

# The Sociolinguistics of Prison Slang

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**Abstract**—The linguistic idiosyncrasies of prison populations have been studied with great interest by scholarly and popular writers alike whose interests range from curiosity to a disciplined understanding of its function. This paper offers a formalized nomenclature for the four relevant terms (*slang*, *jargon*, *argot*, and *cant*) and brings together key sociolinguistic concepts such as domain and register with research on institutional dynamics as well as culture and identity. It presents a fresh body of data drawn from interviews with prison staff in the Northeast (NE) and with awareness of selected publications. The paper then draws a correlation between a person's competence in prison *antilanguage* and their status as part of the in-group. This is a distinctive marker of identification that is essential to inmate survival and staff effectiveness.

**Keywords**—Argot, cant, domain, jargon, slang, sociolinguistics.

## I. INTRODUCTION

FROM a variety of historical sources, one can glean curious accounts of non-standard language being wielded for intentional effects. For example, in his lively account of the convict foundations of Australia, Robert Hughes, in *The Fatal Shore*, narrates the appointment of one hideously-disfigured lieutenant-colonel to the offshore penal colony of Norfolk Island in 1829. It was not merely that James Thomas Morriset's war-mangled face presented prisoners with a grotesquely disfigured "mask of an ogre [1]" – something he wore like "a badge of bitter honor" – but it was the fact that Morriset conveyed to his miserable charges the disquieting sense that he "knew" these people "whose management had become an obsession" for him. He had frequented back streets and police stations in London in his pursuit of learning how "to talk underworld cant." This was a man self-predestined to become the ruler of Norfolk Island – in fact, he begged for that post which, as the *Sydney Monitor* described it, rendered him like "a God" to the powerless of this island incarceration [1, p.460]. In the person of Morriset, sight and sound were to converge with a haunting immanence, cradled on the streets of London and then transported to its awful, divine destination.

Not completely coincidental, it would seem, Morriset's cultural preparation was to occur a decade after the publication (in London) of Australia's first 'applied linguistic' dictionary, assembled by the thrice-transported habitual offender, James Hardy "Flash Jim" Vaux and first published in 1819. Titled *A New and Comprehensive Vocabulary of the Flash Language* [2], [3], the 'cant' it represented distilled from the "ever-evolving language steeped in the cultural melting pot of the British underworld" from which some 160,000 of its nascent speakers would be transported to the Antipodes between 1788 and the mid-nineteenth century. As Barnard notes slyly, in light

of the immense popularity of a volume that underwent four printings in just two decades, "The dictionary [itself] proved to be hot property [3, p.5]." Its applied linguistic intent was to 'translate' for lawyers and government officials the colorful terms and phrases that abounded in convict jargon, and despite a strong dispreference on the part of certain literate individuals who feared its terms would make their way into the national vernacular – and many did – its entertainment features endure to this very day. In fact, it seems merely to have been among the early deposits on an account of abundant glossaries, articles, books and videos (popular and scholarly, in print and online) that display the eternal fascination people have with the intricacy of prison(er) speech for the inquisitive among us today.

## II. TERMINOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY

This paper presents ethnographic research pertaining to the use of what falls under the broad concept of *prison slang*, which itself includes informal speech (which may find written expression) that may be ephemeral and is often particular to the venue in which it is spoken. In its essence, slang is informal and casual, at least in its dynamic usage.

Under the umbrella of *slang* we locate two distinct types of words and phrases. The first is *jargon*, which can be casual and have a 'slangy' style and is typically associated with a particular field of work, study or specialized social situation. Jargon is connected with the institutional life of prisons, is common to inmates and staff, and designates features of the facility and its functions, and often consists of acronyms or abbreviations. Though used informally, it may occur in formal speech situations as well. It is to be distinguished from a second type of word or phrase, namely, *argot/cant*. *Argot* is the most common term in the literature for the speech of a sub-class, usually criminal, that involves a mixture of relexicalized words that are not uncommon to the larger population and its dialects, while *cant* is the argot of the underworld in particular. Given that the literature is inconsistent with distinction between these two terms, we use them interchangeably in this paper [4]-[14].

In this research, we explore three closely related questions. First, what kinds of slang (i.e., jargon and argot/cant) are present amongst modern prison populations today? Two, how porous are the hypothetical lines between speech situations and speakers, e.g. usage by inmates vs. staff, by either ex-inmates or staff outside prison walls, or criminals vs. general population? Three, what is socially signified by the use of prison jargon (particularly, argot), i.e. to what degree is it a matter of secretiveness (as some have suggested) or of in- vs. out-group identification – or, something else altogether?

