COLOURS AND SLANG

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Abstract

The paper aims to highlight the idea that slang is used in order to exceed the pattern of standard language or even to escape the routine of common expression. Slang goes beyond the strictly linguistic framework, it becomes attitude, "sense", action. Its playful component is undeniable, and its encrypted game feature, at a semantic (sometimes phonetic or syntactic) level confers a certain "aura" upon it, an "aura" that, to the uninitiated or those lacking expertise, is hard to understand.

Key words: *chromatic terms, language, expression, codification, meaning*

Résumé

Le présent article est destiné à souligner l'idée que l'argot est employé dans le but d'outrepasser le moule de la langue standardisée et même d'echapper à la routine de l'expression commune. L'argot s'élance au-dessus du cadre strictement linguistique, il devient une attitude, un «pourquoi», une action par soi-meme. Son côté ludique est impossible à ignorer, et c'est justement ce trait essentiel d'être, dès l'atteinte d'un certain niveau (sémantique d'abord, parfois phonétique ou syntaxique) un jeu assez secret qui le fait baigner dans une sorte de «halo», lumineux de ses secrets. Pour les profanes ou pour les gens dépourvus de l'expérience nécessaire, ladite lumière diffuse est difficile à comprendre ou à saisir.

Mots-clés: *termes designant la couleur, langage, expressivité, forme encodée, signification*

1. Slang is "a codified language solely accessible to the initiated"[1]. The main function of slang is that of ensuring the codification of a message by the use of certain utterances in which keywords cannot be understood by a recipient lacking expertise. "Since it is a predominantly oral, unstable, language, with uncertain boundaries, tending to constantly renew itself, slang cannot be easily studied" [2]. Slangs are clearly delimitated linguistic groups; they "first of all characterize the underworld of offenders"[3] (and not only). Moreover, one should take into account that: "Slang dictionaries should be carefully made use of, since they attempt to fix slang instability within the traditional frameworks of standardized culture: words are isolated from the context assigning meaning to them, variants are treated as if they were separate words, and meanings are artificially dissociated" [4].

[1] DȘL, 2001, p. 66.
"A specific nucleus consisting of the expressive or/and secret languages of relatively closed social, homogeneous and marginal groups, (…) using them so as to mark their belonging to a group and (sometimes) to hide from outsiders." (*Enciclopedia limbii române*, 2001, p. 52)
[2] Zafiu, 2010, p. 36. Cf. Topală, 2004, p. 35.
[3] Toma, 1996, p. 76.
[4] Zafiu, 2010, p. 37.

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This codified language borrows models either from language-specific resources or from other languages, and the richness and expressivity of slang terms is mainly due to their use in various domains, where they can be found in the form of the so-called metaphors. Metaphors are often humoristic or ironic, and "puns" emphasize some communication situations. Adriana Stoichițoiu Ichim notes "the revival of researchers' concern for a peripheral functional register, as compared with literary language – slang"[5].

The development of slang cannot be separated from morphology or vocabulary, since word formation and semantic mobility are endless resources in these domains. There is an interdependence among the morphological, syntactic and lexical aspects of chromatic terms belonging to slang, in the sense that, by its content, the slang term is prone to a certain semantic and syntactic function (giving it a certain meaning or shade of meaning).

2. Derivation and compounding processes may increase the number of slang terms. Romanian slang shows a specific tendency towards suffix derivation, in particular diminutive suffixes attached to chromatic adjectives[6]. The following terms were created in this way: *albişori* "money", *albăstrioară* "one thousand lei", *albăstruică* "young woman"[7], *verzişori* "dollars"; *verdeață* (*verdețuri*) [8] has the same meaning, and *roşeața* denotes "gold".

In some other cases, both the prefix and the suffix are attached to the root of the colour name, and the result obtained after the parasynthetic derivation is a slang term: *a se înălbăstri*, meaning "ill omen; danger", an equivalent of the French slang expression *peur bleu*, derives from *albastru/blue*. In Romanian, *situație albastră/ blue situation* is a syntagm referring to a "serious, alarming situation".

