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A cognitive semantic approach to slang

L'auteur de cette étude considère l'argot comme un phénomène socioculturel. Les aspects socioculturels du langage peuvent être décrits grâce à une interprétation stylistique cognitive. L'argot est familier ou grossier du point de vue du comportement, informel du point de vue de la situation, dépréciatif du point de vue des valeurs et néologique du point de vue du temps. C'est grâce à ces propriétés que l'argot remplit, dans les sociétés modernes et postmodernes, sa fonction, qui consiste à décrire le monde d'une nouvelle manière, de façon autoréflexive et autoréférentielle, par le biais des réseaux langagiers.

The paper attempts to interpret slang in a cognitive frame. In this case, slang is a specific way of construing and communicating things by linguistic formation. In my interpretation, slang is not simply a language variety based on certain morpho-phonological and lexical features, resulting in the linguistic expression of certain sub-cultures. Rather, it is a definite way of the conceptual and linguistic construal of the world or entities and relations of the world, in contrast to other ways. This character of slang is a new development, coming with the rise of late modernity and the postmodern. Slang has very strong socio-cultural aspects. (The importance of socio-cultural factors in language system and language use is elaborated, among others, by HALLIDAY 1978; DURANTI 1997.)

The paper gives first an overview of Hungarian slang in relation to socio-cultural aspects, then cognitive linguistics is introduced as the linguistic frame to interpret slang. Thirdly, style is interpreted as the very domain for socio-cultural factors, being able to express slang characteristics, among others. In the last section of the paper, slang is interpreted in this complex frame.

1.

As everything in language, slang is a historical phenomenon. And historical phenomena cannot be treated without historical aspects. Also, slang has very strong socio-cultural relations, although it cannot be seen as a discrete language

variety like traditional dialects or the standard of a language, or like discrete language varieties of discrete social groups, layers, classes. Consequently, slang cannot be described without interpreting its socio-cultural aspects.

Since socio-cultural factors seem to be universal, on the one hand, though culture-specific in their instantiations, on the other hand, different socio-cultural circumstances may result in partly different historical developments of slang. In my presentation I start out from the example of Hungarian. (For an overview of the history of the Hungarian language, cf. KISS 1999; TOLCSVAI NAGY 2004.) I would not say that we have exhaustive and sociologically relevant data on Hungarian slang. However, the historical aspects of Hungarian may be summed up. In the first half of the 19th century, a clear opposition of traditional rural dialects and the standard can be detected. This opposition became relatively strong and reflected by the end of the 19th century: a growing number of Hungarian native speakers came to know about this opposition and all the communicative and evaluative consequences of the situation. This latter period was the time of the formation of urban dialects, especially in Budapest (Pest-Buda) and in other cities. The process of the creation of new urban dialects, new varieties of the Hungarian language had a self-reflexive, self-referential and self-creating nature. It was this process, when certain more or less secret or closed varieties of smaller and peripheral groups, subcultures (i.e. criminals, students, certain professions) became more and more widely known by other groups and subcultures. This was the genesis of slang in the Hungarian language. The historical process was interrupted by the Versailles peace treaty after WWI, dividing large parts of Hungary into four other countries with masses of Hungarian nationals. The process was also interrupted by WWII and the communist dictatorship following the war. The result of the linguistic evolution came to the surface in the 1960s with astonishing strength, generating a heated debate on the ironic and self-ironic nature of the newly experienced language variety, then called 'the language of the youth'. The communist ideology could not tolerate irony, the questioning of the positive description of the world. If there is slang in Hungarian at all, this period was the rise of it. During the next decades this fresh and ironic language variety penetrated into the language use of the older generations, without nearly any social boundaries, although it was restricted mainly to spontaneous spoken interactions. After

1990, the regaining of national freedom, the creative character of Hungarian slang has shown its real wealth.

The process has been in close relation not only with the substantial changes in the forms, domains, goals and reflections of communication (at least in Europe and in America), but also with the interpretation of history and time. As Koselleck (KOSELLECK 1979, pp. 321–348) points out, the interpretation of modern times in the historical sense have some important features not present in earlier times:

- history is not a cumulative process, every period is individual and single, compared to other ones;
- the natural chronology of history is broken by the historical effects of periods and by the rhythm of historical processes;
- the future is open, with continuous change; it is not a mere consequence of past events, development is the central concept, every phenomenon is understood in terms of “earlier than” and “later than”, the simultaneousness of the non-simultaneous is a basic experience;
- the relation between the experience based on earlier phenomena and the expectation of the coming result in seeing the present as a period of transition, always bringing something new and unexpected, but this new and unexpected is expected.

Such historical aspects had a great influence on the self-reflexive character of language use.

2.

Functional cognitive linguistics, as worked out by R. Langacker and G. Lakoff has the following important features: language has an experiential basis, conceptualized through abstraction, schematization and categorization (cf. LANGACKER 1987, 1991, 1999; LAKOFF 1987). Linguistic expressions are symbolic structures, with a semantic and phonological pole. All components of style, sociolinguistics, or pragmatics are processed in the matrix of the semantic structure of a linguistic expression.

