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Variable and Invariable Aspects of Slang

Cet exposé offre un aperçu des arguments pour et contre le caractère universel de l'argot. Les argots contemporains ont certaines particularités communes comme : l'expressivité – des connotations fondées sur une attitude anti-normative et non-conformiste ; le groupement des éléments lexicaux et phraséologiques dans des champs sémantiques peu nombreux ; l'hypersynonymie ; une mutabilité étonnante ; des limites instables avec d'autres variantes de la langue non standard et de la langue familière. Cependant, le caractère historique de l'argot (il existe uniquement en tant qu'il est l'antagoniste d'une langue standard codifiée), ainsi que ses diverses places et fonctions dans les systèmes de variation non standard des différentes langues nationales, nous permet de le considérer plutôt comme un phénomène linguistique « quasi universel ».

In order to answer the question whether slang could be regarded as a language universal, first of all we have to define what slang *is*, and then properly distinguish it from other related varieties of language use. Now, it is well known that even today we have no generally accepted linguistic definition of slang, and consequently there is still no consensus as for its delimitation from other non-standard varieties. Besides, this is not a unique case in our discipline: we have no generally accepted definitions for the phoneme, the syllable, the word, or the sentence, although even schoolchildren are able to recognize these fundamental entities of language. Such an apparent gap between theoretical and practical knowledge arises largely from the very nature of language as an open and dynamic system that can be studied from the viewpoints of various sciences.

In recent times a historico-cultural approach to slang has come into the foreground. In his intriguing monograph *Argot and culture* Vladimir Jelistratov, professor of Moscow University, regards slang as a collection of variants (jargons, sociolects, cryptolects, sacral languages, etc.) that have served at

different times in different societies as verbal devices for the purposes of counter-culture. Implicitly admitting that such a “boundless” concept of slang is unacceptable from the linguistic point of view, Jelistratov claims that slang should be studied as a cultural phenomenon, in close connection with graffiti, dressing fashions of informal social groups, avant-garde styles of art and other semiotic subsystems of urban counterculture (JELISZTRATOV 1998).

Sociolinguists are inclined to treat slang as a *sociolect*, a parlance of young people, especially of those living in cities. But this opinion holds only partially. No doubt, there is a certain predilection of young people for slang owing to some general features of their mental attitude. But on the whole, slang in contemporary developed societies cannot be localized either “horizontally” (as an urban parlance) or “vertically” (as a youth jargon).

Some linguists hold slang to be a *style*. But if we define styles as variants of language use that correspond with particular socially relevant spheres of communication or with typical situations of discourse and are characterized by expedient modes of choice and combination of language elements (see PÉTER 1996–7, p. 152), then slang should not be regarded as a style, since its use is motivated not by functional expediency, but by a certain mental attitude of the speaker. Moreover, styles are variants of the codified standard language, while slang belongs to non-standard usage.

Another difficulty for the linguistic interpretation of slang lies in the fact that there are no clear boundaries separating slang from other non-standard varieties of usage (esp. jargons and argots) and from low colloquial speech. Jargons are marked by the informal word use of certain professional groups and also groups based on common activities (e.g. anglers, card-players, sportsmen, etc.). Lots of jargon elements penetrate into slang, thereby losing their restrictedness to professional or other groups: thus among non-standard Hungarian names for school lessons *matek* ‘maths’ has become slang because of its widespread use, while *biosz* ‘biology’ or *föci* ‘geography’ still remain elements of school jargon. Even homonymy can be observed in certain cases between slang and jargon; thus the Hungarian verb *oboázik* (literally ‘to play the oboe’) has in the army jargon the meaning ‘to be in an awkward, humiliating situation’, whereas in slang it means ‘to make oral sex’ (only a woman). Argots are used by marginal social groups (esp. in the underworld) and are characterized by the dominant

motivation of solidarity and secrecy. However, it should be noted that, on the one hand, an element of solidarity can be found also in jargon (and to a smaller degree even in slang), and on the other hand, argots contain some professional (i.e. jargon) elements and moreover, their secrecy is not absolute. (Note that the first glossaries of Hungarian thieves' argot were compiled by police inspectors.) And as we can infer from the inconsistent and often arbitrary use of the corresponding stylistic markers in dictionaries, it is not easy to distinguish between slang and low (familiar) colloquial speech.

Now, let us turn our attention to the constitutive parameters of slang. Its fundamental linguistic characteristic seems to be expressivity, i.e. the use of language which deliberately deviates from the norms of the standard (or, in terms of the Prague School of Linguistics: the actualized relation between the linguistic sign and its meaning). Slang being almost entirely restricted to the lexical sphere, its expressivity appears in various transfers of meaning, derivatives, compounds and borrowings.

This kind of expressivity is motivated by a more or less conscious opposition of the speaker to the norms of the standard language, and is based in a broader sense on a nonconformist attitude towards the cultural, social and/or political conditions of society. Obviously, this does not mean that anybody speaking slang is a nonconformist, let alone a rebel. As a matter of fact, the expressive (and hence provocative) vigour of a slang element is bound to fade away proportionally to its spread in the wider language community, until finally the expressive innovation turns into its opposite and becomes a vogue-word. This fundamental antinomy of slang parallels in a sense the fate of blue jeans: the denim working-trousers of farmers which adolescent children in rich American families began to wear as a protest against their own luxurious way of life, have spread within a fairly short time all over the world, changing from a symbol of nonconformism into a uniform piece of fashion. This cyclic process of lexical innovation turning into fashion and finally often fading into idle clichés accounts for another essential feature of slang, namely its “fluidity”, the rapid changes it undergoes even within the lifetime of one generation.

