

Ludmila A. Kudryavtseva
National Taras Shevchenko University of Kiev, Ukraine

The Impact of Mass Media on the Formation of General Slang in Modern Russian Language

Lately in mass communication, especially in print media, that is, in newspapers, magazines, and other publications, pragmatically marked lexical units have been widely used; in the first instance, this concerns the elements of various slangs and prison jargon, which are distinguished by such features as expressiveness, emotivity, or evaluation. Their pragmatic potential within the context of current word usage increases greatly. It can be explained by the peculiarities of the given type of communication aiming not only to inform the reader but also to form certain conceptions about events, to evoke changes in the emotional conditions, views, and evaluations, and to model social and individual behaviour, that is, to produce a certain impact on an addressee; (and if to call things by their first names,) the function of the mass media is to manipulate the public opinion. In this respect, the adequate choice and usage of the language units are of great importance, because their task is the achievement of the final aim of communication, that is, influence on an addressee.

There is no doubt that the Russian language possesses a very rich and diverse lexico-phraseological stock: Its connotative content comprises expressiveness, emotivity, and evaluation. In modern newspaper communication side by side with pragmatically oriented language elements, well-known derivational models are also actively employed. They allow the author to model the connotative content by the creation of metaphors, periphrases, enantiosemes, occasional words, etc. (Kudryavtseva 1998).

At the same time, social phenomena such as democratisation of social life, removal of censorial restrictions, and freedom of speech, often understood as the freedom of the usage of any words including rude words and vulgarisms introduced non-standard lexical and phraseological units of the Russian language into the pragmatically oriented language means and, thus, into journalistic practice.

Speaking about the causes of the activation of non-standard vocabulary in the mass media, especially slangy words and jargon, one should underline such general language tendencies as a general liberisation of speech, the increasing influence of spontaneous speech onto prepared one, and primarily onto written speech, and the tendencies of the development of the most popular communication of the 20th and 21st centuries: The journalists refused to use the former hackneyed newspaper-publicistic ideological and language clichés, and they rejected the pathetic expressions peculiar to the mass media texts of the Soviet epoch, striving for the description of the reality as it looks.

Certainly, the list of these causes and facts is not complete, but they produce a great influence and, moreover, they form the peculiar language of the mass media. The main determining reason of the penetration of the substandard vocabulary into the printed media is the pragmatic intention of the author. Among the pragmatic intentions, one can point out the following: the intention to convey expressiveness, evaluation, expression of one's emotions, attraction of the attention, self-expression, stereotypes of certain social groups, irony, play on words, etc.

Thus, it is possible to affirm that today exist all the conditions for the expansion of the sphere of the functioning of lexico-phraseological units, which earlier were limited in usage by either social or professional bounds (in other words, elements of various sociolects), that in their turn stimulated the formation of the new phenomena in the system of the Russian national language – general slang.

In the Russian lexicographical tradition, “words and expressions used by the members of certain professions and social layers” (Rosentalj/Telenkova 1985, p. 287), or “the social variation of the speech” (Skvortsov 1997, p. 129), or “the special language of some limited professional or social group” (Schachnarowitsch 1990, p. 43) is termed as *jargon – thieves' cant – slang*; we prefer to use the term *slang*, because it is not “overloaded” by any connotations.

In the Anglo-American lexicographical theory and practice (the term *slang* first appeared in England in the middle of the 18th century and primarily

meant “vulgar language“), slang is considered to be the main component of popular speech (see, Khomyakov 1971) holding the certain communicative position and main features of “spokenness”: reflection of the psychology of an average speaker and situations of everyday life, spontaneous character of expression, emotivity, figurativeness, evaluation, and familiarity. The researchers of modern English slang suggest discerning the following:

- a) general slang, which is widely spread in spoken language and understandable in all social groups of society;
- b) special slang, that is, a social language microsystem that is heterogeneous in its genetic stock and structure and in its varieties, defined by professional or corporate parameters.

The notion of the general and special slang that is most theoretically grounded within the frameworks of the linguistic context is elaborated in the Ph.D. thesis by Khomyakov. He defines general slang as:

[...] relatively stable for a certain period, widely-used, stylistically marked (lowered) lexical layer (nouns, adjectives, verbs, denoting everyday occurrences, subjects, processes and indications), component of expressive popular speech, which is a part of the literary language, highly heterogeneous in its sources, degree of approximation to the literary standard, possessing the pejorative expression. (1980, p. 11)

As applied to the Russian language, the definition of general slang (GS) demands more precise specifications. Firstly, GS is by no means a part of literary language: It is a component of popular speech to a certain extent being a source of the replenishing of the colloquial vocabulary of the standard language (recently this process has been very active).

The second remark, which must be made to the definition of GS, consists of the following: Unlike special slang, GS is not determined by social, professional, or corporate parameters. In other words, it is not a sociolect in the strict definition of this term. Certainly, this aspect delimits GS within the structure of popular speech. At the same time, it allows for its separation from special slang – professional and corporate. And last but not least, the main function of GS is – emotional – expressive: Lexical units correlated with the notion of general slang are used by the speaker mainly for the ex-

pression of his/her feelings and evaluations connected with the object of speech.

The active employment of the GS units (lexemes, stable word-combinations, phraseologisms, and popular expressions) in the mass media is one of the relevant features of GS, because the mass media are oriented towards the large audience. That is why the natural sphere of usage of the given type of slang broadens.

At the same time, employment of a jargon word in the printed media cannot be the only evidence that this word belongs to general slang. Lexicologists and lexicographers should elaborate a suitable system of criteria in order to isolate GS units out of a huge section of non-standard vocabulary, which in its turn should be scientifically grounded, structured, and classified.

It must be pointed out that general slang in the Russian language is a new phenomenon, which is constantly being formed. That is why minor investigations have been made to its study and lexicographical description. We can mention the lexicographical edition in which the authors place special emphasis on the definition of the notion of general jargon. They refer to it as "the layer of modern Russian jargon, which being not a peculiar feature of some separate social groups, is frequently used in the language of the mass media and employed (and at least understood) by all citizens of the city and by educated Russian speakers, in particular" (Jermakov/Zemskaja/Rozina 1999, p. IV).

The language of the mass media depicts the linguistic picture of the socium, forming at the same time "the language taste of the epoch" (Kostomarov 1994) and influencing the active processes of the development of the modern Russian language, determining the new general language tendencies, to which the formation of general slang in the Russian language as a part of the urban popular speech may be referred (see, Kudryavtseva 2001). At the same time, one should not overestimate the role of journalists as well as writers in the process of the formation of GS. Another contradictory point of view should be mentioned. According to the latter, the mass media and literary standard "exploit" the myth about jargon. "The image of jargon" is created.

In reality, there is no special jargonisation. Jargon is appropriate to the world of the mass media. As a matter of fact, it is the popular speech that picks up the journalists' speech and not vice versa (Jelistratov 2000).

We shall discuss the problem of the existence of slang in real life later. And now, we will try to determine if all slangisms actively employed in newspaper style may be correlated with the notion of general slang ("general jargon" as termed by the authors of the "Explanatory Dictionary of General Jargon"). We do not think so. There are several explanations. Criminal life, as well as other "dark" sides of our life, earlier forbidden for the newspapers, is widely represented on the pages of newspapers and magazines. It is because journalists desire to show all aspects of our society – white as well as black.

In the newspaper article, "Thieves and Authorities" by Petushkin (1995), the following nominative means connected with that sphere of life of society are used: *общак* '1. cash-box of a criminal gang, 2. stolen money or property'; *сходняк, сходка* 'crook's meeting'; *бригада* 'gang of criminals', *пахан* 'gang leader'; *вор в законе, авторитет* 'important person among criminals, "godfather"'; *погремуха, погоняло* 'nickname'; *вертухай* 'watchman, gaol warder'; *держать масть* '1. to have unlimited power, 2. to lead, guide, 3. to follow the rules of a criminal gang'. It is not the only introduction of the given units of thieves' cant into the texts of the printed media. This factor was the reason why the authors of "The Explanatory Dictionary of General Jargon" included a greater number of such units into the dictionary and consequently into general slang (jargon).

This widened explanation of the notion of GS eliminated the limits between general and special (professional and corporate) slang. The words: *ксивник* '1. any kind of (forged) document, 2. purse', *мокруха* 'murder', *могаль, наводчик* 'helper of a gang, accomplice', *общак* 'cash-box of a criminal gang, stolen money or property', *щипач* 'pickpocket', *медвежатник* 'safe-cracker', *мокрушник* 'hired killer' – (prison); *герла* 'girl', *крейзи* 'crazy (adj.)', *креза* 'something crazy', *хайрастый, хайрастник* 'long-haired person, hippie' – (hippie); *шпора* 'crib' – (students); *прослушка* 'tapping the telephone', *слухач* 'tapping specialist', *тонтун* 'spy, informer', *расчленёнка* 'dismembered corpse' – (professional) are:

- a) well-known to the public, but they are not used out of the limits of “their” functional sphere unlike such well-known and often used units that do not have “their” speaker: *болтать* ‘to talk nonsense, to chat’, *балденный* ‘pleasant, fun’, *прикол* ‘joke’, *прикольный* ‘funny, amusing’, *калиф* ‘king for one day’, *понт(ы)* ‘cunning, trick’, *тусовка* ‘meeting’, *прищипки* ‘gimmick, highlight’, *крыша поехала* ‘to be round the bend, to act crazy’, *по барабану* ‘I don't give a damn’, etc.
- b) In the semantic aspect in the words of group (b) (*балдэж* ‘pleasure, relaxation’, etc.), the connotation prevails over the denotation; it is the expressive-emotive content that makes them part of a play and determines their stylistic function in oral and written texts, which is one of the parameters of general slang.

Words of group (a) do not possess the above mentioned characteristics; this makes their inclusion into the dictionary unfounded.

Unlike special slang, units of GS function in various speech spheres and communicative situations. Dialogues of the communicative situation, “City Transport”, may serve as a model (registered in Kiev at the end of the 90s).¹

Subway 23/02/1998:

Woman, aged 40 (A)

Woman, aged 60-65 (B)

A: Кофе рекламирует. Развалили страну, подлецы. Где на кофе *тугриков* взять?

B: А всё из-за расхлябанности политиков. Такое свинство, мерзость всякую рекламируют. Это ж вредная гадость. А народ *ошалелый туфту* поддельную берет у капиталистов.

(A: Ads for coffee. They have destroyed the country, those bastards. Where should one get the *money* for coffee?)

B: It's because of the slackness of the politicians. It's a disgrace, they're advertising every crap. This is nasty. And the *idiotic* people buy that *junk* from these capitalists.)

¹ Records were done by A. Компанетс, a student of Kiev National University.

The speakers are two women (A – aged 40, and B – aged 60-65), who speak a literary standard, are well-educated; they do not belong to any social or professional group where a certain slang exists. The two women use the slangy units as a means of expressiveness: “тугрики” meaning “money” (in the “Dictionary of Russian Jargon” (Mokijenko/Nikitina 2000) is fixed as “jargonised colloquial speech”) and “туфта” meaning “something of a very low quality, having negative evaluation” (in the same dictionary, it is fixed as “prison” and “students”). The primary sphere of function of the words “тугрики ‘money’” and “туфта ‘junk’” is prison jargon; they entered common usage from youth slang by means of intra-family communication and by means of the mass media which play the greatest part in the process for the formation and development of general slang.

Another example:

Trolleybus, 11/09/1997.

Fare-collector (woman, aged 50) (A)

Young man, aged 18 (B)

A: Ты, скот, шо ж это делаешь? Ты, дрянь, зачем компостер ломаешь? Ты его, зараза, вешал? Шоб тебе ручки-ножки ломало!

B: Не кляни, тётка, а то щас навеки заткну. Шо ты тут бродишь, как призрак по вагону? Нашли дюймовочку 60 размера. Смотри, жир спустить быстро могут!

A: Закрой ротяру, шантропа. Да оно обкуренное. Не настругай в салон. Вон отсюда, дрянь, пошел, говорю!

(A: What are you doing there, you bastard? Why are you ruining the ticket-puncher? Did you put it there, you rotter? Wait till I break every single bone in your body!

B: Stop swearing, auntie, or I'll shut you up for good. Anyway, what are you crawling through this carriage like a ghost? We've found a squirt (lit: “a woman with a very little vagina”) size 60 here!

A: Shut up, you tramp. This guy is stoned. You just watch that you don't puke into the carriage. Get out, you bastard, out I say!)

The recording on the answering machine in the firm operating the cable TV in one of the districts of Kiev:

20.08.2000. Женщина.

– Люди добрые, да сколько ж можно издеваться? Я за что *бабки* плачу? Неужели так тяжело зайти и починить? Или просто в *облом*? Вы меня *достали* уже.

(Woman: – How long will you people still take the mickey out of me? What do I pay the *money* for? It can't be so difficult for you to come and repair my stuff, can it? Simply *tough luck*, eh? You guys really *get on my nerves*.)

21.08.2000. г. Женщина.

– Ну и какого *хрена* вы сегодня не пришли? Я целый день, как идиотка, дома просидела! Мастера не было. Какого *хрена* обещать было?! У вас там у всех что, *крыша съехала*? Да возьмите трубку, *блин*! Вот сволота!

(Woman: – And why *the hell* didn't you come today after all? I've sat at home all day like an idiot. The foreman wasn't in. Why *the hell* did you promise it then? Have you guys gone crazy? Pick up the receiver, *bloody hell*! What a riff-raff!)

24.08.2000. г. