

## SOUTH AFRICAN GAOL ARGOT

A former prisoner's notes on certain language usages in South African gaols, based on the gleanings of an eight month stay at Central Prison.

The interest in *Central*, for the linguist, lies in the fact that it is a very mixed community, temporarily bringing together a polyglot population. What apparent linguistic uniformity there is, is largely circumstantial and it cannot be said that there is a definite Central argot; the peculiar idioms and speech-patterns reflect, and are largely drawn from, the larger society from which the Central population has been isolated. The advantage of this arrangement, for the linguist, is that a particular section of society (largely "lower-middle" and "lower" class) is conveniently mirrored within a confined space. Speech-patterns of the outside society can thus more easily be observed at the same time as the indigenous and esoteric phrases and idioms.

Central Prison is of particular interest to anyone studying South African English in that its population is made up, predominantly, of both English and Afrikaans speaking South Africans, drawn mainly from the poorer and more poorly-educated levels of society. At the same time, there is a fair sprinkling of "foreigners", particularly Italians and Eastern Europeans, whose acquaintance with English is often limited. Furthermore, because of its over-riding interest in crime, the *Central* population (when out) often cuts across the barriers existing in the outside society.

*Central* English can thus be divided broadly into two categories: one which reflects the outside society's English; the other which comprises specific *Central* terms (or terms which are common only to *Central* and similar establishments). The influences obvious among the first category range from Westerns and crime novels to American (and more recently, local) comics; from common-society "hip" terms (usually out-of-date) to the popularly attributed Cape Coloured patois ("Gammat and Abdul..."); from "ducktail talk" (which dates it) to rhyming slang (which dates it even further). (Large sections of the population have their roots in the "twilight" areas of South Africa, such as PE's South End, CT's District Six, and old Doornfontein and Fordsburg.)

My impression is that, while the "official" language of *Central* is Afrikaans (the authorities, with few exceptions, are Afrikaans-

speaking), the ratio of English to Afrikaans spoken is somewhat higher at *Central* than it is in any “mixed” language area outside. I attribute this to the presence at *Central* of a proportionately larger number of “Europeans” – who tend to speak English before Afrikaans – than in any section of the community outside. There may also be sociological factors involved here – which may or may not please the English Academy. Impressions differ here. Some observers maintain that Afrikaans is spoken predominantly. My experience (based, as is everyone’s, on the relatively small group within which one moves) was to hear more English at *Central* than outside. There is, however, agreement in the surprisingly large degree of *bilingualism* apparent.

These notes are divided into two parts: the first deals with speech habits noted at *Central*, which may have a direct bearing on points 2 and 3 above, reflecting tendencies in the outside society; the second deals with specific “argot” terms, which are clearly a mixture of both worlds.

The speech tendencies noted below are, of course, not drawn from only one individual; nor are they typical of all English speakers. They often include tendencies noted among those whose first language is Afrikaans or “foreign”. But most of the speech-patterns below are evident in the English spoken by someone whom I regard as “typical” of *Central*. He is a man who claims English as his home language (he has an Afrikaans name); who was reared in a poorer area of a South African city; who left school at 13 and worked as a heavy labourer and factory hand, in between stays at an “institution” for youths, always in an English – Afrikaans environment. He speaks both languages with equal facility but prefers to speak English larded with Afrikaans terms.

#### **I. A. Syntactical problems/mistakes:**

- (i) Use of double negative (Afrikaans and “foreign” influence obvious). Seen in often occurring phrases such as:

*I haven't got nothing*  
*Don't never tell me*

- (ii) Misuse of parts of speech (influence of translation difficulties possible).

e.g. *Do it good*  
*I'll come more early tomorrow*  
*This way is more better*

and one colourful admonition:

*Don't lose your angry!*

Translation difficulties may also explain the often-found:

*Remember me* (for “remind me”)

*Borrow me* (for “lend me”)

*Can I lend your pen?* (for “borrow”)

- (iii) Misuse of conjugation: difficulties with the English irregular verbs are common. Some frequent examples:

*You was there*

*They is there*

*You should have went*

*Did you got it?*

The auxiliary is sometimes dropped altogether: *I done it* (for have done).

