# Vulgar Slang in English and Romanian. A Few Notes on Romanian Hip Hop Lyrics Translated into English

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**REZUMAT: Argoul vulgar în engleză şi română. Câteva comentarii referitoare la texte româneşti de hip-hop traduse în limba engleză**

Definiţiile *„aproape inefabilului"* 'slang' (argou) (Partridge, 1974: 293) sunt foarte numeroase şi diferiţii autori nu cad de acord asupra categoriilor lexicale respective: Partridge distinge vulgaritatea de argou, în timp ce după Andersson şi Trudgill argoul include *„atât limbajul colocvial cât şi vulgaritatea"* (1992: 69) şi chiar în dicţionare, argoul şi vulgaritatea sunt introduse prin mărci diferite. Într-un sondaj european privind recenta traducerea a melodiilor româneşti de hip-hop în limba engleză (Doboş, 2013), am constatat dificultăţile în studierea şi traducerea argoului, mai ales atunci când acesta include o prezenţă largă a cuvintelor vulgare. Traducerea argoului românesc în engleză poate, într-adevăr, pune probleme mari din cauza, în primul rând, a disponibilităţii resurselor lingvistice în cele două limbi. În principiu, traducerea cuvintelor vulgare ar trebui să fie simplă, având în vedere denotaţia şi concretul care se leagă de acestea. În plus, hip-hop-ul este un marker cultural care, adus în România, se potriveşte perfect contextului social şi violent actual şi *„sexualizării limbajului"* de acolo (Cesereanu, 2003: 12). Cu toate acestea, cum limba este legată de cultură şi invers, această vulgaritate nu are acelaşi efect în diferite culturi. Bazându-se pe exemple din traducerea unor texte de hip-hop, acest articol analizează efectele argoului în raport cu cele două culturi, engleză şi română.

**CUVINTE-CHEIE:** *cultură*, *hip-hop*, *argou vulgar*, *argou românesc*, *argou englezesc*



**ABSTRACT**

While definitions of *"the almost undefinable"* slang (Partridge, 1974: 293) vary widely, authors also disagree about lexical categories: Partridge distinguishes vulgarisms from slang, for Andersson and Trudgill slang comprises *"both colloquial and vulgar language"* (1992: 69), and even dictionaries separate slang from vulgar. Having recently translated samples of Romanian hip-hop lyrics



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into English for a European survey (Doboş, 2013), I have come to consider the difficulties related to the study and translation of slang, including a large proportion of vulgarisms. Translating slang between Romanian and English can raise insurmountable difficulties due, first of all, to the quantitative disparities between the two respective language stocks; on the other hand, the translation of vulgarisms should, in principle, be much easier, given the concrete denotations. In Romania, hip-hop is an imported cultural marker which has been perfectly adapted to the current, mainly violent, social context and "*the sexualization of speech*" (Cesereanu, 2003: 12). But language is culture and culture is language; as a result of this vulgarisms and obscenities do not have the same effect across cultures. Based on the translated hip-hop samples, the study analyses the effect of vulgar slang against the background of the two respective cultures, English, and Romanian.

**KEYWORDS:** *culture, hip-hop, vulgar slang, Romanian slang, English slang*



**RÉSUMÉ : L'argot vulgaire en anglais et en roumain. Quelques remarques sur les chansons hip-hop roumaines traduites en anglais**

Les définitions du « *presque indéfinissable* » argot (Partridge, 1974 : 293) sont très nombreuses et les différents auteurs n'arrivent pas à s'accorder sur les catégories lexicales concernées : Partridge distingue la vulgarité de l'argot, selon Andersson et Trudgill l'argot comprend « *à la fois le langage colloquial et la vulgarité* » (1992 : 69) et, même dans les dictionnaires, l'argot et la vulgarité sont insérés par des marques différentes. Lors d'une enquête européenne portant sur la traduction récente des chansons hip-hop roumaines en anglais (Doboş, 2013), nous avons pu constater les difficultés liées à l'étude et à la traduction de l'argot, notamment quand il inclut une large présence de mots vulgaires. La traduction de l'argot roumain en anglais peut, en effet, présenter de gros problèmes à cause tout d'abord de la disponibilité des ressources linguistiques dans les deux langues. En principe, la traduction des mots vulgaires devrait être simple, vu la dénotation et la concrétude qui s'y lient. En outre, le hip-hop est un marqueur culturel qui, emporté en Roumanie, s'adapte parfaitement au contexte social et violent actuel et à la « *sexualisation du langage* » en cours dans ce pays (Cesereanu, 2003 : 12). Cela dit, comme la langue reste liée à la culture et vice-versa, cette vulgarité n'a pas le même effet dans des cultures différentes. Tout en s'appuyant sur des exemples tirés de la traduction des chansons hip-hop, cet article analyse les effets de l'argot vulgaire par rapport aux cultures anglaise et roumaine.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** *culture, hip-hop, argot vulgaire, argot roumain, argot anglais*





