

THE LINGUISTIC STORY OF “86’D”: HOW A NEW YORK BAR TERM BECAME PART OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Annotation: The article explores the linguistic history and cultural significance of the American slang term “86’d.” Originating in New York City, the expression is commonly used in restaurants and bars to indicate that an item is unavailable or that a customer has been removed from the premises. The author examines several theories about the term’s origin, including the popular but debated connection to Chumley’s speakeasy at 86 Bedford Street during Prohibition, as well as a more historically supported explanation from 1930s soda fountain code language. Through these theories, the article illustrates how slang develops from everyday social interactions and reflects the cultural dynamics of specific environments—such as nightlife, restaurants, and urban communities. The spread of “86’d” from local New York slang to nationwide usage highlights the influence of cultural spaces and media on linguistic change. The article concludes that studying terms like “86’d” helps philology students understand how language evolves through social history, urban culture, and storytelling.

Keywords: “86’d”, American slang, New York City linguistics, bar terminology, restaurant slang, Chumley’s speakeasy, soda fountain code, slang origins, Prohibition-era language, urban language evolution, philology.

New York City has always been a place where language changes quickly. New communities, new cultures, and new social spaces constantly shape the vocabulary of its residents. Many English slang expressions were born in the city’s diners, jazz clubs, and speakeasies. One of the most interesting examples is the term “86’d”, a slang expression that originated in New York and later spread throughout American English. I first became interested in the term while reading about New York bars, and I was surprised by how deeply the word is connected to the city’s cultural and linguistic history.

In contemporary English, “to be 86’d” has two common meanings. First, in restaurants and bars, it means that an item is no longer available. For example, when a cook says, “86 the salmon,” it means they have run out of it. Second, it refers to a

person being refused service or asked to leave. When a bar “86’s” a customer, it means the staff ejects them, often for being too drunk, too aggressive, or violating rules. Both meanings reflect the dynamic and sometimes chaotic environment of New York’s food and nightlife culture.

The origin of “86’d” is not fully clear, but New York philologists and slang dictionaries offer several convincing theories. One of the most famous stories connects the word to Chumley’s, a legendary speakeasy located at 86 Bedford Street in Greenwich Village during the Prohibition era. According to New York City folklore, police officers would sometimes warn the bar before a raid. When staff heard the warning, they would tell customers to “86 it,” meaning they should quickly escape through the back door at 86 Bedford Street. While this explanation is popular and strongly tied to New York’s cultural memory, some linguists believe it is more myth than fact. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how language is influenced by local stories and the identity of the city.

Another widely discussed theory links the expression to soda fountain workers of the 1930s. In these restaurants, workers used numerical codes for efficiency. “86” reportedly meant “all out of it,” which matches today’s restaurant usage. This explanation is supported by several slang dictionaries and seems more historically reliable. It shows how the everyday work of ordinary people can produce new language forms that eventually spread into mainstream English. From a philological perspective, the term “86’d” is valuable because it demonstrates how slang evolves

through social interaction, not formal education. It also shows how English absorbs words from various environments: nightlife, restaurants, and even illegal speakeasies.

Terms like “86’d,” “on the rocks,” and “last call” all entered English through bar culture. Such expressions later moved into movies, television, and digital media, making them part of the common lexicon. Today, “86’d” is widely used not only in New York but across the United States, proving that local slang can become national language. My interest in this term also reflects a broader curiosity about New York itself, its multicultural streets, its mixture of languages, and its ability to create new words that feel alive. For philology students, studying a slang term like “86’d” offers an opportunity to understand how English grows in response to social change. It allows us to explore how meaning develops, how words spread, and how cultural spaces influence vocabulary. Ultimately, “86’d” is more than just bar slang. It is a linguistic symbol of New York’s energy: fast, unpredictable, and creative. Whether it came from a speakeasy on Bedford Street or from a soda fountain code, the term shows how even the simplest everyday language can carry a deep cultural story.

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