

Pie-eyed prose

Pete Brown is author of *Man Walks into a Pub*

Illustration by Sophie Allsopp



Drunkenness is a rich part of British life, at least linguistically, writes Pete Brown

It's an oft-quoted bit of trivia that Arctic-dwellers have over ninety different words for snow. The stuff covers their world and therefore defines their life and culture. It's not just snow – it's ground, weather, building material, and source of water to boil up for Bovril. It's life and it's death. There are so many terms because it's so many different things. If you were studying the language of the Inuit, the breadth of terms for frozen water and its by-products would give you a pretty clear indication of what is important in their lives.

If you were to undertake a similar study of the English language, specifically the colloquialisms and slang used by the English themselves, you'd form a similarly clear picture of what matters of the inhabitants of the British Isles.

While I was writing a book on the history of beer and pubs in Britain, I collected 250 different words describing the state of drunkenness. I thought this was quite

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impressive, convincingly seeing off the Inuit and their pathetic tally of snow words. But this was only the start. Soon my research led me to Jonathon Green's *Dictionary of Slang* (Cassells, London, 1999). Green has a database containing 2,500 different terms. The fact that the only subjects that came anywhere close to having this richness were shagging, taking a dump, having a wee, the old chap and a lady's anatomy probably tells you all you need to now about the mind of the average Brit.

So why on earth do we need so

many ways to talk about getting hammered?

Well, to be fair, many of the terms in Green's book are historical. It's rare these days you'll find anyone half seas over, banjaxed, or hanging out the bloody flag. And although you'd see a lot of things in an average British town centre at closing time on a Friday night, I doubt you'd see anyone as drunk as a besom, a bowdow or a Gosport fiddler.

But my initial count of two hundred and fifty is a conservative estimate of words that are still in use in Britain today, and that number is rising all the time. If drunkenness is caused by drink, then specific drinks cause specifically different kinds of drunkenness. So we might get lagered, beered up, and increasingly Stella-ed.

But there's more to it than that. The British may not drink more than anyone else, but they certainly feel the need to drink to excess more than most. It's a huge part of the culture. So as with the Inuit, we're not just describing drunkenness; we're defining many different kinds of inebriation, depending on who is doing the drinking, and to what degree.

For instance, the binge drinking lager lout, who is currently causing much concern in the UK, is as identifiable from his language as from his behaviour. This guy obviously gets pissed (as a fart or newt), but he's also likely to tell you that he's b*****, f*****, or even w*****.

At the other extreme, giggly teenage girls may start the evening aiming only to become tipsy, but will probably get squiffy, piffled or tiddly. If they really over do it, they may end up plastered.

So do editors

Lads' mag editors get gattered. Euphemists may fall under the influence or become tired and emotion-

al. Some people in the Jewish community get ferschtinkenered, while Scots get stocious and people from Northern England become wazzed, beggared or blathered. Fat, bitter middle aged men disappointed with life become soused and probably bellicose. If they make a habit of this and start to loose the plot they may become raddled. Whoever you are, there'll be a range of terms to describe the fine gradations between the start (merry), the middle (half-cut) and the end (hog-whimpering) out of the session.

It has been argued (by my cynical mate, Chris) that you could make this list as long as you wanted simply by taking any word at random and sticking an -ed suffix at the end of it. Thus you could claim that last night you got curtained, or you were absolutely tabled, or scruffed, or railed, and you would get away with it; everyone at least in Britain, would know exactly what you meant. Well, I didn't do that – every word in my list is in common usage somewhere in this country – but there is an element of truth to Chris' claim, and this does prove a point in itself.

Drunkenness is such an important part of British culture that it compels us to push our facility with language to new limits. After a serious night out on the beer, existing words just aren't adequate, and we are driven to create new ones in order to express just how bad we were. We are cosmonauts of the comatose, on a life-long mission to seek out and explore new limits of oblivion.

Britain is, after all, a nation of famous wordsmiths – even Shakespeare got schwalled – although maybe that's not the precise word he used to describe it. In our cups, we see ourselves as carrying on a long and noble tradition. Our pie-eyed prose is something to be proud of.