J. D. Salinger's English Usage

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Resume

Many American novelists and poets in the 20th century have tried to express themselves and have established their own literary styles in which the American spoken language is the base. From among them I have chosen to discuss the colloquialism and slang of J. D. Salinger, concentrating on his representative novel, The Catcher in The Rye, which is full of the spoken language of American teenagers in the 1940's and 1950's. I made a close survey of all the colloquial and slangy expressions and also looked into the characteristics of their usages. The repetition of the same words and the same colloquial expressions is one such feature. The use of repetition is not only on the word level but also on the phrase level as we see in this sentence; "What I decided to do, I decided I'd take a room in a hotel in New York." This often results in ungrammatical sentences. There are several types of these; double negatives, mixed-up cases, genitive cases used for a grouped noun, etc. Salinger's use of grammatically incorrect sentences is his effective technique to create the atmosphere of the young people's world.

Other methods are the "exaggeration" by both numbers and curse words. Frequent use of curses is very notable in this novel. "Concentrated forms" of spoken language, in other words, writing the language as it is pronounced is also very common. All in all they are very effective in creating the world of the teenagers. Salinger has succeeded in establishing his style—the writing of a novel in colloquialisms.

I

Languages are livings. As the years go by, new developments, new inventions and new ideas require the coining of new words or the usage of old words in a new way. Although some words become obsolete and are dropped, the general trend is for an increase in the size of the language. THE RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, Second Edition, 1987 grew by some 50,000 words and 75,000 new definitions over the First Edition of 1966. Probably nowhere is this more noticeable than in slang.

Each generation as it comes along, picks up some of the slang of its predecessor and carries it forward. In time this may become colloquialisms and eventually enter standard speech; e.g. Shakespeare's "beat it" or "flunk" from the early 1800's. However, most of the slang of one generation dies out as a new generation coins new words or changes the meanings of the old words, which creates a gulf of incomprehension between generations—"jitterbug" versus "lambada." While a well-read person in the older generation may be able to shrink this gulf, unless he is a part of the new generation scene—a teacher, for example—he will still be shut out from a rapid conversation between a couple of college freshmen.

Naturally there is some slang which is universally used and understood. However there is slang which is peculiar to groups of people who share the same occupation—army and navy personnel, actors and actresses, farmers, aviators, etc.—and of course students. In this respect slang is similar to dialect: while dialect is spoken in a section of a
country, special slang is used by groups with a common interest. For example, a sailor in the Pacific will tend to use the same slang as a sailor in the Atlantic. Likewise students throughout the USA will tend to use the same slang although regional differences do crop up.

Since the famous story THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN was written by Mark Twain in 1884, writing a novel in colloquialism has become popular and more or less is characteristic of American literature. All students majoring in American Literature know that Earnest Hemingway is said to have fashioned a clear colloquial style of his own. William Faulkner’s style is long, complicated and very ornate and seemingly very different from that of Hemingway. But they actually are of the same lineage as far as the use of colloquialisms is concerned.

In The Stories on English Dictionaries, Shozo Kajima says that Faulkner’s style results from the gushing forces and rhythms of the American colloquial language. “General Americans speak by using colloquial words so freely and vigorously and as a result, I’d better say, their speech vibrant with liveliness is reflected upon American literature of the 20th century.” America is a young country with a history of a mere 200 years. Compared with the peoples of other countries with much longer histories and traditions, Americans might feel more free in their speech. I have noticed in American English that there is a tremendous amount of curse words and that people do use them more frequently than Japanese people. The direct reflection of their carefree lively everyday talk can be seen in their literature. Of course in literature the colloquialisms should not be a direct copy of the raw spoken language.

Many American novelists and poets have tried to express themselves and have established their own literary styles in which American spoken language is the base. I have read somewhere that in the history of the English language there have been two times when English was full of life and flourished; one is the Elizabethan Age and the other the Twentieth Century America.

