

How to Sound Like the Bee's Knees: A Dictionary of 1920s Slang

Prohibition be damned, *words* were just better in the 1920s. If you don't request extra *foot juice* tonight at that dive bar where you order the subpar pinot grigio, you are doing something wrong.

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Prohibition be damned, *words* were just better in the 1920s. There's a fascinating piece today in the *New York Times* from [Edward Rothstein](#) about the new prohibition exhibition at Philadelphia's National Constitution Center that's well worth a read if you're interested in things booze and 1920s, and of course about that truly weird little legal time in our country's history. But of extra-special interest to me in this article was the following note about the exhibition:

On small tables like those at which “zozzled” (drunk) flappers and “jelly beans” (their boyfriends) once illegally imbibed “foot juice” (cheap wine) or “jag juice” (hard liquor), you can read explanations of speakeasy slang.

Speakeasy slang! Language was truly so much more evocative then, wasn't it? If you don't request extra *foot juice* tonight at that dive bar where you order the subpar pinot grigio, you are doing something wrong. In honor of this exhibition, I've scoured the Internet for a list of [twenties-era words](#) and phrases that we need to add

to our contemporary conversations. Did you know that in the '20s, *bimbo* was used to mean "a tough guy"; *butt me* was "to take a cigarette"; and *handcuff* and *manacle* meant engagement and wedding ring? A person who was divorced was *out on parole*, a *gimlet* was "a chronic bore," and the exclamation "Nerts!" meant "I am amazed." Herewith, a dictionary of awesome twenties slang.

Applesauce. Remember how we were going on and on about *malarkey*, thanks to Joe Biden's use of it in the vice presidential debate, the other week? **Applesauce** is a **synonym**. Use it to demonstrate your lack of appreciation for the words of another. Or, alternatively, shout *horsefeathers*.

Bee's knees. No dictionary of twenties slang would be complete without this one, which means, in simple terms, the best. (Synonym: That's *the berries*.) In related bee-talk, say something is "none of your beeswax" when someone who is not the bee's knees is butting into your beeswax. Where did "bee's knees" come from? From *World Wide Words*, "It's sometimes explained as being from an Italian-American way of saying *business* or that it's properly *Bs and Es*, an abbreviation for *be-alls and end-alls*. Both are without doubt wrong. *Bee's knees* is actually one of a set of nonsense catchphrases from 1920s America, the period of the flappers, speakeasies, feather boas and the Charleston." (Other such phrases: "*elephant's adenoids, cat's miaow, ant's pants, tiger's spots, bullfrog's beard, elephant's instep, caterpillar's kimono, turtle's neck, duck's quack, duck's nuts, monkey's eyebrows, gnat's elbows, oyster's earrings, snake's hips, kipper's knickers, elephant's manicure, clam's garter, eel's ankle, leopard's stripes, tadpole's teddies, sardine's whiskers, canary's tusks, pig's wings, cuckoo's chin, and butterfly's book.*")

Clam. **A dollar.** "Can you spot me a few clams?" Other slang for money: *cabbage, kale*.

Dewdropper. A young, unemployed guy who sleeps all day. Alternate synonym: *lollygagger*.

Egg. Man. "He's a funny egg."

Fire extinguisher. A chaperone (aka, a killjoy, an *alarm clock*).

Gams. Is there a better way to say legs, even if one *is* being objectifying? *Pins?* *Stilts?* Or maybe *getaway sticks*. "Cheese it; it's the fuzz! Move your getaway sticks or you'll end up in the cooler."

Hotsy-totsy. Perfect; the cat's pajamas.

"I have to go see a man about a dog." To go buy whiskey.

Jake. Okey dokey. "Everything is Jake."

Know one's onions. To know one's beeswax; to know what someone's talking about.

Let's blouse. We're out of here.

Mrs. Grundy. A prudish type. Maybe also a *fire extinguisher*. Definitely a *wurp*.

Noodle juice. Tea. (But *noodle* on its own means head.)

Ossified. Drunk, probably from having been *on a toot*, or a drinking binge. Also: *splifficated*, *fried*, *blotto*.

Phonus balonus. Nonsense. (Related: baloney = *piffle*).

Quilt. A drink that warms its drinker.

Rhartz! "How disappointing!"

Soup job. To crack a safe using nitroglycerine. (Safecrackers were *yeggs*.)

Tell it to Sweeney. Go say that to someone who'll believe your *phonus balonus*.

Upchuck. Vomit, probably after too much *foot juice* or *giggle water*. (Synonymous: *to pull a Daniel Boone* is to vomit.)

Voot. Money, *lettuce*.

Wet blanket. Someone who is no fun, no fun at all. Someone who does not like *whoopee* (to have a good time).

X. In lieu of any x words, *edge* means intoxication.

You slay me. You're hilarious.

Zozzled. Drunk.

Go forth and enjoy.

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