

**Howard N. Rose's *Thesaurus of Slang* (1934)
Its purpose, structure, contents, reliability, and sources***

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1. Introduction

In 1934, *A Thesaurus of Slang* appeared, “compiled and arranged” by Howard N. Rose.¹ It was soon reviewed in a number of prominent publications, and most of its reviewers found it wanting in various respects. Kemp Malone (1889–1971), the eminent medievalist, described the *Thesaurus* as “so poor a job that a detailed review in this journal [*American Literature*] seems needless” (Malone 1935: 472). It was described as “a boon to fiction writers” in the popular press (Jordan-Smith 1934: A7), however. The *Thesaurus* was reprinted in 1972, and it is still occasionally used for reference (see, for example, Nemser 2002). As time passes, Rose’s *Thesaurus* is likely to attain, at least among unwary users, an air of respectability that many contemporaries were not willing to accord to it. This paper is a re-examination of the *Thesaurus of Slang*: of its purpose, structure, contents, reliability, and sources.

2. Background

The earliest glossary of English cant, published in 1567 in Thomas Harman’s (fl.1547–1567) *Caveat*, was arranged by meaning, according to the conventions adopted in contemporary terminological glossaries (see Hüllen 2006 [1999]: 147). This list was reworked into an alphabetical format by later writers, which remained in circulation until Richard Head (c.1637–c.1686) presented an English-cant version alongside the cant-English list in his *Canting Academy* in 1673. The reverse dictionary of cant was also alphabetically arranged, and it was appended to a variety of miscellaneous works until the middle of the 18th century (see Coleman 2004a: 22-25, 55-75, 158-161, 169-173). The

* I’d like to thank several anonymous referees for their useful comments on earlier versions of the paper.

¹ I have been unable to confirm any biographical information about Rose. There is a minor American novelist of the same name, but he was not born until 1922, which would have made him a very precocious twelve-year old when the *Thesaurus* appeared. Another Howard N. Rose published a book about allergies together with Jack Arthur Rudolph in 1946, raising the tantalizing possibility that Rose shared Roget’s profession as a doctor.

18th and 19th centuries saw the production of numerous minor glossaries of cant and slang, several of which adopted a semantic or semi-semantic ordering system (Coleman 2004b: 203-7, 225-228) or were alphabetized by the standard English term (Coleman 2004b: 239-241). Although some late 19th and early 20th century dictionaries, notably John S. Farmer (1854–1916) & William E. Henley's (1849–1903) *Slang and its Analogues*, use extensive cross-referencing to provide a semantic network within their alphabetical dictionaries, no lexicographer before Rose had attempted to produce a fully-fledged thesaurus of slang. There were to be several later attempts.

3. *The purpose of Rose's Thesaurus*

In the introduction, Rose refers to himself as a writer and explains that he has produced the *Thesaurus* as an aid to fellow-writers:

The immediate purpose of this Thesaurus is to bring to the writer a collection of terms, phrases, and expressions that characterize and typify the every-day language of the various social divisions which have been treated throughout the extent of its pages. (Rose 1934: vii)

He estimates that the subjects covered in his *Thesaurus* account for fifty per cent of all fiction, and further suggests that the *Thesaurus* might even provide a stimulus to the writer's imagination, with the vocabulary within it suggesting situations and even entire plots.

Rose provides detailed guidance on 'How to Use the Thesaurus'. He advises the aspiring writer to read through the relevant section before committing pen to paper, to gain a "working idea" of the terms and phrases available then, later on (p. viii):

[w]hen preparing to write a story, the writer should turn to the proper section of the Thesaurus and look through it for any number of terms which he can foresee will fit into his story. These should be written on paper and kept handy during the preparation of the first draft.

Rose pictures the author hunting for an appropriate term, turning to his well-thumbed copy of the *Thesaurus* and immediately locating "the characteristic expressions which consummate his need" (p. viii). This promise of instant lexical fulfilment suggests that writing convincing and lively fiction requires no background knowledge and little originality. The idea was not new. When Rose's *Thesaurus* appeared, at least two American magazines (*Writer's Digest* and *The Editor*) were already providing aspiring authors with glossaries of slang and specialized terms with which to season their stories and scripts. This popular interest in writing as a profession at this time was probably fuelled, in part, by the lure of fame and fortune in Hollywood, by the limited opportunities available to educated women, and by the difficulty of earning a living by traditional means during the Depression.