From among the numerous American writers of this century I have chosen to discuss the colloquialism and slang of J.D. Salinger; concentrating on his representative novel THE CATCHER IN THE RYE, which is full of the spoken language of American teenagers in the 1950’s. Due to its popularity because of the everyday speech, it has been shut out of “decent” schools with very good academic ratings like Pency Prep School where Holden, the protagonist of this novel had been going before flunking. Now I hear that this novel is widely read by Japanese college students even though some forty years have passed since it was written.

II

J.D. Salinger’s colloquialisms are representative of young people right after World War II. This is a narrative novel in which a young seventeen-year-old boy, Holden Caulfield does most of the talking in a crude but natural way. Holden thinks that he has “a lousy vocabulary” and acts quite young for his age. In order to make the story more lively and up-to-date, and to emphasize the hero’s poor vocabulary, what has been effective? I will quote from the story:

In my mind, I’m probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw. Sometimes I can think of very crumby stuff I wouldn’t mind doing if the opportunity came up. I can even see how it might be quite a lot of fun, in a crumby way, and if you were both sort of drud and all, to get a girl and squirt water or something all over each other’s face. The thing is, though, I don’t like the idea. It stinks, if you analyse it. I think if you don’t really like a girl, you shouldn’t horse around with her at all, and if you do like her, then you’re supposed to like her face, and if you like her face, you ought to be careful about doing crumby stuff to it, like squirting water all over it. It’s really too bad
that so much crumby stuff is a lot of fun sometimes. Girls aren’t too much help, either, when you start trying not to get too crumby, when you start trying not to spoil anything really good. I knew this one girl, a couple of years ago, that was even crumbier than I was. Boy, was she crumby! We had a lot of fun, though, for a while, in a crumby way. Sex is something I really don’t understand too hot.²⁻¹ You never know where the hell²⁻¹ you are. I keep making up these sex rules for myself, and then I break them right away. Last year I made a rule that I was going to quit horsing around¹⁻³ with girls that, deep down, gave me a pain in the ass. I broke it, though, the same week I made it—the same night, as a matter of fact. I spent the whole night necking with a terrible phoney²⁻² named Anne Louise Sherman. Sex is something I just don’t understand. I swear to God² I don’t. (p. 66)

In the above 26 lines most of the frequent usage or characteristics can be found. First is the frequent repetition of the same word or the same phrase. In the top 17 lines, the slang word “crumby” is used eight times. That means it appears almost on every other line. It came into use around 1910 with the meaning of “infected with body lice,” which has developed into “dirty, filthy, contemptible, repulsive and disgusting.” It is one of Salinger’s favorite slang words, for sure.

A particular word is sometimes used extensively in one part of the story as in this quote. Even now it is not uncommon for us to hear teenagers talk using colloquial keywords over and over again, which, I believe, is a universal trend of teenagers’ speech.

Some colloquial expressions are repeated throughout the novel, e.g., “sort of” or “and all.” “Sort of” used like an adverb and appearing freely in any part of the sentence, is colloquial. Here are some examples:

Group 1–1

*All he meant was you’d look better and feel better if you sort of brushed your teeth once in a while (p. 28)
*Ackey just sort of grunted when he said “How’s aboy?” (p. 29)
*All I did was sort of get him on the side of the head or something. (p. 47)
*I sort of enjoyed the air and all. (p. 57)
*I just sort of sat and did nothing. (p. 57)

Group 1–2

*They each had their own room and all. (p. 5)
*about Life being a game and all. (p. 11)
*You wouldn’t think such an old guy would be so sarcastic and all. (p. 12)
*You mean my flunking out of Pency and all. (p. 16)
*Everybody goes through phases and all. (p. 19)
*I read a lot of war books and mysteries and all. (p. 22)
*He’d been at Pency the whole four years and all. (p. 23)
*He started walking around the room, very slow and all. (p. 23)

“Horse around” is also used repeatedly in the novel and Random House⁸ gives as its definition “to fool around, to indulge in horseplay,” and classifies it as slang. But some dictionaries classify it as just a colloquial phrasal verb.

