

# CARNIVAL SPEECH: MAKING THE JUMP

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If one day you decide to forsake conventional life and run away with a carnival, one of the first things you'll notice is that you don't understand a lot of what is being said. Often persons just hired on to a carnival crew aren't even called by name until they have made the jump, or travelled to a new location, at least once. In a subculture with such transient population, newcomers are mere first o' May, wing nuts or often simply green help.

It takes a little persistence to earn the title of carnny, as carnival workers call themselves. And as for understanding the curious hodgepodge of slang, argot and cant which comprise the distinct carnival speech, well, the first aim of carnies is not always to be understood.

Ask about a job and the reply may be "no holes on this crew for a real agent, we don't put up any flats or alibis, but you could work a hanky-pank if you don't mind getting dinged bad for plush." You've basically been told there are no positions for experienced, specialized carnival game operators, but there might be something for you if you don't mind paying an inflated price for the stuffed animals you would use as prizes. (Often one must buy the prize stock from an employer beforehand.)

It is in large part the uniqueness of carnival speech which allows a subculture with rapid turnover and permeable boundaries to maintain its distinctive character and deviant status for which it is known, particularly as carnival reform continues to minimize overtly illegal aspects of carnival game operations. Moving from incomprehension to understanding and then to using carnny talk is quintessential to the process of becoming a carnny.

Much argot used by carnies in the midwestern and southern United States is not exclusive to carnivals. Some terms in usage are associated with criminals and convicts, like to blow and to screw, both ways of "escaping" with unsettled debts or stolen money. Similarly is to crack, which can be used to reveal how much cash

one brought in, as if carnival proceeds themselves were stolen money. Such occurrences indicate crossover between the two subcultures, which carnies themselves will verify. Other terms like heat score to describe a lucky run, or sting for a furtive con, derive from professional gambling and result from the integration of professional gamblers into the carnival.

Other borrowed terms result not so much from mobility between subcultures as from the collective process by which carnies create identity, both positive and negative. Carnies who can bring in lots of money are agents, while those who are passive and unproductive are clerks. Jointies, who work games, have an ongoing rivalry with the ride jocks who run the rides. Still, both have to watch out for a roadie hired to spy on employees by a hard driving coon dog employer.

Whether or not terms originate inside the carnival or are adopted from without, however, argot used consistently over time acquires carnival-specific meaning and connotation. Unlike the breaking of ice at a mainstream cocktail party, the carny who asks "Break the ice yet?" wants to know if the first dollar of the day has yet been reeled in. When carnies flash joints, they aren't showing someone a marijuana cigarette, they are decorating their game-booth. Likewise, cattle rustling has nothing to do with bovines, a g-note is only metaphorically musical, hopscotch in no way involves chalk and skinned knees, and a possum belly would not be found on the underside of a marsupial.

The specific nature of carnival language applies not only to single terms, but to the contextual way language is used. Food concessionaires, for instance, give other carnival workers a cut rate on purchases. To request a discount, however, is like insulting the vendor's mother. Simply say "with it" when making the purchase, and an up-to-twenty-percent discount can be had. (Unlike a decade earlier, with it is now used by carnies in their first season.)

Aside from the pragmatic role jargon plays in facilitating communication in any business, carnival argot acts as a powerful mechanism by which carnies define boundaries. One demarcation to be drawn is between carnies and non-carnies: variously marks, townies or straight johns. Perhaps even more determinative in the creation of carnival speech, however, is the distinction carnies draw among themselves. This is, after all, the way seniority translates into power and prestige, the way an H.P.O. (High Powered Operator) is distinguished from a mere first o' May (May 1 traditionally marks the opening of carnival season, and thus the neophyte's debut). Fluency in specialized language is perhaps the most effective way of articulating insider status to persons just entering the carnival milieu: linguistic indoctrination fuels the motor of socialization and enculturation into carnival norms and values.

The best example of how the seasoned carny/new carny delineation is made perhaps lies in the use of a carnival pig-Latin called Czarny, also known as Z-Latin or simply Carny. A carny questioned

about the reasons for the use of Czarny, which rearranges English to make it unintelligible to the unenlightened ear, might give the following example. What if a coworker were trying to work strong, to operate a gaff, or rigged game, on a police official posing as a mark, or someone otherwise not to be toyed with? Another carny could voice an audible warning in Czarny that would not be understood by the outsider. In other words, carnies explain Czarny as a cant, or specialized slang, used by a criminal group to make meanings indiscernible to outsiders.