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Following the collection of materials on prison jargon drawn from a diversity of writers (scholarly and popular), research locations and time periods (as reflected in the References Section), we proceeded to a series of off-site interviews conducted between spring 2021 and fall 2023 with 12 employees of correctional facilities located in the NE United States. These included corrections officers and other staff members who currently serve, or have retired from, employment at U.S. correctional facilities, and some parole officers (who are employed by county or state authorities). For reasons of security, no names are given here (only representative letters) and no facilities will be identified in order to protect the privacy and safety of our research participants. As a phenomenological study, our concern was to develop what Vagle [15] calls “A feeling of deep resonance and understanding of the nature or meaning of an everyday experience – a time when one does not need to say I understand because one already knows one understands.”

Aside from some general demographic items, we asked two related questions of each research participants: a) What words and phrases do you hear being used in prison by inmates or staff which appear to be particular to that domain? b) What meaning do you attach to the competent usage – or lack of such jargon – whether performed by inmates or staff? Our goal was not only to supplement the existing data on the various kinds of inmate slang but to find out from prison staff what social purposes they perceived to be tied into its usage; our data are presented in Appendix A. This means we need to define the shared experiences of prison life and how terminology particular to prisons locates the essence of the experience and the purposes derived from continued existence in such facilities. Various explanations have been offered as to why prison slang has come about and some have claimed that secrecy is a fundamental motivator for it; on the other hand, we aimed to find out what our informants said it means *to them*.

Thus, our work reflects two of Moustakas’ models [16] of phenomenological study, that of an *ethnography* with “direct observations of the activities of the group being studied, communications and interactions with the people, and opportunities for informal and formal interviews...,” the result being cultural description, and that of a grounded research theory by which one is “unraveling the elements of the experience.”

### III. LITERATURE SURVEY AND CONCEPTUAL GROUNDWORK

Allnj argot/cant is slang though only some slang classifies as jargon or argot/cant, especially since much slang goes with age- or social-tags and is notorious for its ephemeral existence. The overlapping usage of these terms and their variance of definition can be confusing, in part, because the word *argot* derives from a 17<sup>th</sup> century French word used to describe the language of thieves, having previously meant a ‘group of beggars’; *cant*, on the other hand, also arose about the same time in France (albeit having a Latin derivation) and designating the speech of beggars seeking alms for some beggars were thieves incognito. Since slang encompasses both jargon and argot/cant, and lends itself particularly to oral

events, we use it in the title of this paper for its comprehensiveness [10, p.31-32]. Halliday [17] uses these terms interchangeably; Maurer [10, p.4] specifically connects *argot* with crime (“specialized language used by organized, professional groups operating outside the law; these groups normally constitute criminal subcultures”), as we and most of the literature do also. See also Andersson and Trudgill [18] for similar definitions and typology, and particularly their characterization of *slang* as intended to make one’s speech “vivid, colourful and interesting.” These key conceptual terms can be organized via the chart in Fig. 1.

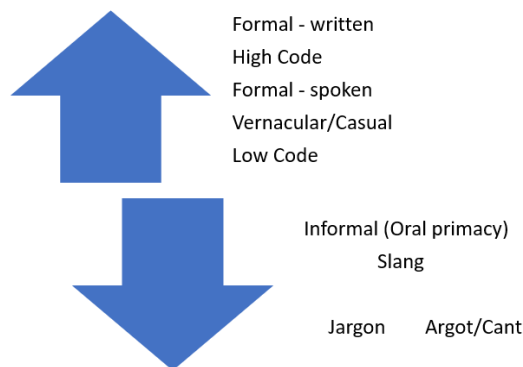


Fig. 1 Inverse Relationship Between Formal and Informal Communications

Fig. 1 chart indicates that modes of speech (often classified as registers, styles, or ‘codes’) fall along a continuum of factors that relate to (in-)formality, oral/literate, high/low code, and even +/- prestige. Whether conceived as a hierarchy or continuum, they reflect incremental gradation and overlapping features. Formal language and speech varieties can occur in spoken or written forms and coalesce with what Ferguson [19] calls “high” forms in his classic diglossia paradigm; these often occur in content with strong literary and religious traditions. Vernacular speech, which may be casual and informal (though it does not have to be so), is more likely to use a lower, commonly-used form of the language (with or without diglossia). Swearing and scatological words can occur at any level in this language continuum though such speech is more likely to increase in open usage the lower one’s register in use at the moment.

