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SLANG TERMINOLOGY – OLD PROBLEMS AND NEW SOLUTIONS

Gueorgui Armianov

“Slang is one of those things that everybody can recognize and nobody can define.”

Paul Roberts (Andersson –Trudgil 1990: 69)

Over the years, in my work I have constantly highlighted the terminological heterogeneity in the field of European social dialects. Many of the terms that belong to national traditions and cultures are used in conjunction with international scientific ones (Armianov: 2004).

And yet, the linguistic features that make terms out of ordinary words are rather clear and we can put forward the following characteristics:

1. the single meaning (the monosemy) of the term;
2. its semantic precision;
3. its stylistic neutrality.

It is surprising that as soon as one starts discussing *slang*, *argot* or *jargon* the linguistic and cultural polysemy of these terms immediately brings a very complex and diverse picture to mind. This complexity and this diversity exist in all the countries of Europe and in the United States and they are quite difficult to overcome because of numerous extralinguistic factors. Very often specialists face outdated concepts and bizarre ideas. Scientific studies are regularly opposed to journalistic and non-professional articles, where the main goal is not scientific truth and a precise analysis of the facts but rather the emotional effect on the readers.

Because of this sociocultural opposition and the heterogeneity of the sociolectal terminological apparatus I think that it is important to bring some order to this chaos. In the current context, I will attempt to paint a picture in which the European social dialects (or at least some of them) will be defined and analysed according to their pure linguistic and social characteristics.

The final goal is to elaborate a clear structure, and a common terminological scale for European sociolects where each *slang*, *jargon* or *argot* can find its place.

FRANCE

France is probably the European country where a particular interest in social dialects first appeared. One can find some isolated quotations about *jargon* (and its variants *gargon*, *gergon* and *gergo*) as early as the 12th century (Robert 1993: 1221) and a number of strange encrypted words, dating back to the XIV century, suggest that it is likely that this type of sociolect existed well before that time. The available documents contain some interesting glossaries and show that in the 15th century the term *argot* as a ‘social dialect of a closed secret group’ was unknown in France, while the term *jargon* existed in the 12th century. The term *argot* appears, very likely for the first time, in the work of Olivier Chéreau “Jargon de l’argot réformé”, where even the

title indicates a social group and not its specific language, its social dialect (Chéreau 1630).

The existence of such a meaning is also reflected in the “Dictionnaire universel” of 1771 in which we find the following definition: “argot is also (sic!) the name that the beggars give the language or jargon they use” (Dictionnaire 1771: 495). In his “Anthologie de la littérature argotique”, Jacques Cellard also shows that in the 17th century the term *argot* possessed only one meaning – he writes: “jargon is a language; argot, a society” (Cellard 1985: 17).

As early as the beginning of the 18th century, *argot* began to be used in competition with *jargon*, which in turn took on a narrower sense: “Jargons are not secret but rather ‘professional languages’; and it is in this sense that we must understand the term jargon.” (Calvet 1999: 9).

Today, this is the use and the most common meaning of the two terms that we observe in France, not only in the scientific community, but also in the wider circles of writers, journalists and educators. In parallel, one can find many other terms, such as *bigorne*, *cadogan*, *javanais*, *jobelin*, *langue verte*, *largonji*, *redegue*, *tortillage*, *verlan*, etc., that indicate some specific kinds of French sociolects.

Some recent works of the Centre d’Argotologie in Paris support the idea that a distinction should be made between corporate sociolects, professional and mixed (corporate–professional) ones – an idea that have been circulating in Eastern Europe for more than 50 years now. Some authors even proposed the term *jargot* “to refer to all uses where jargon and argot are mixed” (François-Geiger 1991: 7). This term, which is apparently not easy to impose itself, combines quite artificially elements typical of cryptic sociolects with elements of corporate and professional sociolects. Nevertheless, it clearly shows the need to establish a more accurate and understandable sociolectal terminological system.

UNITED KINGDOM

Terminological tradition in Britain and in all English-speaking countries is based on a clear distinction between three basic terms – *slang*, *jargon* and *argot*. As a rule, each is linked to a specific type of social dialect, and there is almost no confusion between them. Most authors, when discussing corporate sociolects such as those of pupils, students, soldiers, sports players, drivers, etc., give preference to the term *slang*.

The use of this term dates back to the Middle Ages and its origin has been the subject of many discussions (Hotten 1913; Weekley 1859: 287; Partridge 1956; Ritter 1906: 45–49; Westendorpf 1923). Some writers consider *slang* as everything that looks new and is not in dictionaries of British dialects (Thorne 1990: 26). Others include in this term different language varieties, ranging from secret sociolects to professional terminology. For instance, in the Pocket Oxford Dictionary *slang* is defined as “very informal words, phrases, or meanings, not regarded as standard and often used by a specific profession, class, etc.” (Pocket 1996).

In their book “Bad Language”, Lars-Gunnar Andersson and Peter Trudgill prefer not to define the term, and give no less than thirteen largely explained features that should characterize the linguistic variety called *slang*, namely:

1. Slang is language used below the neutral stylistic level
2. Slang is typical of informal situations
3. Slang is typical of spoken language

4. Slang is found in words, not in grammar
5. Slang is not a dialect
6. Slang is not swearing
7. Slang is not a register
8. Slang is not cant, *argot* or *jargon*
9. Slang is creative
10. Slang is often short-lived
11. Slang is often conscious
12. Slang is group-related
13. Slang is ancient (Andersson–Trudgill 1990: 69–81).

Perhaps, the authors were not convinced in the unconditional validity of certain features because they showed the limitations or the exceptions of this classification. They say, for example, that *slang* is a phenomenon of the spoken language, but immediately emphasize that there are areas where it is widely used, particularly in modern literature and cinema. Then they emphasise that “Slang is not swearing” although one can easily find hundreds of examples of *slang* swear words and expressions in spoken or written form. Finally, Andersson and Trudgill declare that “Slang is often conscious”, but does that mean that in some cases *slang* is the result of an unconscious activity?

However, in general the term *slang* in the English-speaking world covers only a specific area of social dialects wherein the roles of expressive linguistic creativity and informal union of people are predominant characteristics.

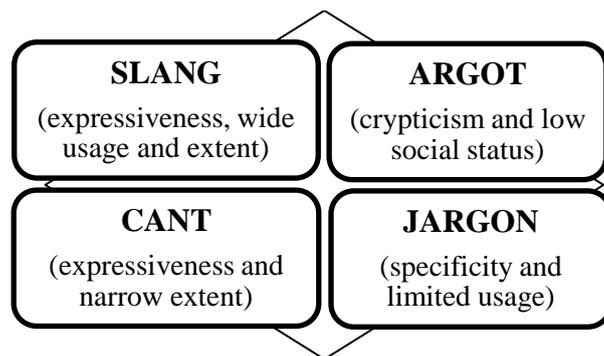
The other two terms that are positioned at the same level as *slang* and are clearly defined, are *argot* and *jargon*, which represent respectively:

- *Argot* – A more or less secret vocabulary used by a particular class or group (Webster 1996: 52)
- *Jargon* – The technical or specialized vocabulary of a particular profession or group (Webster 1996: 540)

Very often in English and American linguistics, we find the term *cant*, which can be defined as “the restricted, non-technical words and expressions of any particular group, as an occupational, age, ethnic, hobby, or special-interest group.” (Britannica 1998). Still, according to this definition, we can compare English cant with sociolects which often bear the name of professional *jargon* or even *slang*.

At the same time, in the specialized literature we can discover definitions of the term cant such as “a secret speech of the underworld” (Partridge 1956: 124) or “the slang of professional criminals” (Green 2000: VII) which establish a similarity with the widely known *argot* (Gotti 1999).

In fact, a comparison of the four terms given above and of their meanings in Great Britain and the United States allows us to create a clear scale of the social dialects in these countries – a scale built on the basis of entirely linguistic criteria, and at the same time taking into account some important social differences.



The change in any fundamental feature of a particular sociolect leads to a modification in its nature and to its transformation into a different form. For example, the widening of the narrow usage of cant turns it into *slang*; the suppression of the specific usage of professional *jargon* leads to its transformation into standard vocabulary; the disappearance of crypticism of an *argot* nullifies its own existence.

It is important to point out that there exist several traditional terms in English and American linguistics which have a very broad meaning and sometimes intersect in their use with *slang* or *jargon*, for example: *tongue* (Coltharpe 1965), *talk*, *speech*, all of which describe a type of strange, specific, incomprehensible language of a certain social or regional group.

BULGARIA, RUSSIA AND SERBIA

Studies of social dialects in Bulgaria first appeared at the end of the 19th century. At that time (and in rare cases even today) one could find traditional Bulgarian names, as: *tarikatski ezik* ‘dodger language’ (Mladenov 1930; Hadžidenev 1941), *tarikatski govor* ‘dodgers dialect’ (Stojkov 1946), *tarikatski jargon* ‘dodgers *slang*’ (Popov 1952; Stojkov 1953; Andrejčin 1958; Boyadžiev 1972; Pärvev 1980), *tarikatski dumi* ‘dodgers words’, etc. These names show the “genetic” links that existed between youth slang and the argot of the outlawed until the late 19th century, but also the hesitations of Bulgarian linguists when it came to finding the most accurate term.

