

1920's Slang

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-ski, -avous: these are two suffixes (derived from Russian and French, respectively) used in flapper parlance to “dress up” normal words. The suffix could be added to *any* word. There was only one hard and fast rule: if you responded to a question containing a suffix, you had to use the same part of speech somehow. Example: “*Would you like a drink-avous?*” “*No thanks, I’m on the wagon-avous.*” “*The sun-ski is so bright!*” “*Put on a hat-ski.*”

A

ab-so-lute-ly: affirmative

all wet: incorrect

And how!: I strongly agree!

ankle: to walk, i.e.. “*Let's ankle!*”

apple sauce: flattery, nonsense, i.e.. “*Aw, applesauce!*”

Attaboy!: well done!; also, Attagirl!

B

baby: sweetheart. Also denotes something of high value or respect.

baby grand: heavily built man

baby vamp: an attractive or popular female, *student*.

balled up: confused, messed up.

baloney: Nonsense!

Bank's closed.: no kissing or making out ie. “*Sorry, mac, bank's closed.*”

bearcat: a hot-blooded or fiery girl

beat it: scam, get lost.

beat one's gums: idle chatter

bee's knee's: terrific; a fad expression. Dozens of “animal anatomy” variations existed: elephant's eyebrows, gnat's whistle, eel's hips, etc.

beef: a complaint or to complain.

beeswax: business, i.e. “*None of your beeswax.*” *Student*.

bell bottom: a sailor

bent: drunk

berries: (1) perfect (2) money

big cheese: important person

big six: a strong man; from auto advertising, for the new and powerful six cylinder engines.

bimbo: a tough guy

bird: general term for a man or woman, sometimes meaning “odd,” i.e. “*What a funny old bird.*”

blotto (1930 at the latest): drunk, especially to an extreme

blow: (1) a crazy party (2) to leave

bohunk: a derogatory name for an Eastern European immigrant. Out of use by 1930, except in certain anti-immigrant circles, like the KKK.

bootleg: illegal liquor

breezer (1925): a convertible car

bubs: breasts

bug-eyed Betty (1927): an unattractive girl, *student*.

bull: (1) a policeman or law-enforcement official, including FBI. (2) nonsense, bullshit (3) to

chat idly, to exaggerate
bump off: to kill
bum's rush, the: ejection by force from an establishment
bunny (1925): a term of endearment applied to the lost, confused, etc. Often coupled with "poor little."
bus: any old or worn out car.
bushwa: a euphemism for "bullshit"
Butt me.: I'll take a cigarette.

C

cake-eater: a lady's man
caper: a criminal act or robbery.
cat's meow: great, also "cat's pajamas" and "cat's whiskers"
cash: a kiss
Cash or check?: Do we kiss now or later?
cast a kitten: to have a fit. Used in both humorous and serious situations. *i.e.* "*Stop tickling me or I'll cast a kitten!*" Also, "have kittens."
chassis (1930): the female body
cheaters: eye glasses
check: Kiss me later.
chewing gum: double-speak, or ambiguous talk.
choice bit of calico: attractive female, *student*.
chopper: a Thompson Sub-Machine Gun, due to the damage its heavy .45 caliber rounds did to the human body.
chunk of lead: an unattractive female, *student*.
ciggy: cigarette
clam: a dollar
coffin varnish: bootleg liquor, often poisonous.
copacetic: excellent
crasher: a person who attends a party uninvited
crush: infatuation
cuddler: one who likes to make out

D

daddy: a young woman's boyfriend or lover, especially if he's rich.
daddy-o: a term of address; strictly an African-American term.
dame: a female. Did not gain widespread use until the 1930's.
dapper: a Flapper's dad
darb: a great person or thing. "That movie was darb."
dead soldier: an empty beer bottle.
deb: a debutant.
dewdropper: a young man who sleeps all day and doesn't have a job
dick: a private investigator. Coined around 1900, the term finds major recognition in the 20's.
dinge: a derogatory term for an African-American. Out of use by 1930.
dogs: feet
doll: an attractive woman.
dolloed up: dressed up
don't know from nothing: doesn't have any information
don't take any wooden nickels: don't do anything stupid.
dope: drugs, esp. cocaine or opium.

doublecross: to cheat, stab in the back.
dough: money
drugstore cowboy: A well-dressed man who loiters in public areas trying to pick up women.
dry up: shut up, get lost
ducky: very good
dumb Dora: an absolute idiot, a dumbbell, especially a woman; *flapper*.