Owing to an original antinormative disposition, almost all words and expressions of slang possess an inherent depreciatory connotation ranging on a board scale from playfulness and droll mockery to rude bluntness. Because of

their inherent connotation almost all elements of slang have neutral conceptual synonyms in the standard usage. A lexical unit no longer belongs to slang whenever it supersedes its standard synonym or obtains a meaning that cannot be denoted otherwise. (P. Roberts gives the example of the former slang expression *hot dog*: in our days nobody would ask at the counter for “hot sausage with onions and mustard in a sandwich” (ROBERTS 2002 [1963], p. 131.)

Besides hypersynonymy and the predominance of connotation, the various national slang varieties display other (almost) universal lexico-semantic features too. Here we can mention the grouping of lexical items in a small number of semantic fields, and the predilection for figurative semantic transfer with similar or even identical substitutes (e.g. Engl. *pumpkin*, French *citrouille*, German *Kürbis*, Hung. *tök(fej)* ‘head’).

Summing up what has been said so far, we may define contemporary slang as a variant of non-standard usage basically restricted to the lexical and phraseological sphere, not localized either areally, or socially, though preferred by the younger generations living in cities. The essential linguistic feature of slang is expressivity due to the antinormative attitude of the speaker, but after a rather short while the expressive elements of slang fade into vogue. Almost all elements of slang are marked by a depreciatory connotation, which distinguishes them from their conceptual synonyms in the standard; hence slang can be characterized by what we may call “hypersynonymy” (see TENDER 1997 [1994], p. 97). General tendencies can be observed in the grouping of words and expressions in a restricted number of semantic fields and also in figurative semantic transfers.

For all that, we have to bear in mind that slang is a historical phenomenon; its antinormative disposition presupposes a codified standard usage to which it can be opposed. At earlier stages of development, when standard languages were just taking their shapes, the non-standard and substandard variants of speech (urban *koinés*, interdialects) had other parameters and functions than slang at later times. Now, as the authors of the *Memorandum Concerning Language Universals* have pointed out, “from the general linguistic point of view some universals are most easily understood as the outcome of dynamic processes” (GREENBERG et al. 1961–63, p. 261). In this sense slang could

be regarded as the universal verbal manifestation of counterculture in a socio-cultural situation that is marked (among others) by the predominance of a full-fledged and prestigious standard language. But from a strictly structural and functional point of view, that is considering the varying place and function of slang in the systems of non- (and sub-)standard varieties of different national languages, its universal character should not be accepted without reservations. Thus, for example, if we want to define the place of slang in the non-standard sphere of contemporary Russian usage, besides various jargons and argots we also have to take into account the so-called *prostorečie* literally: ‘simple speech’), a substandard interdialect spoken mainly by illiterate townsfolk. The study of contemporary Russian slang should not neglect prison camp speech (*lagernyj jazyk*) either, a peculiar mixture of political and prison jargon and criminal argot, many elements of which have penetrated for well known reasons into common usage, including recent works of fiction and journalism. As for the Czech situation, it should be noted that the place and functions of slang cannot be determined without considering that there are two types of Czech colloquial speech: the colloquial variety of Standard Czech (*hovorová čeština*), and the widespread *obecná čeština*, a substandard interdialect with conspicuous phonetic and grammatical features that is used in everyday conversation not only by uneducated people but also by the highly qualified intelligentsia.

Finally, I should like to mention another important aspect of slang, the universal nature of which has not yet been thoroughly examined with regard to different languages. According to Jelistratov’s apt metaphor, slang may be regarded as a rough draft of the changes to come in the standard usage. Indeed, the history of modern languages displays many instances of lexical and/or grammatical anomalies which in the course of time have been adopted by the standard language. (Besides, this is what the adherents of linguistic purism persistently disregard.) I confine myself to the case of Russian, an essentially inflectional and predominantly synthetic language, which has been penetrated during the last century by a considerable amount of analytic elements. (For details see PANOV 1968, pp. 42–104.) Now, contemporary Russian slang bears witness not only to the persistence of this analytic tendency, but to its expansion as well. Let me mention just one striking example cited by Jelistratov. In Standard Russian the suffix *-ak* (*-jak*) forms names of persons (*rybak*

'fisherman', *cholost'ak* 'bachelor') and names of things (*kost'ak* 'skeleton', *sin'ak* 'bruise'). In slang the suffix expands its derivative function and forms substantives with an abstract qualifying meaning (*klev'ak* 'something good', *neudobn'ak* 'something inconvenient'), neutralizing in addition the difference between parts of speech: cp. *neudobn'ak situacija* 'inconvenient situation' (adjective) and [*mne*] *neudobn'ak rabotat'* 'I don't feel like working' (predicative adverb) (JELISZTRATOV 1998, pp. 114–5). In that way some words formed by the suffix *-ak* (*-jak*) obtain their grammatical status only in the sentence, this being a significant mark of analytic (or even isolating) languages. Apparently, facts like these should not yet be considered as evidence for the "spiral course" of the morphological development of languages as stated by Gabelentz (see GABELENZ 1891, pp. 250–3); however, the case of the Bulgarian language, which has completely lost its nominal declension might warn us against a flat refusal of this hypothesis.

Having weighed the above mentioned pros and cons, we may conclude that slang in modern national languages, notwithstanding its non-panchronic and "fluid" nature, is characterized by some essential common features and tendencies, and therefore might be ascribed to the class of "near universal" phenomena of language.

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