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SOME REMARKS ON A LINGUISTIC PREDATOR: FOREIGN INFLUENCES UPON PRISON SLANG

Abstract: Prison slang may be considered to be a language variety with great creativity, which is manifested in its inherent tendency to draw on and borrow from other languages and language varieties. As a result, in the linguistic repertoire used by inmates in British and American prisons we observe a strong tendency to apply vocabulary items which derive from many different linguistic backgrounds, such as, among others, Yiddish, Spanish, Italian and Cockney Rhyming slang. Unfortunately, this aspect of prison slang seems to be sadly neglected, if not altogether ignored. This paper provides an analysis of the subject of borrowings in the linguistic repertoire used by English-speaking inmates.

Key words: prison slang, Yiddish, Hispanics, Italian, Cockney Rhyming slang, borrowings.

It is an obvious truism to say that, considering the dynamic nature of language, change is ever pervading and ever present. Nevertheless, such a statement that is frequent to see in handbooks on language and language change triggers other important questions, such as, for example: *Why is language changing and what are the causes of language change?* To start with, language evolves because of our needs, experiences, living conditions, beliefs, views, and many other aspects of our lives are constantly changing. In order to name new concepts, objects, actions or places we need new names. These are not necessarily new lexical items since we – not infrequently – create new words by shortening the existing ones (e.g. *gym* for *gymnasium*), by combining words or elements of words together (e.g. *red* and *coat* to form *redcoat*, *breakfast* and *lunch* to form *brunch*), or by employing proper names (e.g. *Levis*). Nevertheless, the results of employing the mechanisms discussed above are in no way sufficient to keep pace with the changes taking place in extra-linguistic reality. As argued long ago by Sapir (1921:93): *Languages, like*

cultures, are rarely sufficient unto themselves [...], and that is why the evolving nature of language manifests itself in its tendency to borrow from the resources of other languages. Significantly, the tendency to draw on the linguistic repertoires of speakers of different languages is not only typical of the standard varieties of natural languages, but also for nonstandard varieties, such as, for example, prison slang.

In order to understand the gist of the influence of different languages on prison slang, which is a feature of all the major languages of the world, one must first realise that in the history of correctional institutions, inmates have a tendency to come from a variety of countries, nationalities, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In effect, each prison community is a mixture of people with diverse features, abilities, convictions and character traits. The diversity inherent to the community of inmates also manifests itself in the linguistic repertoire employed within prison walls. To be more precise, the manifestation of the diversity of prison slang is embodied in its tendency to draw on and borrow from foreign languages. To put it metaphorically, it may be argued that prison argot is ‘a linguistic predator’ which borrows, uses and abuses without shame from every possible source. In the case of English, prison slang has particularly sponged upon Yiddish, Spanish, Italian and Cockney Rhyming slang.

Yiddish has greatly contributed to the richness and vividness of English prison argot. Before we start discussing the Yiddish influence on prison slang it is necessary to define Yiddish and explain how and why this language appeared in the English-speaking countries. To start with, Yiddish is the historical language of Germanic/Hebrew origin spoken by Ashkenazi Jews in Europe.¹ As to the history of Jews in England, a small community lived in Britain between 1066 and 1290, when they were increasingly prosecuted, until they were finally expelled by Edward I. The Jews started to return to England in the 16th century, but it was only in the 19th century that the British Jewry was granted formal emancipation, and the Jewish community became more and more integrated into British society (see Hyamson, 1908).²

It goes without saying that most of the influence of Yiddish on English is related to the growth of the USA. As pointed out by Halpern (2007:124): *In the 1880s, Yiddish became to arrive in thick waves at a crowded, chaotic Ellis Island. For a few decades it concentrated itself in Jewish communities, Yiddish theatre, Yiddish literature, mixing slowly like molasses with the English world surrounding it.* As a result, many words that have entered English from Yiddish managed to penetrate world Englishes by way of the American variety. Today, it is American

¹ Although the community of Ashkenazi Jews who moved to Israel switched to traditional Hebrew, the Jews who in the 19th century arrived in America still used their Yiddish dialect, which became dominant within their community.

² The most obvious traces of Yiddish origin upon British English are observable in the Cockney Rhyming slang of East London.

English that abounds in words of Yiddish origin and this includes words spoken in the environment of the entertainment industry (those that entered the English lexicon via vaudeville, the Catskills/Borscht Belt, and Hollywood), prison argot, as well as the standard varieties of English. What is also worth mentioning here is the fact that there are a number of words that are more regionally oriented, for example, in the New York metropolitan area. In this context a question could be asked: *Why was Yiddish so easily adopted?* Ozick (1988:99) formulated a very convincing argument saying that: *Yiddish is especially handy for satire, cynicism, familiarity, abuse, sentimentality and resignation, for sense of high irony, and for putting people in their place and events in bitter perspective: all the defensive verbal baggage an involuntarily migratory nation is likely to need en route to the next temporary refuge.* All these features allowed this language to become an integral part of the English-speaking tradition.