Gradually, since the sixties of the last century, with the deepening of studies in this area, there appeared the necessity to determine sociolectal terminology and to harmonize it with international standards.

At the same time, in parallel to the term *social dialect*, often used in language studies, authors began to use the term *sociolect*, created in the 1970s by the German linguists Grosse and Neubert (Grosse 1970; Neubert 1979). Traditional designations were replaced by the terms *jargon* and *slang*, which were gradually imposed in the scientific literature, without any of them becoming accepted as the sole one. In general, these two terms exist as synonyms, and their use is a matter of personal preference rather than of conceptual differences (Pačev 1988: 1).

It should also be noted that some linguists consider the term *slang* as the notion of species, related only to corporate sociolects, and the term *jargon* as a generic term which includes all the others. Other authors consider *jargon* a subordinate part of *slang* and refer to the use of “jargon words in slang” (Čizmarov 1982: 160–166). Some even judge the term *slang* as a scientific one and *jargon* as a “colloquial term” (Vălkov 1990)!

In his “Small encyclopaedia of sociolinguistics” A. Pačev presents *slang* as a “secret language (speech)”, thus repeating the unacceptable mixture between the two

concepts (Pačev 1993: 14). A hundred pages further, he divides *jargon* into two groups – corporate *jargon* and outlaw *jargons* – and when explaining the nature of the second group, he uses the term *slang* as a synonym for *jargon* (Pačev 1993: 117). Still, in the article on the term *slang* the author presents it as a type of speech (Pačev 1993: 231) without paying attention to the fact that the Bulgarian term “*razgovorna reč*” means not only spoken language but also ‘familiar speech’. At the end he gives almost identical examples of those included in the article about *jargon*.

The reasons why authors prefer one or the other term are different, but are rarely of a linguistic or scientific nature. It is only recently that some linguists have begun to formulate a difference between *jargon* and *slang*, using the former for professional sociolects, as in English-speaking countries, the Czech Republic, Russia and sometimes France, and reserving the latter for corporate sociolects only (Videnov 1990).

In Bulgaria, as in the most European countries, the term *argot* exists with only one meaning – ‘secret social dialect of craftsmen, criminals or outlaws’. This probably facilitates the understanding of the structure, relationships and links within the system of the Bulgarian social dialects, but poses problems when it comes to a comparison with the French system, for example, since in France professionals and amateurs alike prefer to use the term *argot* to refer to all types and sub-types of social dialects, which are not related to a profession, and especially when referring to the “traditional” sociolects of criminals and youngsters (Marusaut 1960; Esnault 1965; Quillet 1965; Calvet 1994).

In Russia (and in the Soviet Union until 1991), studies of social dialects date from the early 20th century (Trahtenberg 1908; Handzinskij 1926; Potapov 1927). Most of them were dedicated to traditional sociolects of merchants and criminals which, as in Bulgaria, had their own additional Russian names: *ofensky yazyk*, *ofenskoe argot*, *fenya*, *blatnaya reč*, etc.

In the 1930s some interesting studies were published on Russian professional sociolects, the criminal *argot* and the language of the city, which, in addition to their obligatory ideology, make a strong impression on the reader with their systematic analysis (Barannikov 1931; Larin 1977¹; Čistyakov 1935; Lihačev 1935; Uspenskij 1936).

Just as in Bulgaria, the titles of these articles demonstrate the same hesitation about the terms to employ. The use of the term *fenya* persists even today in books on contemporary social dialects, like the criminal *slang* reflected in the book “*Russkaya Fenya*” of Vladimir Bykov (Bykov 1994). In the preface, the author uses the term “*interjargon*” to show that use of this sociolect is not strictly limited to a group of criminals or prisoners, but is well known to different and heterogeneous social groups, such as thieves, hooligans, drug dealers and other people placed in different institutions of compulsory labour (Bykov 1994: 3). Then, he subtitled his book “*Slovarj russkogo argot*”, that is to say, “*Dictionary of Russian slang*”, thus creating a mix of scientific terms and traditional names (Bykov 1994: 13).

However, a few pages further on, when Bykov speaks of grammatical and semantic features of the “*russkaya fenya*”, he uses the terms *blatnaya muzyka*, *jargon* and thieves’ *jargon* as synonyms for the terms *interjargon* and *fenya* (Bykov 1994: 4–9).

