This essay analyzes *Hobson Jobson*, the well-known nineteenth-century glossary of Anglo-Indian argot, as an instance of a colonial attempt to resolve the contradiction between benign intent and the violence of colonial rule in India under the British Raj. Grounded in historiography and linguistic anthropological theory, the essay tries to demonstrate the need for more sober readings of the primary text than are typically offered by celebrations of cosmopolitan language-mixing, and offers an approach to understanding the relationships between language and power embedded in both historical artifacts and social relations.