Neither dialect nor prestige – key concepts in sociolinguistics – play a definitive role in this chart for these can be construed distinctly from inmate slang. For example, speakers of various dialectal groups will learn prison slang (its jargon *and* its argot), though what is prestigious ‘on the block’ may be stigmatized ‘on the street’ (to use a common prison-related distinction), for even speakers of prestigious high codes can be looked down on by speakers of vernacular. Prestige does not have a fixed relationship to any level in the chart, but hinges on the values of a given speaker and domain; thus, for some, formal speech is prestigious while for others the essential standard will be acquisition of the *informal/low* code range – i.e. that range in which prison speech is typically located. Either way, written evidence of argot/canting is traceable to Europe in the Middle

Ages [4, p.64] and has thrived amongst academicians and in popular imagination ever since.

So, using these designations that are compatible with much of the literature on the subject, we will argue that American prison slang does indeed comprise what Halliday [17, p.570] identified as *anti-language* in his seminal article, by means of the following steps which bring in sociolinguistic concepts crucial to such a definition: First, we will incorporate literature on the concept of speech communities, showing that unlike traditional communities that are defined by region, dialect, ethnicity or socio-economic commonality, prison communities (for all their irregularity) constitute a speech community. Second, we will show that various kinds of publications present ample evidence of different kinds of slang that are unique in their totality to a prison environment (albeit with some differences reflective of region and ethnic composition of the inmates). Third, we will supplement these studies (some of which include lexical and phrasal lists of prison slang) with our own findings drawn from interviews with staff who currently work at prison facilities in northeastern American states and drawn from interviews with staff occupying various position (as noted previously). Fourth and finally, we shall correlate our findings with the literature to show where we affirm, or differentiate from, what has been published.

A diverse assortment of fields necessarily feeds into the subject at hand. Sociolinguistics, per the Lazarsfeld formula, concerns itself broadly with 'Who speaks what language, to whom, when, and why'. A pivotal starting point for this paper will be Gumperz' [20] seminal article on "The Speech Community," which he defines as "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage." This triad of features which leads to the "assigning of special meanings to common nouns, verbs and adjectives" Gumperz promptly links with made-up children's talk, liturgical materials, the literary products of modern nation-states especially in their urban centers (which "tend to be representative of majority speech") – as well as "thieves' argot, the slang of young gangs, and the jargon of traveling performers."

This pivotal concept is occasionally acknowledged in some of the literature we reviewed [21], though it is more often tacitly assumed. Irwin and Cressey [22] advocate a "fine distinction between 'prison culture' and 'criminal subculture'...." Nielson and Scarpitti [12, p.265] present a unique take on the use of argot in a therapeutic setting intended for inmates, finding its use (by staff, among others) to be "an essential element in the treatment process."

Gumperz' defining characteristics [20, p.181] of speech communities as being "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage" is essential to this essay. We affirm that there is overwhelming sociological evidence that this is exactly the case with prisons.

The social dynamics of prison life have long been the subject of numerous studies, including [23]-[28], [21, p.325], and [22,

p.154], to give a few examples. The social world of prisons is described by Bondeson [29] as "an informal social system" complete with its own expressions of lifestyle consistency, solidarity, various kinds of internal dangers, and the psychological and social effects all of these have upon inmates in Swedish prisons. Wooden and Parker [30] are among the many who specifically address socialization into sexual relationships and roles within the prison orb.

Among the most influential researchers is the sociologist Erving Goffman, and the concept in *Asylums* [31] of prison as a "total institution" has left an indelible imprint on subsequent research. Prisons constitute the third of the five types of total institutions, a type designed to protect the outside human community. In Goffman's establishing chapter, he makes numerous observations relevant to the fact of prison as a community, including that "Every institution captures something of the time and interest of its members and provides something of a world for them; in brief, every institution has encompassing tendencies." However, some of these, he says, "are encompassing to a degree discontinuously greater than the ones next in line. Their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure [sic] that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors." In other words, every waking and sleeping need (except for freedom) of a prisoner is at least theoretically being met from *within* this artificial, well structured 'community', including room and board, activities, medical and related care, and so forth.

Whereas the activities have distinct zones in the outside world, total institutions break down the sphere boundaries and locate all of these in relatively close proximity supervised by a unitary authority, even as nearly all the activities must be done in the company of many other persons – and, we might add, have long moved beyond barbed wire to almost exclusively, razor wire, instead. Volition is largely dispensed with, and mass regimentation is the rule. Social stratification is intensely regimented – for staff as well as inmates, a power structure made evident even in unauthorized activities such as a corrections officer (CO) being able to withhold or delay activities and rights as an expression of their authority over inmates (not to mention that inmates do so to each other as well; these latter observations are from our study rather than Goffman [31]).