Linguistic expressions – simple or complex – conceptualize a thing, a relation, a process, or a scene. (A scene is a simple event where something happens to somebody or something, prototypically construed in a clause.) It is a

fundamental notion of cognitive linguistics that things, processes, scenes can be conceptualized in different ways, i.e. linguistic expressions always construe a semantic structure to conceptualize a phenomenon in a certain way, different from other possible ways. Imagery is the human capacity that makes us capable of construing the same phenomenon in different ways, i.e. conceptual construal is the base for semantic structures and schemas for larger linguistic units, constructions. In the following examples, the sentences conceptualize the same scene from different perspectives: in the two sentences of (1) the mapping of the vertical spatial relation is different (once the lamp is in the centre of attention, once the table), in (2) the way the addressee is invited differs in its style.

- (1) a. The lamp is above the table.
- b. The table is under the lamp.

- (2) a. Come on in.
- b. Come in.
- c. Please come in.
- d. Would you like to come in.

The complex matrix is modelled in a row of cognitive domains, in each domain with one feature foregrounded (profiled) in the background of others. The conceptual substructure foregrounded is a salient figure, standing out from the other substructures forming the ground (cf. LANGACKER 1987, pp. 120–122). Foregrounding or figure/ground alignment plays a basic role in conceptualization, therefore in every part of language. The way an expression designates something, i.e. the formation of an expression may be foregrounded, too.

3.

From the viewpoint of a cognitive theory of style, the formation of an expression may be foregrounded during the processing of that expression, and thus the formation itself may activate semantic content. One semantic type of foregrounding is completed by socio-cultural factors. The parameters of these factors are not given by the general experience of the world but by the experience of the communicative situation and the verbal action which the foregrounding is part of, and at the same time this foregrounding also creates

the communicative experience. In this respect the term “social” covers the universal features of cognition and communication in community, and the term “cultural” refers to the culture-specific factors of cognition and communication.

The following cognitive domains as socio-cultural factors of style are identified in the present model (for a more detailed presentation see TOLCSVAI NAGY 2005).

- The domain of attitude
- The domain of situation
- The domain of value
- The domain of time
- The domain of language varieties

In all the domains, it is important to note in advance that the socio-cultural factors in figure – ground relations are strictly constrained in the sense that they are represented within their scope in language. That is, it is not attitude in general that has a partial role in representing style, but attitude towards the formation of linguistic symbolic structures, texts.

The domains form different types of continua, and in each continuum certain subdomains may be separated, where the concentration of realizations are more dense than in other regions of the continuum. Subdomains overlap at the edges, i.e. their edges are fuzzy. In four of the enumerated domains there is a neutral subdomain. Neutrality means that the neutral subdomain is the central subdomain in the sense that a linguistic unit conceived as neutral in some respect needs no other symbolic structure in order to make a comparison and thus to relate two symbolic structures to establish their style with respect to each other in one of the socio-cultural factors of style. In establishing a non-neutral subdomain, the neutral subdomain is always needed within the same domain.

The domain of attitude conceptualizes the speaker’s attitude towards the formation of linguistic structures, texts, in the interpretation of the recipient. It is not the attitude of the speaker directed immediately towards the recipient. There are focal subdomains within this scalar continuum, namely vulgar, familiar, neutral, elegant, sophisticated.

The domain of situation conceptualizes the speaker’s representation of the current communicative situation in relation to the formation of linguistic symbolic structures, texts. It is certainly not the objective depiction of the given

situation. There are focal subdomains within this scalar continuum, namely informal, neutral, formal.

The domain of value conceptualizes the speaker's evaluation of the scene and the participants, entities, actions involved, through the formation of linguistic symbolic structures, texts. There are focal subdomains within this scalar continuum, namely value deprivation, neutral, value saturation.

The domain of time conceptualizes the speaker's perspective towards the formation of linguistic symbolic structures, texts. It is not the time of the actual verbal interaction, but the historical relations of the symbolic structures in the text. There are focal subdomains within this scalar continuum, namely archaic, neutral, neologistic. The prototypical subdomains are: the present state of the vernacular is neutral, one generation backwards it is partially archaic, more generations backwards it is archaic, new expressions (particularly at word level) are novel. These subdomains are schematic categories.

Although language varieties are not manifestations of style in themselves, they have a certain function among the socio-cultural factors, mainly by their prestige and typical co-occurrences of subdomains within the first three socio-cultural domains. The important language varieties are the following: standard, the language of the literature, regional dialect, urban dialect, school slang, the historical styles of literature, etc. Expressions belonging to standard vs slang varieties in texts have clear stylistic consequences, like *cop* vs *police officer*, etc.

Within the different domains of the socio-cultural factors of style different subdomains can be foregrounded. These cognitive domains are in a relation that may be called parallel distribution. From the stylistic perspective the variability of co-occurrences of the foregrounded subdomains is important. There are typical co-occurrences, in which the profiled subdomains tend toward a relatively homogeneous representation of all the socio-cultural factors, i.e. a relatively homogeneous representation of the socio-cultural references of the stylistic structure of a linguistic unit. In other cases the co-occurrences form a differentiated representation.