Group 1–3

*I started horsing around a little bit. (p. 25)
*You shouldn’t horse around with her at all. (p. 66)
*I was going to quit horsing around. (p. 66)
*We never necked or horsed around much. (p. 84)

I think that I will classify “hot” as a more slangy word than the words in Group 1 and put it in Group 2. THE DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN SLANG⁸ by Wentworth and Flexner defines this “hot” as “good, fine, admirable, competent, able, charming, attractive, etc.” and a little note is added saying, “often in the negative.” The negative sense always has “so” between “not” and “hot” thus always, “not so hot.” In Salinger’s writing...
"too" is often inserted between "not" and "hot."

Group 2–1
  *She's not too hot. (p. 75)
  *...which was really a hot one. (p. 62)
    (This refers to a lie, and that a "dangerous" lie.)
  *He had sinus trouble and he couldn't breathe too hot when he was asleep.
    (p. 43)  (In this case it is adverbial.)
  *The next part I don't remember so hot.  (p. 47)
  *You couldn't see the grandstand too hot.  (p. 6)
  *I can't sleep so hot if I have to keep my feet on the floor.  (p. 201)

"Hot" also makes some compound nouns like a "hot-shot" meaning, "an important, active, successful person."

*You take somebody's mother, all they want to hear is what a hot-shot their son is.  (p. 46)

*You take a very handsome guy, or a guy that thinks he's a real hot-shot.  (p. 32)

That sunuvabitch Hartzell thinks you're a hot-shot in English, and he knows you're my roommate.  (p. 33)

I would like to go on to another slang word, "phoney." The American slang dictionary I referred to before explains that it came into use around 1900 as being "not genuine, fake or faked; counterfeit," but it had changed its nuance and has come to mean "a pompous, punctilious person; snob, a stuffed shirt; one who pretends to be heap but isn't." According to the dictionary the expression was very common in 1935 and has been widely used by students since 1945. Is it still common among students? I will take up this point later in Section V. Now I will just give some of the examples from the book.

Group 2–2
  *She probably knew what a phoney slob he was.  (p. 7)
  *There's a word I really hate. It's a phoney. I could puke every time I hear it.  (p. 14)

One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam windows. For instance, they had this headmaster, Mr. Haas, that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life.  (p. 18)

*He was the kind of a phoney that have to give themselves room when they answer somebody's question.  (p. 133)

There are many more examples; such as, "phoney girls" (p. 57), "phoney handshake" (p. 54).

The third group of words that are probably most noticeable are the cursing words. "Hell" is one. When you can just simply say, "I hope not," Salinger's protagonist says, "I hope to hell not."  (p. 19) "I slid way down in my chair." becomes, "I slid way the hell down in my chair."  (p. 25) By using "hell," which has the meaning of "very much," you can exaggerate as you see in the examples below:

Group 3
  *...and his ears were always dirty as hell.  (p. 26)
  *My chest hurt like hell from his dirty knees.  (p. 48)
  *I was mad as hell.  (p. 55)
  *She's old as hell.  (p. 49)

"For the hell of it" has another meaning; which is, "for fun," and this is also used quite frequently.  (p. 33, 64, 77) Another expression which contains "hell" is, "to do (the) hell out of," and this means, "completely."

*He looked at me like he'd just beaten hell out of me in pingpong or something.  (p. 16)

*My Gladstones kept banging hell out of my legs.  (p. 57)

*It fascinated hell out of her.  (p. 61)

*He banged hell out of the room.  (p. 38)

In the next section I will list all the curse words used in this novel. There are so many of them and they are so frequently used that it seems to be impossible to count them. You can not read a page without coming
across a "damn" or a "goddam." Here in one-third of a page, I find 4 goddams and one damn.

We got on the wrong subway, I had to keep getting up to look at goddam map on the wall.

He came over and stood right in my light. "Hey," I said, "I've read this same sentence about twenty times since you came in."

Anyone else except Ackley would've taken the goddam hint. Not him, though. "Think they'll make you pay for 'em?"

"I don't know, and I don't give a damn. How 'bout sitting down or something, Ackley kid? You're right in my goddam light." He didn't like it when you called him, "Ackley kid." He was always telling me I was a goddam kid, because I was sixteen and he was eighteen. It drove him mad when I called him, "Ackley kid." (p. 24)

It is interesting to see most of the English curse words include, "God," "Christ," "Jesus," "heaven," "hell," and the like.