That prison is an institution and thus constitutes its own (sub)community needs no further supporting argumentation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to identify whether this kind of situation constitutes a genuine speech community. We argue that it does. Language communities and domains are standard material for sociolinguistic research. There are many such language/speech communities, for example, as can be seen in the literature, including such groups (we note, as commonly designated, though not as we ourselves would identify and label them) as North-Atlantic fishermen, carnivals, moonshiners, hucksters and scam artists, prostitutes, marijuana users, narcotics addicts, gamblers, horse racers – all of these having devoted chapters from Maurer's compendium [11].

Unfortunately, not all such communities are truly “underworld,” and even one [11, p.17] on Australian rhyming argot supposedly showing up in American underworld speech (originally published in 1944) is fancier than fact, as he demonstrates. Key among this, however, is Maurer’s awareness that sociological distinctives tend to produce linguistic distinctions which are the communications hallmark of a community.

Linguistic distinctions that are particular to communities certainly comes to the fore in Halliday’s properly-foundationalized approach, as he addresses the counter-cultural speech of prison inmates, which he describes as “a society that is set up within another society” [17, p.570-71, 580, 583]. Formal features (e.g. of lexicon) have strong social correlation, he says, noting that “The principle is that of same grammar, different vocabulary; but different vocabulary only in certain areas, typically those that are central to the activities of the subculture and that set it off most sharply from the established society” – his selected case studies, including the Calcutta underworld, Polish prisons and Elizabethan ‘pelting speech’, give evidence that what is going on is the use of such language as social stratification, and may have the immediate effects of “liveliness and humor or, in some case...secrecy.” He, among others, insists that (what he calls) such “social dialects are not necessarily associated with caste or class; they may be religious, generational, sexual, economic (urban/rural), and perhaps other things too... The social function of dialect variation is to express, symbolize, and maintain the social order; and the social order is an essentially hierarchic one,” as it brings “into sharp relief the role of language as a realization of the power structure of society.”

A committed study is presented in Bondeson’s chapter, “Argot Knowledge as an Indicator of Criminalization” ([29], see similarly [32] and [33]), its measurement being applied to youth offenders with predictions of future tendencies in connection with their differing degrees of recognition of argot language, which the author describes as “to a great extent an exclusive language,” whether truly a secret one or not. Bondeson notes that there exists “a large gap between the inmates’ and the staffs’ knowledge of argot,” an observation to which we shall return in a while. Of interest was her observation that inmates had trouble coming up with a label for their prison argot, reportedly considering it “everyday” language or “just normal talk” to them. However, not all have equal possession of it: some described it as “a status symbol” implying one has served much time and therefore should be liked or at least respected.

Accordingly, Savignon [34] has described language as “culture in motion,” noting that “Every society has rules for participation in social events. And these rules shape language development, social identity, and, and self-expression. Language also serves to identify and challenge established social rules”. Halliday [35] has defined meaning potential as the range of variation available to the speaker. A linguistic act is not only a use of the potential of the language system but is also a social and cultural act, an expression of oneself.

Along compatible lines, Ciechanowska [36], citing Pollock

[37], affirms that argot “serves as a symbolic expression of group loyalty, the use of which serves as a message of integration and allegiance to the inmate subculture,” and correlates this with Einat and Livnat [38]. We agree, in part, but note that this must be qualified with respect to the use of it by COs and other staff members.

Sykes [24, p.85] dedicates a chapter to “Argot Roles” that describes the speech of maximum security prisoners as “the language of the dispossessed, tinged with bitterness and marked by a self-lacerating humor” (his work draws heavily from data collected from the New Jersey State Prison system). This language, he says, draws together whatever is the current (U.S.) slang and that of the underworld. Significantly he argues that, regardless of the exact nature of its roots, “it provides a map of the inmate social system,” and while discounting its alleged secrecy value it holds as its “greatest importance” a function of “distinguishing symbol” and an “expression of group loyalty and group membership” and noting that “inmates feel that a person who speaks in terms of their lexicon is something other than a stranger” – and, the fact that prison staff also use this speech does not indicate that said staff approve of the group values but may represent (to the inmates) their keen awareness.

Thus, connecting speech to social institution, Sykes argues that “the more critical function of prison argot would appear to be its utility in ordering and classifying experience within the walls in terms which deal specifically with the major problems of prison life” [24, p.86]; and specifically, he proposes that the “crucial axes of life” in prison, i.e. the interests and problems one faces within its orb, lead to the mechanisms that “attach distinctive names to the resulting types or typical social roles.” Labels always reflect organizational systems, it can be assumed; therefore, so not surprisingly such will emerge in an incarcerated society as they would anywhere else. That some jargon of inmates reflects U.S. military or para-military jargon reflects, for example, the fact that many staffers (and some inmates) previously served in the military and acquired certain speech forms in that domain.