Reported styles of speaking Czarny differ; the method of scrambling English that I learned is simpler than previously documented methods. If, for example, the aforementioned co-worker desires to say "Careful, Sarah, I think the guy's a narc," in Czarny it would come out "Ca-zareful, Sa-zarah, lz-I thi-zink thi-zis gu-zuy's aza-na-zarc." Essentially, a Z-sound is inserted after the first consonant, and if the word begins with a vowel, before the vowel sound, in the first syllable only. Other reports involve altering every syllable in this way, some adding extra vowel sounds every syllable (for example, game becomes "gee-a-zame," ask becomes "ee-a-zask," and carnival becomes "kee-a-zar nee-a-zuh vee-a-zul"). A comparative study needs to be undertaken before determining whether this simplification indicates an overall trend in carnivals nationwide since the last observation more than ten years ago.

A persuasive reason that it might is that I never heard Czarny used as a means of prohibiting outsiders from understanding illicit information. Rather, I heard it posed as a test by well-integrated carnies to newer carnies: "Can you speak Czarny? Are you a real carny?" Moreover, Czarny is not much used by persons in positions of real authority, but rather by persons vying to improve reputation and status.

If the present-day importance of speaking Czarny is more as a rite of passage for entrants than as a concealment of criminal activity, the simpler version I learned would suffice. It can be argued that there is less need for a cant in the criminal sense than for a boundary-defining linguistic code. As previously mentioned, illicit elements in carnival operations have been gradually reduced, beginning with the Sunday school reform movement in the 1950s. Simultaneously, as the business itself has expanded, it has been vexed by the problem of how to define group boundaries and identity amidst high turnover and the absence of a majority of "natives"; most carnies are not born into the business, but are "made." Hence, the significance of carnival cant may become one of defining identity instead of masking trickery.

Like the varying use of Czarny, carnival argot is not employed uniformly by all members of the carnival industry. Owners of carnivals are less likely to use terms which most typify carnival argot. Neither the operator I worked for nor anyone in his family, who together comprise a formidable carnival dynasty, would condescend to call a customer a mark, while the term commonly occurs among workers in other carnival strata.

It is not difficult to see why owners choose to propagate a more

respectable, less deviant image of the carnival. In short, it pays: most owners today feel that the Santa Claus approach, where prizes are given away regularly, is more profitable than the corrupt flat-store and alibi games of the past.

This introduction to the glossary of carnival terms which follows is offered as a step toward explaining why carnival workers, as opposed to owners, have more invested in a distinct speech mode. CARNY talk distinguishes carnies from a culture which they have chosen to reject, often as a result of first being cast out. If carnies have their own tongue, rest assured it is being vehemently thrust in the face of some mark.

### GLOSSARY

The glossary compiled here, while attentive to argot used in the various carnival segments, concentrates on usage among jointies (those that operate games of chance and skill). Fieldwork focused on this segment as best typifying deviant, semi-legal subcultural aspects of carnies as a whole. I maintain that, because of the type of work jointies do multiply rewards skills in manipulating and stimulating, that most innovations and incorporations in argot are produced among gameworkers. I am indebted to Don Watkins for the recording and definition of many of the terms below.

**ABORTION** Trailer which has been remodelled to fulfill a purpose different from that of the original frame.

**AGENT** A carny operating a joint and capable of bringing in a passable amount of money (indicates adventurous, spy-like connotations of carnival game workers, deriving from semi-legal nature of the outdoor entertainment business). Also a **QUALIFIED AGENT** (see also H.P.A.)

**ALIBI** Fabricated excuse offered to **MARKS** for why they haven't won a game, i.e. "Nope, you stepped over the line. I said you have to stay behind the line," at a baseball pitch, or "Sorry, I said no backstops" at a basketball throw.

**ALIBI JOINT** A game conducive to the employment of **ALIBIs**, where odds can be therefore completely controlled by the **AGENT**.

**ALIBI AGENT** A **CARNY** who specializes in **ALIBIs** (second in the hierarchy of **AGENTS** in terms of manipulative skills, illegality).