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While taboo language is an affront to common sensibilities,
the *phenomenon* of taboo language is an affront to common sense.
(Steven Pinker – *The Stuff of Thought*)

## 1. Introduction



**EFINITIONS OF SLANG** vary widely, which is only to be expected, as this linguistic concept implies a strong social variable, liable to make for much disagreement among linguists – *"one of those things that everybody can recognize and nobody can define"* (Roberts 1958: 342). Modern theory nevertheless identifies it as a psycho-social phenomenon: it represents *"humanity at its most human"* (Green 2015: 2). It can be noted, to begin with, that in general theorists and dictionary makers fail to distinguish clearly between "slang" (Rom. "*argou*"), "colloquial language" (Rom. "*limbaj colocvial*") and "vulgar language" (Rom. "*limbaj obscen/vulgar*"). Any analysis will be further complicated by the admixture of other related concepts, for example "jargon" (Rom. "*jargon*"), "cant" (Rom. "*jargon*"/"*limbaj secret*") and "swearword" (Rom. "*înjurătură*"/"*imprecație*"). Several books on the subject have put forward the notion of *bad language*, also as title, e.g. Andersson and Trudgill 1990 appears to be the first and Battistella 1995, naturally related to those of *foul language* (Hughes, 1991) and *expletives* (Wajnryb, 2005).

The notion of "bad language", which conjures up that of "good/proper language", is a reminder, first, of the contested nature and emotional involvement of linguists in evaluating such language phenomena, and second, of the related issue concerning the relationship between bad language and slang. While earlier "purists" distinguished between vulgarisms and slang, for instance Partridge (1974), and Nida (1964/2000: 138), more recently vulgarisms have been subsumed to slang, from Andersson and Trudgill (1990) to English leading lexicographer Jonathon Green's *The Vulgar Tongue. Green's History of Slang* (2014).

Allen and Burridge note that *"in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,* slang *denoted the 'thieves-Latin', 'the vulgar tongue of the lowest blackguards in the nation'. So slang is, by association, 'bad language'"* (2006: 70). Nevertheless the notion of bad language is obviously vague, as it may mean, as Andersson and Trudgill note, a number of things (1990: 14-31), from swearing to what they term *"truly bad language"* – verbosity, racist and sexist language (1990: 29). In Romanian slang, Rodica Zafiu (2011) notes that *"slang makes extensive use of vulgar and obscene words (the familiar names of genitalia and of physiological acts that are banned in public), which nevertheless also characterize colloquial*



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*speech.*" This study is also an exemplification of the foregoing observation in national hip hop lyrics, which currently enjoy wide popularity with the young generations.

On equating bad language with "vulgar", "obscene" or "untidy" language, theorists appear to agree on some notion of control as well as its acceptability only in restricted contexts, irrespective of its covert prestige and despite the fact that swearing can be called universal. Clearly, language is also "*a window into human nature*", as posited by leading scientist of language Steven Pinker in a recent thought-provoking book which includes a chapter on "*the strange shock and appeal of swearing*" (2007: 327). Bad language is thus a cultural construct, being bad because it refers to taboos that are culturally stigmatized – e.g. words for bodily fluids are more or less universally tabooed; there are, in contrast, only very few purely linguistic taboos (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990: 57). In the case of Romanian, linguist Rodica Zafiu (2007: 269) makes a cogent observation:

> particular vocabulary items are not trivial or vulgar in themselves (although there are, of course, several words that current dictionaries avoid): in fact, what is important in this case is the intention behind the current use of these terms, as well as the implicit set of cultural values upon which such intention rests.

