

# Slang Lexicography of the Past, the Present and the Future

George VOLCEANOV

"Spiru Haret" University, Bucharest (Romania)

Faculty of Letters

[geovolceanov@yahoo.com](mailto:geovolceanov@yahoo.com)



THE HISTORY OF SLANG lexicography is as fascinating as slang itself. It would be quite impossible for anyone to engage in the systematic study of slang without relying on the contribution of the lexicographers. For centuries on, they have recorded and preserved linguistic facts, often short-lived ones.

The current issue of *Argotica* is dedicated to the slang lexicography of the past, the present and the future. Before discussing the contents of this issue I have revisited the original call for papers, which proposed a number of topics pertaining to lexicography, like, say,

- 1) The comparative study of slang lexicography in various Western cultures (its origins and evolution);
- 2) The migration of slang items from one culture/language to another in various historical ages, which is detectable thanks to lexicography;
- 3) The revival of slang lexicography in formerly Communist countries where, for several decades, slang was a taboo subject;
- 4) The current stage of slang lexicography in various countries;

and questions like

- 1) Has a global slang emerged in the "global village" brought about by the Internet?
- 2) Is the expansion of the "linguistic imperialism" of English apparent in slang, too?
- 3) Is there, especially in ex-Communist countries, an opposite tendency at work, of a flourishing "local" slang?
- 4) Given the current dynamics of all languages, can a slang dictionary be compiled by a single author or will slang dictionaries become the result of

team effort (as in the case of the on-line, so-called “urban” dictionaries compiled by collective, anonymous authors)?

5) Is slang invading, nowadays, public space, and are the traditional frontiers between slang and the generally accepted literary language getting more and more blurred?

At the time when I devised this CFP, I was not aware that two solid academic works that I was to review for this very issue, authored by Julie COLEMAN (ed.) and Jonathon GREEN, had partly answered some of the aforementioned questions. The two books and the articles published in this issue of *Argotica*, written by a group of scholars from various geographical zones, are complementary and they help experts on slang further put together the complicated pieces that make up the elusive puzzle named *slang*.

Jonathon GREEN’s “Game Over” is an elegy for the expert slang lexicographer who could conjure massive dictionaries single-handedly. It points out the undeniable truth that the history of slang lexicography is the history of solitary long-distance runners like he himself has been. It is an elegy for the expert lexicographer, an endangered species on the verge of extinction, nowadays brutally displaced (or, shall I say, supplanted?) by the “crowd” and its “varied” (often silly, or to put it bluntly, stupid) “opinions.” I can perfectly empathize with Jonathon GREEN whenever I happen to look up an entry in the Romanian versions of the Urban Dictionary and find myself mauled by vicious attacks. The Internet has given birth to its multilingual children, the UD’s which have become the epitome of relativism in slang lexicography. Although GREEN’s article mimics the rhetoric of a tired Prospero, whose “every third thought shall be [his] grave,” and who seems to have come to terms with the sound and the fury of the Urban Dictionary, I am persuaded that its author still has the patience and prowess to delight his world-wide readership with further feats in the escalating antagonism between the academe and the “crowd,” with slang as the bone of contention.

That slang is no piece of cake or pastime hobby of the multitudes is substantiated by the scholarly contributions of Ala Eddine BAKHOUC, Rosa CETRO, Frédéric LE GOURIÉREC, Masaaki OGURA and Loredana TROVATO in their illuminating articles on various aspects of slang lexicography. It turns out to be more than a matter of likes and dislikes. It has to do with theoretical implications underlying typologies, with historical, linguistic and cultural dimensions of facts (BAKHOUC). It implies diachronic research and the attempt to retrieve slices of slang from remote ages and preserve it in present-day French dictionaries (the prostitutes’ slang revisited by Rosa CETRO).

I had a great surprise reading Frédéric LE GOURIÉREC’s article, when I had to implicitly compare his findings about the current state of slang studies

in a Communist country (China) with my own complaints about the neglect of slang lexicography in Communist Romania, a complaint I've repeatedly voiced in the prefaces to my own slang dictionaries compiled only after the downfall of Communism. The concept of "vagueness" surrounding slang actually saved the Chinese linguists from being censored and banned.