E

earful: enough
edge: intoxication, a buzz. *i.e.* "I've got an edge."
egg: a person who lives the big life
Ethel: an effeminate male.

F

face stretcher: an old woman trying to look young
fag: a cigarette. Also, starting around 1920, a homosexual.
fella: fellow. As common in its day as "man," "dude," or "guy" is today. "That John sure is a swell fella."
fire extinguisher: a chaperone
fish: (1) a college freshman (2) a first timer in prison
flat tire: a bore
flivver: a Model T; after 1928, also could mean any broken down car.
floorflusher: an insatiable dancer
flour lover: a girl with too much face powder
fly boy: a glamorous term for an aviator
For crying out loud!: same usage as today
four-flusher: a person who feigns wealth while mooching off others.
fried: drunk

G

gams (1930): legs
gatecrasher: see "crasher"
gay: happy or lively; no connection to homosexuality. See "fag."
Get Hot! Get Hot!: encouragement for a hot dancer doing her thing
get-up (1930): an outfit.
get a wiggle on: get a move on, get going
get in a lather: get worked up, angry
giggle water: booze
gigolo: dancing partner
gimp: cripple; one who walks with a limp. *Gangster Dion O'Bannion was called Gimpy due to his noticeable limp.*
gin mill: a seller of hard liquor; a cheap speakeasy
glad rags: "going out on the town" clothes
go chase yourself: get lost, scam.
gold-digger (1925): a woman who pursues men for their money.
goods, the: (1) the right material, or a person who has it (2) the facts, the truth, *i.e.* "Make sure the cops don't get the goods on you."
goof: (1) a stupid or bumbling person, (2) a boyfriend, *flapper*.

goofy: in love
grummy: depressed
grungy: envious

H

hair of the dog (1925): a shot of alcohol.
half seas over: drunk, also "half under."
handcuff: engagement ring
hard-boiled: tough, as in, a tough guy, ie: "he sure is hard-boiled!"
harp: an Irishman
hayburner: (1) a gas guzzling car (2) a horse one loses money on
heavy sugar (1929): a lot of money
heebie-jeebies (1926): "the shakes," named after a hit song.
heeler: a poor dancer
high hat: a snob.
hip to the jive: cool, trendy
hit on all sixes: to perform 100 per cent; as "hitting on all six cylinders"; perhaps a more common variation in these days of four cylinder engines was "hit on all fours". See "big six".
hooch: booze
hood (late 20s): hoodlum
hooley: bullshit, nonsense. Very popular from 1925 to 1930, used somewhat thereafter.
hop: (1) opiate or marijuana (2) a teen party or dance
hope chest: pack of cigarettes
hopped up: under the influence of drugs
Hot dawg!: Great!; also: "Hot socks!" Rarely spelled as shown outside of flapper circles until popularized by 1940s comic strips.
hot sketch: a card or cut-up

I

"I have to go see a man about a dog.": "I've got to leave now," often meaning to go buy whiskey.
icy mitt: rejection
insured: engaged
iron (1925): a motorcycle, among motorcycle enthusiasts
iron one's shoelaces: to go to the restroom
ish kabibble (1925): a retort meaning "I should care." Was the name of a musician in the Kay Kayser Orchestra of the 1930s.

J

jack: money
Jake: great, ie. "*Everything's Jake.*"
Jalopy: a dumpy old car
Jane: any female
java: coffee
jeepers creepers: "Jesus Christ!"
jerk soda: to dispense soda from a tap; thus, "soda jerk"
jigaboo: a derogatory term for an African-American
jitney: a car employed as a private bus. Fare was usually five-cents; also called a "nickel."
joe: coffee
Joe Brooks: a perfectly dressed person; *student*.

john: a toilet
joint: establishment
juice joint: a speakeasy

K

kale: money
keen: appealing
kike: a derogatory term for a Jewish person
killjoy: a solemn person
knock up: to make pregnant
know one's onions: to know one's business or what one is talking about

L

lay off: cut the crap
left holding the bag: (1) to be cheated out of one's fair share (2) to be blamed for something
let George do it: a work evading phrase
level with me: be honest
limey: a British soldier or citizen, from World War I
line: a false story, as in "to feed one a line."
live wire: a lively person
lollapalooza (1930): a humdinger
lollygagger: (1) a young man who enjoys making out (2) an idle person

M

manacle: wedding ring
mazuma: money
Mick: a derogatory term for Irishmen
milquetoast (1924): a very timid person; from the comic book character Casper Milquetoast, a hen-pecked male.
mind your potatoes: mind your own business.
mooch: to leave
moonshine: homemade whiskey
mop: a handkerchief
munitions: face powder

N

neck: to kiss passionately
necker: a girl who wraps her arms around her boyfriend's neck.
nifty: great, excellent
noodle juice: tea
nookie: sex
Not so good!: I personally disapprove.
"Now you're on the trolley!": Now you've got it, now you're right.