The feminine, articulated form *neagra /the black one*[9] denotes the genital organ of a woman, the "vulva", and, by extension, the "vagina" [10], whereas *a fi pe roşu/ to be on the red*[11] (literally) is said about a "menstruating" woman. *Ferrari* cars, sport cars by definition, are usually red, even if the colour (and syntagm) *roşu Ferrari/Ferrari red* has not been imposed in specialized languages yet. The name of the well-known *Ferrari Testarossa* ("red head") makes a kind of indecent hint to a certain part of a woman's body[12]. In this respect, Ion Toma specifies: "The most obscene terms lie in the most obscure and *aggressive* areas of slangs" [13].

In slang, too, the noun *negresă/ black woman* denotes "the gas cylinder"[14].

Florica Dimitrescu notes the existence of the syntagm *ogor negru/black field*,

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[5] Stoichițoiu Ichim, 2001, p. 119.

[6] Cf. Zafiu, 2010, pp. 68-71.

[7] See Milică, 2009, p. 99.

[8] "Recent chromatic terms produce homonymy, not within the chromatic spectrum under discussion, but with pre-existing terms of common language: *albăstreală* with the following meanings in *DEX* 1. "blue, blueness" and 2. "blue, violet substance" becomes the homonym of the more recent slang term meaning "lei" (Romanian currency). Similarly, *verdeață* with the traditional meaning of "vegetables" acquired the slang meaning of "dollar", *verzitură* "unripe fruit" also means "dollars"; *albi*, besides the chromatic sense "the white ones", also means "money". (Dimitrescu, 2006, p. 177).

[9] See American English *black stuff* "sex partner (most often a black woman) of a (white) man"; cf. *black velvet*.

[10] Volceanov, 2006, p. 302.

[11] Cf. American English *red sails in the sunset* "menstruating", *red tummy-ache* "menstruation".

[12] Ferrari regularly uses descriptive terms related to a female's body when describing the style of their automobiles. Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferrari_Testarossa/23.07.2009.

[13] Toma, 1996, p. 77.

[14] Volceanov, 2006, p. 173.

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used in the language of the underworld in order to indicate "an unfavourable place for committing crimes; place full of policemen"[15]. *Oamenii în negru* (*uniforme negre*)/*men in black* (*black uniforms*) represent the special intervention forces[16]. The singular form, *omul negru/ black man* has the meaning of "policeman" [17]. The term *negrocalmin* denotes the "rubber baton of guards" [18]. Just like policemen, offenders are also named by chromatic terms: the neutral noun *indigo/ violet*[19] denotes "the offender specialized in a certain type of crimes". The syntagm *blat negru/ black dodge* (literally) probably appeared "by analogy with the syntagm *post negru/ black fast* and describes a maximum risk situation (without paying)[20]".

In Romanian, certain nouns denoting animal names, followed by the adjective *negru/ black* have a negative meaning; in these syntagms the term *negru* does not necessarily express chromatic appreciation: *oaia neagră/ black sheep* – is a person who usually stands out of a group (in the negative sense)[21]; *pisica neagră/ black cat*[22] is the embodiment of bad luck, and at the same time, an ill omen, when it crosses one's path; *vaca neagră/ black cow* – is a synonym of "death" and is (rarely) used in curses[23]; in the slang of the underworld, *ţapul negru/ the black billy goat*[24] is "the judge", and *ţapul roşu/ the red billy goat*, in the same slang of the underworld, is "the prosecutor".

The borderline between irony and joke is not strictly marked and therefore chromatic terms are used in slang for the purpose of creating a relaxed, relaxing, high-spirited atmosphere. "A strong comic effect, the result of wilful, intentional disguise, is obtained by antithesis: *albă-ca-zăpada/ snow-white* = "heroine"; in the slang of Paris "the black man" is *boule de neige*[25], and in American slang, *Mr. White*[26]. Used rather deprecatingly and ironically, the Romanian *negrotei* denotes a black person.

The association of two chromatic terms *albul/ white* and *negrul/ black* created a compound, *alba-neagra*, which does not express a chromatic tone, but "gamble"[27].