*"I swear to God." (p. 25)

*He wanted you to think he'd come in by mistake, for God's sake. (p. 66)

III

The reason for grouping the colloquial expressions in the paragraphs above is that, of course, there are several usage levels in them. Group 1 contains colloquial, informal expressions. Group 2 has the slang that is used among people on intimate terms or in specific groups and is quite informal. Group 3 has the curse words which can generally be included in Group 2. Besides these there is obscene language or taboo language; id est, ribaldry, which I put into Group 4. Needless to say there are informal expressions peculiar to America or England, and regional dialects. But, since the novel in question is written by an American writer, I will just concentrate on his colloquialisms.
Bastard; a despicable man, an untrustworthy, selfish, unethical man
Booze hound; one who habitually drinks a lot, a drunkard
Buddy; a close friend
Buddyroo; very close friend
Click; a commercial success in the entertainment field
Clinch; an embrace, a hug
Cop; a policeman
Crap; anything inferior, cheap, ugly or insulting by its presence
Dime; one thousand dollars
Dope; a person who acts as though drugged, hence, usually a stupid person
Dough; money
Dump; any unattractive, cheap, shabby or wretched house, apartment, etc.
Flit; homosexual male
Gal; girl
Goner; a thing or person doomed to destruction, dying person
Guts; courage, nerve
Hot-shot; an important, active, successful person
Jerk; an ineffectual, foolish or unknowingly dull youth or man
Lulu; anything or anyone remarkable or outstanding
Nuts; one who is or seems to be mentally unbalanced
Panic; something very funny
Pansy; a male homosexual, esp. one who plays female role; an effeminate man
Pimp; a panderer, a person who solicits customers for a prostitute
Racket; any shady or dishonest business or occupation, a swindle
Rat; a despicable or contemptible person
Rubber necks; a curious crowd, a mob
Sack; a bed or anything used as a bed
Screwball; an insane person
Slob; a stupid, clumsy or unclean person
Stiff; a corpse
Whore; any person who changes lovers, jobs, friends, ideals, etc.
Yap; the mouth, considered only as the organ of speech

Verbs

Bawl; to weep
Beat it; to go or go away, to leave or depart
Booze; to drink liquor or to go on a drinking spree
Bum a ride; to hitchhike
Chew the fat; to argue, talk
Chew the rag; to talk, to gossip, to chat at length, esp. about trivial matters
Chuck; to throw a ball, hurl, fling
Connect; to join
Cut it out; stop
Get a bang out of; to get great pleasure from something
Get the ax; to be fired or dismissed
Get wise with (someone); to become sexually intimate with a girl or woman
Give a buzz; to telephone
Give (someone) the eye=put the eye on (someone); to flirt with, esp. to look lasciviously at one of the opposite sex
Give (someone) the (big) freeze=put the freeze on (someone); to snub
Give (someone) the time; to have sexual intercourse with someone
Hit (someone); to overwhelm or bewilder
Hit the ceiling; to become greatly excited or violently angry
Keep tab(s) on; be careful about, attend
Kid the pants off a girl; tease a girl very much
Kill; to make an extremely favorable impression on a person or audience
Knock (oneself) out; to work excessively hard to exhaustion; to elicit an enthusiastic or emotional response
Neck; to kiss and caress intimately, to play amatively, to pet
Puke; vomit
Rubber; to gaze at, around or about
Rush; to pay romantic attention to a girl or woman
Shack up; stay for the night
Sock; to hit, as with the first or a club
Squeal; to complain, to protest
Tee off; to criticize
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Toss (one's) cookies; vomit, cookies=the contents one's stomach, what one has eaten recently