O

ofay: a commonly used Black expression for Whites
off one's nuts: crazy

Oh yeah!: I doubt it!

old boy: a male term of address, used in conversation with other males. Denoted acceptance in a social environment. Also "old man" "old fruit." *"How's everything old boy?"*

Oliver Twist: a skilled dancer

on a toot: a drinking binge

on the lam: fleeing from police

on the level: legitimate, honest

on the up and up: on the level

orchid: an expensive item

ossified: drunk

owl: a person who's out late

P

palooka: (1) a below-average or average boxer (2) a social outsider, from the comic strip character Joe Palooka, who came from humble ethnic roots

panic: to produce a big reaction from one's audience

panther sweat (1925): whiskey

percolate: (1) to boil over (2) As of 1925, to run smoothly; "perk"

pet: necking, only more; making out

petting pantry: movie theater

petting party: one or more couples making out in a room or auto

piffle: baloney

piker: (1) a cheapskate (2) a coward

pill: (1) a teacher (2) an unlikable person

pinch: to arrest. Pinched: to be arrested.

pinko: liberal

pipe down: stop talking

prom-trotter: a student who attends all school social functions

pos-i-lute-ly: affirmative, also "pos-i-tive-ly"

punch the bag: small talk

putting on the ritz: after the Ritz Hotel in Paris (and its namesake Caesar Ritz); doing something in high style. Also "ritzy."

Q

quiff: a slut or cheap prostitute

R

rag-a-muffin: a dirty or disheveled individual

rain pitchforks: a downpour

razz: to make fun of

Real McCoy: a genuine item

regular: normal, typical, average; "Regular fella."

Reuben: an unsophisticated country bumpkin. Also "rube"

Rhaz!: How disappointing!

rub: a student dance party

rubes: money or dollars

rummy: a drunken bum

S

sap: a fool, an idiot. Very common term in the 20s.
says you: a reaction of disbelief
scratch: money
screaming meemies: the shakes
screw: get lost, get out, etc. Occasionally, in pre 1930 talkies (such as *The Broadway Melody*)
screw is used to tell a character to leave. One film features the line "Go on, go on -- screw!"
screwy: crazy; "You're screwy!"
sheba: one's girlfriend
sheik: one's boyfriend
shiv: a knife
simolean: a dollar
sinker: a doughnut
sitting pretty: in a prime position
skirt: an attractive female
smarty: a cute flapper
smoke-eater: a smoker
smudger: a close dancer
sockdollager: an action having a great impact
so's your old man: a reply of irritation
spade: yet another derogatory term for an African-American
speakeasy: a bar selling illegal liquor
spill: to talk
splifficated: drunk
spoon: to neck, or at least talk of love
static: (1) empty talk (2) conflicting opinion
stilts: legs
struggle: modern dance
stuck on: in love, *student*.
sugar daddy: older boyfriend who showers girlfriend with gifts in exchange for sex
swanky: (1) good (2) elegant
swell: (1) good (2) a high class person

T

take someone for a ride: to take someone to a deserted location and murder them.
tasty: appealing
teenager: not a common term until 1930; before then, the term was "young adults."
tell it to Sweeney: tell it to someone who'll believe it.
tight: attractive
Tin Pan Alley: the music industry in New York, located between 48th and 52nd Streets
tomato: a "ripe" female
torpedo: a hired thug or hitman

U

unreal: special
upchuck: to vomit
upstage: snobby

V

vamp: (1) a seducer of men, an aggressive flirt (2) to seduce
voot: money

W

water-proof: a face that doesn't require make-up
wet blanket: see Killjoy
wife: dorm roommate, *student*.
What's eating you?: What's wrong?
whoopee: wild fun
Woof! Woof!: ridicule

Y

You slay me!: That's funny!

Z

zozzled: drunk