience. For this I am blessed and thankful to both Saint Louis University and the Missouri Department of Corrections.

K. Koenig

*

I participated in the developing of a dictionary that reflects the culture and

uniqueness of the prison population at ERDCC.

This dictionary reflects almost every aspect of social lifestyles within this prison. It deals with economics. It deals with what is considered good moral conduct and the things that reflect bad conduct. It deals with how prisoners view each other as well as corrections staff.

The making of this dictionary was no easy task. In fact, the project was so big that it took three separate workshops. Several people contributed, and several people left the workshops. However, I found the project to be worthy of the time and efforts of all those who contributed to its success.

Prison life is ever-static, ever-moving, and after thirty-three years of incarceration, I've seen the changes in the words and terms we use today at ERDCC, and

none reflect those that I was introduced to so long ago.

In this dictionary, the focus is on words that reflect the mentality, social standing, and culture of the prisoners at ERDCC.

There is a distinction between how two sides of the prison use certain words. What I mean is this: you have the honor housing units, and you have the other side of the prison. The honor side is not always aware of the usage of new words that are prevalent on the other side of the population. This divide goes as deep as a gap in generations. The fact is that new arrivals are introduced to the regular housing units six months or more before they are able to come to the honor-house side of the prison.

You know this project can be viewed in many ways. I myself choose to see it as a

learning experience, an unfolding of what can be accomplished by those whom society has deemed as the damned. I see it as an opportunity to show society that we are not only capable of communicating in our own language, but that we can also translate that language into terms that others can understand.

Lastly, this project was put together by a group of men from every walk of prison life, people that probably would pass each other by daily because of many differences, whether they be social, economical, even spiritual. Yet they all contributed to the project and should be applauded.

L. Griffin

*

Here is printed proof that a language, its vocabulary, and its lexicon represent a culture: its histories, evolutions, goals,

hierarchies, stigmas, and priorities. This dictionary is a snapshot into a society’s infrastructure and soul based on its social, environmental, and financial way of life.

I have been using dictionaries since early grade school. In all the intervening years, I have given little or no conscious thought to the labor involved in the creation of one or into the cultures of the people using the language represented by that dictionary. By being even such a small cog in this group of people who have put this dictionary together, my eyes have been opened to deeper aspects of the society in which I live.

Take our dictionary’s entry *jail*, for example. Its use here, as a verb instead of a noun, takes on a different meaning. In order to find some sense of peace of mind in prison, one not only needs to be able to “jail” but also needs to find a “celly” who

knows how to jail. Unfortunately, it is something that only comes with experience and practice.

This same concept of jailing was exhibited by those of us who were able to work together in harmony to create the prison dictionary.

This labor of love has proven to be an exercise of discernment, diligence, pragmatism, and commitment. It is a good feeling to be part of something constructive and bigger than myself.

I am grateful for this experience and hope this dictionary might prove beneficial to future users, as it proved beneficial to me to share in this creation.

T. Cupp

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