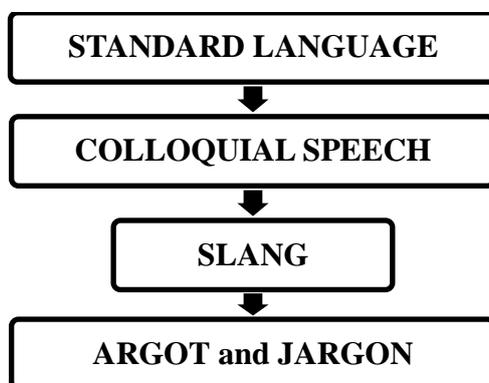
¹ The article was first published in 1931 and is based on an early oral version of 1926; later it was being republished in 1977.

The term *interjargon* was used similarly by L.I. Skvortsov in his article "Standard language, colloquial speech and jargon and their interactions". There he defines the term somewhat differently: "vocabulary that belongs to several jargons", that grows and, as a result, "enters slang" (sic!) (Skvortsov 1997: 35–36). From this point of view, the term *interjargon* looks similar to the French term *jargot* mentioned above, but once again we are faced with a pretty obvious terminological confusion.

Although Russian linguists generally use the term *argot* for secret sociolects of criminals and *jargon* for corporate and professional sociolects, a confusion between these terms can be noticed even in some university textbooks and academic papers (Valgina 1971: 35; Šmelev 1977: 172; Dešeriev 1981: 80; Šanskij 1981: 49; Bondaletov 1987). For example, in the article by Skvortsov quoted above, the author uses *jargon* and *argot* as absolute synonyms: "The standard language is regularly enriched by words of a dialect, popular and jargon (*argot*) origin" (Skvortsov 1997: 29).

A few pages further on, he puts *argot* and *jargon* as well as "different *argot* and *jargon* elements" at a lower level than the terms *slang* or colloquial speech: "The evolution of *jargon* to *slang* and then to colloquial speech is a complex and heterogeneous process... In colloquial speech and in *slang* enter not only neutralized words belonging to one *jargon* or another, but also *interjargon* words" (Skvortsov 1997: 35–38).

Following Skvortsov, we can build a scale on which *argot* and/or *jargon* are placed at a low level, *slang* at a higher level, and above them stands colloquial speech, considered by the author as an integral part of the standard language, but located at its lowest levels.



A different case can be found in the "Slovarj moskovskogo argot", literally "Dictionary of Moscow argot" by V. S. Elistratov. The author in fact presents the corporate youth sociolect, which is a linguistic variety located very far from *argot*. The theoretical part of the dictionary, entitled exactly "Argot and culture", begins with a sentence that establishes an equation between the terms *slang*, *jargon* and *argot*: "The problem of *argot* (i.e. *jargons*, *slangs*, etc.) is one of the most complex problems, not only in linguistics but also in all human sciences" (Elistratov 1994: 594).

From this quotation we can conclude that *argot* (in the singular!) is considered a generic term which is located at the highest level of the sociolectal scale and contains other smaller and limited varieties, as *jargons* or *slangs* (in the plural!) – a position that cannot be successfully defended. This contradiction still exists in a recent dictionary of Russian *slang* published by Elistratov, where even in the subtitle he includes the term *jargon* in the wider variety of *slang*: "Dictionary of Russian slang

(more than 12 000 words and phrases; argot; kinemalogos; jargons)” (Elistratov 1994).

Moreover, in the review of the dictionary published in the prestigious literary journal “Literaturnaya gazeta”, the journalist writes that “there are several approaches to argot (slang)”, thus repeating the already exposed confusion (Gazeta 2007).

The same confusion exists in the “Manual of linguistic terms” by Rosenthal and Telenkova. At first, the authors use the term *argot* to refer to all types of social dialects (those of criminals, of schoolchildren, students, athletes, etc.). *Jargon* is presented as its exact synonym. Unexpectedly, a few dozen pages further, they explain that *jargon* “is the same as argot, but with a pejorative meaning” (Rosenthal 1972). It is not clear how they come to that conclusion. Similarly, it is surprising that the term *slang*, well known and used in Russia since the thirties, appears nowhere in this book.

The use of the term *slang* in Russia (usually written as *сленг* or *слянг*, as in Bulgaria) has been rather sporadic and often limited to the context of English studies (Sudzilovskij 1973; Makovskij 1982; Švejcer 1983), while terms like *dialekt* ‘dialect’, *reč* ‘speech’, *govor* ‘dialect’ and *yazyk* ‘language’ are still very common, especially in popular articles. Even in the most recent publications, some ambiguity and mutual substitution of the terms *slang* and *jargon* can be observed (Mokienko 2009), though the term *slang* appears more and more frequently (Ponomarev 1996; Nikitina 2009). Thus, on the internet-site “Živoje slovo”, Elena Marinova asserts that *slang* is a non-standard variant of the national language and, by contrast with *jargon*, is not limited regarding its speakers. It can be used by “people of different professions, different social status, age, education, etc.”, while “Jargon as a variant of the national language always has a limitation in terms of the people who use it” (Marinova 2011).