**B.R.** Bank roll. Sometimes used in place of **buttocks**, as in "She's a pain in the B.R."

**BLANK** A **SPOT** where no money is made for reasons of rain, poor attendance or individual poor performance.

**BLOW** To leave the carnival, to escape, usually under such inauspicious conditions as severe indebtedness.

**BLOW A TIP** To lose the interest and the presence of a crowd of customers; to lose the customers (see also **TIP**).

**BREAK THE ICE** To make the first money of the day.

**BUST** Big money, as in "Saturday is always **BUST** day," or "that's a **BUST**-up spot."

**CALL** The appointed time for the fair to open for the day or night, as in "Have your awnings up at **CALL**."

**CALL THEM IN** To get people to play the game; to call them over.

- CARNY 1) A person who works for a carnival; not used to refer to the carnival itself. 2) A JOINTIE as opposed to the rest of the carnival people, who are show-people.
- CATTLE RUSTLING The act of OVERCALLING or beckoning to customers beyond the imaginary lines extending outward from the edge of a JOINT.
- CHUMP CHANGE Leftover tokens in an arcade that players want converted back to money -- something that carnies will not do.
- CIRCUS JUMP To close a show at one location, move overnight, and set up to open elsewhere the following day (standard for circuses, less common for carnivals).
- CLERK A pejorative term for a passive AGENT. The implication is "why not just work a STRAIGHT JOHN job?"
- COON (or COON'S ASS) An employer who is considered too hard-driving or who does not treat his people well.
- CRACK To reveal something, tattle, spill the beans, as in "Don't CRACK how much you grossed to the other crews."
- CZARNY 1) A way of speaking, similar to pig-Latin, where a Z-sound is inserted after each consonant (also called Z-Latin). 2) An alternative name for a CARNY.
- D.Q.'D Disqualified; a CARNY who is not allowed to work in a region or in the business as a whole. This is either done by the government or, more often and effectively, by those within the business itself.
- DEUCE A twenty-dollar bill.
- DING To charge a JOINTIE for an unanticipated operating expense, or to charge more than was anticipated, as in "And then they DING me for the electricity, too!"
- DONNIKER A bathroom, or a person tending the bathroom.
- DOUBLE A twenty-dollar bill.
- DROP THE GATE To make admission to the carnival free, as in "Tuesday we're gonna DROP THE GATE for the school kiddies."
- FAIRIES Persons working in food concessions or other aspects of a fair not strictly tied to the carnival's rides, games and sideshows.
- FIRST O' MAY One who is with the carnival for the first season, so named because the carnival season traditionally starts in May.
- FIN A five-dollar bill.
- FLASH 1) The stock (stuffed animals, T-shirts, posters, etc.) that is displayed to decorate a joint and catch attention. 2) -CLOTH, a fabric backdrop. 3) To hang stock in order to make a game look appealing, as in "to FLASH a JOINT."
- FLAT (or FLAT JOINT) A JOINT where the AGENT has total control over winning or losing, where a prize may never be awarded unless the AGENT chooses to do so. In the game Razzle, for example, the AGENT uses dice which can be interpreted to add up to a winning number or a losing number at the discretion of the AGENT.
- FORTY-MILER A CARNY who only works in a limited radius around his home, or a CARNY who is not associated with a particular show but who moves around (see also HOPSCOTCHER).
- FREE ACT An act which draws more spectators than players, such as a Bozo game.
- G-TOP A gambling tent for show people only.

