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TOWARDS THE FUNCTIONS OF PRISON SLANG¹

Abstract: The phenomenon of *prison slang* has always raised much controversy. There have been many attempts of different scholars, at different points in history, to fully cover the subject in question, and especially one of its aspects, namely the functions that this particular language variety may serve. Nevertheless, the issue of functions of *prison argot* has always received merely fragmentary treatment, and hence it is difficult to find widely and unequivocally accepted conclusions. The paper provides a consistent overview of the subject with special reference to the following functions of *prison slang*: <SOLIDARITY AND LOYALTY FUNCTION>, <IDENTITY EXPRESSING FUNCTION>, <SECRETIVE FUNCTION>, <ALLEVIATING FUNCTION> and <INMATE RECOGNITION FUNCTION>.

Key words: prison slang, prison subculture, communication in prison, prison argot functions.

In recent linguistic literature there have been many attempts to account for various types of *argot*. As far as *prison argot* is concerned, the research on the type of jargon targeted in this paper has been conducted from various perspectives and resulted in publications of both foreign and Polish provenance, such as Потапов (1927), Clemmer (1940), Maurer (1955), Sykes (1958), Cardozo-Freeman (1984), Rossi (1989), Moczydłowski (1991), Oryńska (1991), Балдаев, *et al.* (1992), Einat and Einat (2000), Szaszkievicz (2000), Einat and Livnat (2012) and many others; although, as far as lexicographic works are concerned, Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of the Underworld* published in the middle of the 20th century remains the most widely referenced book on the subject. Nevertheless, barely any of the works mentioned in the foregoing concentrate on the communicative system of inmates,

¹ Let me take this opportunity and thank **Prof. Grzegorz A. Kleparski** for suggesting a number of improvements. Obviously, all the remaining errors, blunders and misfires are entirely my own responsibility.

but rather *prison slang* forms one of the target points of the analysis and it is usually located within the larger socio-cultural panorama of the problem. Nonetheless, there are a few exceptions to this rule and one may encounter works whose only target of analysis is the language of the subgroup, such as those of Oryńska (1991), Einat and Einat (2000) and Einat and Livnat (2012). Due to the fact that the very subject of the functions served by this particular language variety seems to receive merely fragmentary treatment in the publications mentioned, the main purpose set to this paper is to propose a somewhat systematized picture of the functional aspects of *prison argot*. In other words, an attempt will be made to single out such clearly emerging functions as <SOLIDARITY AND LOYALTY FUNCTION>, <IDENTITY EXPRESSING FUNCTION>, <SECRETIVE FUNCTION>, <ALLEVIATING FUNCTION> and <INMATE RECOGNITION FUNCTION>.

Multiple studies have examined the language repertoire used by inmates which is as difficult to account for as other aspects of prison subculture. The number of factors that make the picture of this particular language variety dim and complicated is extensive, and hence understanding them demands specific knowledge in certain academic areas, ranging from psychology and sociology, to criminology. Accordingly, there are many controversial questions surrounding the phenomenon of *prison argot*; one of them pertains specifically to the subject of its functions.

In search of the functions of *prison slang*, let us start from analysing the power to form and maintain solidarity and group loyalty within the subgroup, which is almost universally foregrounded in most publications and stressed by those who come into contact with representatives of this group (see Einat and Einat 2000, Sykes 1958, Lutze and Murphy 1999). Linguists seem to agree that *prison argot*, being a subtype of *anti-language*,² serves the function of affirming membership and validating its anti-normative character. Thus, in other words, *prison jargon* may be considered to be a kind of a 'boundary-maintaining mechanism' in which words and expressions – on the one hand – aim at excluding the free society and deliberately alienating by means of using words that are derisive and derogatory when they reference people outside of the subgroup, and – on the other hand – reinforcing group solidarity by the use of terms and expressions that are, not infrequently, euphemistic or even laudatory for themselves. The lexical manifestations of the <SOLIDARITY AND LOYALTY FUNCTION> are by no means hard to find. And so, for example in English *prison slang* the term *boss*, used extensively by inmates to refer to correctional officers, at first glance, seems to be positively loaded but, in fact, it is a derogatory term which began its life in the early years of penitentiaries as the reversed interpretation of *sorry son of a b**itch*³ read backwards. Other negatively loaded terms used in the human-specific sense of 'a correctional

² For more on the issue of *anti-language*, see Halliday (1976).

³ To meet the criterion of politeness and taboo avoidance in the spelling sequence of words that may be considered as insulting by the reader, we apply a convention of breaking such spelling sequences with two asterisks.

officer' are *pig* and *monkey*.⁴ For those who are inside criminal society, among the euphemistic terms found in *prison argot* we encounter the term *organisation* used to convey the sense of 'a gang', or *retired* whose semantic reading is 'a lifer'. Less frequent as they are, one may speak of laudatory terms such as *convict* or *old school* which are used by inmates in the sense of 'a prisoner with traditional values, one who has pride and respect and maintains integrity within prison'. Assuming the comparative angle we see the Polish *gad* (literally 'a reptile') that is a derisive term used to refer to 'a correctional officer' and *milioner* (literally 'a millionaire'), that pigeonholes a given criminal in a particular category because it is used in the very specific sense of 'a prisoner who has been incarcerated for committing an economic crime'.

According to Pollock (2006:94): [...] *prisoner argot serves as a symbolic expression of group loyalty, the use of which serves as a measure of integration and allegiance to the inmate subculture*. This emphasis is in line with some recent studies of Einat and Livnat (2012:101) who explicitly suggest that: [...] *mastery of the argot represents an important index for the degree of a prisoner's assimilation into the prison subculture, a great deal of pressure is put to bear on the inmate to learn it*. As one may observe, *prison slang* is certainly a kind of a hermetic language variety which promotes isolation and serves to unite, and is also a tool for demonstrating criminal identity and full loyalty. Interestingly, such values as loyalty and unity are, not infrequently, given high status within certain professional groups and this includes criminal groups, and especially within the group of professional criminals.⁵ *Prison argot*, in other words, identifies an inmate as a well-versed member of the subgroup, but – on the other hand – reinforces the intended opaqueness and is an expression of a defensive reaction to the hostility of the outside world or other subgroups existing within prison walls, such as, for example, different prison gangs. As a result, various verbal manifestations of the <SOLIDARITY AND LOYALTY FUNCTION> pertain to the outside world as well as to those who are outside a given criminal group and, at the same time, organised within the limits of another group in the same criminal world. And hence, in certain states of the USA the acronym *AB* is used in the sense of 'Aryan Brotherhood, a white prison gang'. Likewise, the semantic reading of *AC* is 'Aryan Circle, a white prison gang', the term *Border Brothers* is used in the sense of

⁴ Note that these two examples are cases of *zoosemy* (see Kleparski 1997, 2002, 2007).

⁵ For a number of authors dealing with the subject of the underground subcultures, including prison subculture (see Maurer 1940, Malik 1972, Schulte 2010 and Pollock 2006), the language used by criminals is considered to be a language of profession. As a matter of fact, the assumption that *prison slang* is mostly used by professional criminals has its roots in the works published by Maurer (1940) in which the author concluded that it was the language that was learnt and transmitted by the people who belonged to the social network as he believed it to be a kind of mirror of the social reality of criminals, and he suggested that *criminal argot* is used exclusively by professional criminals who are rooted in the milieu.

‘Mexican nationals’, whereas *Nazi Low Riders* is used in reference with ‘a white prison gang’. At the same time one can speak of derogatory terms that are used by members of a certain gang towards other gangs’ members, such as, for instance, *babydoll*, which is a Texas Syndicate *slang* term for Mexican Mafia members.⁶

All things considered, the mastery and day-to-day application of *prison slang* reflects and testifies to an inmate’s belonging to the subgroup of prisoners and that is the reason why upon entering any correctional institution prisoners are expected by other convicts to adopt a new way of communication, which, in turn, is a way of specialized socialisation into the new community. Moreover, *prison argot*, not infrequently, is regarded as a kind of ‘insurance policy’ for a recidivist who enters the environment of a new correctional institution, since it is then an indicator of the inmate’s membership to the subculture of prisoners. Therefore, we shall turn now to the <IDENTITY EXPRESSING FUNCTION> of *prison argot*.

According to a substantial number of researchers dealing with the subject of *prison subculture*, such as, for example, Cardozo-Freeman (1984), Nadrag and Stroescu (2010) and Einat and Livnat (2012), the peculiar language variety used by prisoners plays a very significant role in reflecting the attitudes, beliefs, needs and philosophies that are constitutive elements of an inmate’s identity. Identity, in this respect, is understood by Bucholtz and Hall (2005:586) as: [...] *the social positioning of self and others* [...] and is considered to be constituted through social action, and especially through language. In effect, in *prison argot* there is an extensive number of terms that determine an inmate’s position on the hierarchical ladder, and hence at the top of the hierarchy one finds a *convict boss*, a prisoner given authority in prison, whereas at the other end of the spectrum there are *rats*, *cheese eaters* and *snitches*, informants who give up information to correctional officers, child molesters referred to as *chester*, *Cho Mo*, *diaper snipper* or *diddler*, and passive homosexuals labelled as *joto*, *punk* or *old lady*.

When we narrow our perspective to Polish criminal language, we see that the hierarchy of prisoners displays certain similar, if not identical features. And hence, at the top there are *ludzie* (literally ‘people’), also labelled as *gitowcy* (literally ‘ok people’) who belong to the so-called subgroup of *grypsera*,⁷ a lower level is occupied by those who do not identify themselves with that group, and they are referred to as *frajerzy* (literally ‘losers’) by the members of *grypsera*. At the bottom of the ladder there are those least respected, labelled as *cwele*, *cwelatka* or *cwelerzy* (literally ‘wankers’) who are either passive homosexuals or those who were raped in prison.

⁶ The examples sketched in the foregoing derive from the American prison background which is due to the fact that it is the activity of American prison gangs that has been most extensively researched, whereas in Great Britain the issue has received merely fragmentary treatment and perfunctory attention. For more on this issue, see e.g. Klein (1995), Wood and Adler (2001).

⁷ The Polish term *grypsera* is a label for a widely understood prison subculture in Polish penitentiary. For more on this issue, see e.g. Szaszkiewicz (1997), Moczydłowski, (1991).

In order to lay stress on the importance of the identity constructing role of *prison argot*, let us quote at this point Boroff (1951:190) who vividly claimed that: *Pungent, vivid, racy, and irreverent, the parlance of prisoners' reflects the personality of the inmates who employ it, as well as the conflicts and tensions inherent in the institutional setting.* This emphasis is in line with the words of Nadrag and Stroescu (2010:12): *[...] prison argot reflects the personalities of inmates who employ them, as well as the conflicts and tensions inherent in prison settings. [...] the distinctiveness of prison argot is largely a product of the character of penal context. Its extent of use varies with the extent of penal discipline.* On the basis of the view quoted in the foregoing one may conclude that *prison slang* – on the one hand – is considered to be the embodiment of prisoners' identity or, in other words, personality, but – on the other hand – it may also justifiably be regarded as a way of defining the framework of a correctional institution and a mechanism reflecting other aspects of prisoners' lives, namely their conflicts and tensions arising as a result of living in conditions of confinement.⁸

Obviously, what has been labelled as the <IDENTITY EXPRESSING FUNCTION> is naturally linked to various other aspects of criminal existence and criminal conduct. It is clear that the more crime engaged the person is, the more there is to hide, or – to put it differently – the graver the crime, the greater the mystery and secret that there may be behind it. Therefore one of the most outstanding functions of *prison slang* is the <SECRETIVE FUNCTION> which forms the backbone of most of the definitions of this particular language variety. As pointed out by Sykes (1958:87):

Certain types of information are prohibited from flowing across social boundaries, erected within the group and deception, hypocrisy, spying, and betrayal emerge as crucial social events. The most obvious social boundary in the custodial institution is, of course, that which exists between captors and captives; and inmates argue fiercely that a prisoner should never give any information to the custodians which will act to the detriment of a fellow captive. [...] The bureaucracy of custodians and the population of prisoners are supposed to struggle in silence.

Obviously, there are situations in which inmates can hardly avoid facing correctional officers, and hence must communicate with them, which requires the use of appropriate language. As a result, in such situations prisoners use certain language terms that are accepted by correctional officers when applied to them,

⁸ As formulated by Stohr and Walsh (2012), certain types of prison form the most favourable conditions for the development of prison subculture, and hence: *By definition, the longer inmates are in an institution, associating with others like them, and the more "total" the institution is in its restrictions on liberty and contact with "outsiders," the more subjected inmates are to the pains of imprisonment, and the more likely they are to become "prisonized" in that they adopt the inmate subculture.* (Stohr and Walsh, 2012:118).

such as *CO* used in the sense of ‘a correctional officer’, *officer*, *mister* or the earlier discussed *boss*. In other communicative situations, not involving staff members, correctional officers are labelled as *screw*, *monkey* or *hack*, all of which are linked to a certain amount of negative load and emotional charge.

No doubt, one of the functions of *prison argot* is to prevent others, especially the correctional staff, from eavesdropping on any of the secrets of inmates’ activities. Nevertheless, as Pollock (2006: 94) puts it: *This may or may not be correct because guards usually know the meaning of prisoner slang as well as the prisoners do, and may use it to a significant degree.* This conclusion is also echoed in the work of Fiszer (2012:7) who suggests that: *Funkcjonariusze obcując z osadzonymi siłą rzeczy wsiąkają w to środowisko, niejako go współkreując. Czy tego chcą, czy nie, muszą, a przynajmniej powinni, znać swoisty język więźniów, czasem również posługiwać się nim.*⁹ As a result, it poses much difficulty for prisoners to communicate without the danger of being uncovered by the correctional staff.

It is not without significance that in most correctional institutions *prison slang* is resorted to in order to generate those signs that allow prisoners to distinguish between those who actively belong to inmate subculture and those who are outside it. In Polish prison subculture the semantically almost uninterpretable and very much conventional combination: *Feścisz, greścisz czy szeleścisz?* serves as the question addressed to those you meet for the first time and wish to check whether they have mastered *prison argot*, which is at the same time a manifestation of the <INMATE RECOGNITION FUNCTION>.

It would be a simplification to say that the secrecy inherent in *prison slang* merely serves as a tool for keeping information from correctional officers. Gambetta (2009) makes an important point and claims that the deviant and criminal character of criminals’ business implies severe constraints on their communication in general, and thus it forces them to draw from a large repertoire of communicative options, the most important of which is *prison argot*. Apparently, such an attitude is in line with the opinion recently expressed by Russel (2014:3) who argues that *prison argot [...] can be defined as a system of non-verbal symbols, vocabulary, and verbal expressions within a natural language that is used expressly for the purpose of concealment. The reason for secrecy in this case is criminal or deviant behavior[...].* Certainly, *prison slang* is frequently used as a means of talking about illegal or questionable activities without fear of discovery, not merely by the correctional staff, but also by members of the free society. Hence, instead of the verb *to steal* prisoners employ the euphemistic verb *to nick*, and they never commit any crime but they professionally *do the job*. For the same reasons stolen goods are referred to as being *hot* and a person paid to smuggle drugs from one country to another is zoosemically labeled *a mule*.

⁹ Custodial officers interacting with convicts naturally permeate their environment, so to say, participating in the formation of it. Whether they want it or not, they have to, or at least they should, know the language peculiar to inmates, sometimes they even have to use it. (Translation is mine).

Gambetta (2006) and Russel (2014) conclude that inmates do not use the tool of language merely to pass on information, but rather there exist other, sometimes highly sophisticated and ingenious methods of communication between prisoners, such as *mimic alphabet*, *miganka* (literally ‘winking’) which is a way of communicating by means of a specific sign language, *lustrzanka* (literally ‘mirror signaling’), involving the use of mirrors to pass on information over long distances, *stukanka* (literally ‘tapping’) which is a way of communicating by means of knocking radiators, sewer pipes, walls or the floor, *dmuchanka* (literally ‘blowing’) which involves the use of a rolled up newspaper serving as a tool for blowing out *grypsy* (literally ‘illegal letters’) which are pieces of secret information contained within the limits of tiny scratches of paper that are blown out over a distance as far as 20-30 meters.¹⁰ All things considered, the <SECRETIVE FUNCTION> of *prison slang* defends inmates against the curious ear of those people who belong to what is widely regarded as mainstream society and allows its users to recognise other convicts as active members of the subculture, to mention but a few.

Another critical function of *prison argot*, which is emphasized in a number of publications, pertains specifically its role in alleviating the severity and drudgery of life behind bars, and therefore one may speak here of an <ALLEVIATING FUNCTION>. Prison life is pervaded with pessimism and all-embracing futility, therefore inmates must find ways to cope with the emotions that result from the difficulties of living under constant stress, and in conditions of degradation and stigmatisation. According to Jones (2005:64), [...] *prison argot functions on the emotional level, venting a release of pent-up emotions such as anger, frustration and anxiety in a way that maintains social space while minimizing tension*. Hence, it is hardly surprising that inmates, not infrequently, resort to swearing, teasing or offensive joking to relieve tension. As a result, as pointed out by Busic (1987:8), [...] *the use and need for euphemism is nowhere more apparent than within a prison population. In this highly specialized subculture, the psychological need to disguise and transform unpalatable realities becomes critical*. In the language repertoire used by inmates one easily comes across ubiquitous elements of humour the presence of which lowers the level of severity of reality in order to make it bearable. And that is why we encounter such humorously picturesque terms as *diesel therapy* used in the sense of ‘being transferred on the prison bus’ or *ninja turtles* employed in the sense of ‘guards dressed in full riot gear’, whereas *escape dust* is used in the sense of ‘fog’. When we narrow our perspective to the Polish criminal background we come across such terms as *ołówek* (literally ‘a pencil’), used metaphorically in the sense of ‘a crowbar’ or *cyferka* (literally a dim. form of ‘a number’) which is employed in the sense of ‘an accountant’.

All things considered, one may say that the functions of *prison argot* are both various and many, and – as the language data suggests – they range from

¹⁰ For more on this issue, see Kamiński (2003), Szaszkievicz (1997).

those that are related to the secret nature of prisoners' activity, inmates' feeling of loyalty and devotion to the prison subculture. At the other end of the spectrum there are such functions that pertain to prisoners' identity or personality traits, as well as the peculiar character of criminals' professional life. Obviously, there are also other, less frequently discussed functions that *prison slang* may serve, such as, for example, the facilitation of social interactions and relationships, which are considered by Einat and Einat (2000) as one of the major functions of this particular language variety, and which due to the space limits of the paper was not discussed.

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