I demonstrate the importance of socio-cultural factors by a test, made on the two versions of one news event. These versions were published in two different Hungarian daily papers. 38 respondents gave answers to 25 questions

concentrating on the socio-cultural factors of the two texts, in the respondents interpretation (for details cf. TOLCSVAI NAGY 2005, pp. 94–105). According to the respondents one text included many slang expressions, while the other one was written without any such word. Table 1 demonstrates the prototypical co-occurrences of *police officer* and *cop* in the two news items.

In the case of *police officer*, the prototypical matrix of socio-cultural factors shows a high degree of homogeneity. It has to be noted that the subdomains are profiles related to other subdomains. However, neutral subdomains need a lower degree of the activation of other subdomains. On the other hand, other subdomains profiled in the matrix of socio-cultural factors of style activate the other subdomains to a higher degree, as in the case of *cop*.

In the case of *cop*, the tendency is again relatively homogeneous. In this typical form of co-occurrence, familiarity, informality and the relative degree of value deprivation are closely related, and they are also in close connection with non-standard language varieties.

The data in Table 1 to highlight systematic differences and close relations.

Table 1.

	<i>police officer</i>	<i>Cop</i>
The domain	The profiled subdomain	The profiled subdomain
attitude	neutral	familiar
situation	neutral	informal
value	neutral	deprivation
time	neutral	neutral (or neologistic)
language varieties	standard/neutral	slang or neutral

Table 1 clearly demonstrates the tendential differences between the prototypical matrices of socio-cultural factors of style, pertaining to different linguistic expressions. The relation of the two matrices in Table 1 is not accidental or formal, because the two symbolic structures in the example are synonyms. As a consequence, the profiles in the subdomains of one of the words can be understood in relation to the subdomains as secondary profiles of the other. All the categorizations of *cop* are foregroundings in the given domains, where the relating subdomains pertain to *police officer*, and *vice versa*. The expression rated as belonging to slang is interpreted in relation to its neutral

equivalent. Also, basic features of slang expressions are conceptualized by the naming of the profiled subdomains.

4.

As we all know, many interpretations concentrate on slang as a socio-cultural phenomenon, with features as follows. Thus slang is informal, ironic, relevant for in-group members, action-oriented, productive, and diffusive (i.e. spreading in different social layers). (See for example PARTRIDGE 1970; FLEXNER 1960/1975; KÖVECSES ed. 1995.) These features are processed in a parallel way with other semantic and phonological ones. Using the system of socio-cultural factors the basic socio-cultural features of slang in Hungarian are the following.

In the socio-cultural domain of attitude: familiar or vulgar

In the socio-cultural domain of situation: informal

In the socio-cultural domain of value: value deprivation

In the socio-cultural domain of time: neologistic

In the socio-cultural domain of language varieties: always in comparison with other varieties

The typical co-occurrences of these parameters make people think of slang as a discrete language variety. Slang usage is always foregrounding the construal itself, that is, slang usage always directs attention to the way a thing, a process or an atemporal relation (e.g. a quality) is construed conceptually and semantically, also phonologically. This construal in slang is never neutral, it never fits automatically the situational context. That is why it always seems active, action-oriented, producing inherent and implicated speech-acts of surprise, astonishment, calling attention to the speaker's behaviour, to the situational context otherwise automatically processed, etc. These features are produced by different semantic and phonological means, for instance:

- The extension of polysemantic structures by strikingly new meanings that are in a much more distant semantic relation with the already used meanings than usual. That is, the semantic distance of the meanings within a polysemantic network are larger than usual.

- The spreading and higher frequency of lenition processes
- The assimilation of foreign words and expressions with their pronunciation and spelling changed explicitly to vulgar Hungarian
- The import of foreign words from unknown languages, words without any background in Hungarian.

Summarizing the socio-cultural factors, it can be stated that slang is evaluated as a language variety of low prestige, near to every-day informal colloquial speech, sometimes even vulgar. On the other hand, one of its cultural roles is to penetrate into language varieties of higher prestige, presumably to bring sincerity into these varieties. A specific tension relation is created between slang and e.g. standard.

Thus slang is a reflection to the conventional conceptualizations and the corresponding semantic structures of language in general, and to the specific languages and cultures of the Western world, particularly. This reflection is in close contact with the changes in the social and linguistic stratification of modernized societies. Through a longer process the importance of large categories like nation, state, social class has decreased in relation to language, while the significance of smaller categories like speech community and dialect or register has increased. Instead of the linguistically homogeneous nature of the nation or the state, the heterogeneous features of communication networks have come to the front, representing and simultaneously creating a dynamic view of language varieties, as a result and symbolization of individual and group identity, self-representation and self-reflection. This type of the interpretation of language, both in science and folk categorization, clearly corresponds with the historical features of modernity summarized by Koselleck, e.g. in the idea of the ever expected new.

Slang understood like this is a way of construing things verbally, where the verbal formation questions itself, questions the canonized way of communicating something without failures, without underspecification or ambiguity. Slang is one verbal method to find the way out of the linguistic dilemmas of the modern and postmodern ages. It tries to answer the questions arisen about the *describability* of the world.

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