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Is Slang a Linguistic Universal?

La présente étude se propose de démontrer que l'argot est un universel absolu, c'est-à-dire que, son existence étant nécessaire, il est présent à toutes les époques dans toutes les langues parlées depuis la naissance du langage humain. La preuve en est fournie moins par les premières traces attestées de l'argot ou par les argots connus de nos jours que par l'examen des fonctions originelles de l'argot et du langage humain. Celui-ci nous apprend en effet que la principale fonction de l'argot est la fonction phatique, celle du maintien et de la confirmation des relations et de l'affirmation de l'identité à l'intérieur des groupes mineurs existant au sein d'une communauté plus grande. L'argot n'est autre en fait que la révolte verbale de l'individu ou du groupe mineur contre la hiérarchie, révolte qui sert à défendre l'ego et à lui permettre de se libérer de la pression du groupe. Par cette fonction et par les moyens qu'il emploie, l'argot se rapproche beaucoup du rire libérateur et du réalisme grotesque, dégradant et matérialisant du carnaval de Bakhtine, probablement pour la raison que l'argot transfère le rire libérateur carnavalesque et, ainsi, le carnaval lui-même au quotidien. Comme les causes qui donnent naissance à l'argot (et, en même temps, à la langue) se ramènent aux propriétés essentielles de l'homme, aux caractéristiques sociales de l'Homo sapiens, nous pouvons dire que les raisons de son existence sont en premier lieu d'ordre biologique, éthologique et social, et non pas linguistique ; par conséquent, l'argot est un universel non seulement linguistique mais humain aussi.

The opinion that slang is a universal phenomenon seems to come up often in recent years (PENTTINEN 1984, p. 7; CHAPMAN 1988, p. xiv; TENDER 1997, p. 91). Without having tried to prove this statement I have said such things too, stating that slang is a linguistic universal because presumably it is found in every language and in every era of the languages. One of the basic conditions of its birth – perhaps the most important one – is a community the members of which are in a daily relationship of intensive verbal

communication. If this relationship of intensive verbal communication exists, slang phenomena occur in the language. The more intensive the (communication) relationship of the speaking community is, the more frequent the slang phenomena are (KIS 1997, p. 241).

However, such statements cannot even be called hypotheses on their own right because by using them we only state that we cannot imagine a language without such ways of speaking specific of small communities within the same dialects; ways of speaking that deviate (often on purpose) from the usual speaking of the community even if these deviating ways of speaking are not considered slang neither by the researchers of the given language nor by the speakers of the dialect. But this is only a supposition based on anticipation, not a fact based on data.

It is because of the lack of facts that Mihály Péter considers the question 'Is slang a linguistic universal?' impossible to answer: "I answer the question with another question: do we have enough empirical (and to a great degree historical) material to answer?" (PÉTER 1999, p. 33.) He implies that we possess too little knowledge to really be able to label slang a linguistic universal.

But is finding and describing all the slang in the languages of the past and present world the only means to prove that slang is a linguistic universal? I believe not. Before I start to explain this thought it is worth to declare what we mean by the term linguistic universal.

It is common to differentiate between two types of linguistic universals. The first is the *absolute universal* that can be either deductive (inevitable *a priori* statement or judgement derived from *a priori* premises during the descriptive method) or inductive (when the universal validity of certain phenomena can be empirically postulated). The opposite of *absolute universal* is the *statistical universal* (tendency, quasi-universalia, near-universal, relative universal), which can be observed in the majority of languages but there are exceptions also. For that matter, universals are mainly implications considering their logical forms (*implicational universal*), that is they appear in the form of "if X then Y" (HAJDÚ & DOMOKOS 1978, pp. 112–113).

Labelling slang a universal exposes numerous problems. First of all, researchers do not state whether they consider slang a statistical or an absolute universal.

If we start to examine which languages have slang and how old the earliest relics of the slang of the languages are, we will only be able to state that slang is a language characteristic existing in some of the world's languages (maybe in the majority but it cannot be proven) and having existed for several hundred, perhaps one or two thousand years already. On these grounds slang can be regarded 'only' as a statistical universal.