As far as prison slang is concerned, it was already Partridge ([1933]1979) who pointed out that many Yiddish words had become integrated into criminal slang and attributed this phenomenon to the fact that the Jews were the first traders and vagabonds, and anyone who came across them on the roads could hardly escape their lexical influence. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that many of these words are related to the world of petty crime and money, subjects that are inseparably tied to any criminal community. In effect, in English prison lexis there are terms of Yiddish origin which are closely linked to the conceptual category **HUMAN BEINGS**, and – in particular – to the microcategory **CRIMINALS**, such as, for example, *arch gonnof* used in the sense ‘the chief of a gang of thieves’, *baldober* employed in the sense of ‘a director or a leader, the director or planner of a robbery’, *masse-stapler* conveying the sense of ‘a rogue disguised as a woman’, or *kike* denoting ‘a Jew, a Jewish thief.’ Some of the words of Yiddish origin which entered prison argot are – not infrequently – employed to convey polysemous senses, such as, for example, *magsman* used in the sense ‘a fashionably dressed swindler; a street swindler who watches for countrymen or gullible people; a card sharper; an extremely dishonest horse-dealer’, *gonnof* employed to convey the sense of ‘a thief; a witness; an amateur or bungling pickpocket; a retired rogue, especially a retired thief’. There also exist Yiddish words which are used in reference with other people related to the prison community, such as, for example, *zabist* which conveys the sense of ‘a policeman’, *cozer* employed in the sense of ‘a stool pigeon, one who reports to the police’, *baldower* denoting ‘an informer to the police’, *flecker* which conveys the sense of ‘a spy, a spotter’, *gunsel* or *guntzel* which denotes ‘a boy a youth, with implication of sexual perversion; a passive male homosexual, usually a youth, a younger man’, *kibitzer* or *kabitzer* employed to convey the sense of ‘one who volunteers advice and who endeavors to conduct another’s affairs’, *shyster* employed in the sense of ‘an unscrupulous lawyer’, *shamus* designating ‘a private detective’, and *snodder* which means ‘one who dislikes spending money’. Apart from the conceptual category **HUMAN BEINGS**, another category, namely

INANIMATE OBJECTS is also represented by various words of Yiddish origin, such as, for example, *keister* conveying the sense of ‘a handbag, a small grip, a satchel; a strong box; a safe within a vault’, *autem* which designates ‘a church; a meeting house’, *driz kemesa* used in the sense ‘a lace shirt’, *schnozzle* used to convey the sense of ‘a nose’, and *mazuma* employed in the sense of ‘money’.

Yiddish influence is in no way restricted to the adoption of nouns. Within the realm of prison slang vocabulary, we also find adjectives, verbs and phrases of Yiddish origin, such as, for example, *mockey* used in the sense ‘Jewish’, *meshuga* employed in the sense of ‘crazy’, *to gonnof* conveying the sense of ‘to wheedle out of, to cheat; to steal by pickpocketry’, *to fleck* which means ‘to spy upon’, and *ryebuck* which is used in the sense ‘all right, straight, it will do, I am satisfied’.

Yiddish provides but one of the sources of vocabulary items used in prison slang. Another language which has served as a frequent source of loanwords is Spanish. The beginning of Spanish influence on English started to be felt in the 16th century – the age of explorations – when Spain, being a very powerful country, was engaged in a conflict with England. The Spanish impact upon English gained new momentum in the 19th century, as a result of steady immigration from Spain to the USA, fuelled by poverty, urban congestion and unpopular wars in Europe. Due to these extra-linguistic reasons, the majority of borrowings of Spanish origin in English are specific to its American variety, and they are said to constitute one of its most important peculiarities when compared with British English.³ Nowadays, as Wolfram *et al.* (2004:339) argue: *Spanish speakers are by far the largest group of current immigrants to the United States mainland. During the 1990s, the Hispanic population increased by over 50 percent, and since the 2000 census, it has grown nearly four times faster than the overall U.S. population.* As a result, as pointed out by González (2000:292): *Spanish has made one of the major contributions to English vocabulary.* Obviously, the interfusion of Spanish to English is not merely observable in its standard variety, but also in slang usage.