Partridge’s delightful history of slang [39] from 16thC – 20thC portrays the phenomenon in England and America (with some on Australia as well), yet virtually nothing on inmate/prison/underworld slang in particular. Eggert [40] hedges a golden opportunity with his introduction to linguistics using taboo and scatological language – yet alas, includes nothing on inmate/prison jargon specifically there either. Maurer’s collection of sub-communities [11] presents various kinds of argot (sometimes calling it ‘lingo’) but separates “The Argot of the Underworld” with its thorough glossary from other underworld situations, e.g. the “diffused subculture” of marijuana users – an arbitrary distinction, it seems to us, which is an oversimplification and therefore inaccurate.

Russian prison slang, drawn in part from Alexandr Solzhenitsyn’s 1962 volume, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, provides the substance of Galler and Marquess [40], and is described (on the jacket cover) as being “a substandard variety of Russian, used by Russian speakers of every geographical origin and social background who have been unfortunate enough to learn its use at firsthand (*sic*).” It

presents the Russian word in Cyrillic alphabet followed by an English gloss and accompanied with bilingual explanation and contextual usage examples.

Heller-Roazen [9, p.38-40] notes that, among options for criminal slang is the “cryptic jargon,” involving neologisms and phrases “forged by the most varied of rhetorical means: metaphors, metonymy, antithesis, and epithets, most obviously, can all have roles to play.” So does “alteration of sound shape” that might include syllabic scrambling, variant forms of affixation, and the like. He also suggests that the famed Cockney rhyming slang shows up in both Australian and U.S. prisons, though we have not encountered any in our interviews. We affirm, however, the plausibility of the idea that *some* prison slang may serve a secretive function.

Clemmer [23, p.330-334] indicates awareness of some 1200 words and phrases drawn from prison jargon, though limits his listing on these pages to the more familiar ones. What is clear from interviews we did with respect to this kind of list (which originated more than seven decades ago) are two trends: one is for some slang terms to have gone mainstream (e.g. *ice* ‘diamonds’, *to case* ‘shadow/follow’, *edge* ‘advantage’, *lam* ‘depart in haste’) while others have dropped out of use altogether (e.g. *man* ‘prison keeper’, *gaff* ‘pressure’, *gerber* ‘pickpocket’), at least with respect to those meanings. The ephemeral life of slang is the rule of the day, any day.

#### IV. INTERPRETATION OF DATA AND CONCLUSIONS

When it comes to prison slang of any category, it is of no surprise that while scatological language is common to most (if not all) societies, such usage appears to be even more dense among prison populations (including inmates and staff). Yet it is fitting to note [26, p.2] that lines between domains (inside/outside the wall) are porous and “transitory, with jargon usage overlapping because inmates and staff bring their language from the streets into the prison but also carry the language from the prison out into the streets,” as a number of COs also noted to us in conversation. Walls are impenetrable but social lines are not.

Yet determination of meaning is no simple matter: some words and phrases seem simply to drop from usage (the perennial nature of slang) while others go mainstream in popular parlance and still others undergo total semantic shift. We assume that the prevalence of crime- and police-dramas on television and in movies will disseminate some prison slang (whether accurately portrayed or not) to the general population, though specific determination of this lies outside the scope of this paper.

As indicated, we formulated three goals for this research: to identify examples and types of prison slang amongst a modern prison population, and then to find whether it was shared substantially by staff as well as inmates, ‘on the street’ as well as ‘behind the wall’. Then, we wanted to identify the social functions that were served by competent performance of these words and phrases. Our results, summarized in Appendix A, brought us to the following conclusions:

1) With respect to secrecy: though we do not doubt that prison slang (particularly, argot) may occasionally serve this

function, this does not appear to be its primary purpose. It is more generally utilitarian and one of social identity. It is the de facto linguistic currency of the domain.