When considering the qualification as an absolute universal it seems to be a much easier statement but to prove it is not simple at all: as far as the world's languages are concerned, we have quite a small amount of material (especially in the case of languages spoken outside the Western world) although there is access – even if very limited – to smaller slang collections of the world's many languages. On the internet we can find *The Alternative Dictionaries* (An internet collaborative project: <http://www.notam.uio.no/~hcholm/altlang/>) that is being expanded by the readers and has a collection from 160 languages. At the moment (16 January 2006), it does contain slang words and expressions from 77 languages. On the site the slang of many non-European languages are represented including Chinese, Japanese, Tamil, Hindi, Uzbek, Vietnamese, Thai, Amharic and even Esperanto. However, these 77 or 160 languages make less than 2-3% of the world's languages thus they have minimal statistical proof.

Furthermore, we have still less data from the past. This is natural as slang is a typical verbal phenomenon very rarely written down thus written records hardly appear. Of course we know that slang words 'already' appeared in Sanskrit (cf. *kapāla* 'dish' → 'head': PEI 1960, p. 144), and that behind words explained from vulgar Latin in the Neo-Latin languages (see TAMÁS 1969, pp. 35–40; PEI 1960, p. 144) we can often suspect the phenomenon nowadays called slang: Latin *equus* 'horse' ~ *caballus* 'bad horse' >> French *cheval*, Spanish *caballo*, Italian *cavallo* 'horse'; Latin *follis* 'leather bag, windbag' → 'stupid, crazy, fool' >> French *fou* 'fool'; Latin *testa* 'pot, crockery' → 'head' >> French *tête*, Italian *testa* 'head' etc.

In the long run the arguments – that slang was already present in the ancient comedies; that Shakespeare made his characters say slang expressions; and that Villon wrote numerous ballads in cant – are all rather too weak (ANDERSSON & TRUDGILL 1990, pp. 80–81) because they extend the time span examined

only to several centuries and considering language and culture except from the Sanskrit example we do not even leave Europe.

Therefore I think it is not worth examining the linguistic universal nature of slang based on written data of linguistic history and on conclusions derived from them because we should go back in time for ten thousands of years – and knowing the limits of the linguistic history methods, that seems rather hopeless.

Based on the spatial and temporal limits of the accessible data on slang we may think that the absolute universal nature of slang cannot be proven; we may only prove that if certain conditions apply (like some implicational universal) slang appears in languages. This supposition is tied to the concept that slang is the folk speech of modern big cities. According to this concept slang appears only at a level of civilisation which emerges together with the forming of big cities and the side-by-side living of different culture groups in human history (ALLEN 1994, p. 3961).

Of the Hungarian slang researchers Mihály Péter for example believes that “the evolution of slang is mostly supported by city life, moreover by big city life and this also supports the argument that slang is a historical category of language” (PÉTER 1999, p. 33), although he immediately notes that “the circumstances that tradition and innovation, regularity and irregularity, automatisisation and actualisation are antinomies basically determining the life of language alludes to the universal tendency of forming slang. Partridge considers slang to be as old a phenomenon as the poetic language because playing with language and spontaneous expression of the self is an ancient characteristic of men” (PÉTER 1999, p. 33).

For the formation of such slang “there has to be a socially accepted standard linguistic variation” (KÖVECSES 1997, p. 9) because “the anti-normative, different way of speaking can have only a codified prestige version as a *raison d'être*” (PÉTER 1999, p. 33).

In this approach slang is such an implicational universal the existence of which is tied to an independent phenomenon: the emergence of standard. Pursuant to this approach slang cannot be as old as human language and cannot appear in all languages: slang appears only in those languages that have experienced standardisation. The researchers who adopt this train of thought

(like Mihály Péter in his lecture published in this volume) regard slang as a near-universal.

Regarding slang as big city folk speech and an anti-language evolving in contrast to the standard may seem convincing but is contradicted by the linguistic history data listed above because they show that slang did exist in the languages concerned even before the emergence of a standard variety.

It is much more realistic an idea that does not attribute the evolution of slang to modern age society and the existence of standard. Sándor Szilágyi N. believes in this when writing that slang “is such a way of speaking that is determined to realise the low version of a language, or to be more precise, the low version’s accessible extreme. It has already been written that slang is actually an ‘anti-language’; but a specification is needed here: it is not the anti-language of the spoken language in general but the anti-language of the high version. Its numerous characteristics can really be interpreted as the reflection of the high language version. (For this reason I believe that slang exists there and then where and since when language has some kind of high version, even if only a ritual one. If there is a language without a high version, then it probably lacks slang.)” (SZILÁGYI N. 2006).

Szilágyi’s last sentence tells me more than just regarding slang as a near-universal though more accurately and in more realistic conditions. His statement suggests that the existence of a language without a high version is highly unlikely. And from this it probably follows that the existence of a language without slang is highly unlikely: for me slang does seem to be an absolute universal after all, a phenomenon independent of linguistic and cultural regions and of time, as old as human language. Since language in the modern sense is used by the *Homo sapiens*, probably slang is used, too.

I believe that by examining the evolution and development of language we can find the stage when in the language emerging in human groups in the modern sense (in synchrony with the language and part of it) slang phenomena evolved.

It is not my purpose to outline even partly the different theories connected to the origin of language. But I do need to quote the thoughts concerning the causes linked to the social relationships among humans which make the appearance of slang legitimate and keep slang alive today. These reasons are the

very same as the reasons that on a larger scale create and maintain the language that involves slang. These reasons can best be explored by reconstructing the original functions of the language.

What are the original functions of language (and slang)? On the one hand, this can be answered by considering functions of the contemporary languages assuming that the language of modern man is not too old, maybe 100-150,000 years old, and it has perhaps only existed in its current form for 40-50,000 years. Since there has been no significant (e.g. genetic) change concerning *Homo sapiens* we can assume that our language is best serving those functions which needed it originally and which were most adaptive during the natural selection.

On the other hand, we may choose etiological functionalism. Etiological functionalism means that when trying to state the function of a feature, instead of concentrating on the actual inputs and outputs, we have to concentrate on the evolutionary past of the feature and the environment when and where the function could have exercised reasonable contribution to its own selection. This relevant period is attributed to the emergence and evolution of the Homo-generation around the Stone Age (NEMES & MOLNÁR 2002, pp. 21–22).

If we seek to find the original functions of language based on the contemporary ones it is clear that the essence of language is not primarily what the linguists and non-linguists believe it to be used for: language is not primarily a tool for exchanging ideas and objective information and presumably it has not been so at its evolution. This is supported by the fact that language has difficulties expressing descriptions of spatiality, feelings and emotions and that it deals with simple information only with moderate success. On the contrary, language is prominently convenient for building and maintaining social connections and for manipulating others (AITCHISON 1996; SÁNDOR 2003).

This social function is expressed by the fact that language indicates our group identity and relationship with our communication partner every time we speak; that is to say every time we speak our use of language indicates to which group we belong and what is our position in the group hierarchy. This characteristic of language is very adaptive to group formation because it ensures the isolation between the groups and stabilises the hierarchy within the group at

the same time thus it strengthens group cohesion significantly (SÁNDOR 2003).

Observations by both ethologists and sociolinguists imply that the place and role of language cannot be explained on the level of the individual but on the level of the group and this usage is not primarily an exchange of information. Its main function is not the Jakobsonian referential function but like in case of the different types of animal communication, human speech can be comprehended as an act of behaviour which changes the probability pattern of the animal behaviour to a rate which is favourable for the communicator considering existence and reproduction on an average of many cases (CSÁNYI 1999, p. 231). From an ethological viewpoint this communication is a type of behaviour (cf. SZILÁGYI N. 2004, pp. 42–45) regulating the recognition and identification of the individual, the hierarchy of the group, the reservation of contacts etc.

The factors observed in the workings of the languages existing today and the ethological researches indicate that the emergence of language in the contemporary sense is closely tied to the early man's community needs. Maybe language departed from the social intelligence originally responsible for managing social situations in the primate brain (MITHEN 1996); or that the inner representation of the linguistic meaning derives from the primates' representation of social situations (WORDEN 1999). Merlin Donald (1991) emphasises this in his theory: the evolution of the vocal speech was permitted by certain cognitive transitions (SÁNDOR 2003).

Among the relating hypotheses the most well-known is probably that of Robin Dunbar (1996) according to which language in the early times played the same group and coalition cohesive role – and to an extent still does so – as grooming does in the case of anthropoid apes. This theory was based on the observation that the evolution of the Homos – occurring in very small and closed groups – was accompanied by a certain growth in group size: the early Habilines used to live in groups of twenty-something, whereas later the group size of Sapienses might have reached around 140-150. With the growth of the numbers the forces to destroy the group grew too: the chance of conflicts increased, thus there emerged an increased need to reduce aggression, and to secure group stability and cohesion. Among the primates different means

occurred of which the most widely used – as Dunbar explains – was grooming, the cleaning of the other's fur with an intent to soothe and make peace. During grooming coherent groups of three, seven or eight appear within the big group, which protect the members of the group against outside attacks (DUNBAR 1996, 2003; SZVETELSZKY 2002, p. 30).

Because of the evolution the opportunities of grooming became rather reduced (since in an extended group all the relationships cannot be firmed like that) its petting and confirming role was taken over by other means, primarily by vocal speech. Although speech could not reproduce some important aspects of grooming (e.g. direct touch, caressing and the stimulation of endorphin release incidental to it accompanied by slight euphoria – this function of grooming will be replaced by laugh; cf. DUNBAR 2003), apart from this language plays the role magnificently: words can also soothe, caress, relieve stress and moreover, they can be targeted to several individuals at the same time. The 'grooming' talk – that helps to keep and strengthen contacts – or gossiping is still the most typical form of language usage today, according to observations in many different cultures (DUNBAR 1996; SZVETELSZKY 2002, pp. 29–30). This role of language is called phatic function – term by Malinowski (1953) – and many believe that this is the original function of vocal language. All the other functions were set on this in layers, often masking the original.

The evolutionary pressure of the reasons and conditions outlined above formed a language that fits in a set of factors called the human behaviour complex. The complex consists of the features solely characteristic of humans, which developed after the derivation of our chimpanzee relatives and thus are specifically human (CSÁNYI 1999, p. 125). It is evident that language is not only part of the human behaviour complex but can shape it too. The complex played an enormous role in the individualisation of groups and their isolation from other groups. As language is not inherited genetically it is necessary that within the groups it has developed and is still developing to be unique and different. These different languages were attributed to certain groups only, thus language became one of the best criteria of belonging to a group, isolating the outside and supporting group cohesion inside and a main tool of group member recognition: it helps to distinguish the freeriders (and stigmatise them) who

want to have their share in the advantages of group life but are unwilling to contribute to the group's wellbeing (SÁNDOR 2003; DUNBAR 2003).

In my opinion, what was said about language and the basic functions of language apply to slang as well, and we have to ask the related question: where do we find the place of slang in the language of Stone Age groups of maximum 150?

In connection with his social brain hypothesis, Robin Dunbar points out the fact that, considering the individuals, a group of 150 does not form a homogenous unit at all. Dunbar emphasises that “It seems likely that there are cognitive limitations on the number of individuals that can be held in a relationship of a given degree of intensity. There is some longstanding evidence, for example, that the number of individuals we can have a particularly close bond with is limited to around 12-15, and that within this there may be an inner circle of about 5 individuals with whom this relationship is especially strong. There is, in addition, evidence to suggest that there may in fact be a series of layers, with boundaries at around 35 and 80-100, each associated with a declining level of emotional intensity and closeness. It is as though each of us sits in the centre of a series of expanding circles at 5, 15, 35, 80 and 150 individuals” (DUNBAR 2003).

I presume that slang can be identified with those forms of language usage in this layered social network that are used in groups (coalitions) which include members very close to each other and emotionally well connected within a bigger group. To a great extent these small groups become individualised exactly by the language they formed, and the sense of the common language does contribute to group consciousness. Researchers of slang usually say that every group creates its own slang (cf. YELISTRATOV 1998, p. 20). Of course, slang in this role does not differ from the common group language or its variation; those serve exactly the same function in their bigger user groups as slang types in their own smaller coalitions. Slang is basically not different from the common language layered above it: indeed – at least concerning their linguistic tools and vocabulary, in other words considering slang a mere lexical or grammatical category – they might be described only as subsystems compared with the common language, containing relatively small amount of elements filled emotionally, typical of the small group.

By approaching slang as a language variation indicating and supporting identity of coalitions within the group we can cast more light on other characteristics of slang and we can explain many attitudes and opinions concerning slang. For example, why do certain language communities (and often the speakers of slang, too) usually strongly disapprove of slang?

Obviously it is the fundamental interest of the group not to have smaller-bigger gangs, separate small groups within the community because by exercising their own interests they would risk the interests of the whole community (or at least that of the coalition of the community power). Dissension can raise the issue of group disintegration and that would mean the death of the group members in Stone Age conditions. That is why the big group or its leading coalition tries to end small groups, isolate them, homogenise and synchronise the community (with the help of common rituals, beliefs, the sense of the common language etc.). One way to homogenisation is disgracing and discrediting the inner groups and that goes hand in hand with stigmatising their way of speaking (their slang) because the slang of the group of people so supportive of each other even against the big group is identified with that certain small group, by the groups above them in the hierarchy just as well as by the stigmatised coalition.

Naturally, the members of the small groups – themselves also belonging to the same bigger community – relate to other groups' slang the same way because they too feel that such linguistically expressed separation is disintegrating. Accordingly, they are very likely to accept the stigmatisation of their own slang and therefore slang usage may make its users ashamed. There are surveys on attitude these days that present this well. (As an example see SZABÓ 2005 on prison slang.)

Overt prestige is never attributed to slang because of its stigmatisation but covert prestige is a typical characteristic of slang, as the person using slang expresses by his/her language usage that he/she belongs to a smaller community thus the small group attributes qualities to the person like friendliness or loyalty (TRUDGILL 2003, p. 30).

Depending on how conflicting the slang user group and its language (if conflicting at all) seem to the community, slang can be considered by the majority an anti-language, while the small group may consider slang a tool of

defence against the community (cf. HALLIDAY 1976). (However, in Stone Age conditions it is very unlikely that anti-groups would appear in communities of 150. This is rather a phenomenon of later ages in societies formed of different culture groups that are much layered in economical and other aspects; cf. TAYLOR 1994.) Slang's turning into an anti-language is a natural process because slang is born as a linguistic consequence of the reason that generated small group formation, because the members of the small group want to escape from the pressure of the big community. The positive role of the small groups is that they relieve the individual from the pressure of the big community. Slang is actually the verbal revolt of the individual and the group against the hierarchy and making just with humour (PENTTINEN 1984, p. 14). This verbal revolt is so successful because it helps to relieve stress but does not threaten the big community on its own thus it does not destroy the community that provides territory for the small group and its members too.

This way slang is a self-therapy, the defence of the ego against the oppressing community. Robert L. Chapman wrote: "Surely wounded egos are the most common human nonanatomic possession. Slang might be seen as a remedy for them, as a self-administered therapy old as the first family that spoke. The family, like society, entails a hierarchy of power and of right, against which the healthy growing self of the child needs measures to compensate for its weakness and sinfulness. Slang as a remedy denies the weakness and brags about the sinfulness. In this view, it would not be too much to claim that therapeutic slang is necessary for the development of the self; that society would be impossible without slang. It is curious that a linguistic phenomenon that seems so fleeting and so frivolous, as slang undeniably does, should at the same time be so deep and so vital to human growth and order. (...) In this aspect slang is similar to, and perhaps the same as, profanity. Like profanity slang is a surrogate for destructive physical action." (CHAPMAN 1988, p. xiv.)

Slang's personality-defence function shows a strong resemblance to certain ancient celebrations that temporarily suspended community hierarchy. I am going to call these celebrations *carnivals* from now on by extending Bakhtin's term. I suspect that slang places the most important characteristics of the carnival in a verbal form to our everyday life. With this approach we can say

that both carnival and slang are based on that feature of man that the individual cannot live under the pressure of the group all the time. It is a good thing to belong to a closed community because it provides security but sometimes we need to get out – of the community and of ourselves. Our excessive need used to be satisfied by those rituals of controlled ceremonies to assure that no explosion of the revolt could get out of control and destroy the group (ZOLNAY 1983, p. 232; cf. BAKHTIN 2002, pp. 18–19).

Carnivals used to help people to experience total freedom. According to Bakhtin, to experience this total freedom the most important tool was the festive, communal and ambivalent carnival laugh that is “joyful, loud happiness but mocking and ridiculing at the same time; it claims and denies at the same time, buries and revives at the same time” (BAKHTIN 2002, pp. 20–21).

The importance of laugh cannot be overemphasized in human life (both during the carnivals and in the everyday life) and in human language (both in carnival speech and everyday slang). According to Dunbar, laugh serves to complement for that narcotic joy basic in social attachment which would have become absent with leaving grooming behind. Laugh can produce the same narcotic effects as grooming: “we feel relaxed, euphoric, at peace with the world and well disposed towards those with whom we laugh. It appears to play a very fundamental role in human social interaction.” (DUNBAR 2003.)

The two special kind of laughs – the carnival laugh and the laugh carried by slang – have a lot in common but while carnival laugh accompanies rare celebrations slang laugh is a ‘drug’ in the everyday life. I think I am not mistaken when I say it is not a coincidence that slang has so many expressions full of emotions that are humorous and funny at the same time. Slang seems to place that liberating carnival laugh in linguistic patterns, materialise them in words and thus it transports the carnival itself to everyday life.

We know very little of slang laugh but we are likely to find many characteristic of carnival laugh in it. Bakhtin elaborates on carnival laugh, and we already mentioned some of its characteristics so it should be enough just to mention a few that can be observed in slang laugh too. For example there is the aesthetical approach to carnival laugh, the grotesque realism. In grotesque realism humans are presented as group members whose bodies do not become fully independent, do not have rigid borders to keep them from the outside. It is

not the single biological individual but the group who bears the material-physical principle and this group is a continuously growing and renewed community (BAKHTIN 2002, pp. 28–29).

The most important feature of grotesque realism (and slang) is degradation: changing the sublime, spiritual, ideal and abstract into the level of clear materialism, worldliness and the sensuality tied to them. The communal laugh, as the organising force of all forms of the grotesque realism is already connected to the lower, material-bodily regions. The laugh degrades and materializes (BAKHTIN 2002, pp. 29–30).

Laugh in the form of grotesque realism has an unbreakable, inner relationship with freedom (BAKHTIN 2002, p. 101) and an alternative view on truth. One can experience victory over fear extraordinarily in carnival laugh. This feeling is not only attributed to the victory over the mystic fear (‘fear of God’) and over the fear of nature’s forces but primarily to the feeling that laugh can win over the moral fear that would freeze, depress and distract one’s mind (BAKHTIN 2002, p. 103). Because the community’s festive laugh does not only win over the underworld, sacred things and the fear of death but also over the fear of all kinds of power, worldly emperors and any kind of oppression and restriction in general. This laugh is not a mask but a substantial inner form that cannot be changed into seriousness without revealing and destroying its truth (BAKHTIN 2002, p. 106).

I think these characteristics of carnival laugh are present in slang laugh as well.

I am convinced that the characteristics of slang mentioned above (and those not yet mentioned) make slang one of the most important linguistic tools, verbal communication methods of the speaking community. Slang conserves the original functions of human language so clearly, visibly and moreover, strikingly and in a concentrated way that (with a bit of prepossession) we could call it a *language essence*. Slang is – as Yelistratov put it in its defence – “not an optional feature in a language, not a tumour that should be removed to leave the linguistic body healthy and beautiful, but on the contrary it is the very own structure making feature of language” (YELISTRATOV 1998, p. 143).

Now, at the end of my essay I should return to the question: is slang a linguistic universal? I believe that, as a conclusion of the arguments considered, I can say yes: the use of slang must be a characteristic of the *Homo sapiens* since the formation of language. Slang is an absolute universal, its existence is and has always been legitimate in every human language. Furthermore, as the reasons creating slang (and thus language) derived from the most basic human characteristics, the social features of the *Homo sapiens*, we can also state that it was created not primarily for linguistic reasons but for biological-ethological-social reasons, thus slang is not only a linguistic but a 'human' universal.

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