## 2. Slang in English and Romanian

In the case of English, while there is no shortage of theoretical/ lexicographical research on slang, information on its actual use is far less abundant. Due to its enormous cosmopolitan vocabulary and its large numbers of mono- and disyllabic words, contemporary lexical creativity in English is limitless: for example, Graeme Diamond, an editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* estimated back in 2001 that he detected a thousand new words or meanings every three months (quoted in Evans, 2001: 36). Naturally, most of this creativity is played out in the arena of slang, and has become impossible to keep track of: "cutty-eye, absquattle, weezo, yatty". Experienced translators know that thorough knowledge of the source culture is an important requirement, in parallel with the option of consulting with native-speaker informants.

In the case of Romanian, research on the subject was abruptly curbed by the communist linguistic authorities soon after coming into power in mid-20th century, when slang was vigorously condemned as belonging to the margins of society, being seen as nothing short of a danger. Totalitarianism legiferated in matters of language in that it had to be made 'unitary' and uniform, by means of dialect homogenizing, social conformism and rejection of colloquial language with an obsession for 'correctness,' 'purity,' and 'the



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cultivation of language.' Uniformity was a communist obsession: the whole people had to be 'uniform', i.e. classless – the only way to mold them into 'new men', so language had to be uniform as well – "wooden", to use the established metaphor, i.e. devoid of any proper ideas or meanings. Instead, naturally, slang continued to develop, with its perceived subversive peculiarities; for example, author Ion Anghel Mânăstire's novel *Noaptea nu se împuşcă* was in 1985 the object of public repudiation, mainly on account of its use of vulgar slang. Vulgar language was ostensibly correlated with subversion and a negative view of reality (Zafiu, 2007: 69-70).

After the demise of communism, the disappearance of censorship and the newly-found unrestrained freedom of speech made for an increasing pressure of the colloquial slangy registers on the language of public communication and the media, a process deemed to be a natural psychological reaction to the former "wooden tongue". Linguist Oana Chelaru-Murăruş remarked some time ago, in a debate on the state of the national language, on *"the verbal violence which characterizes present-day Romania, filled with resentment and brutality"* (2006), but author and academic Mircea Cărtărescu has warned that the current wave of witlessness sweeping the language and society at large is not a new development:

> the confusion and aggressive vulgarity are in no way the result of post-1989 society. The language spoken by common people hasn't undergone radical changes between 1989 and today. […] language today is the exchange currency for the abject, base and submissive living during communism.
>
> (quoted in Gheo, 2005)

Thus at present current language use has taken a (rather) unexpected turn, and as has been remarked; the "marginal" in language (colloquialisms, slang, obscenities) seems to be taking its own back by the very means formerly employed to establish the cultivated literary language. In this context, it can only be deplored that Romanian lexicology is still lacking in proper studies of the evolving slang, despite a few small format not entirely reliable dictionaries of slang now available.

Penelope Eckert rightly notes that *"adolescents are the linguistic movers and shakers […] and as such a prime source of information about linguistic change"* (1997: 52). Western linguistics has recently seen a wealth of research on youth language, which has shown that by and large, it is characterized by the use of slang, taboo words and overuse of pragmatic markers (Stenström & Jørgensen, 2009: 2); however there will always be local specifics related to culture, as all categories of slang can only be made sense of in their respective cultures. In Romanian such research, with few exceptions, is all but absent, despite the fact that youth speech



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is becoming ever more 'visible', mainly as a result, in the context described in the previous paragraph, of what author and academic Ruxandra Cesereanu has termed the "*sexualization of language*" and the outbreak of a violent mental imagery (2003: 12; 148). Present-day youngsters have literally picked up where slang creativity left off during communism, e.g. "*a-i beşi mintea*" (one's mind farts = to think or express atypical ideas); "*a o lua în frează/gură*" (get it over the head/mouth); "*a-i scoate (cuiva)*" *plombele* also "*a rupe (pe cineva) în două*" (take out sb's fillings/ break sb in two = to beat the daylights out of sb).

It has been argued that slang depends on psychological development and reaches its peak in early adolescence, while carrying masculine features of power as occurring mainly in male talk. To explain why swearwords are used, Timothy Jay has developed the Neuro-Psycho-Social (NPS) Theory, which combines three aspects of human behaviour: neurological, psychological and socio-cultural. Jay argues that cursing is purposeful and rule-governed, and individual's knowledge of it depends on personal experience, psychological make-up and culture (1999).