4. *The structure of Rose's Thesaurus*

The macro-structure of Rose's *Thesaurus* can only be understood with reference to his intentions for its use. It is not a thesaurus in any conventional sense (see Hüllen 2006

[1999]: 13): it is ordered not by meaning, but by context. There are fourteen sections, arranged alphabetically, beginning:

- I. AVIATION
- II. COLLEGE
 - a.) general campus expressions
 - [there is no subsection b)]
- III. DETECTIVE
 - a.) underworld
 - b.) prison
 - c.) English underworld

Within this contextually-based macrostructure, are 24 separate synonym dictionaries, each alphabetized by the standard English definition or synonym (see Hüllen 2005, chap. 6). Section IV “Hobo”, for instance, begins:

Beg (v phr.): *to hit up; work the stem.*

Begging Hobo (n): *a plainer; moocher; boodler; (phr.): stew bum; home guard.*

Bums (n phr.): *mush fakers; qualley workers.*

Bum Who Waits Around a Saloon for a Free Drink (n): *a wallflower.*

Criminally-Inclined Hobo (n): *a crip-faker; throw-out; (these hoboese play upon public sympathy).*

First Grade Hobo (n): *a tramp.*

Hobo (n.): *a jungler; bindle stiff; willie; wob; wobbly; bo; (phr.): knight of the road.*

Other entries are provided for “Second Grade Hobo”, “Third Grade Hobo”, and “Young Hobo”, among others. Rose thus indicates that there was a hierarchy among tramps and hoboese, but does not consistently observe it himself. The only term listed under “Second Grade Hobo” is *bum*, suggesting that the heading could also have included terms listed under “Bums”, and cited above. As Kuethe (1905–1973) commented (1935:143): “Unfortunately it is very much more difficult to index slang terms by their meanings than under the terms themselves and Mr. Rose has not met this situation with much dexterity.” It appears that Rose was aware of his limitations, because he emphasized in the introduction that it is not always easy to find a specific term: “In seeking for a certain term try to be as logical as possible: *look for it under the most relevant wording of its meaning or significance*” (Rose 1934: viii; his italics). Definitions that might be hard to find in an alphabetical list include:

Accepted Well by an Audience (v phr.): *to go over*. [XIIa: Broadway and the Stage]
Expression “By God” (exp.): *I God*. [V: Lumberjack]
Man Who Reads Galley Proofs to Be Perfected (n): *a proof-reader*. [VII: Newspaper Slang]
When a Pawnbroker Sends for the Police (v phr.): *to get the blue ink*. [IIIc: English Underworld]

4.1 *Other weaknesses in the metalanguage*

Rose’s linguistic expertise did not match his ambitions. He frequently failed to match the grammatical function of his definition and headword:

Angry (prep. phr.): *on the muscle*. [IIIa: Underworld]
Conceited (adj. phr.): *to be bigger than Billy Bedam; to be some punkins; bigger than Cuffy*; (v. phr.): *to feel one’s oats; to cut a wide swath*. [VI: New England]
Bucking Style (adj.): *fence-row*. [XIII: Western]

Rose’s grammatical labelling of phrases is particularly insecure:

Anything Enjoyed (adj. phr.): *hot stuff*. [IIa: General Campus Expressions]
Electrocuted (v): *to be burned*; (phr.): *to take the electric cure; to ride old smokey*. [IIIb: Detective Slang]
Boxing the Air to Limber Up (v phr.): *shadow boxing*. [XIb: Boxing]

— and he is inconsistent both in his use of hyphens and in his analysis of hyphenated words:

Dress Up in One’s Best (v phr.): *to doll up*. [IIa: General Campus Expressions]
Fly Out to the Infield (v): *to pop-up*. [XIa: Baseball]
Bill Posters Who Spit Tacks to Magnetic Hammers (n phr.): *tack-spitters*. [XIIc: Circus and Carnival]
One Who Continually Complains (n): *a belly-acher*. [XIV: War]

Fortunately, Rose provides other indications of grammatical function, though only for the first term listed under each definition:

Cable-Tool Engine (n phr.): *a long tail; long-tailed engine; mail pouch*. [VIII: Oilfield]
Make Fast Time (v phr.): *to beat ’er on the back; drop ’er down the corner*. [IX: Railroad]

In addition, some definitions are not helpful to a user lacking specialist knowledge of the context:

Intimate Form of Direct Address (n): *Maid*. [IX: Sea-Fishing]
Ends (n): *the wings*. [XIc: Football]
Have a Stunt Man Double for the Actor (v phr.): *to double a stunt man*. [XIIb: Cinema]

5. *The coverage of Rose's Thesaurus*

Because Rose was compiling a reference work for the use of writers attempting to insert authentic local colour into works of fiction, he did not set out to list all current slang terms. Assuming that the users of his dictionary were fluent speakers of American slang, he decided that “many of the more familiar terms and phrases [should be] purposely omitted” (1934: vii). This decision would, of course, cause problems for anyone other than Rose’s anticipated users employing the *Thesaurus* for anything other than its anticipated purpose. It would certainly not be a useful reference for a twenty-first century linguist wishing to study 1930s American slang, since the most common terms are, by design, not there.

6. *The reliability of Rose's Thesaurus*

There are a number of ways of assessing the reliability of Rose’s *Thesaurus*. One is to consider the reliability of his sources, another is to compare it with a modern historical dictionary, and a third is to compare his coverage of slang terms with a contemporary authority.

6.1 *Rose's use of his sources*

Kueth (1935:144) comments that “A number of the entries given by Rose closely resemble material in articles published elsewhere, but no credit is given”. He is certainly correct in observing Rose’s unoriginality, but mistaken in the imputation of plagiarism. Rose clearly acknowledged his sources, both by name and by publication. He acknowledged particularly that *American Speech* “furnished a wealth of valuable material” (Rose 1934:v).

Section I “Aviation” includes 49 definitions for 61 terms. Of these, 25 (41%) are from an article in *American Speech* by Paul Beath (1905–?1982). Where Beath (1930a) has:

ace, n. Originally a pilot who has brought down five enemy planes. Now used for any famous or expert pilot.

conk, v. An involuntary stopping of the motor.

power, v. To equip a plane with a motor. “He powered his Ryan with an OX5.”

— Rose lists:

Pilot Who Has Brought Down Five or More Enemy Planes (n): *an ace*.

Involuntary Stopping of the Motor (v): *to conk*.

Equip a Plane with a Motor (v): *to power*; *ex: The plane is powered with an OX15* [sic].

From Beath’s list, Rose excludes only *solo* “to fly solo” (though he includes *solo flight* “flying alone”) and *gun the motor* “to fly fast”. Most of the entries not from Beath’s list are more technical in nature (e.g., *fusilage* [sic], *starboard*, *torque*, *wake*) and are, presumably, from another source. Similar dependencies can be identified for many of Rose’s other sections.

6.2 *The reliability of Rose's sources*

As has already been established, *American Speech* furnished many of the terms and definitions included in Rose's *Thesaurus*. Some of these were based on original research performed to the scholarly standards of the time.² However, other glossaries in *American Speech* at this time came from decidedly dubious sources. Several articles reprinted material extracted from various other publications without further investigation of their reliability. For example, R.S. (1928) re-published in *American Speech* a list of American slang issued to London theatre audiences; Conkle (1899–1994) (1928) extracted his list of circus slang from a popular play; and Beath's list of criminal language (1930b) was constructed from an article in the *Saturday Evening Post*. It may be an indication of Rose's scrupulousness that he does not use any of these articles in his thesaurus. Many *American Speech* glossaries of this period were presented without any explanation of their origins and methodology at all. Even the best include only a brief statement that "I collected these terms during my time in college/the circus/prison".

