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Hungarian Prison Slang Today

L'argot des prisons est une des variétés sociologiques du hongrois les moins connues. Le but de notre recherche était de recueillir le vocabulaire de cette variété et de l'analyser d'un point de vue sociolinguistique. Une enquête par questionnaires, complétée d'interviews thématiques, a d'abord été conduite à Debrecen, puis dans tous les établissements pénitentiaires majeurs de Hongrie. Un des principaux résultats de ce travail a été l'élaboration d'un dictionnaire de l'argot des prisons.

1 The objectives of the research

As the title suggests, my research presents Hungarian prison slang attested from 1996 to 2005. This variety has never seen an overall study in Hungary up to now, so my research project tried to bridge this gap and dealt with general questions of the internal and informal language use of prisoners of penal institutions. To be able to conduct such a study I had to work out novel research methodologies and extensively collected linguistic sample in prisons. I then arranged the collected words and expressions into a systematic database in the form of a dictionary. Having created a database, I analysed the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of the given variety.

When conducting a pilot study, data, which have never been dealt with in Hungarian linguistics, emerged in such quantity and quality that this first exploratory stage inspired an overall study of Hungarian prison slang through a deeper and planned slang research.

During my research, I always held as a principle to consider slang from the slang user's perspective so my objective was to provide a description of conditions motivating group members for slang usage. In order to learn about these conditions, I had to extend my research to the examination of the groups of closed space, observing the possibilities and reasons of group formation within a prison community.

During my work, I had to ask myself the inevitable question whether it was a good idea or not to prepare an apparently static dictionary when trying to conduct sociolinguistic research which regards language as a dynamic system. Of course, I was aware of the fact that this dictionary was a testimony of slang deprived of its context, however, in this form it was an empirical testimony made available for outsiders, including the researcher, and therefore being the only way for carrying out linguistic analysis of the examined group. Furthermore, as research was mainly oriented towards the examination of people using this particular variety, a collection of words and expressions was necessary simply because this was the best way for getting to know the characteristics of the given language variety. The preparation of the dictionary was indispensable for answering the questions of the examined areas.

So, by presenting prison slang, my objectives were to approach the given slang phenomenon from a linguistic point of view, with special reference to those areas where sociolinguistics can reach a deeper understanding of a closed group. Finally, I have found it important to establish a linguistic database, in such a form that allows both linguists and the public to get an insight into the language use of prisoners in Hungary, so I compiled words and idiomatic expressions, together with their meanings, into a monolingual dictionary.

2 Methods

For the purposes of my research it was necessary to give both a chronological and a thematic overview of relevant literature on slang research, with an emphasis on the sociolinguistic attitude already present in early cant research. I also made use of the results of contemporary slang research, the most information about which is to be found in the series *Szlengkutató* edited by Tamás KIS.

It was indispensable to work out my own research method since there had been no prison slang study conducted earlier in Hungary. That's why I also had to work out the methodology of both data collection and data processing.

Data collection procedures, respondents

The linguistic material presented in this paper had been collected during the last eight years. The main research tools were questionnaires but at some places

I had the possibility for group interviews and for individual, one-to-one interviews. The questionnaires were administered in 18 larger penal institutions all over Hungary. I used a detailed questionnaire containing 18 conceptual categories that I had compiled myself.

As regards the research population, an average of 25-30% of the prisoners in the given institutions were probed by the questionnaire but even on the less favourable occasions a minimum of 10% of all the prisoners filled in the questionnaires. Respondents were not selected by any criteria according to the requirements of random sampling.

According to the testimony of the biographical parts of the questionnaires, I could make it sure that there were long time recidivists sentenced for serious crime as well as first-crime prisoners having just arrived at the institution. The researcher was present at the administration of the questionnaires in most of the cases, so the informants had a chance to discuss problematic points.

Besides my own collection, I also processed the material of a competition for prison slang collection advertised in *Börtön Újság*, a monthly journal for prisoners and relatives as a targeted audience. This vocabulary collected mainly by prisoners for this competition served as a confirmation to my own collection.

A study aiming at getting an insight into slang in action and its role in its users' life could not be complete with a simple collection of words and expressions. So the questionnaire study was followed by individual and group interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Penitentiary and Prison of Sopronkőhida, within groups of 5 to 6 prisoners. Using this method, approx. 25 informants were interviewed per day. Interviews were recorded by taking notes since tape-recording was not allowed.

Due to the circumstances I used a standardized protocol interview format with a pre-structured set of questions, in a pre-determined sequence in order to be able to pay full attention to the respondent's testimony. This way I managed not only to direct the course of the interviews but also took notes systematically in order to capture comparable data. Questions addressed mainly the linguistic attitude of slang users towards their group language. Having finished data collection, I prepared a systematic linguistic database from the raw testimony of the data collection.

To sum up the research design considerations, it should be stated that individual research methods were necessary for the preparation of my work, tailored to the users of this group language and to their conditions. In retrospect, we can conclude that the methods applied captured dependable findings, which in turn helped the researcher to explore the Hungarian prison slang of the given period and to interpret the findings from different aspects.