Also probably both from Afrikaans (EK is HIER) and “foreign” (Je suis ici..) the not uncommon:

*I am here since last year*

Possibly to be included here is the frequent “misuse” after *none*:

*None of them are here*

and the corresponding:

*Neither of them are here*

- (iv) *Formation of plurals*: again, frequent difficulties with the “irregulars”, producing for example:

*foot – feets*

*sheep – sheeps*

*goose – geeses*

(Conversely, frequent greeting is “*good mornings*”)

- (v) “*Of*” for “*have*”: which seems a peculiarly prevalent South Africanism – understandable phonetically, but certainly already part of *Central’s* written language:

*You should of gone*

*You didn't ought to of*

- (vi) *dropping prepositions after verbs*: clearly, translation difficulties: e.g. *Don't swear me* (Moenie my vloek nie)

## B. Influence of Afrikaans

Two categories can be noted:

- (i) those words and phrases which are directly translated into English;
- (ii) Afrikaans words freely used in English, usually with Afrikaans pronunciation.

1. *Uncle* – used not only as term of respect for an older man  
*Thank you, Uncle*

– but also as general term for any man –

*That Uncle told me ...*

*Auntie* is similarly used.

In both cases there is a nuance of affectionate familiarity, though frequent usage – particularly of *Uncle* – has stripped the word of any overtones.

2. Tendency to add “month” wherever a month is mentioned –  
*He came in January month.*
3. Use of *Yes-No*: not only in sense of *Ja-nee* (which is common, though *Ja-nee* itself is usually used) but also, in conversation, as “transit” term; eg:  
*That was a good movie*  
*Yes, no but you should’ve seen the first one.*
4. Typical South African use of *man* is very prevalent – similarly *you see* (sien jy, hoor jy) – and *hey?* or *hey!*
5. Frequent use, in conversation, of *is it?* or *is it!* – to express surprise, note approval, or merely as neutral response. Emphatically, with accent on the second syllable (iz'ɪt).
6. Frequent use, in *Central English*, of Afrikaans diminutive (e.g. *My cherrytjie ... well, my mannetjies...*)

### Loan words

- (a) frequent use of words common outside:

*Finished and klaar* (usually *finish* at *Central*)  
*Huisbesoek*  
*Padkos*

and numerous expletives, of which some sedate examples are:

*magtie/magtig! bliksem...bedonnered*

and numerous variants of

*yirr...yus...yussus*

- (b) Outside words frequently used at *Central*, sometimes with added significance:

*kwaai*: used as general term of approval, retaining only the force of “*kwaai*” (not the meaning) – denotes anything from “good” to “beautiful” as in:

*It was a kwaai movie*  
*She’s a kwaai goose* (see below)  
*Kwaai, man, thanks!*

*lekker*: strong term of approval, widely used – more forcefully and meaningfully than “lovely”

*ou*: widely used as common label for any man

*Sat*: Afrikaans word used, with Afrikaans pronunciation, frequently and most expressively.

e.g. *I’m sat with this book* (finished)  
*Are you sat with it yet?* (finished)  
*Have you sat it yet?* (finished)  
(After meal) *I’m sat!* (full and satisfied)  
(After work) *I’m sat!* (exhausted! )  
*I’m sat of him* (tired of, sick of)

*Smaak*: usually as a verb

*I smaak this chocolate*  
*I smaaked that movie*

(Note that when an Afrikaans word is taken over into English, it usually retains the basic Afrikaans pronunciation but is used with English inflections. See *sug*)

*Sommer*: widely used (often with *like* – see below):–

*I sommer hit him*  
*Do it sommer like this*  
*He’ sommer a punk*

*Span*: (usually pronounced as if English, but clearly from Afrikaans) – widely used to denote “a lot”:

*I like him a span*  
*You've got a span of books, hey!*

*Sug*: (as in Afrikaans) widely used to denote “complaint” and “to complain”

*Go and sug about it*  
*I sugged about it (sə:xt)* i.e. as in “hu11e”  
*You're always sugging (sə:xiŋ)* (as in “hu11e”)  
*You've got a sug for everything*

*Sukkel*: commonly used – as a verb, synonymously with *battle* (see below)

*You've got to sukkel to get anything*  
or as noun:

*That was a sukkel*

*Toppie*: common, widely used term for “old man”. Similarly, *laitie* for “young man”

Possibly from “*lat* = small branch” thus “*latjie*”; “*laikie*” transferred (through the Cape? ) to usual “*laitie*”

### C. “Like” (usage of “Beat” origin? )

This word frequently appears in conversation, often without apparent reason or purpose, but usually tagged on to the end of a description. eg:

*He was looking all queer like*  
*I was the hell-in so I sommer hit him like*

and even:

*Do it like this, like.*

### D. Historic Present

A marked tendency in conversation is the use of the historic present (Afrikaans and “European” influence), often with remarkably vivid effect. A description will often run something like this:

*I was gripped last year. You see, there's this warehouse with a span of stuff and we're just getting in see, when there's this helse geraas downstairs and the dicks is there before we can do a thing like. And they surrounded the whole place...*

II A. To deal now, more specifically, with individual “boop” terms. *Boop* itself (pronounced as in English *loop*) is the commonly used term for jail – sometimes spelt *boob* but always pronounced *boop*: origin possibly from “booby-hatch”, “booby-trap”.

Society outside, to the *bandiet* in boop, consists of the Haves (*them*, the *brass\**) and the Should-haves (us). *They* have *start* (the ubiquitous term for money) which we must *battle*, *sukkel* and *scheme* to get. The process of this *battle* is usually pretty heavy: sometimes successful (like when you *pull off a job*, *scale ‘em out*, and so *come right*) – sometimes unsuccessful (which is when you *misluk* or *lose out*).

The process of losing out follows a regular pattern: you’re always dogged by the *dicks* or *johns* (police, detectives) and eventually you get *gripped* – often being *pinched* or *lumbered* on the job. Or one of your *chinas* (from china-plate = mate, so too *one and eight*) – maybe even your own *brigidier* (brother) – *pimps* or *shelfs* you; that is, *narks* on you – and then *goes state*. Whatever the actual process, you end up before the *maggie* (Afrikaans pronunciation = magistrate) – or worse, before a *beak* (judge). There, unless you’re lucky and *come loose* (in Cape, *tol*), you get *settled*: which is always because you were *framed* or *railroaded* – and anyway, they’re all *kangaroo* courts. So you get your *stretch*, and you’re off to *push time*.

B. Some random terms, in passing:

- handcuffs are *bracelets* or *bangles*;
- a stabbing knife is a *tongue*, *lem*, *blade*, or *dicky*, *dirk* or *chimney*
- in South Africa, there are *whiteys*, and there are *gunners* (from “Ghana”?) or *vissies* (Afrikaans pronunciation – maybe from “Jim Fish”)
- a woman is a *goose*, *doll*, *cherry* (from *cherie*?) or *sheila* (cf. in Soweto, Thursday is Sheila-day, day-off for the nannies)
- terms for guns seem to be all imported, eg *rod*, *gat* (English pronunciation)

---

\* the *koppe*, *shots*

C. In boop itself – sometimes called the *bighouse* at *Central*, probably because of the architecture, and because it houses the *rope* – most aspects of life are reflected in argot terms. (*Central* is *the boop*, not “soft like these new ones”).

A cell is a *peter* (from rhyming slang, Peter Bell?) – the judas-hole in the door is the *judas* – blankets must be specially folded into a *radio* or *wireless* (so named because of its eventual shape). You’re usually *one out, in the peter* – i.e. alone (or *on my pat* – from *two out, three out* etc. See also D. below).

The punishment block is *Bombay*, (so called because punishment diet is *rice water*), or simply *the bom*, where you get *sloughed up doing meals* (an official term: i.e. meals are taken away as punishment). The universal term *cooler* comes to *Central*, through non-white jails, as the *koelekoets*.

The observation block – where prisoners go on arrival for observation under the *Psychos*, (also sometimes called “trick-cyclists”) is, simply, the *madhouse*.

Warders generally are *boere*: sometimes *screws* (with infrequently used rhyming slang, *pot of glue*) or *lanies* (Afrikaans pronunciation, derivation probably Malay).

While awaiting trial, you’re a *stokkie*. *Bandiete* (*bandiets*) graduate from short sentences, through 2-4 and 4-8 (years), to the pinnacle of a *coat* or *baadjie* (both widely used, recalling the former “blou baadjie” worn by long termers). A *coat* means 9 to never. Lashes are given on the *merrie*: derivation probably from gym “horse” (which it resembles) or from *nagmerrie* (which describes the experience) and from the fact that the man about to be lashed is bound, astraddle, on to the *merrie* – which position presumably also explains the use, less frequently, of the term *bride*.

Food is *graze*, (you “*tand graze*” – from the Afrikaans for teeth. Work is *graft* (i.e. legal or illegal “work”).