A very similar situation exists currently in Serbia and Croatia, where we can observe the same kind of contradictions, inaccuracies or confusions. In both countries, the terms *slang*, *jargon* and *argot* are frequently mixed with other traditional designations as *šatra*, *šatrovački govor*, *guegavački govor*, *frayerski govor*, etc., which further complicates the understanding and, therefore, the proper use of scientific linguistic terms. In addition, the terms *slang*, *jargon* and *argot* are used with similar or identical meanings to those of their Bulgarian and Russian counterparts. This is valid to a certain degree in Poland as well, while in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia the use of the three scientific terms is fairly clear and unambiguous.

To illustrate this confusing picture, in the table below I have placed the three key terms – *slang*, *jargon* and *argot* – together with other traditional national expressions, used to describe certain specific types of sociolects. The countries concerned are France, the United Kingdom, Russia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Poland, and the Czech Republic.

This table shows that the same terms are often used to define distinct linguistic varieties and it is valid not only when we compare the terminological systems of different European countries, but also within the boundaries of a particular country and its terminological system. In France and Russia, for example, the term *argot* means both “secret language”, “language of criminals” and “corporate sociolect.” In Bulgaria, Russia and Serbia, the term *jargon* means “professional sociolect”, “corporate sociolect” and “incomprehensible language.” If we include here the extraordinary heterogeneity of traditional names of each country, we will get a picture which is as colourful as a patchwork carpet.

This unruly situation requires an attempt to unify the meanings of sociolinguistic and sociolectal terms, which in turn would lead to clarity in the system

of social dialects on the Old Continent. Is this feasible in practice? Is it possible to simply ask Bulgarian, Czech, Russian, Slovak or Serbian linguists to replace the well-established term *jargon* with its meaning of ‘corporate sociolect’ with the English term *slang*? The answer could be positive, if we take into consideration the fact that these two terms are already competing.

Well, but is this substitution possible in France, where cultural traditions play a very important role and where there is a fierce national fight against the so called “invasion of English words”? Here, the answer is rather no. Furthermore, it could lead to a new terminological synonymy, this time between the term *slang* and the recently created term *jargot* which, in a great measure, occupies a similar linguistic space.

Such danger seems quite likely to arise, because even the French linguistic community is pretty heterogeneous, and is not fully ready to adopt such a change even if it is understood as a necessary step towards the unification of terminology in the field of social dialects.

| | ARGOT | JARGON | SLANG | OTHERS |
|----------------|---|---|---|--|
| FRANCE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secret sociolect • Criminal sociolect • Corporate sociolect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional sociolect • Incomprehensible language | ∅ | Bigorne, cadogan, jargot, javanais, jobelin, langue verte, largonji, redegue, tortillage, verlan |
| UK | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criminal sociolect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional sociolect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect • Sociolect | Cant, lingo, patter, shop talk, tongue, talk |
| BULGARIA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secret sociolect • Criminal sociolect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect • Professional sociolect • Incomprehensible language • Sociolect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect • Sociolect | Tarikatski ezik, tarikatski govor, tarikatski jargon, poslovečki govor |
| SERBIA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secret sociolect • Criminal sociolect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect • Professional sociolect • Incomprehensible language • Sociolect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect | Frayerski govor, guegavački govor, kozarski govor, poslovečki govor, šatra, šatrovački govor |
| RUSSIA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secret sociolect • Criminal sociolect • Corporate sociolect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect • Professional sociolect • Incomprehensible language • Sociolect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect • Sociolect | Blatnaya muzyka, blatnoi yazyk, fenya, jive, kent, kivruli, ofensky yazyk, tompak, splav, zirkon |
| CZECH REPUBLIC | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect • Secret | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect • Professional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sociolect • Professional | Hantýrka, hantec, hatlanina, |

| | | | | |
|--------|---|---|-----------------------|---|
| | sociolect • Criminal sociolect | sociolect | sociolect | hatmatilka |
| POLAND | • Secret sociolect • Criminal sociolect • Corporate sociolect | • Corporate sociolect • Professional sociolect | • Corporate sociolect | Gwara, wiech, bałak, grypsera, grypserka. |

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