3 Research findings

As late as until the end of 1980s, slang was generally regarded as a deviant variety unworthy of research, as slang was not considered a language variety proper. Today more and more linguists research into this area, slang is no longer regarded as a harmful offshoot but as a sociolinguistic phenomenon which is worth being subjected to study.

In my research I have found that slang is a language variety with the help of which we can obtain very important information regarding the origins of language or the original functions of language, which means that we can obtain knowledge which cannot be easily acquired through the analysis of other linguistic phenomena or which cannot be acquired at all.

As a result of my research, besides clarifying general questions of slang, I presented the few examples of prison slang research in Hungary and examined the relationship between cant and prison slang, with stress laid on cant remnants important from the perspective of prison slang research. From cant literature, I emphasized mainly those points where individual authors dealt with the presentation of cant users, functions of cant, change and changeability in the register, the history and origin of cant and cant words, always comparing their findings to my own statements emerging during the study of prison slang. I also emphasized those parts of the dictionaries and studies where the authors, even as early as in the 1860s, attempted to create sociolinguistic theories.

In the light of this research, my findings have brought novelty to the field in the following areas:

3.1 Groups of closed space; group organization in the prison

In my research I have found that from a sociological point of view prisons are organized as institutions, secondary formal groups. Prisoners are members

of this formal system organized top-down and the informal bottom-up groups of prisoners are units of this system, too. From the aspect of prison slang research, these latter ones are important not as units of an institution but as non-official small groups created within the formal institution.

Groups born by necessity in such a totally closed prison organization operate along informal sanctions and awards. Through slang I could get an insight into the working of these informal sanctions and awards, furthermore, slang has also shown that these sanctions and awards are much more important in the life of a convict than those of formal authorities. According to psychology, such an everyday close coexistence as in the case of the convicts creates tension in the individual. These tensions are evidenced in the vocabulary and phraseology of prison slang too, what's more, the possibilities to tackle these tensions are also linguistically presented according to the testimony of my data.

Examining the role of slang within such conditions has also shed light on those processes that a newcomer has to face in prison and has shown the steps of continuous initiation, including the acquisition of prison slang.

In slang I have also found the roles of informal prison society, presented along with the place of individual prisoners in this informal hierarchic system, and also the concrete and abstract principles important for a prison society. The findings of my project have convinced me that researching into prison slang is the most appropriate method for presenting this set of problems.

After examining this area, one crucial result of my research has started to crystallize, namely, that prison slang is not only an interesting set of words and expressions, but a very lively internal language operated by informal groupings that make up a language variety to be used as a substantial tool for everyday social contacts.

At this point of the study, it could be seen what reasons the speakers had for slang usage, why and when they felt it important to use the internal language variety, and which were the situations when one behaved "in slang".

Besides considering the social aspects, I also aimed at conducting an overall linguistic study of the data collected. The analysis of the linguistic data went beyond general conclusions and resulted in a thorough inspection of the word formation system of this particular language variety.

3.2 Linguistic analysis of prison slang

As a result of the variations in the origin/activation of slang, general conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the prison slang database. First I examined the organization of the vocabulary which appears to show that there is a central, core vocabulary in prison slang just as in any other group language, the elements of which are known and used frequently in each penal institution. Furthermore, there is a peripheral vocabulary, that is, a data set consisting of words and expressions which are used less frequently or are unknown at some places. As to the general findings, I have identified the attraction centres of prison slang formation. Such attraction centres were people like man, woman, friend, helper and traitor, or categories related to police, penal institutions, etc. Still another general finding was the description of those morphological variants that appear in great number across the examined group language. This study has clearly shown that morphological differences occur mainly in comparison of different institutions; but sometimes there are such variants within one and the same institution too, especially in the case of loanwords from a foreign language. Relevant morphological differences were frequent in the case of Romany loanwords especially when there were missing phonemes in the Hungarian sound system, the substitution of which leading to morphological variants.

My research has documented the various word formation methods characteristic of prison slang, with the help of the systematization principles of Tamás KIS and Ottó HOFFMANN related to this field. First I have presented prison slang loans from foreign languages. When having an overview of the database, it has emerged that it is Romany which gives the most loan words to prison slang and it is only German (mainly its *argot*) that comes close to it in quantity. Although far behind Romany or German, English has also provided loan words for prison slang (e.g. *bobby* for 'policeman'; *brake* for 'breaking into a house'; *Broadway* for the 'prison yard'; *joker* for 'a convict assisting others'; *yard* for 'police'; etc.) and there are some, although even less frequent, Italian and French loans, too, in prison slang.

Words and expressions borrowed from different varieties of the host language serve as yet another layer of the internal informal vocabulary of

prisons. Within its frame, there are some words which are of dialectic origin, there are loans from the penal technical jargon, from military slang and from cant, in considerable quantity. Research has shown that borrowing from the group languages of Hungarian besides prison slang is an extremely productive way of word formation in our case. In a publication resulting from my study, I showed a range of examples for proving this.