To escape is to *break* (rhyming slang accounts for another expression *over the meat ball* = wall), or to *spring*. *To be sprung* also refers to being ordinarily released.

Understandably perhaps – for it’s a touchy subject – there are few, if any, jocular terms for the gallows: it’s simply the *rope* or the *galg* – they are the *condemned*s who “go out feet first”, or “through no. 5 pos” (the gate, at *Central*, next to the gallows), having been “topped”.

D. Various social practices are reflected in the terminology

- a) Either you're *staunch* (ie *straight*, trust-worthy and therefore a potential *china*); or you're a *hark*, *pimp*, *ponce* or *shelf*, in which case you're said to be *snaai* or a *snaai* (from English "snide" or variant of "sly"?). And you're a *canary* if you *talk* (ie sing like a *canary*, to the *dicks* or *boere*). A more general, derogatory term for anyone you dislike is *crab*. To court trouble in any way is to *draw crabs*. To pinch or pimp anyone is to *put his pot on*, or to *swaai his pot*, or merely to *pot* him, (probably from "putting him in the shit", pot-wise\*). The daily search on the way to the (work) *shops* is a *stud* (some times *shake*): *to stud*, (possibly linked too with *skut-geskut* = "pound, to impound") is applied generally to searches – cell searches, particularly severe ones, are also called *ramps* (as in "camps"). If, when two men *make a deal* or *trade* or *make a move* or *move*, they use someone else as a go-between (preferably so that he isn't aware of the deal), he's a *steamer*. *Steamer* is thus also a common term for "sucker". (The outside term "mailer" was common before liquor-for-all days.)

To swop something is to *pass it out*, (and *put off* is to sell) – to ask someone for something is to *bite* him for it (very common) – and to know one's way around is to have *boop-craft*.

- b) Being what it is, the society produces its own lovers, and the terms, like the practices, are widespread and very common. Here, "gay" or "camp" terms from outside are common (e.g. *moffie*) but specific distinction is drawn between *hawks* and *hasies* (sometimes *rabbits*). And the general term *laitie* now gets specific application. Communal cells are known as the *married quarters*. Other terms (e.g. *blower*, *gobbler*, *liza*) need hardly be explained.
- c) Possibly the most abundant single group of terms is that relating to smoking. Here the common boop terms invariably have further significance for the *rokers* – ie those who smoke *boom* (dagga – occasionally *weed* or *tree*). Again the terms are as widespread as the practices.

To take the common terms first: tobacco is *snout* (as in *clout* – ubiquitous use). *Skuif* is a cigarette – sometimes also *laugh*, *spill* or *zoll*. Most *skuiwe* are hand-rolled from *pipe-snout* (brand

---

\* There are no toilet facilities in cells – only pots.

cigarettes are *tailor-mades*) using *check*: thin paper, of which brown wrapping-paper is the most popular – or *zigzags* (cigarette papers, old brand name), very commonly known as *blaadjies*. *Snout* is of two sorts: *private* (bought, brand tobaccos) or *issue* (the issued ration).

The indigent frequently beg for a *borsie* (sometimes *chesty* – i e a pull at one's *skuif* or *pipe*) or they collect the *butts*, *nubs*, *endjies* or *doompies*, and make up their own *skuif*e.

A match is a *dog*, *hondjie* or *jack* (rhyming slang: *Jack Slatch* = match. *Central* has separated the two terms – see *slatch* below) and it is often sliced in two, sometimes three parts, becoming a *split*. Among those without matches, illegal tinder boxes are common: the tinder is sometimes *camphor* and is ignited with a *jimmy* (ie flint – origin? ) The striking side of a matchbox is the *slatch*, often broken off for easier concealment. A *bomb*, (note: another sort of *bomb* in more common use, is a simply contrived heating device, illegally inserted in light sockets to boil water) is a large, handrolled *skuif*.

For the *rokers* – the *boom-boys* – hand-rolling is essential, unless the *boom* and *snout* are mixed in a pipe. To the ordinary smoker, a *stop* (Afrikaans pronunciation) means a fill for a pipe or sufficient *snout* to roll a *skuif*: to the roker, *stop* means *boom-stop*. These *stops* – or rather, the *boom* for the *stop* (*boom* is never taken neat) – come in varying parcels, from a *finger* (so named because so shaped when wrapped) to a *bale* and an *arm*. There are numerous different “brands”: eg *Rooibaard*, a favourite Cape brand; *greenstuff*, a top Natal brand (this term sometimes applied generally to any *boom*).