- 2) Some slang fits particular details of prison life which exist only ‘behind the wall’ and have little or no application ‘on the street’ – i.e. the terms are domain-specific (as seen in the first section of Appendix A). However, we observed that some argot/cant differs between prisons, e.g. the term prison wallet (among others) was familiar to a staffer at one facility and distinctively not to a veteran of another not far away.
- 3) Prison slang is indeed an example of Hallidayan antilanguage, as much of the literature rightly insists it to be, setting apart a criminogenic lifestyle and a key marker for inmates and staff alike – for, inmates, being a hallmark of in-group belonging, and for staff a measure of their capability to understand prison life. As one corrections officer (CO) put it: “Newbies have to learn these terms; after a year, staff & inmates should know them.”
- 4) Consequently, competence in the use of prison slang (and particularly, argot) is essential for recognition and esteem in this unusually-configured community. This means that inmates or staffers who fail to demonstrate competence in the jargon may flag themselves as vulnerable and stand at a heightened risk for isolation and identified as weak or defenseless. In short, what ogre-faced James Thomas Morriset determined centuries ago for commanding Norfolk Island [1] remains relevant for inmates and prison staff today.

#### APPENDIX A – PRISON SLANG

##### Jargon

##### Nouns

- *Chow Hall* – open meal room for inmates
- *DTU* – Diversionary Treatment Unit (for changing behavior)
- *ODR* – Officers’ Dining Room
- *PC* – Protective custody (aka ‘self lockup’) done at request of prisoner due to threats from other inmates (see also Separation)
- *POC* – Psychiatric Observation Cell (with observations cameras), used for psychiatrically at-risk or self-harming, suicidal inmates
- *PRT* – Psychiatric Review Team
- *RHU* – Restricted Housing Unit (aka the hole/bucket)
- *SRTU* – Secured Residential Treatment Unit
- *STG* – Security Threat Group – both a generic reference to a gang member, as well as the name of a specific gang in NYC
- *Body scanner* – when inmate is sent to the hole, he must pass through scanner similar to airport security (reveals implants, metals & non-natural masses such as balloons, batteries, drugs or weapons)
- *Chow* – food served in prison
- *Contagion* – when group of inmates coordinates on doing a problem activity, in order to accomplish something else

- (e.g. group suicide attempt aimed at other purpose)
- *Dry cell* – cell within running water; used for inmate who has swallowed something (e.g. contraband) so whatever he passes can be screened and retrieved)
- *Four piece* – when inmate has to be restrained at four points, e.g. Both arms and Legs
- *Gen pop* – general inmate population (cf. “the hole” - high security housing, in contrast)
- *Green Sheet* – parole board has met with inmate and issues a decision about his release, assuming no further charges are made or misconducts are written up.
- *Grievance* – paper form filled out by inmate making formal complaint to upper staff and seeking improvement of condition/situation (often, frivolous)
- *Hot shot* – water fountain offering cold and hot water options
- *(The) Hole* – any Level Five housing (maximum level of security); aka “the bucket”
- *Indigent* – inmate with no extra funds, so uses only prison-provided supplies such as food, soap & hygiene goods, etc.
- *Jacket* – one’s legal file. e.g. “Check his jacket” – ‘don’t mess with him’; hence, reflective of one’s threatening reputation
- *Juvenile Lifers* – inmates who were tried as adults even though they were below the age of 18 and sentenced to life in prison.
- *Life* – life sentence(s) w/ no chance of parole; lifers (inmates serving a life sentence)
- *Line movement* – inmates moving in controlled fashion from one part of a prison to another (e.g. to yard, chow, recreation, classes, etc.)
- *Min/Max* – minimum sentence at which inmate is eligible for parole; at upper limit, inmate “maxes out” and is released and normally will not need to cooperate with parole (though sex offenders must continue to register on SORNA, the sex offender registry)
- *Pie slot* – aka wicket – pie hole - space in door to pass along food, etc.
- *Prison load* – ground, usually mixed meats with whatever other foods and vegetables are being served for that meal, pressed into a small loaf shape so it can be eaten using one’s fingers since no plastic wear is made available (e.g. for inmates deemed dangerous)
- *Probie* – new CO (aka COT)
- *Psych* – mental health worker of any status assisting inmates (even employees tend not to distinguish psychology from psychiatry – all get referenced as “psychs”)
- *Real Talk / For Reals / For Real For Real* – inmate wants a serious conversation with someone, e.g. staff member
- *Rec* – blackout time for activities (e.g. yard time, TV, other); umbrella term for various out-of-cell activities
- *Restraint Chair* – when an inmate is restrained (often with Spit Mask – paper mesh over mouth to prevent distance spitting)
- *Separation* – inmates are moved to a different prison or a different part of the prison from others who are part of their

court case, or a physical threat. Inmates are also separated from staff if they have a relationship with the staff member or have assaulted that staff member