This influence of Spanish on nonstandard varieties of English is especially visible in the language of the underworld and this may be related to the fact that, as reported by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, nearly 33.8%⁴ of people held in federal prisons in North America are Hispanics.⁵ This close and long-term contact between English- and Spanish-speaking inmates resulted in the adoption of a huge number of borrowings used on daily basis in prison slang. Among others, we may speak of

³ The *OED* (1989) recorded over 1,000 words and phrases of Spanish origin, and nearly 40% of them are still in current usage, and *Webster's Third Dictionary* (1961) included over 2,000 (see González, 2000).

⁴ As of the 26th of December, 2015. For more on this issue see https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_ethnicity.jsp.

⁵ The term *Hispanics* is used in the sense ‘a person of any race speaking Spanish and English’. For more information on the Hispanic population in correctional institutions in the USA see http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/inc_hispanicprisoners.pdf.

Spanish etymology in case of such terms as, for example, *hombre* used to convey the sense of ‘a man’ and *lobo crook* employed in the sense of ‘a thief who steals alone’, both of which refer to the conceptual category of **HUMAN BEINGS**. As to the macrocategory **INANIMATE OBJECTS**, it is also richly represented by various lexical items of Spanish origin, such as, for example, *comida* used in the sense ‘a meak; a handout’, *comino* conveying the sense of ‘a ride’ and *dinero* used in reference to ‘money’. Also, we find here a phrase of Spanish origin, that is *on the picaroon* conveying the sense of ‘in search of anything profitable’.

Let us point out that in comparison to the Yiddish influence on English prison slang, which is particularly observable in the macrocategory **HUMAN BEINGS**, words of Spanish origin prevail in the lexis related to the microcategory **DRUGS**. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, in the USA, drug use among whites and Hispanics is relatively equal; however, Hispanics are twice as likely as whites to be incarcerated in state prisons for a drug offense.⁶ As a result, not only is the number of words of Spanish origin related to the use of illicit substances in the language of the underworld stunning, but also these lexical items are infrequently employed to indicate the minor differences between the given intoxicating substances, such as, for example, different colours or even the quality. In effect, in the linguistic repertoire used by inmates we find different Spanish loanwords conveying the sense of ‘marijuana’, such as, for example, *Doña Juana*, *cosa*, *jerez seco* or *pasto*. In addition, *duros* is used in the sense ‘marijuana that is strong’, *sinsemilla* conveys the sense of ‘a highly coveted marijuana’, *bolsa* is used in the sense ‘a pack of drugs, especially a ten-dollar bag of marijuana’, the meaning of *cartucho* is ‘a packet of marijuana cigarettes’ and *cargador* is used to convey the sense of ‘a marijuana dealer’. The variety of terms of Spanish origin used in the sense ‘amphetamines’ is also bewildering, and prisoners use such lexical items as, for example, *morena*, *crystal* or *durazos*. The meaning of ‘heroin’ is also conveyed by means of a variety of terms, such as, for example, *carne*, *blanco*, *hache* or *gato*. Another illegal substance richly represented by means of Spanish loanwords is ‘barbiturate’, and inmates use *avispa* to convey the discussed sense. If one wants to differentiate between different types of this drug, they use *rojas*, the meaning of which is ‘a capsule of barbiturate Seconal’, *amarilla* which refers to ‘a barbiturate, especially in a yellow capsule’, or *azulillo* used in the sense ‘a barbiturate, especially Amytal which is frequently sold in blue capsules’. Obviously, it is not only names of drugs that have Spanish roots in the lexicon of inmates, but also terms related to prison life, such as, for example, *vendedor* conveying the sense of ‘a drug dealer’, *melina* which is a term for ‘a house of prostitution’, the meaning of *caballo* is ‘one who smuggles drugs into prison’, *to vamoose* is used in the sense ‘to flee’, *chingadera* is a term conveying

⁶ For more on this issue see http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/inc_hispanicprisoners.pdf.

the sense of ‘drug injection equipment’, and *abla de narco* is used in reference to ‘a narcotics agent’.