*Rokers'* pipes are numerous – the conventional pipe is used, particularly in *boop*, but is not as popular as the many other varieties, which range from the tops of broken bottles to more sophisticated models such as the *hubbly-bubbly* (a primitive sort of hookah). A common *boop* method of smoking a *zoll* is *vuivang*: the *boom-skuif* is held firmly between the fingers, closer to the knuckle than normally, and the smoke is then drawn in through cupped hands.

Some terms, originating with *rokers*, are carried over into general usage. A *roker*, after a good *fix*, becomes *happy*; he's *flying high*, all *dillied-up* – simply *gerook*. As if with liquor, he's *topped up*, *pissed* (the effects are not dissimilar). Some *rokers* frequently get their kicks by drinking Brasso, strained through

bread; or paint thinners – or by consuming vast quantities of aspirins, or stronger drugs. LSD had not appeared while I was at *Central* but the expression “go for a trainride”, or “trip” was already common to describe drug-rides.

The terms for this state of intoxication are transferred to describe anybody who, normally, appears to be slightly *mugu* (African origin “moegoe?” = mad) – anybody who is *dicky*. Such a one, by rhyming-slang, becomes *Uncle Willy* – and, in a state of high tension, lack of control or when apparently suffering the effects of too long a stay, is said to be *boop-happy*.

E. Some terms which fit no specific category but are commonly used:

*bubble*: Cape term for a book.

Newspapers are *kites* or *rags*

*bunch of fives*: fist

to *catch a spook*: to get a fright (*spook* – Afrikaans pronunciation)

to *catch a compie*: or *kompie*: to develop a complex.

a *clevvie* – ie intellectual, “brainbox”, or smart Alec.

to *cock a deff/deffie/d*: to “cock a snook” (sometimes merely to “*cock him one*”). Possibly from “defy”, even “deaf”

to *chat*: to talk to, used without the preposition (“I’ll chat you”)

to *check*: to look at (“check this”). Similarly, “take/have a dek/dekko at this” and “have/take a shiftie at this”, (British Army slang, from Arabic “to look”).

to *cut up*: to cheat, particularly by way of giving short measure, (“he cut me up with that snout”).

to *stand on your dick*: for “dignity”. Thus “to touch his dick” means to offend him.

to *fly something off*: to steal it.

to *holhang*: loaf, swing the lead – thus *holhanger*

to *jerry*: to con, observe, work at (“jerry this book”)

to *jol*: (Cape) to play/fool around

to *knock back*: to refuse – usually of a request, which is *knocked back*, or *blocked*.

to *sharpshoot*: act quickly, *otherwise* = “perverse”, as in “he’s acting otherwise” also used adjectivally, “he’s an otherwise ou”.

*scope* (or *scopes*): bioscope, the movies (and when someone has some good news, or is happy for some reason, he’s “in the movies”).

to *skelm*: to do something in an underhand way. Also used transitively: to get something by skelm means (“I skelmed that book from him”).

*to spot*: to see, look at (as in “spot this” – see *check*) – and thus to look up, meet or visit (I’ll spot you tomorrow).

*sterker*: used as noun – a strong, tough man

*stiff*: common as expression of regret, sympathy (as in “that’s stiff”, or more usually just “stiff”!) Possibly contraction of “It’s/that’s tough”.

*sweet*: common expression, with wide significance, to denote approval, thanks, agreement. (Used much as is *okay*, but with more vividness).

*to switch off*: to silence someone

*tart*: sometimes used, without pejorative overtone, for girl.

*tricky*: “clever”, but often without pejorative nuance = “nice”

*to tune*: to sound out someone’s opinion, usually with view to making a request. (“tune him for some snout ... tune the boss for a rise”).

*katkop*: (with variants *kattie*, even *cutty*) – originates from *Central* where bread is cooked in distinctive small brown loaves, looking like a “cat’s head”. Itinerant “bandiete” have universalised the term, now, apparently, common (for bread) in most *boops*.

#### **Clothes terms:**

*rammies* = trousers

*boats, floats, ones and twos* = (also *wheels* – which signify feet too).

*Dicky* = (*dirt*) = shirt

*sky* = pocket (rhyming slang = sky-rocket)

*titfer* = hat (rhyming slang = titfer, tatfer...)

Also *Bob Hope* = soap.