Another great surprise came for me from the Far East in the person of a young Japanese scholar (**Masaaki OGURA**) interested in the study of slang "in relation to the prescriptivism-descriptivism continuum." Frankly speaking, I would have been more elated to learn some "linguistic" facts about the Japanese underworld, the Yakuza, about its slang and the presence of the respective *argot* in specialized dictionaries, but I hope that this well-documented theoretical piece of writing will have a more practical sequel in some future issue of *Argotica*.

That a Japanese scholar is fascinated by Cambridge dictionaries should come as no surprise; one of **Loredana TROVATO**'s sources in the discussion of the First World War slang, the so-called *parler poilu* is the Romanian linguist and lexicographer Lazăr Șăineanu. Again, the diachronic dimension of research is essential, and the summary tables provide interesting information on the impact of the obsolete "poilu" on present-day French.

The articles grouped under the heading *Varia* present explorations of what might be counted as "exotic" regions and times when viewed from a Eurocentric perspective or from a twenty-first century reader's standpoint. **Dayo AKÀNMÚ**'s article aims at identifying and describing the New Idioms brought forth by the Yoruba Home Video Productions, the linguistic strategies involved in their formation, with a view to establishing their communicative and stylistic relevance.

A second article by **Ala Eddine BAKHOUC** discusses morphological matrices as enriched resources of slang creation. I am normally reluctant to phrases such as "theory and methodology," but BAKHOUC's article could be used as a seminal point of departure especially in compared linguistics.

The reading of **Hermann CHONOU**'s article about Nouchi (the language of the underworld of Abidjan) ought to be a must for any European traveller taking a chance to visit "the dangerous districts of Abidjan" (which unwittingly remind me of "the mean streets of Glasgow" advertised in the trailer of a famous British TV series, *Taggart*). Interestingly, the article gives a well-articulated answer to one of the questions listed earlier: Is slang invading, nowadays, public space, and are the traditional frontiers between slang and the generally accepted literary language getting more and more blurred? And the answer is: yes, insofar as Nouchi is currently spoken by all the layers of the Ivorian social categories and is considered the communication medium or vehicle by a vast majority of the Ivorian youth.

As a literary translator, I am more than happy that **Ginevra GROSSI** chose to submit her article to *Argotica* instead of a translation studies journal. The translation of slang, cant, argot, jargons will be one of the fascinating aspects of a translator's work and the outcome of his/her endeavours will always trigger debates inasmuch as no translation is perfect or finite. The article explores the clashes of translators' egos in a contrastive analysis that takes us from the first translations of Zola's *L'Assommoir* to the most recent ones, which are under scrutiny for the first time in a specialized article.

**Joseph de MIRIBEL**'s article on "an unknown, nearly forgotten slang" likewise takes us back to the nineteenth century and the legendary French ship launched in 1864 and reinstated as school ship in 1890. The article explores the French Naval Academy cadets' slang, a sociolect, the so-called '*argot-Baille*', with its main characteristics, those of being economic, ludic, cryptic and closely linked with the cadets' identity.

**Bauvarie MOUNGA**'s article on the French slang used by young people in Cameroon illustrates another topic originally suggested by the editors' CFP, namely the migration of slang items from one culture/language to another, and a tinge of linguistic imperialism might be added to the topic. The author relies on stylistics and pragmatics in order to make his point, to show how the use of slang influences identity and may cause problems.

The current issue of *Argotica* also hosts five reviews about books that are tightly connected with slang lexicography. **Laurențiu BĂLĂ** reviews a volume published in Poland, in honour of the greatest expert on French *argot*, who is also one of the leading slang scholars in Europe, Jean-Pierre Goudaillier ('*25 Years of Lexicography and Slang Studies*'), on occasion of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birthday. **Aloisia ȘOROP** examines the latest and, probably, the most reliable English-Romanian slang dictionary so far, issued in 2015. **Alena PODHORNÁ-POLICKÁ** goes over an interesting dictionary of Czech slang used by drug consumers and addicts (Romania has its own expert on the topic, retired police officer Jenică Drăgan, former head of the Romanian anti-drugs squad, who authored two such dictionaries); while the editor in charge of this issue reviews Mr. Slang's impressive *History of Slang* and a collection of articles (many of them closely related to a lexicographer's duties) edited by Julie Coleman in the wake of a slang workshop held at the University of Lancaster.

I shall bring this introduction to a conclusion with due thanks to all the contributors to the current issue of *Argotica* and I am looking forward to learn as much as possible about their forthcoming projects and writings that keep alive the fabulous world of slang studies and slang lexicography.