Adriana Stoichiţoiu Ichim considers that back-formation, without being productive with regard to the creation of new Romanian chromatic terms, is also used in occasional formations which have, sometimes, a deprecating connotation, as in the example: „*Alb-ca-Zăpada* şi cei şapte vicepreşedinţi" („*Snow White* and the seven vice-presidents")[28].

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[15] Dimitrescu, 2006, p. 168.

[16] Cf. Eng. *men in black.*

[17] Volceanov, 2006, p. 178.

[18] Idem, *ibidem*, p. 173.

[19] Idem, *ibidem*, p. 128.

[20] Cf. Zafiu, 2010, p. 115.

[21] See *persoană neagră/ black person* "a person to be blamed for all evils" (Dimitrescu, 2006, p. 172). Cf. Eng. *black-sheep*.

[22] Cf. It. *gatto nero*, Fr. *chat noir*.

[23] See: *Călca-te-ar vaca neagră*!/ *May you be trampled by a black cow!*

[24] Volceanov, 2006, p. 253.

[25] In Romanian, *boule de neige* is a food-related phrase, it denotes a cake.

[26] Baciu Got, 2006, p. 161.

"Intentional disguise, as a slang means of verbal expression or ironical intention, is doubled by involuntary disguise, in the use of terms by which the speaker understands totally different things due to vague, external similarities." (Baciu Got, 2006, p. 161)

[27] "In describing the game named *alba-neagra*, the deceiving method is thus explained: "the sucker" tries to find the hidden object and he constantly loses, whereas the accomplices of the person leading the game win (…)". Zafiu, 2010, p. 181.

[28] *România liberă*, January 21, 2006, p. 1.

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Likewise, Silvia Pitiriciu motivates her opinion according to which slang meanings have contributed to the consolidation of the lexical and semantic status of some terms deriving from the adjective *alb*, by providing some examples[29]; thus, *albitură* denotes an "alcoholic beverage"[30]; *albeață* means "bedclothes", as well as "silverware"; *albişori* "money". *Albă-ca-Zăpada/ Snow White* is a term used by drug addicts to refer to "cocaine"; *moara albă/ white mill* denotes in the language of the underworld, "the silver pocket watch" [31], *moara roşie/ galbenă* ("red/yellow mill") is a "golden watch"[32].

Bleumangri is a compound: *bleu/ light blue* – initial word segment + final letter: *-n-* + word: *gri/ grey* (contamination), which denotes an unreal, artificial colour; it can also be found in the syntagm *bleumangri cu picățele* (*pink/violet/grey*), used ironically, deprecatingly.

As for the issue of slang expressivity, Miorița Baciu Got considers that it "directly involves semantic fields"[33], by indicating the way in which the terms within the same (semantic) field are used with a special meaning. The following phrases are deeply expressive: *a vedea albastru* – literally "to see blue", *a se înverzi* (*de furie/ ciudă/ de necaz*) – literally "to turn green (with anger/ envy/ rage)", *a se îngălbeni* (*de frică/ de ciudă*) – literally "to turn yellow (with fear/ envy)". A certain shade of raillery and (self-)irony is involved in "galben şi frumos" ("yellow and beautiful") as a reply to the question about one's health. Other chromatic terms, *gălbejit/ yellowish* and *palid/ pale* are also signs of possible pain, since they express the paleness and unhealthy condition of a sick man's complexion.

Throughout the centuries, in the European chromatic systems, the *yellow* colour lost part of its value. In the popular symbolism of colours, gaudy *yellow* is associated with envy and jealousy; the syntagm *galben de invidie* (literally "yellow with envy") refers to the paleness of those dominated by ill feelings, maybe by jealousy. In Romanian, the chromatic term *yellow* can be found in the expression *a râde galben* (literally "to laugh yellow"). In French (unlike Romanian) there is an expression: *être peint en jaune*, referring to infidelity (cf. It. *essere tradito dalla moglie*).

The compound, rarely used term *burtăverde* designates a "tradesman with a green waistband (or wearing a green apron)"; deprecatingly, it has the meaning of "bourgeois"[34].

