



# JAZZ AGE SLANG

THE INTERNET GUIDE TO

The following is an alphabetical listing of slang words used in the "Jazz Age" (generally taken to mean the years of the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression). The Jazz Age was the first modern era to emphasize youth culture over the tastes of the older generations; the flapper sub-culture had a tremendous influence on main stream America--many new words and phrases were coined by these liberated women. These are the most common words and phrases of the time, many of which you may be surprised to note are still very much in use today!

Some entries were the exclusive domain of students (or rather, those of student age; only a very small percentage of the population attended college) or flappers and have been indicated as such with *italicized* monikers. Also, the words that emerged in a particular year are noted appropriately.

Note: the majority of the entries were gleaned from a great slang dictionary called *Flappers 2 Rappers*, written by Tom Dalzell (Merriam-Webster, 1996). This is *their* source for those interested in slang from any decade of the 20th century. The reader will find more Jazz Age slang, along with literally *hundreds* of other words and selected etymologies.

Many entries have also been added from *The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life from Prohibition through World War II*, by Marc McCutcheon. This book is an indispensable guide to all those minutiae of life during one of the most story rich periods in history. A must have for those interested in the Twenties!

Source: <http://home.earthlink.net/~dlarkins/slang-pg.htm>

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

Abe's Cabe: five-dollar bill

ace: one-dollar bill

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

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

barrell house: illegal distillery

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; *student*

bell bottom: a sailor

belt: a drink of liquor

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.*"

## B

blind: drunk

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

brown: whiskey

brown plaid: Scotch whiskey

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

busthead: homemade liquor

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

## C

Cash or check?: Do we kiss now or later?

cast a kitten/have kittens: to have a fit. Used in both humorous and serious situations. *i.e.* "Stop tickling me or I'll cast a kitten!"

celestial: derogatory slang for Chinese or East Asians

chassis (1930): the female body

cheaters: eye glasses

check: kiss me later

chewing gum: double-speak, or ambiguous talk

Chicago typewriter: Thompson submachine gun

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, all in order

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, *i.e.* "That movie was darb."

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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 20s

dinge: a derogatory term for an African-American; out of use by 1930

dogs: feet

doll: an attractive woman

dolled 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

drum: speakeasy

dry up: shut up, get lost

ducky: very good

## D

dumb Dora: an absolute idiot, a dumbbell, especially a woman;  
*flapper*  
dump: roadhouse

## 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, *i.e. "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, 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  
futz: a euphemism for "fuck;" *i.e. "Don't futz around."*

## G

gams (1930): legs

gasper: cigarette

gatecrasher: see "crasher"

gay: happy or lively; no connection to homosexuality; see "fag"

Get Hot! Get-Hot!: encouragement for a hot dancer doing his or 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"



## H

handcuff: engagement ring

hard-boiled: a tough person, *i.e.*: "*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;" also see "big six".

hoary-eyed: drunk

hooch: booze

hood (late 20s): hoodlum

hooy: 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

horse linament: bootleg liquor

Hot dawg!: Great!; also: "Hot socks!"

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

## I

Indian hop: marijuana

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," from the name of a musician in the Kay Kayser Orchestra

## J

jack: money

Jake: great, *i.e.* "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, ergo the alternate nickname of "nickel"

joe: coffee

Joe Brooks: a perfectly dressed person; *student*

john: a toilet

joint: establishment

jorum of skee: a drink of hard liquor

juice joint: a speakeasy

junk: opium

## K

kale: money

keen: appealing

## K

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

M: morphine

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

## M

mop: a handkerchief

Mrs. Grundy: a prude or kill-joy

mulligan: Irish cop

munitions: face powder

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## N

neck: to kiss passionately; what would today be called "French kissing"

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!".

## 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 as a way to denote acceptance in a social environment; also: "old man" or "old fruit"

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

O

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 piss/sweat (1925): homemade whiskey

pen yen: opium

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

pet: like necking (see above), only moreso; making out

petting pantry: movie theater

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

phonus balonus: nonsense

piffle: baloney

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

pill: (1) a teacher (2) an unlikable person (3) cigarette

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"

pull a Daniel Boone: to vomit

punch the bag: small talk

P

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

Reuben: an unsophisticated country bumpkin; also, "rube"

Rhartz!: "How disappointing!" *flapper*

rotgut: bootleg liquor

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

sawbuck: ten-dollar bill

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!"



S

sheba: one's girlfriend

sheik: one's boyfriend

shine box: a bar or club for black patrons

shiv: a knife

simolean: a dollar

sinker: a doughnut

sitting pretty: in a prime position

skee: Scotch whiskey

skirt: an attractive female

smarty: a cute flapper

smoke-eater: a smoker

smudger: a close dancer

snort: a drink of liquor

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

strike-me-dead: bootleg liquor

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

**S**

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

tea: marijuana

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

three-letter man: homosexual

tight: attractive

Tin Pan Alley: the center of the music industry in New York City, located between 48th and 52nd Streets

tomato: a "ripe" female

torpedo: a hired thug or hitman

trip for biscuits: wild goose chase

**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



W

white lightning: bootleg liquor

wife: dorm roommate; *student*.

"What's eating you?": "What's wrong?"

whoopee: wild fun

Woof! Woof!: ridicule

X

Y

"You slay me!": "That's funny!"

Z

zozzled: drunk

**Sources:**

Dalzel, Tom. *Flappers 2 Rappers: American Youth Slang*. (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1996). Entries used on this page are duplicated with permission.

McCutcheon, Marc. *The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life from Prohibition through Word War II*. (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1995). Permission pending.