- *Slides* – white slip-on canvas casual shoes for inmates while ‘in the hole’ because they lack laces which might be used as weapon or means of suicide
- *Strip cage* – where an inmate is stripped out (strip searched for contraband)
- *Tether* – rope used for restricting an inmate’s movement so that he is led in particular direction; usually clipped to handcuffs behind the back
- *White-shirts/hats* (upper management), grey shirts (COs) brown shirts (maintenance), blue shirts (kitchen/dietary), others are non-uniformed (‘civilians’ – people who are perceived to do whatever they like ‘w/o accountability’)
- *Yard Time* – time allowed for outside activities such as weight lifting, basketball, football, and other physical activities)

Adoption of military terminology is also standard parlance amongst COs and some inmates as well, such as use of military time (2400 hours/day) and alphabetic references (e.g. A Block = Alpha Block; E = Echo; F = foxtrot; etc.) or use of military slang, e.g. *fuck fuck games* = passive-aggressive strategies.

#### Verbs:

- *To be out on writ* – when inmate appears their case, and are transported to whichever court system originally tried their case (writ is an official order authorizing a person to cease some task/area and switch to original jurisdiction for process)
- *To cease movement* – everyone in line movement stops simultaneously, e.g. at shift change or when an inmate is taken to the hole
- *To be cold cocked* – to be punched spontaneously by an inmate
- *To shit up the cell* = ‘painting’ one’s cell with one’s own feces
- *Shitting down* – cocktail of urine and feces intended for throwing at staff or inmates (and what is thrown is called a Shit Bath)
- *To strip out* – take off all clothing for a strip search by COs (= strip search in strip cage)
- *To SEAP out* – take time off work due to emotional stress (acronym < State Employees Assistance Program)
- *To put on blast* – staffer publicly calls out inmate by name over intercom/radio (i.e. to embarrass him; can be done if inmate loiters near another’s door)
- *To take a hit* – when parole board does not approve inmate for parole (and can last up to two years before next review with board)

#### Argot

#### Nouns

- *Artist* – inmate who draws greetings cards or pornographic images (one type of hustle)
- *Ass time* – (COs use this) – to sit down and chill (“I didn’t get any ass time this shift”)

- *ATM* – ass-to-mouth (sexual activity of inmates)
- *Behind the wall* – inside prison, i.e. having passed through front security entrance
- *Blue belly = blue shirts* – food service officers (for color of clothing)
- *Boofing* (aka *Keester*) – contraband smuggled via rectum
- *Brick* – package of drugs (shaped like a brick)
- *Brown belly = brown shirts* – maintenance workers (who wear brown clothing)
- *Bubble guy* – office who sits in protective room with windows (the bubble) able to see persons in immediate vicinity, and electronically locks/unlocks doors
- *Cellie* – analogous to roommate/roomie
- *Chi-chi* (abbrev. *chiches*) – (usually, Ramen) noodles mixed with other foods which often have been saved from a ‘chow hall’
- *Cho-mo* – child molester (also: Chester, baby raper, diaper-swiper)
- *Courtesy flush* – quick flush of toilet right after usage
- *Crash dummy* (or *Test crash dummy*) – inmate who does risky tasks for another and is set up to take the fall for it
- *Diaper sniper/ChoMo/Baby Raper/Pedo/SO* – sex offender (note multiple terms for worst possible offense as adjudged by inmate standards)
- *Dime* – ten-year sentence
- *Door gangster* – inmate who talks freely behind a door so they can ‘run their mouth but when they come out in the open ‘they don’t really do shit’)
- *Door warrior* – inmate who screams at cell door from inside but when guards open the door the inmate is compliant and calm
- *Fifi* – improvised sex toy
- *Fish* (aka *fresh meat*) – new inmate, never before in the system
- *Fishing line* – sheets or clothing torn into thin strips to make line for passing notes between cells (i.e. using pie slot) during lock in
- *5-0* – COs as ‘cops’ (e.g. when COs are approaching, inmate yells out a “5-0” caution)
- *Grind game* – ability to spar verbally (on part of staff or inmates) – whether playfully or in hostility
- *Hooch / prison hooch* – save all fruits and bread in order to make alcohol, and the drink produced is also called hooch
- *Hut* – inmate’s cell
- *Jody* – man on the street who is sleeping with inmate’s wife (< military)
- *John* – anything, a whatchamacallit (has spread to general usage) – sub at brain-block! (aka *Chompy*)
- *Joint* – faggot (derogatory)
- *Jailhouse lawyer* – inmate who gives legal advice to fellow inmates; some have credentials (i.e. approved by the prison) and others are self-taught/proclaimed
- *Kite* – contraband letter that is on the ‘fishing pole’ (contraband – drugs or even food) OR: write up for misconduct
- *Lock-in-a-sock* – improvised weapon (self explanatory)
- *Muscle* – inmate whose body build facilitates their ability to intimidate others (can carry pos or neg connotations; some are muscle only, not intelligent)
- *Mushroom stamp* – inmate presses genitals up against a window to leave mark
- *Nigga, Skinheads* (generic for White; cf. Whites who socialize with Blacks are excluded), *Beaner/Wetback, Chinks*, etc.
- *No smoke* – no hassle, am willing to follow directions (e.g. “I don’t want no smoke.”)
- *OG* – original gangster (< streets)
- *Old head/hat* (see also OG) – senior inmate (cf. Young bull)
- *On the street* – outside prison, i.e. having left the secured premises
- *Pinks, Blues, Oranges, Browns* – reference is to prisoners’ clothing color indicative of their classification, by state or particular to a block within a prison
- *Prison wallet* – inmate’s rectum when used to hide contraband
- *Road dogs* – one’s friends, homies
- *Shank* (N or V) – small, sharp prison weapon (e.g. from pen or spoon); aka *Shiv, Whack*
- *Shit-on-a-shingle* – breakfast beef served with watery gravy (< military)
- *(Side) Hustle* – anything you do in prison to make money off other inmates (e.g. run a store, extortion, protection, loan illegal cell phone, do tattoos) – in addition to paid prison employment assignment
- *Short-timer* – inmate serving a sentence of no more than a few years
- *Shot caller* – gang member who has authority to organize gang activity, incl. ‘putting out a hit’ on someone
- *Skittles* (aka *TicTacs*) – medications (esp. psychotropic meds)
- *Snitch* – inmate who gives away secrets that disclose others’ illegal activities
- *Snow bunny* – while female (used mostly by Black inmates)
- *Stinger* – electric cord rigged in way to heat water/food, often with nail clippers at ends
- *Three hots and a cot* – prison provides three meals and a cell bed
- *Viking* – inmate who refuses to shower and clean himself (cell-dweller)
- *VOM* – victory over management (e.g. evidenced in bathroom graffiti)
- *Whack* (N) – any weapon, though often bigger than a shank (e.g. piece of gate or gutter)
- *Wood pecker* – knocking on a window to get female’s attention and/or to flash her
- *Young blood/bull* – newer inmate (cf. *old head/hat*)