Along with the Slavonic nations, the Jews and the Spanish, during the third and largest wave of immigration, Italians also left their homeland and arrived on the American shore. Italian immigration to the USA started in 1890, and between 1900 and 1915, 3 million Italians, constituting the largest nationality of new immigrants, set their feet on American soil (see Cavaoli, 2008). The influence of Italian on American culture is undeniable and the same can be said about the impact this language made on American English. Nevertheless, as far as prison slang is concerned, it is the *Italian Mafia*, also labelled as *Italian Mob*, or *the Mob*, that has most significantly contributed to the diversity of the community of inmates and their language. To start with, the Italian Mafia emerged in Italian immigrant neighborhoods as a secret, immensely powerful and almost invincible criminal society having its roots in the Sicilian Mafia. Its members usually used the term *Cosa Nostra* to name the society.⁷ Due to direct anti-mafia policies and the intensification of law enforcement repression and sanctioning since the 1990s, we are currently observing a radical decrease in the activity of organised crime of Italian origin (see Siegel and Nelen, 2008). Nevertheless, the influence the Italian Mafia had on the American underworld is undeniable, as we find words of Italian origin in the lexicon of inmates, especially those that are strictly related to the activity and structure of the organisation, such as, for example, *Cosa Nostra* conveying the sense of ‘a tightly-knit underworld society whose members are solely of Italian-Sicilian descent and are frequently involved in organized crime’, *capo dei capi* used in the sense ‘the leader of all leaders or boss of bosses; the most powerful Mafia boss to whom all others defer’, *capo* used in reference with ‘the boss of a crime family or his lieutenant who would be on the third level of the Cosa Nostra’s authority structure’, *capodecina*, the meaning of which is ‘a leader of ten in a Cosa Nostra family’, *capofamiglia* used in the sense ‘the boss of a Cosa Nostra family’, *caporegima* employed in the sense of ‘the lieutenant in a Cosa Nostra family’, *avvocato*, the meaning of which is ‘a counsellor or lawyer for organised crime representing one or more Cosa Nostra members’, *consigliere* employed in the sense of ‘someone intended to serve the family membership in a Cosa Nostra by granting a channel of communication from soldiers to the boss’, *borgata*, the meaning of which is ‘a family, the basic structural unit of the Mafia society’, *vendetta* used in the sense ‘a pledge of personal vengeance on an enemy’, and *omerta* referred to as ‘a uniquely Sicilian attitude calling for non-cooperation with government authority and the settlement of disputes through personal means, the Mafia’s strict code of silence with regard to underworld affairs’.

English prison argot has also drawn heavily on one minor variety of English known as *Cockney Rhyming slang*. In the lexicon of English prison argot there

⁷ For more on the issue of the Italian Mafia in the USA see https://www.europol.europa.eu/italian_organised_crime.

are many terms that derive from this English slang which developed in the East End of London, in which a word is replaced by a phrase which rhymes with it. A good number of expressions of Cockney origin have been adopted into common language in London. However, as pointed out by Green (2002:3) [...] *rhyming slang [...] rooted in England, is not the province of native English-speakers. Two countries have taken it on board, neither as extensively nor as enthusiastically as the UK, but a survey of both Australian and American slang will unearth examples.* As a result of the spread of Cockney Rhyming slang to other English-speaking countries, in the linguistic repertoire of English-speaking inmates we find such terms as, for example, *bird lime* which is used in the sense ‘time spent in prison’ (from *lime* to rhyme with *time*), *kanga* ‘a prison officer’ (from *kangaroo* to rhyme with *screw*, one of the most common names for prison guards), *nicker* which is employed in the sense of ‘a chaplain’ (from *vicar*), *anilla* that serves to convey the sense of ‘a judge’ (from *vanilla fudge*), *vera* used in the sense ‘cigarette paper’ (*Vera Lyn* to rhyme with *skin*), and *bull and bat* used in reference to ‘a hat’.

Apart from the influences discussed above, the lexicon of the underworld in English-speaking countries has also been affected, to different extents, by other languages, such as, for example, French, from which it borrowed the term *colquarron* used in the sense ‘a neck’, *dauber*, the meaning of which is ‘a painter working for car thieves’ or *faggot* conveying the sense of ‘a whore’. English prison slang has also borrowed from Russian, which is the source of *czar* conveying the sense of ‘a prison warden’. The lexical item *cravat*, used in the sense ‘to sleep in one’s cravat’ is of Croatian origin, *brahma* conveying the sense of ‘a good-looking girl’ and *dakma*, the meaning of which is ‘silence’ both derive from Hindu, *bohunk* is a term of Hungarian origin which is used in reference to ‘a poor specimen’, *entjie* used in the sense ‘cigarettes’ has Dutch roots, *cossack* conveying the sense of ‘a policeman’ originates from Turkish, while *cambra*, employed in the sense of ‘a dog’ is related to Arabic.

All in all, prison slang is a type of sociolect that has borrowed extensively from various sources. When analyzing the issue of prison slang, in many cases one may successfully determine the roots of certain lexical items. On the other hand, in the majority of cases the origins of words and expressions lie in obscurity. Nevertheless, one must admit that without foreign influences the map of prison argot would not be as vivid and colourful as it is.

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