

'Jab': A British Term for a Covid-19 Shot, but Born in the U.S.A.

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By Ben Zimmer

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It might not be the most important point of contention in the pandemic era, but a British-style, three-letter word for a vaccination shot has proved irksome to many Americans: “jab.”

On Twitter, the backlash against the use of “jab” has been furious. “Free speech is an important value, but we must ban the importation of the British term ‘jab’ to describe vaccination,” journalist Matthew Yglesias, a co-founder of Vox, jokingly tweeted to his half-million followers. Likewise, Politico legal reporter Josh Gernstein griped, “If you use the term ‘jab’ rather than ‘shot’ and are not located in the U.K. or a Commonwealth country, I’m banning you. No discussion.”

Not everyone is so anti-“jab.” “I love the word ‘jab,’” confessed Walter Shapiro, staff writer for the New Republic. “So much less violent than the word ‘shot.’ Also a much more accurate description of getting the vaccine. And let me add that I am not normally a fan of Britishisms.”

The 19th-century use of ‘jab’ was likely inspired by the then-new application of the word ‘shot’ for an injection of a narcotic drug.

Whether you love it or hate it, the trans-Atlantic importation of “jab” has been on the rise with the rollout of the coronavirus vaccine. Some observers noted the creeping American use of the term late last year, including author and cultural critic Ben Yagoda on his blog “Not One-Off Britishisms” in December. “I would imagine that a big reason is elegant variation—there’s only so many times a journalist can write ‘shot’ or ‘injection’ before yearning for a synonym,” he wrote.

Soon thereafter, Lynne Murphy, an American linguist who teaches at the University of Sussex, declared that “jab” was the “2020 U.K.-to-U.S. Word of the Year” on her blog “Separated by a Common Language,” beating out “rubbish” and “reckon.”

But despite the markedly British flavor of “jab” in current usage, the origins of the hypodermic meaning are actually American.

As a verb and noun for a poke or thrust, “jab” first entered English in the early 19th century as a Scottish variant for “job,” which at that point could refer to the pecking of a bird. Its colloquial use for an injection began in the U.S., however. In November 1898, the *Inter Ocean*, a Chicago newspaper, quoted a gambler recounting a card game against a drug addict. “I observed that my lucky faro player gave himself a hypodermic jab in the arm with some fluid he had on tap there,” the gambler recalled. “I soon discovered he was a confirmed victim of the needle, and required rather regular jabs to keep keyed up to the notch.”

This use of “jab” was likely inspired by the then-new application of the word “shot” for an injection of a narcotic drug. A January 1889 article in the *Sacramento Bee* gives an early example: “The gang of miserables who have acquired the terrible habit often have a hard time to get money enough to buy ‘a

shot' as they call a morphine injection." While "shot" eventually moved into mainstream use for any sort of hypodermic injection, "jab" remained a slangier alternative.

As the lexicographer Jonathon Green details in "Green's Dictionary of Slang," "jab" began to be used by British forces in World War II to refer to inoculations against diseases like tuberculosis. Gerald Kersh, a writer who served in the British Army, used the word in his 1941 novel "They Die With Their Boots Clean": "First time that feller got a Jab, he went out like a light."

After the war, the British public became increasingly exposed to this meaning of "jab," often in newspapers where it served as handy shorthand: "flu jab" is a lot punchier than "influenza vaccination," after all. Now that "jab" has made its way back Stateside, lexicographers are taking note. Editors at Merriam-Webster are reviewing meanings of "jab" for a possible future entry: the act of inoculation (as in "jabs in arms") as well as a dose of a vaccine (as in "I got my second jab of Moderna"). The semantic spread of the term is proving downright infectious.