Title:
Nice Twist

Word Count:
775

Summary:
Times change, and with them, so do the words and phrases people use. As if the English language wasn't enough of a muddle with morphed meanings and period phrases, now the era of cyberspace has created new terms at an astounding pace. The need for a comprehensive slang dictionary is thus more acute than ever. Given the resources available on the Internet, it's only natural that one has emerged.

Keywords:
Urban Dictionary, etymology, linguistics, word meanings, word definition changes, slang dictionary, online slang dictionary, Cyberiter

Article Body:
The legendary George Carlin made a career out of calling attention to the difference between how words and phrases are perceived as opposed to what they're 'actually' saying ...

He would ask wonderfully rhetorical questions, my favorite of which was this:

- Would you really get on a non-stop flight?

And yet, that term is not only used on a daily basis, but with a straight face every time. How does this happen, where nonsense actually becomes an understandable phrase?

There are two schools of thought when it comes to the use of the English language. The conservative view is that its integrity must be maintained, perhaps grudgingly at times. The liberal view is that, in order to be a lively, vibrant language, it needs to adapt to the times. Of course, there's also my view, which is that the English language defies definition.

My case could be started by citing the classic instance where it can be argued that 'ghoti' is a homonym of 'fish' by nature of the following logic:

- 'gh' sounds like 'f' in words like 'enough' and 'cough;'

- 'o' sounds like 'i' in 'women;' and

- 'ti' sounds like 'sh' in words like 'sanction' and 'action.'

This is a ridiculous extreme, of course. The evolution of letter combinations and the sounds they represent in English is a result of dialectical isolation over many decades. As universal as the language has become, this is a natural progression. It's also why more geographically 'compact' languages such as Swedish remain 'purer' in the logic of their pronunciation rules.

Another development of English is that, not only do sounds change over time, so do definitions.

With that in mind, let's take a 'nice' change of direction. 'Nice' has its origin in the Latin word, 'nescius,' which means 'ignorant.' So, the phrase 'nice man' would have been referring to an idiot in the 1400s. However, by the 1600s, the word had turned. A 'nice man' then meant that he was 'refined.' After slightly more than a century, a 'nice man' had become 'pleasant' --- and recognized in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as such --- which stands to this day.

How 'sick' is that for a turn of events?

I'm not sure what 'dudes' did in the 1400s to do the deed on 'nice,' but their modern-day progeny are alive and well today, turning the street meaning of 'sick' into a synonym for 'cool,' which was 'morphed' by earlier 'cats' from a temperature condition to a state of zeitgeist. (That's German for 'trendy;' conservatives find foreign phrases acceptable as 'pop' condescensions.) Every generation has its slang, of course. It's rare that definitions of affected words actually evolve into the established vernacular, ie- dictionary recognition, which ironically gives them the distinction of being defended by conservatives as 'proper' English. Whether that occurs or not, people of each time period still need to understand each other. This gives rise to 'alternative' reference sources.

One of the more interesting of these today is the Urban Dictionary. It's the brainchild of Aaron Peckham, a student at (where else?) Cal Poly. He saw a need to catalog, define and post today's slang for the benefit of all. His site is non-profit and its popularity has skyrocketed. The key reason for this has got to be the exponential growth of cyberspace.

The Urban Dictionary has become so popular, it's now available in book form. It

contains a modest 2000 slang definitions. However, that's the same as the number of submissions the website receives every day from contributors around the world. You'll find over 250,000 submissions there, from emoticons to phrases.

If you've 'gone 404' --- a reference for the online error message displayed when a site is missing --- you're truly speaking geek. If you're ignoring someone by concentrating on your electronic device, such as a PDA, MP3 or laptop, you're 'evoiding' them. Have you ever accidentally called someone because your mobile phone is fitting too tightly in your pocket? If so, you've just 'butt dialed' someone.

Peckham's labor of love attracts millions of hits per year. He now utilizes the services of volunteer editors to keep his site up-to-date. It's fair to say that the Urban Dictionary has become a reliable reference for coping with the cyber-culture. Peckham says as much in the book's introduction, calling it "a resource for parents trying to understand their kids, for language learners confused by real-world English — but most of all for your entertainment."

It is an interesting surf. As he promises, it can even be quite useful. In fact, I'd even go so far to say that he's done a very nice job with it. Very nice, indeed. In a sick sort of way, of course.