Adjectives and Adverbs
Be shot; be sick, be exhausted, be tired
Be up (down) one's alley; be very good at something
Can; a toilet, a rest room
Cold as a witch's teat; crooked, drunken
Corny; trite, lacking in subtlety
Crazy; absurdly fond, passionately pre-occupied
Creepy; cheap, inferior
Crumby; Iousy
Dopey; stupid or slow, as if doped
Freeze; cold and unfriendly treatment
From hunger; inferior, cheap, ugly, low-brow, disliked, unwanted, hammy
Horny; sexually obsessed
Load; wealthy, carrying a large amount of money
Lousy with (something); well provided with something, usu. money
Murder; very painful
Nuts about; in love with, enthusiastic about
Oiled; drunk
Old; placed before several standard and nonstandard nouns which mean friend, this prefix word suggests easy familiarity, long intimacy, or sympathy
One's ears off; badly
One's head off; many, much, a great deal
Oodles; a large quantity
Panic; something very funny
Phoney; a pompous, punctilious person, a snob, a stuffed shirt
Plastered; drunk
Plugged; shot by a bullet
Royal; thorough(ly), complete(ly), elegant(ly)
Sad; sorry, poor, inferior
Sharp; mentally alert, stylish, attractive
Snotty; rude, arrogant, supercilious
Swanky; stylish, luxurious
Too hot=so hot; too well, wonderfully
Up the creek; out of luck, in a predicament, in trouble, in difficulty

Group Three

Damn it all
Fuck it all
Damn
Give a damn
Darn; euphemism for "damn"
Goddam

Hell=heck (Originally "hell" in Lancashire dialect)
The hell out
For the hell of it
Like hell
As hell

Shoot; euphemism for "shit"

For Chrissake
For Good's sake
I swear to God
God
God damn it
Je-sus Christ
Jesus H. Christ
Jesus

Group Four

Nouns
Backasswards; in reverse order, confusedly
Crap; nonsense, cant, lies, exaggeration, insincerity, mendacity, bull
Feel; the act or instance of touching, exploring or stimulating a girl's or woman's vagina manually
Knockers; well-shaped breasts
Old bag; a prostitute
Tail; the vagina, a girl or woman considered only sexually

Verbs
Cheat; to lie, exaggerate, flatter, or boast
Shoot (the) crap=shoot (the) (old) bull; to talk, gossip, cheat
Screwed up; to cause to fail, to spoil or
ruin, esp. to ruin or fail at something due to blundering or errors of judgment

IV

I showed some examples of repetitional use of the same words in Section II. This repetition is very characteristic in this novel. It is mostly on the word level. But sometimes it also occurs on the phrase level as is seen in the examples below:

*So what I decided to do, I decided I'd take a room in a hotel in New York—some very inexpensive hotel—*(p. 55)
*So what I did was, I went down the hall and woke up Frederick Woodruff, this guy I'd lent my typewriter to.* *(p. 56)

This type of writing naturally results in ungrammatical sentences. The first example should be, “So what I decided to do was to take a room…” And the second one should be, of course, “So what I did was to go down the hall…” In discussing ungrammatical sentences, the most common are those of this type; the subject is followed by a be-verb and a comma and a bare sentence.

“...but the trouble was, I really felt like dancing.” *(p. 74)

Other ungrammatical sentence types are like the ones below:

*And the reason he was elected, the simple obvious reason, was because Ernie wouldn’t let us nominate him.* *(p. 60)
*All that sort of made me look tough.* *(p. 49)
*That sort of scared me a little bit.* *(p. 68)
*but do you hate it, is what I mean?* *(p. 136)
*On account of they’re both so nuts about Charles Dickens and all.* *(p. 144)

But the most frequent ones are the sentences with a root-infinitive as a compliment. These occur frequently in the novel; viz.:

*All I ever saw him do was booze all the time.* *(p. 136)

*All you ever did at Pency was play polo all the time.* *(p. 6)
*All I had to do was change Allie’s name.* *(p. 43)
*The one thing I hate to do is go to bed.* *(p. 71)
*All they did was keep letting Him down.* *(p. 104)

A COMPREHENSIVE DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR explains that in American English “to” in the infinitive when used as a compliment is sometimes omitted. It is, therefore, no longer even a colloquialism but just an American style of English, I should say.