Verde/ green is also a component of certain phrases: in informal language, when referring to an old person, who yet looks young, strong and mentally sane, one says that he/ she is (still) *green*[35]. The same meaning existed in the Latin expression *cruda*

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[29] Pitiriciu, 2008, p. 149.

[30] Croitoru Bobârniche, 1996, p. 20.

Cf. American English *white coffe, white lightning* "wish-wash, poor quality alcoholic beverage".

[31] Volceanov, 2006, p. 168.

[32] Cf. Zafiu, 2010, p. 246.

[33] Baciu Got, 2006, p. 140.

[34] With regard to this meaning, Stelian Dumistrăcel says that "the status of the person called so is not, by any means, 'shameful' ". And the original denotation, ideologically "unengaged" and particularly without the mark of the wooden language, due to the fact that one starts from a dress feature, was discovered by Slavici, in the description of a tradesman's suit, a man who was, at the same time, a discreet usurer: "an original man, who still wears a caftan, and a green waistband - the traditional burtăverde – and he also wears his old cap with a brim" (*Cel din urmă armaş*, 1923)." (Dumistrăcel, 1997, p. 257)

[35] Cf. Eng. *green old age* "vigorous old age".

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senectus "still green old age". When referring to a young person, *green*[36] means "inexperienced, immature". The expression *a fi verde pe la urechi* (literally "to be green around one's ears"), used in the south of Transylvania, refers to a very young person, who acquired the experience of a mature one. By extension of meaning, *de când cu buricul verde* (literally "since he had a green navel") signifies "since he was a child".

Many slang words also penetrated colloquial language, possessing an inventory of accessible/ well-known terms to any user/ speaker. The difficulty consists in the delimitation between slang and colloquial language, which is less and less clear. For instance, the syntagm *cai verzi* (*pe pereți*) – (literally "green horses on the walls") which belongs to slang, signifies, according to Ioan Milică[37], "impossible, unbelievable, stupid things; chimeras". However, in the region of Oltenia, the expression *a visa cai/ codrii verzi* (literally "to dream about green horses/ woods") means "to wish things that are impossible to achieve". By analyzing the meanings of these expressions, one can say that they partly overlap; Romanian speakers know them and therefore they cannot be included in the category of slang.

3. Slang generally characterizes subcultures; in certain human communities (groups, societies, organisations etc.), individuals develop different ways of life and expression, some of them deviating, even hostile towards the norms and values of society in general. Created by the marginalized people of society, slang has two meanings, imposed by its creators/ users: a) a code – inaccessible to the uninitiated; and b) a metaphor – decipherable in context. Therefore, slang comes into being and is temporarily fixed in language, since it is constantly renewed.

The study of Romanian slang in terms of expression and content highlights the individuality of this language. Slang terms are usually and naturally integrated into spoken language, where they are constantly subject to changes of value, the slang expression becoming the signifying element of a particular code.

Special/ specialized languages were called by the members of the Prague Linguistic Circle (Bohuslav Havránek, Karel Horálek, Vladimir Skalicka) *functional languages* or *styles*. They delimitated for the first time the borderline between style, as the totality of tendencies for the purpose of communication, and language, as the totality of expressive means. The distribution of chromatic terms is achieved, according to the value of the acquired connotation, within each language, and they are used with the same semantic value by all the users of a language specific to a certain field, the originality and diversity of slang contributing to a vivid expression, as opposed to standard language, to linguistic norms.

Slang vocabulary forms an inventory that contains simple units, compound units, derivative units, phrases and expressions. It partly originates in the fundamental vocabulary, in loans or it just represents slang creations as such. Slang words develop a specific meaning, usually resulting from the change of meaning of the lexical elements or from the preservation or change of meaning of loans, or a newly created one. Slang has massively developed in the last years, also raising experts' interest due to its functions: hermetic function and dynamism.

[36] Cf. Eng. *greenhorn*, *green hand* "inexperienced, immature person; beginner".
[37] Cf. Milică, 2009, p. 228-232.

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