#### Verbs

- *To be down* - be incarcerated
- *To bitch up* – inmate yells and complains from inside cell but when guards arrive the inmate verbally retreats in their presence
- *To be gay for the stay* – inmate engages in homosexual

activity only during incarceration

- *To be sent upstate* – sentenced to term in prison (vs. jail, below 2-year incarceration), concept being a hierarchy of county (jails) → state (prison) → federal (prison/penitentiary)
- *To be up top* – when employee walks out of security corridor leading to/from the secure prison area (opposite of ‘behind the wall’)
- *To be behind the wall* – when employee is within the secure area (note: superintendent & some administrators work outside the wall)
- *To be shot out* – exhausted and worn down by one’s experiences
- *To buy it* – to behave in manner that gets you punished or set back in some way (e.g. of inmate sent to hole for violence: “he bought it”)
- *To call doors* – when CO or other staff request that cell door be opened by the “bubble guy”
- *To cuff up* – put someone in handcuffs (shackle, belt, etc.)
- *To cut up* – self-inflicted laceration with view to suicide
- *To dry snitch* – to provide unsolicited negative information on other inmate leaked to white shirt (often without specific names). Could be done with loud talking.
- *To fish* – passing stuff to other inmates (e.g. a string of paper, potentially conveyed across many hands)
- *To get stepped on* – when two employees use radio at same time and one is drowned out by the other, the latter “got stepped on”
- *To grind up/have a grind game* – be able to verbally spar and pick on others (in good spirit); often involving quick comebacks and quips
- *To hang up* – attempt suicide by hanging (using twisted sheets or strips of cloth)
- *To have a beef with someone* – to have conflict, complaint about another
- *To pump fake* – to bluff, so as to achieve a secondary goal
- *To run a store* – under the umbrella of one’s hustle, e.g. to sell food, cigarettes, etc.
- *To spin [someone]* – to lie to inmates so as to give them what they want to hear, instead of giving factual or difficult information
- *To suit up* – extraction team of guards dons protective clothing in preparation for extraction of non-compliant inmate from his cell
- *To throw down* – to fight someone
- *To ride the rainbow* – inmate known as, or perceived to be, homosexual

#### Misc. Idioms

- *You got something for me? /* – inmate asking for money or item (e.g. soup, pen, drugs) (aka - Let me hold something).
- *Do you like it spicy?* – CO threatening to use OC spray on non-compliant inmate

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