

The argument of the doctoral dissertation

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Hungarian Prison Slang Today
From 1996 to 2005

Debrecen
2005

1 The matter and the objectives of the dissertation

As already the title has suggested, my dissertation presents Hungarian prison slang as attested from 1996 to 2005. This group language has never seen an overall study in Hungary up to now. I deal with general questions of the internal and informal language use of the prisoners of penal institutions in my work and, together with rendering the words and expressions into a dictionary, I attempt at the linguistic and sociolinguistic description of the group language examined.

My objective, the overall study of Hungarian slang, is justified by the data being of such quantity and quality and having never been dealt with in linguistics that seemed worth to be examined by a deeper and planned slang research.

My main objective was to explore Hungarian prison slang, to present its origins, functions and operation as well as its role within slang user communities. My aim also was to show its linguistic predecessors, to compare it to an existing linguistic database of criminals, that is, to the elements of cant, and, together with it, to define its place in the area of Hungarian slang research. During my studies, I always kept man's role in slang in mind so my objective was the description of the conditions among which the members of a researched group are motivated for slang usage. In order to learn about it, I had to extend my research to the examination of the groups of closed space, observing the possibilities and reasons within prison community.

During my work, it was natural that there emerged the question: in what way does it make sense to prepare an apparently static dictionary when trying to meet my own objectives, that is, conducting a sociolinguistic research and regarding the language as a dynamic system? Of course we have to be conscious of the fact that this dictionary is slang which can be grasped on its own, that is, empirical material available for outsiders, being the only way for reaching the objective, that is, the linguistic analysis of the examined group. But research was oriented mainly towards the examination of people using language. Attestation of words and expressions was necessary only because this was the best way for obtaining the characteristics of the given language variant. The preparation of the dictionary was indispensable for answering the questions of the examined areas, and it was logical due to the possibilities.

So, with presenting prison slang, my objectives were to approach the given slang phenomenon from the most possible aspects and to analyze prison vocabulary from a linguistic point of view, with special reference to those areas where linguistics, that is in this case prison slang research, can be addressed for the deeper understanding of a closed group. Finally, I held it important to fix the linguistic database, which was created during the research, in such a form that lets both linguistics and the public have a look at the language use of prisoners in Hungary so I publish words and fixed expressions, together with their meanings in a monolingual group language dictionary.

2 Methods

For the dissertation it was necessary to overview the literature of slang research which is relevant for prison slang, both chronologically and in a thematic way, with an emphasis on sociolinguistic attitude which was present as early as in the early cant research. Certainly I made use of the results of examinations within the scope of group languages by contemporary slang research, the most information about which was to be found in the series *Szlengkutató* edited by TAMÁS KIS. I also relied on the works of MIHÁLY GEDÉNYI, LÁSZLÓ VELKEI, KRISZTINA SZABÓ, IMRE BENCZE, FERENC C. FEHÉR and ISTVÁN FARKAS which are predecessors of prison slang. I also held it important to present an overview on the theoretical statements concerning group language research of our cant dictionaries so some pieces of essential information were added to my work by the researches of TAMÁS KIS into early remnants of cant and by the research results of lexicographers of cant from 1862 (KÁROLY TORONYAI, KÁLMÁN BERKES, SÁNDOR JENŐ and IMRE VETŐ, KÁROLY KISS, ISTVÁN SZIRMAY, JÓZSEF BALASSA, JÓZSEF BOROSS and LÁSZLÓ SZŰTS, ISTVÁN FAZAKAS).

It was indispensable to work out an own research method since there has never been prison slang study on such scale in Hungary. That's why I worked out the methodology of both data collecting and data processing.

The linguistic material presented in the dissertation had been collected during the last eight years as a whole. Research was realized by questionnaires but at some places I had the possibility for group interviews and for individual ones. Data collecting was performed in the larger penal institutions of Hungary, that is, Debrecen, Nyíregyháza, Sátoraljaújhely, Szeged, Tököl, Budapest (Kozma street), Balassagyarmat, Vác,

Esztergom, Kalocsa, Sopronkőhida, Sándorháza, Mélykút, Baracska and Székesfehérvár. I used a detailed questionnaire containing 18 conceptual categories compiled by me. In most cases 25-30% of the prisoners was interviewed but a minimum of 10% of all the prisoners filled out the questionnaire on the less favourable occasions, too. I did not have selected informants and sampling was random. When overviewing the personal parts of the questionnaires, I could make it sure that there were long time recidivists with great crimes as well as first-crime prisoners just having got into the institution. Research was conducted personally by me in most of the cases so we could discuss problematic attraction centres.

Besides my own collection, I also processed the material of the competition for prison slang collection advertised in *Börtön Újság* (20 March 1998), issue 7/12, page 6. For this competition, most of the material (4) were sent from the penitentiary in Kozma street, Budapest. 2-2 works were sent from Sopronkőhida, Szeged and Vác, 1-1 from Dunaújváros, Kecskemét, Pálhalma, Tököl and Nyíregyháza, and there was a work without place indication. This vocabulary, collected mainly by prisoners, worked as a confirmation to my collection.

Finishing the study here with the relatively large collection of words and expressions would not have allowed me to notice the operation of slang and the role of slang in man's life. So the examination was followed by individual and group interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Penitentiary and Prison of Sopronkőhida, within groups of 5 or 6 of prisoners. Using this method, approx. 25 informants were interviewed on one working day. Interviews were recorded in my notes since I could not have used a tape-recorder. I used pre-made question types so I could direct the talking and the notes could have been prepared systematically. Questions concerned mainly the linguistic attitude of slang users towards their group language.

Having finished data collection, I prepared a linguistic database from the unsystematic collection. In this, I recorded the slang attested, its meaning, its stylistic level (determined by its user), examples when appropriate, as well as the place of the attestation of the collected slang word or expression, phrase, simile or ryme.

As a conclusion, we can state that individual research methods were necessary for the preparation of my work, tailored to the users of this group language and to their conditions. When finishing work, we can conclude that the methods applied gave results, that is, I succeeded to explore and to approach from different aspects the Hungarian prison slang of the given period.

3 Results

3.1 Predecessors of prison slang research

As long as until the end of 1980s, it was customary to regard slang as a deviant variant of language, and to think it unworthy for research or not to take it into account as a linguistic variant. Today more and more linguists deal with this area of the language, as related to earlier conditions and it is no more appreciated as a harmful offshoot but as a sociolinguistical phenomenon. In my work, I summarised the most important results of Hungarian slang research and I showed that slang is a piece of language with the help of which we can obtain very important information as regarding the origins of language or the original functions of language, which means that we can obtain a knowledge which cannot be easily acquired through the analysis of other linguistic phenomena or which cannot be acquired at all. Having this in mind, I dealt with the problem of defining slang technical term and with typological questions of slang variants (based mainly on the writings of KAARINA KARTTUNEN and TAMÁS KIS).

After clarifying general questions of slang, I presented prison slang in Hungary (unfortunately not of large quantity) and I disputed the relationship between cant and prison slang, with stress laid on the results of cant remnants important from the viewpoint 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 of origin of cant and cant words, always comparing the results of researches to my own statements emerging during the study of prison slang. I also emphasized those parts in the dictionaries and studies where the authors, even as early as in the 1860s, attempted at creating sociolinguistical theories.

For the examination of prison slang, it was necessary to get information about prison world itself, so I could not have avoided an overview on Hungarian prison conditions in order to get acquainted with prison as an institutional system and to make it known for outsiders as well as to learn about official terms and attitudes and to help the readers to the knowledge of these.

3.2 Groups of closed space; group organization in the prison

Prisons are organized as institutions, that is as secondary formal groups from the sociological viewpoint. Prisoners are members of this formal system organized from above and the formal groups of prisoners are units of this system, too. From the aspect of

prison slang research, these are important not as units of an institution but as non-official small groups created within the formal institution.

In my dissertation, I presented the groups created necessarily in such, totally closed prison organization, together with informal sanctions and awards which operate these, strained relations resulting from everyday's close coexistence and possibilities for solving these, and the role of slang within such conditions. I tried to throw light on those processes which a newcomer prisoner has to face and to present the steps of continuous initiation, including learning prison slang. I presented the roles of informal prison society, the place of individual prisoners in the informal hierarchic system, concrete and abstract principles important for prisoner society, with the help of prison language since slang is the most appropriate method of all for presenting this set of problems.

After examinations in this area, one essential result of my research seemed clear, that is, that prison slang is not only an interesting set of words and expressions, but a very lively functioning internal language operated by informal groupings who make it an important tool for everyday social contacts. Through my examinations it could be seen at this point what reasons the speakers have for slang usage, why and when it is felt important to use an internal language variant, and what are the situations where you behave „in slang”. Besides taking into account social aspects, my objective was a pervading study of linguistic material, the result of which was the analysis of the linguistic material attested from general conclusions to examination in the system of slang word formation.

3.3 Linguistic examination of prison slang

As a result of varietude in the place of origin/activization of slang, general conclusions can be stated from the database collected. First I examined the organization of the vocabulary as a result of which we can state that there is a central, core vocabulary in prison slang just as in other group languages, the data of which are known and used frequently in each penal institution and that there is a peripheral vocabulary, that is, a data set the words and expressions of which are used less frequently or not known at all at some places. As to general overview, I present the frequent attraction centres of prison slang formation, and my analysis is continued with the presentation of variants of which there is a large number in the examined group language. Morphological differences can be experienced mainly when comparing the materials of each institution; but it occurs that

there are such variants within one and the same institution, in particular when it is a loan from a foreign language. Relevant morphological differences were experienced in the case of words of Romany origin mainly when there were missing phonemes in the Hungarian sound system which led to morphological variants.

In my dissertation, I present various word formation methods characteristic of prison slang, with the help of the systematization principles of TAMÁS KIS and OTTÓ HOFFMANN relating to this field. First I present prison slang loans from foreign languages. When overviewing the database, it can be observed that it is Romany which gave the most loan words to prison slang and it is only German that comes close to it in quantity and mainly its argot variant. Although not coming near to Romany or German, English also provided loan words for prison slang and there are some Italian and French loans, too, in prison slang.

Words and expressions borrowed from the different variants of the basic language serve as another layer of the internal informal vocabulary of prison. Within its frame, there are some words which are of dialectic origin, there are loans from penal technical jargon, from military slang and from cant, in considerable quantity. Research showed that borrowing from the group languages of Hungarian besides prison slang is an extremely productive way of word formation in our case. In my study, I show a range of examples for proving this.

I present groups of word formation types applied in prison slang with the usage of elements within the language variant, that is rare ways of semantic, formal and internal word formation. The results show that it is name giving which is the most rare 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.

Within the field of morphological word formation, compounds are highly frequent, together with derivation which I prove with many examples for different derivatives. I could not find a typical prison slang derivative, it is only the derivative *-inger* which generally results in slang word and another frequent group is words with the derivative *-esz* in prison slang. Verb derivation was used less frequently by the creators and users of the examined group language, since most verbs get into prison slang already derivated. Here I must note that the prefixation of verbs is very frequent in prison slang. It occurs that prison slang borrows a word in unchanged form and with unchanged meaning from the basis language, only with the modification of the usual prefix, and such is the way for

the creation of a slang word, but in most cases the prefixation of a verb can highly modify the meaning of the basis language word, too.

As a result of the rarer possibilities of internal word formation, we can find contamination, morpheme prolongation, morpheme truncation, word truncation, back-formation, distortion, movement 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 such a possible way of word formation the result of which can be found funny from the outside. 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 slangs, it is frequent in prison slang that certain concepts are named with syntagms so they use 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 together with prisoners but is part of their everyday social behaviour. This is proven by some extracts from the dictionary in the study.

A refined, 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 relating to their group language on this field for now.

3.4 Linguistic attitudes relating to prison slang

At this point of my dissertation, the main result of my dissertation can be seen the best. This means that slang is not only a language variant which differs from the common register in its words and expressions but it is a way of living, differing from the world of weekdays not only in the usage of certain words by certain people in certain situations. Slang is the medium which helps its users to survive the period which is not the least pleasurable for him or her. It is the medium where those who know this language variant can understand each other from half words, unfinished sentences and significant glances.

In my work I attest the views of prisoners on their own language variant, their opinion on the originating mechanisms and on the functions within the penal institution of this language variant, as well as their views on social slang use and slang situations. I inquired about personal experiences of slang learning, too. As a result of the answers given, I could conclude that prisoners go through a resocialization process in the prison which is

revealed by the individual appearance of prison slang, too. Resocialization happens when such marks appear in the behaviour of prisoners which they had thought unacceptable and unimaginable when just getting into the institution. If we regard only one side, that is, prison slang, this must be the stage when the prisoner says that he or she does not notice in what situation he or she uses prison slang since he or she is not conscious 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 who does not want to use it but they get used to it. You either get used to it or you escape*”. From the answers, it turned out 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, meaning 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 life with a changed behaviour. In this particular case, it would be harmful to continue outside life with norms acquired in the prison for easing prison life. With getting within new life conditions, with new resocialization, a new behaviour can be formed, with linguistic behaviour as an integral part.

As a result of my slang research, the dictionary of Hungarian prison slang was created, containing as many as five thousand entries¹ with those linguistic data which come from the collection of the last eight years, and which served as a basis for my sociolinguistical examination. Prisoners are among those slang users the life style 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 the members of the society and by a specific communicational basis for expressing thoughts.

¹ Entries of the dictionary contain the following data:

bláz fn gyak 1. Cigaretta. *Nyomass egy ~t a csacsogómba!* 'Adj egy cigarettát a számba!' [ált.=Cigaretta. Ném. *blasen-* Fújni füstöt.] — **babáresz, bagaretta, bágárez, bagó, búzrúd, cirok, csavar, dohánygerenda, dollár, dzsanga, gerenda, gigi, langesz, mellbemaró, nikotinrúd, ördögfüst, pábáresz, pábáró, pampi, pipu, rakéta, spagóca, spandi, spangli, stab, stalli, staub, stób, sziga, tab, tabak, tabaré, tubák, tubálesz, tubáló, tubáresz, vatta.** Vö. mezítlábas. 2. Férfi nemi szerv, hímvessző; **dákó.** *Laza ~t a vigyorgódba!*: Menj a fenébe! (Tkp. Ernyedt péniszt a szádba!) Vö. **leakad.**

4 List of publications concerning the topic of the dissertation

1998. Belső szókincs. A mai magyar börtönszleng [Internal vocabulary. Hungarian prison slang today]. In: *Börtönügyi Szemle*, issue 17/2, pp. 34–45

2001. A Sopronkőhidai Fegyház és Börtön szlengszókincsének változása az 1960-as évektől napjainkig [Changes in the slang vocabulary of the Penitentiary and Prison of Sopronkőhida from the 1960s to today]. In: *Magyar Nyelvjárások* Vol. 39, pp. 115–126

2001. A 'besúgó' a magyar és a finn börtönszlengben [Terms for 'informer' in Hungarian and Finnish prison slang]. In: *Folia Uralica Debreceniensia* Vol. 8, 581–6.

2003. A magyar büntetés-végrehajtási intézetekben élő fogvatartottak hierarchikus szereprendszerének bemutatása a szleng szókincs tükrében [The hierarchic system of roles of prisoners living in Hungarian penal institutions as illustrated by their slang vocabulary]. The 12th Conference of Applied Linguistics, Szeged

2003. „Nagyobb lesz az ember, ha kicsit dumásabb” A börtönszlenghasználók véleménye nyelvváltozatukról [„You grow somehow if you are a spieler”. Opinion of prison slang users about their language]. In: *Magyar Nyelvjárások* Vol. 41, pp. 533–542

2004. Egy kutatás módszerei (Börtönszleng Magyarországon, 1997–2004) [Methods of a research (Prison Slang in Hungary from 1997 to 2004)]. In: *A hét*, issue II/51–52 (16 December 2004). p. 16