Another type of word formation applied in prison slang is the use of elements within the language variety. Rare ways of semantic, formal and internal word formation have been evidenced. The results indicate that name giving is the least common way of word formation in prison; metonymy and name transfer is more frequent, but there are examples of complex semantic change, semantic extension, semantic restriction and semantic loss, too.

Within the field of morphological word formation, compounds are highly frequent, together with derivation. I could not find a typical prison slang derivational affix, the only one is *-inger* which generally results in a slang word, and another frequent group consists of words with the derivational affix *-esz*. Verb derivation was used less frequently by the creators and users of the examined group language, since most verbs get into prison slang as derivatives. Here I must note that the prefixation of verbs is very frequent in prison slang. Apparently, prison slang borrows a word without changing its form or its meaning in the host language, only the common prefix is modified, and such is the way of creating a slang word, but in most cases the prefixation of a verb can highly modify the meaning of the host language word.

As a result of the least frequent possibilities of internal word formation, we can find contamination, morpheme prolongation, morpheme truncation, word truncation, back-formation, distortion, displacement of word boundary, ending fixation and acronyms in prison slang... We can also find word forms with playful word formation, that is group language users use a way of word formation the result of which can be found funny from the outside position (e.g., “*dolce vita*” for ‘dollar’; “*baby’s stew*” for ‘porridge’). This is a kind of a creative word formation, that is, creativity of slang users is reflected by forms created this way.

Similarly to most slang varieties, it is also frequent in prison slang that certain concepts are named with syntagmatic or syntactic construction. Besides

expressions, it is best shown by fixed conversation elements that prison slang does not live as an isolated linguistic material or vocabulary but is part of prisoners' everyday social behaviour.

A more delicate, more hidden sociolinguistic aspect of prison slang can be studied within living language conditions, during conversation and with the help of fixed pictures and sound material. Unfortunately, I had no opportunity for the latter so I had to be satisfied with the results of the prisoner's linguistic attitude test.

3.3 Linguistic attitudes relating to prison slang

It is this area of my research that clearly shows slang as being not only a language variety which differs from the common register in its words and expressions but that slang is a way of living, different from the world of weekdays not only in the use of certain words by certain people in certain situations. Slang is a medium which helps its users to survive a difficult period of their lives. It is a medium that enables those who know this language variety to understand each with the help of partly uttered words, unfinished sentences and significant glances.

In my work I have also documented the views of prisoners on their own language variety, their opinion of the originating mechanisms and functions of this language variety within a penal institution, as well as their views on social slang use and slang situations. I inquired about personal experiences of their own slang learning, too. As a result of the answers, I have managed to conclude that prisoners go through a resocialization process in prison which is revealed by the individual appearance of prison slang, too. Resocialization takes place when marks – that would have been unacceptable and unimaginable to them before arriving into the institution – appear in the behaviour of prisoners. If we regard only one side, that is, prison slang, this must be the stage when prisoners says that they do not notice in what situation they use prison slang since they are not aware of *its* being slang: *“You use it continuously here. It becomes fixed so much that you will be compelled to use it outside, too. There are some people who do not want to use it but they get used to it. You either get used to it or you escape.”* According to the answers, it appears that learning the new linguistic pattern of behaviour is not compulsory, only recommended in case the prisoner

wants to be an ordinary member of the given cell community, that is he or she wants to spend his or her sentence as a group member. But successful resocialization comes only together with linguistic change. We have to stress that resocialization depends on life conditions so it is not necessary to live the remaining part of one's life with a changed behaviour. In this particular case, it would be harmful to continue life outside with norms acquired in the prison for easing prison life. By getting within new life conditions, by a new resocialization process, a new behaviour can be formed, with linguistic behaviour as an integral part.

As a result of my research project, a dictionary of Hungarian prison slang has been created, containing as many as five thousand entries resulting from the fieldwork done in the last eight years, which served as a basis for my sociolinguistic analysis.

The dictionary of prison slang contains entries in an alphabetical order. The entries are of two types: independent ones and those that refer to other entries. The independent entries give all the possible information available for the researcher, the cross-references only indicate where the given item is presented in more elaborate way. The target slang word of each entry is in bold and in an enlarged font size. The structure of an entry is as follows.

Data related to the target slang item – and all its meanings – is given in the heading of the entry. First we find the basic form of the given slang item. Homonyms differing in their origin and meaning are arranged under indexed parts within the entry. Then follows, where relevant, data concerning pronunciation, and then the different morphological variants are listed. Word class is indicated thereafter and stylistic register is provided if data was available from respondents, then follows the frequency and the usage of the particular slang item. To illustrate and interpret the given item, the next section of each entry provides further examples with indication as to their origin. The meaning is either given with everyday synonyms or is paraphrased.

4. Summary

Prisoners are among those slang users the lifestyle of whom is the most different from that of everyday people, and who create a specific internal

informal society characterized by a specific behaviour of its members and by a specific communicational basis for expressing thoughts.

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