The theory addresses slang from the perspective of offensive semantics, where slang is employed to oppose authority and develop personal identity; "*identity is developed through the use of slang, especially for teenagers, who closely identify with the words they use and the music they listen to*" (1999: 175). More recently, Steven Pinker, who distinguishes between at least five types of swearing: "*descriptively (*Let's fuck*), idiomatically (*It's fucked up*), abusively (*Fuck you, motherfucker!*), emphatically (*This is fucking amazing*) and cathartically (*Fuck!!!*)*" (2007: 350), also addresses expletives in psychological terms and has subsumed taboo speech to "word magic":

> Though one of the foundations of linguistics is that the pairing between a sound and a meaning is arbitrary, most humans intuitively believe otherwise. They treat the name for an entity as part of its essence, so that the mere name of uttering a name is seen as a way to impinge on its referent. Incantations, spells, prayers, and curses are ways that people try to affect the world through words, and taboos and euphemisms are ways that people try *not* to affect it.
>
> (Pinker, 2007: 331)

In Romania vulgar violent slang is not only a lexical marker of youngsters. In present-day language use, where a recent poll has shown that more 75% of the population uses profanities on a regular basis, a most disturbing occurrence is the ubiquitous reference to the male organ accompanied by the first person possessive pronoun ("*pula mea*") or ("*în p*** mea*") used as interjection which is in fact a filler word, which nevertheless conveys self-satisfaction, comparable in this function to the English *f*-word when used as an intensifier.



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That there is much deeply-ingrained dissimilarity between the English and Romanian cultures is a truism. English, which was codified and standardized starting in the 17th century, has at present come to be identified as the language of "*understatement*" (Wierzbicka, 2006: 28), based on the pragmatic value it attaches to 'tact' and 'non-interference' as reflected by so-called whimperatives ("could you/would you") and the use of speech-act verbs. Romanian, which was codified and modernized only in the second half of the 19th century, generally favours *emphatic overstatement* (e.g. syntactic reduplication and absolute superlatives) and open engagement of one's interlocutor by means of interjections and vocatives. Cultural theorists have also noted the Oriental influences in Romanian culture:

> Asia and the Orient are omnipresent in Romania: in the negative as well as in the positive, in what is bad and what is good, in the carelessness of the rail linemen and in the talent of the violinists, in the filth of public spaces and in the gold of the icons, in the economic chaos and in the works of art.
>
> (Fernandez, 2000: 20)

Against the North-South European divide, the two cultures are typified mainly by distancing devices and repairing strategies versus collectivism, which annihilates distancing devices (see also Doboş, 2011).

Consequently, as shown before, the use and functions of vulgar slang in the two cultures are also bound to differ to a great extent. University of Oxford psychologist Peter Collett remarks that European languages can be clearly distinguished in terms of the types of swearwords they contain and of their frequency of use (2006: 58) and goes on to contrast Protestant countries' coarse expressions based on sex and scatology to Catholic ones' blasphemies and profanities (2006: 68). Swearwords are said to mirror core values in each culture. Absent from Collett's survey, Romanian culture, interestingly enough, makes use of the whole range of European obscenities. American translator Gregory Rabassa notes that "*different peoples have different concepts of how to insult or demean each other. The Anglo-Saxon is quick to denounce someone's illegitimate background, while in Spanish it would be relatively mild to call someone* bastardo" (1996: 190) and goes on to makes an interesting suggestion:

> Some languages are richer than others in foul language. It may be that those societies that still must deal with horses and other living creatures have richer vocabularies than those of us who deal with dull machines. […] Beyond that, we may have lost individual creation with the homogenized speech fed us on radio and television and the repetitive utterances that pass for song lyrics.
>
> (1996: 191)



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### 3. Romanian Vulgar Slang and Hip Hop

A fair range of vulgarisms is exhibited by national hip hop lyrics. While hip hoppers worldwide obviously have a lot in common, I have argued that the Romanian phenomenon is in many ways the direct outcome of the recent communist past (Doboş, 2013); Pennycook & Mitchell confirm this possibility, suggesting that *"global Hip Hops do not have one point of origin [...] but rather multiple, co-present global origins"* (2009: 40).

Romanian hip hop belongs to the (pseudo)-critical urban subculture that developed amid the dismal ghettoed blocks of flats, the architectural and social scars of Romanian towns and cities. In the overpopulated poor working-class neighbourhoods, youngsters make up an amorphous mass, prey to delinquency, prostitution and gangsterism. After the fall of communism, Western popular culture became the object of imitation in the absence of a dominant public cultural discourse. Romanian expatriate sociologist Denise Roman, who describes national post-communist aesthetics in terms of the Bachtinian *"carnivalesque"* (2007: 69), writes that

> in postcommunism, popular culture is at its apogee, making postcommunism a social and cultural formation that resignifies and hybridizes communist popular culture by displacing signifier from signified, reordering its symbols under a new logic, and mixing it with precommunist pasts and more recent imported markers.
>
> (Roman, 2007: 44)

The central message of Romanian hip hoppers relies on boundless freedom, which makes for limitless extolling of the marginal "virtues" associated with sordid life as well as violent criticism of outsiders. In their lyrics, the periphery is nothing short of a 'court of miracles' of orgies, drugs, alcohol and 'home girls'. The economic difficulties are obviously real, compounded by widespread corruption and other social evils, but whatever form political criticism takes in hip hop it simply cannot avoid an abject sexual register, e.g.

> Tre' să ştiu dacă te rişti/ Să sugi pula cînd mă piş./ Io, beat mort în intersecţie,/ Îţi prezint pula-n erecţie,/ Îţi promit clipe de vis,/Cu scurgeri şi sifilis.
> [I wanna know if ya'd risk/ Sucking my dick while I piss./ I, dead drunk at an intersection,/ Will present ya my dick in erection/ And promise ya an exquisite time/ With discharges and syphilis]
>
> (*Paraziţii*, „Iartă-mă")

The effect is simply grotesque, preserving all its shocking force, as a result of the violent libidinous and excremental register employed, in a basically traditionalist



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patriarchal-oriented cultural context, in which taboos are exclusively of the sexual order.

Following are other similar examples of hip hop vulgarisms that I translated for a German survey of European hip hop (Doboş, 2013):

> Doar o mişcare-n plus şi glonţul pleacă-n cap/ Băga-mi-aş pula-n mă-ta/ Am un 9 şi te fac/ […] Hai omoară-i pă toţi/ Pă şmecheri, pă fraieri, pă oricine poţi
> [Just one more move an' I'll put a bullet into your head/ I'll fuck your mother/ I've got a 9 mm an' I'll do ya in/ […] Come on, kill'em all/ Dawgs, scrubs, anyone ya can]
>
> (*BUG Mafia*, "9 mm")

More examples from *Paraziţii*, who flaunt their vulgarity – "*the most obscene album since Romanian was invented*":

> Utilitatea ta pe Pamănt, căcat, e relativă,/ Mori în morţii tăi din proprie iniţiativă. /O voce plictisită-ţi poate spune-n telefon, / Că ăla nu-i chilot, e-o husă drăguţă de camion. /Pus in situaţia de-a te fute, chiar şi ultimul distrus/ S-ar căca pe el de frică, s-ar pişa pe tine de rîs.
> [Your usefulness on Earth, you shit, is relative/ Why don't ya die an' go join your fucked up dead/ A bored voice on the phone can tell ya/ Those are no panties, but a nice truck cover/ Forced to fuck ya, even the last loser/ Would shit his pants and piss on ya laughin'"]
>
> („Cum să jigneşti o femeie"- How to Offend a Woman)

> Monstrul din bucătărie denumit soţie,/ Nu-mi dă nici un motiv de bucurie,/ Face prost muie
> [The monster in the kitchen, called wife/ Gives me no kicks/ She cannot suck my dick]
>
> („Probleme de Mandibulă" - Jaw Problems)

> M-am intors acasă, pune-ţi pe cap casca de fier!/ Faci faţă sper, fa zdreanţo. Du-te la baie/ Ţi-am spart faţa c-ai avut tupeu' sa-mi dai cu palma-n coaie"
> [I'm back, put on your iron helmet/ I hope ya'll be up to it, ya sleaze. Go to the bathroom/ I've broken your face cos' ya had the guts to hit my balls]
>
> („De dragoste" – Of Love)

*Paraziţii*, one of the best known and most widely listened to hip hop bands in the country, has turned out, in 17 years of activity and as many albums, around 70 tracks with sexist contents, instigating violence against women, and some of them presenting what amounts to full scenarios of torture, violence and sexual insult and mockery. The masculine model presented by such lyrics is obviously one characterized by brute force, hypermasculinity and misogyny, amounting to a phallus-dominated logocentric order



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reminiscent of Jacques Lacan's arguments concerning the position of power in language, the symbolic order imposed by the male organ, and master-signifiers as identity-bearing and identity-constituting words. But while in hip hop elsewhere women are equated with trophies (Newman 2009: 206), indeed a form of objectification, in Romanian hip hop they become simple mindless sex objects, meant to be endlessly and gratuitously abused.

These samples show that in every case the authors make use of the most vulgar (tabooed) words, in an attempt to shock and offend outsiders and at the same time to assert their "machismo". Romanian culture has known neither the sexual nor the feminist revolutions that redefined Western cultures in the 1960s and 1970s; the only revolutions were of the communist order. Moreover, Romanian culture favours polemics and the direct engagement of interlocutors, as shown above. Little wonder then that *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* (DEX, 2012) reflects asymmetrical gender-marking (Hellinger & Pauwels, 2007) in its definitions of "man" and "woman", while showing extreme prudishness by keeping out the words "*pula*" (of Latin origin) and *a fute* (of Latin origin), henceforth the *p*- and *f*-words, despite their widespread use and in spite of the fact that they belong to the core vocabulary of the language (Schøller, 1971: 244).

An interesting observation belongs to the French author Pascal Quignard: in every case, the 'protolanguage' is the language of outrage and obscenity (1994: 260). This protolanguage is in English Anglo-Saxon (Germanic), which provided practically all of the taboo words, while in Romanian it is Latin (with the exception of the Slavic name for the female sex organ) which, as Quinard writes, "*names things and points at them*", shunning the abstraction and euphemisms favoured by ancient Greek.

The Danish translator Erling Schøller showed, on the basis of extensive research, that the number and combinations of Romanian swearwords is endless, characterized by implausible figures, creations of an overheated imagination, particularly as regards sexual acts and excretion (1971: 250). The sheer creativity of Romanian obscenities includes countless combinations of the *f*-verb with all manner of religious objects and entities as well as mothers, family and dead ancestors, the latter probably an absolute originality in the whole Balkan area, an amazing mixture of gross vulgarity, violence and degradation.

Compared with the horrific Romanian curses, English ones pale into insignificance, as they appear mostly bland and spiritless. In her disturbing essay, Ruxandra Cesereanu argues that physical attack characterizes the Romanian mental imaginary, which appears obsessed by the materialness of flesh, in which Romanians are at ease (2003: 11). Ioan A. Gherea argued



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that swearwords represent the most original creation of South-Eastern European folklore (1971), and as proof of this assessment, folk productions include, among many others, Eminescu's

> Futu-ți morții țară străină/Cum mi-ai făcut barba lînă
> [Fuck your dead, foreign land/ You have turned my beard to wool]

and

> Frunză verde trei ardei/ Leleo, futu-ți dracii tăi
> [Green leaf of three peppers/ Fuck your devils, woman]
> (quoted in Murăraşu, 1979)

Romanian slang has Gypsy ("*țigănesc*") foundations, which represent its "*most characteristic and consistent element*" (Zafiu, 2011), a fact also confirmed by hip hop lyrics, which include items such as *bulangiu* (homosexual; outsider), *bulău* (jail), *ciordeală* (theft) or *lovele* (money).

That such choice of vocabulary is mainly meant to shock and offend is made plain, as hinted at above, by the use of precisely those words that are perceived as most vulgar, rather than their admittedly not very many slang equivalents, i.e. blunt literalness, rather than metaphor, which best characterizes slang. This is confirmed by fiction author Bujor Nedelcovici, for instance, who in the afterword to his novel *Provocatorul*, makes a point of the fact that he included French words and expressions instead of Romanian ones for the atmosphere, but also because words relating to the human body have a vulgar ring in Romanian, where they are used literally as swearwords and obscenities. With reference to the *f*-word, translator and academic Clifford E. Landers writes:

> English is surprisingly deficient in words midway between clinical terms like 'intercourse' and its street equivalents. Brazilian Portuguese suffers no such dearth, and the translator encounters a superabundance, ranging from comical to pornographic.
> (2001: 153)

While the observation about English is not quite correct, for example while Allen and Burridge report at least 800 expressions for 'copulation' (2006: 243), Green has 1,740 (!) (2008), but Romanian sets itself apart from the other Romance languages in that the number of slang versions for vulgar items is quite low, a suggestion which ties in with Rodica Zafiu's remark that Romanian slang is relatively little developed (2001: 200).



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Also at present, English "fuck" has been "de-sexed", in the context of shifting taboos; leading lexicographer John Ayto (quoted in Margolis, 2002) remarks that, although a sexual term, *"realistically it is almost never used that way; the overwhelming amount of times it is being used in some figurative sense […]; its impact is diminishing at a rapid rate"* (also Jones quoted in Margolis). Some of the metaphorical uses of the transitive verbs for sex, including "fuck – shaft", "ream", "screw" or "dick", identified by Lakoff quoted in Pinker (2007: 356) are *exploitation* and *grievous damage*, as in *"fucked up, screwed up, buggered up"* and *"bollixed"* (see also Andersson & Trudgill, 1990: 60; Sheidlower, 1995). Currently, taboos in English are related to 'politically incorrect' language, including "*nigger, Paki"* and "*spastic"* (Aitchison quoted in Margolis). Moreover, the amazing lexical creativity of English allows it to turn over impressive numbers of euphemisms and dysphemisms for taboo concepts.

The translation of slang is a difficult and controversial problem – *"as big a nightmare for the translator as unfindable acronyms"* (Fawcett, 2003: 118), mainly due to its extensive use of metaphor. Identification of slang is the first problem; the biggest one, however, is that *"the type of slang, the density of use and the purpose of use may not be the same from one culture to the next"* (Fawcett, 2003: 118). When dealing with slang and idioms, the translator should also recall that both are usually class and time-bound. For vulgar slang, like the one in the hip hop examples, which include references to plain vulgar acts as well as short simple clauses, literal translation appears to be the best solution, while preserving an equivalent effect in the target text.

To this end, stylistic compensation too is always an option. Further difficulties for translators relate to finding the relevant slang dictionaries, in this case hip hop slang, e.g. *dawg, scrubs* etc. Landers writes *"when it comes to out-and-out profanity, our English our-letter expletives can hold their own against any language in the world"* (2001: 152). My own translations of the hip hop lyrics above made use of literal translation, i.e. English "four-letter words", to convey the same effect of aggression and grobianism, since rap and hip hop are subcultural phenomena in most, if not all, English-speaking countries; there is thus also equivalence of function and pragmatic impact (cf. Newmark, 1988: 109).

## 4. Conclusions

Slang is notoriously difficult to define, due also to the fact that linguistic categories are usually fluid ones. Vulgar slang/vulgarities/obscenities – and there are more similar terms, such as foul or rude language (for careful distinctions between these notions, see Wajnryb 2005), are subsumed to slang



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by most contemporary authors, rather than set apart as a separate category. Slang in general expresses membership of a social group, is often subversive and often metaphorical, in which case translation often poses great difficulties.

Translating slang is always a demanding job, mainly because its characteristics and purposes are not the same across cultures. The Romanian and English cultures typify Western and Eastern cultural values; in this context, the current widespread use of vulgar slang in Romania sets it apart in any possible comparison of the two cultures. Thus Western political correctness has imposed taboos related mainly to ethnicity and gender, while in Romania taboos are in fact exclusively related to sexuality.

Thus although slang's rebellious edge is also the source of its vitality, vulgar items are by and large disapproved of irrespective of cultural orientation. Even in this era when sexuality is more openly expressed than ever before, vulgarisms and swearwords preserve their emotional charge, one which, Steven Pinker (2007: 350) suggests,

> people would rather not have running through their minds at the drop of a hat – a sense of awe (for God and his trappings), fear (for Hell and disease), disgust (for bodily effluvia), hatred (for traitors, heretics, and minorities), or depravity (for sexuality). Because speech perception is automatic, uttering a taboo word can force a listener's mind to go in a direction it ordinarily prevents itself from going in.

Thus the famous psycholinguist's question is legitimate: why do speakers try to impose their wills on their listeners' minds in this way?

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