Another typical usage of Salinger’s protagonist is that of a separated infinitive; inserting an adverb or an adverbial phrase between “to” and “the infinitive.” Here is an example: “but he didn’t have guts enough not to at least grunt.” *(p. 29)

A genitive case used for a grouped noun is also very interesting, and colloquial, e.g.:

“The blond I’d been dancing with’s name was Bernice something—Crabs or Krebs.” *(p. 77)

Sometimes cases are mixed up or wrongly used or they do not agree with each other as we seen in these examples:

*You don’t think them fish just die.* *(p. 88)
*You think if they’re intelligent and all, the other person, and have a good sense of humor, that they don’t give a damn...* *(p. 115)

What we call “double negative” has acquired recognition as a colloquial expression in America. Salinger uses it several times in THE CATCHER IN THE RYE:

*Stradlater wasn’t hardly listening.* *(p. 36)
*But hardly didn’t even know I was doing it.* *(p. 42)
*Nobody’s tryna chisel nobody.* *(p. 107)

V

In the previous section I discussed mostly ungrammatical usages in THE CATCHER IN THE RYE. Of course the author’s use
of ungrammatical English is his technique, and surely it is effective, to create the atmosphere of the young people's world. There are two things that Salinger adopted for feasible results of the same sort. One is the "exaggeration method." The other is to write the language as it is pronounced. When the meaning is, "What do you want to make me do—cut my goddam head off?", he expresses it, "Wuddaya wanna make me do—cut my goddam head off?" (p. 34) Some of these contractions are listed in slang dictionaries.

So he had a tie on that you liked a helluva (hell of a) lot. (p. 28)
He is a huge sonuvabitch. (son of a bitch) (p. 106)

SLANG AND EUPHEMISM gives the explanation that a son of a bitch" came into use as slang sometime in the 1900's but that the four words combined became popular in the 1950's; that is, in Salinger's time. Another dictionary says it is one of the most popular, insulting epithets in the USA, and is used by school boys as a jocular euphemism.

In some cases 4 or 5 words are put together like, wuddayacallit (p. 101), for what-do-you-call-it, or wutchamacallit for what-you-may-call-it. (p. 108) But these are rather exceptional. Most of them are simple combinations of two words, e.g., gonna (going to), gotta (got to), can'tcha (can't you), wanna (want to), willya (will you), hellly or hellja (hell are you) and lemme be (let me be) and so on.

"Exaggeration by numbers" is also very notable in this novel, when Holden Caulfield describes his girl friend's facial expression, while talking with something akin to love, he says, "Her mouth sort of went in about fifty directions, her lips and all." (p. 82)

About when he has a fist fight with his roommate Stradlater, he writes, He (Stradlater) kept holding on to my wrists and I kept calling him a sonuvabitch and all, for around ten hours. (p. 48)

Again when speaking of this same roommate, who is a "Year Book kind of handsome guy." (p. 31), and who "spent around half his goddam life in front of the mirror." (p. 37)

It is natural for anybody to emphasize what he wants to say when his emotions are uplifted because of love or anger. But in this novel, the emphasis by number is repeatedly used and has become a part of its style.

For example, in just two pages, I can find four examples:

*It took him about five hours to get ready. (p. 40)
*I dropped about a thousand hints, but I couldn't get him to go. (p. 41)
*He'd already told me about it a hundred times. (p. 41)
*He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. (p. 41)

It has been forty years since THE CATCHER IN THE RYE was written and slang has undergone changes. I made a list of 121 expressions from this book and sent questionnaires to 10 American teenagers. Only four replied; two boys and two girls, aged 18 and 19. However their responses were not very satisfactory. Some questions were not clear to them and some questions were not answered properly.

However from these replies I could get a pretty good idea about which expressions are obsolete now and no longer even understandable to high teens of 1990; also those which are understandable but no longer used.

<table>
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<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of Expressions they do not know</th>
<th>Number they think no longer used</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>67</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>46</td>
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From this tabulation it can be seen that the average number of expressions that are unknown today is 29 out of 121, which is about one fourth. But the average number of the 1950 colloquial or slang expressions they think are no longer in use is 75, which
amounts to approximately 60% of the 121 expressions listed in the questionnaire.

Notes


Other Reference Books