- G-MAN A person who uses threatening tactics, coercion and sometimes force to get money from workers in an operation that is run like an organized crime ring. Sometimes this refers to Mafia involvement in the carnival business.
- G-NOTE A thousand dollars.
- GAFF A rig in a game, or the rigged game itself.
- GIVEAWAY A JOINT where a prize is won every time or almost every time.
- GREEN New, novice, as in "All we've got on this crew is GREEN help."
- HANKYPANK A straightforward game where prizes are often won, many of which are SLUM.
- HEAT SCORE A lucky run; a roll. Used with the preposition on, as in "winning it on a HEAT SCORE."
- H.O.ING Holding out, not turning in all the money one brings in.
- H.P.A. (or H.P.O.) A high-powered AGENT or operator; one who is capable of bringing in big money, who is or conceives himself to be of exceptional worth to an employer.
- HOLE A job, and open position, as in "Got any HOLES open on this crew?"
- HOLLYWOOD A fashionable or slick dresser.
- HOPSCOTCHER A CARNY who is not hooked on with a particular show; one who runs an independent operation or who is a free contractor.
- JOINT A concession, usually meaning a game. If a food concession is meant, it will usually be called a food JOINT or a grab JOINT.
- JOINTIE A CARNY who operates a game.
- MARK The carnival attendee.
- NATURAL A MARK who plays a game with no bidding from the AGENT.
- NIGGER-RIG To do a makeshift repair job.
- OVERCALLING Addressing MARKs who are outside of the imaginary lines of demarcation that extend from the end of one's JOINT out into the midway.
- P.O. JOINT A JOINT which is played to win money; a percentage JOINT.
- PATCH The person whose job it is to contend with "heat" from police or townspeople. A PATCH usually tips or pays off local officials so that JOINTs have the freedom to work STRONG.
- PENCIL To readjust figures or add expenses when figuring finances so that the JOINTIE is paid less than expected.
- PIG IRON Those working manual labor on the rides, especially with assembling and dismantling. Also a verb for this kind of work, as in "They don't pay me enough to PIG IRON."
- PINK ROBBER (also PUNK ROBBER) A game for small children.
- PLUSH A stuffed toy, considered a good prize.
- POSSUM BELLY The storage compartments underneath the trailer of a semi.
- POSSUM BELLY QUEEN A promiscuous female CARNY, so named because she would presumably sleep in a makeshift place such as a POSSUM BELLY.
- RAG (or RAG IN THE BAG) A stuffed toy more inexpensive than PLUSH.
- RIDE JOCK A worker on a ride, so named because of the heavily physical nature of the work, requiring little thought.
- RIDE THE MERRY-GO-ROUND 1) To have sexual intercourse. 2) To get married, carnival style.
- ROADIE Someone hired by the concessionaire to watch his JOINTs and his employees. Often, those working the JOINTs do not know the ROADIE

exists. The ROADIE may work for several operations at the same time.

ROUGHIE Someone hired specifically to perform the physical labor of setting up, tearing down, and the raising of the awnings at the beginning of the day.

SANTA CLAUS An AGENT who gives away too much stock for his game to be profitable.

SAWBACK The ten-dollar daily draw, or advance, on pay.

S.O.P. Standard operating procedure.

SCREW To steal money or other valuables from the show and leave.

SLOUGH To disassemble the carnival, to TEAR DOWN.

SLUM Cheap prizes, given away in HANKYPANK or GIVEAWAY JOINTs.

SPOT The place where a carnival plays.

SQUARE When finances are such that no one owes anybody money, as in "We're SQUARE now."

STANDBY The time that awnings must go up at the beginning of the day, usually a half-hour before CALL. One cannot BREAK THE ICE, however, until CALL.

STILL DATE A carnival that does not play with an accompanying rodeo or fair, usually less profitable.

STICK A CARNY who poses as a MARK to generate interest in a game. This could refer to someone who "wins" at a FLAT JOINT so that the impossible game seems possible, or simply to a CARNY throwing a ball at the game of a friend so that the game appears active.

STRAIGHT JOHN The average person who works the average blue-collar job, where he punches in and out on a time clock.

STRONG Deceptive. To work STRONG means to pull a scam on the MARKs, to sucker them. A FLAT or an ALIBI is a STRONG JOINT.

STUNG Stolen from; ripped off.

SUNDAY A hard punch which takes one by surprise.

SUNDAY SCHOOL A clean operation. In reference to games it means all HANKYPANK; to the carnival at large it means no strip acts or geek shows.

TEAR DOWN To disassemble the carnival, to SLOUGH.

TIP A crowd of players at a JOINT. One either "holds a TIP" or one "blows a TIP."

WALL TO WALL When one showman has control over booking all the space at a particular spot.

WALK-IN A JOINT which has its own appeal; MARKs will play whether or not the AGENT calls them in.

WHITE Honest, generous, as in "Be WHITE about it and give us some."

WING NUT An inexperienced or bumbling CARNY.

WITH IT 1) Under the employ of the carnival. 2) Something one CARNY says to another when a CARNY in a joint tries to get the stroller to play (used to save the working CARNY the energy).

WRANG 1) A fight. 2) To fight.

X 1) The exclusive right to operate a certain game or food JOINT, as in "Mama Dell's got the X on the Mouse game at that spot." 2) A verb referring to operating rights, as in "We got X'd out in Elkhorn and didn't make anything the whole SPOT."

YARD A hundred dollars.