6.3 *Rose, the Historical Dictionary of American Slang and the OED*

Having established that Rose's *Thesaurus* is only as good as its sources, and that some of those sources are not entirely dependable, I will now turn to more reliable reference works to determine the reliability of Rose's material. Of Rose's "Aviation" terms, 32 fall within the alphabetical range covered by Lighter's dictionary (1994, 1997). Only nine of these (28%) are listed by Lighter (b.1948), all from Beath's aviators' glossary and all clearly current at the time that Rose was compiling his lists. Reference to the *OED*, which cites Rose's *Thesaurus* only five times, explains why Lighter lists so few of Rose's entries: eighteen entries (30% of Rose's list) appear to have been in general use, seventeen (28%) are technical terms in aeronautics, and twelve (20%) are not listed because they are phrases that can be understood by reference to the terms included within them. The *OED* marks only two of Rose's terms as "slang" (*joystick* "control lever" and *crate* "aeroplane") and one as colloquial (*conk* "to fail"). Rose's failure to distinguish between different registers was one of Kuethe's many criticisms:

Not only because of the paucity of entries, but also for other reasons, it is doubtful if this book will be of any value to philologists or authors. There seems to be very little contribution to the study of slang. There are, however, a great many entries which are not slang at all, but range from colloquial expressions to technical terms. (Kuethe 1935:143)

The failure to distinguish between registers can be traced back to Rose's sources, many of them in the same journal that published this damning review. To be charitable, Rose may have been using *slang* in a wider, though by this stage dated, sense: "The

² See Poston (1964), Kratz (1964) and Banchemo & Flinn (1967) for a discussion of college slang that preceded and certainly contributed to the disappearance of such glossaries from the pages of *American Speech*.

special vocabulary or phraseology of a particular calling or profession; the cant or jargon of a certain class or period” (OED *slang*, n³ 1b). It is also important to bear Rose’s target audience in mind: a writer wishing to produce a short story set among aeronauts, but knowing nothing about them, would be frustrated to find that Rose provided only slang terms and that the technical vocabulary had to be sought elsewhere.

6.4 *Rose and Weseen*

In the same year that Rose’s dictionary appeared, Maurice Weseen (1890–1941) published his *Dictionary of American Slang*. Its macro-structure is similar to Rose’s, in that Weseen divided his word-list into 21 sections, including some that correspond exactly to sections in Rose’s *Thesaurus*, including “Hoboes’ and Tramps’ Slang”, “Aviators’ Slang”, and “College Slang”. Some of Weseen’s sections focus on areas of meaning rather than context, such as “Drinking Slang”, “Eating Slang”, and “Money Slang”. Within each section, Weseen provided a conventional slang dictionary, alphabetized by the slang term. Kuethe, whose critical comments on Rose I have quoted above, also reviewed Weseen’s dictionary, describing it as “perhaps the most inclusive dictionary since Farmer and Henley” (Kuethe 1936: 293). A review by Harold Bentley (1899–1980) in *American Speech* the previous year had also commented on Weseen’s inclusiveness, describing his *Dictionary* as “unquestionably the most complete compilation of American slang words and phrases that has ever appeared in print in a single volume” (1935: 64). Section 9 “Aviators’ Slang” contains 86 headwords, including:

Ace—An aviator who has destroyed five or more enemy aeroplanes; a superior aviator.

Conk—An involuntary stopping of a motor.

Power—To equip a plane with a motor.

As is evident, Weseen used some of the same sources as Rose, and in much the same way, though he did not acknowledge them at all. Twenty-five of Weseen’s aviators’ terms (29%) are from Beath’s glossary (1930a). Clearly, although Weseen did provide more material than Rose, the reliability of both of these dictionaries can only be assessed by reference to their sources. Weseen used all three of the dubious *American Speech* glossaries avoided by Rose and discussed in section 6.2. That Weseen received more positive reviews than Rose may have owed more to Weseen’s academic status, as a professor at the University of Nebraska, than to any material difference in the quality of their work.

7. *Conclusions*

Rose’s *Thesaurus of Slang* is a disappointing work for anyone looking for a thesaurus of slang: it is not a thesaurus and the words listed are by no means all slang. However, although he chose to give it a misleading title, Rose was very clear about the use he

foresaw for his work and entirely straightforward about his methodology. Had he given it the title *Glossaries of Specialized, Colloquial, and Slang Terms for Lazy and Ignorant Writers of Not Very Good Fiction*, we could have praised Rose's honesty, but his sales would undoubtedly have suffered. Contemporary reviewers tended to praise Weseen's work above Rose's, but for its size rather than for any noticeable difference in quality. In other words, what mattered was not so much that Rose's content was unreliable but rather that there was not enough of it. Perhaps reviewers were also punishing him for his rather loose application of the term 'thesaurus'.³

The title is one of the reasons why Rose's work should be of interest to us now. It demonstrates the appeal of the word "thesaurus", which clearly implied an exhaustive reference work serving as a practical tool for writers:

Every workman in the exercise of his art should be provided with proper instruments [...] It is therefore essential to [the writer's] success that he be provided with a copious vocabulary ... (Hüllen 2005: 328, quoting Roget's 'Introduction')

Rose's *Thesaurus* is also an expression of the sense that American English was growing to such an extent that no single individual could be expected to know it all. It is a statement of national pride, not only in standard, but also in non-standard American English. It demonstrates that there was by this time a sense that slang was both more compelling and more vivid than the standard form.

When Roget constructed his *Thesaurus*, he envisaged that it might enhance learning and:

bring about a golden age of union and harmony among the several nations and races of mankind ... [by removing] that barrier to the interchange of thought and mutual good understanding between man and man, which is now interposed by the diversity of their respective languages (Hüllen 2005: 328-329, quoting Roget's 'Introduction')

Rose provides an insight into a less lofty view of thesauruses: that they could serve as a substitute for specialized knowledge and as an alternative to understanding.

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³ This looser meaning "A 'treasury' or 'storehouse' of knowledge, as a dictionary, encyclopaedia, or the like" is cited by the *OED* between 1840 and 1910.

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SUMMARY

This paper is a re-examination of Rose's *Thesaurus of Slang* (1934): of its purpose, structure, contents, reliability, and sources. Contemporary reviewers were largely unimpressed, and their criticisms are also considered. Despite its undoubtedly poor quality, Rose's work provides some interesting insights into attitudes towards American English, the power of the word "thesaurus", and the partiality of the reviewing process.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article porte un nouveau regard sur l'ouvrage de Howard N. Rose, *Thesaurus of Slang* (1934): son but, sa structure, son contenu, sa fiabilité et ses sources. Les commentateurs de l'époque n'ont guère dit de bien sur cet ouvrage, et l'on prend ici en considération leurs critiques. Malgré sa qualité manifestement piètre, l'ouvrage de Rose fournit d'intéressantes indications en ce qui concerne les attitudes envers l'anglais

américain, le prestige du mot 'Thesaurus', et le manque d'impartialité des comptes-rendus et des activités connexes à l'époque.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Beitrag untersucht (erneut) den Thesaurus of Slang (1934) von Howard N. Rose hinsichtlich Zielsetzung, Aufbau, Inhalt, Verlässlichkeit und hinsichtlich seiner Quellen. Zeitgenössische Kritiker waren wenig beeindruckt von dem Werk. Trotzdem werden die von ihnen vorgebrachten kritischen Gesichtspunkte hier auch in Betracht gezogen. Wenn auch von bescheidener Qualität, bietet das Werk einige interessante Einblicke in die zeitgenössische Einschätzung des amerikanischen Englisch, in den Bedeutungsumfang des Wortes Thesaurus und die Besonderheiten des Rezensionsverfahrens.

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Writers often turn to a thesaurus to diversify their vocabulary and add nuance to their prose. But looking up synonyms and antonyms in a thesaurus can help anyone—writer or not—find the most vivid, incisive words to communicate thoughts and ideas. Most logophiles consider the thesaurus to be a treasure trove of diction, but the word thesaurus really does mean "treasure." It derives from the Greek word *thēsauros*, which means a storehouse of precious items, or a treasure. 2. The plural of thesaurus is thesauruses or thesauri. iStock. How do you refer to more than one octopus? People say everything from octopuses to octopi to octopodes. Similarly, many people have trouble figuring out the correct plural form of the word thesaurus. A thesaurus (plural thesauri or thesauruses) or synonym dictionary is a reference work for finding synonyms and sometimes antonyms of words. They are often used by writers to help find the best word to express an idea: Synonym dictionaries have a long history. The word 'thesaurus' was used in 1852 by Peter Mark Roget for his Roget's Thesaurus. While some thesauri, such as Roget's Thesaurus, group words in a hierarchical taxonomy of concepts, others are organized alphabetically or in some other way.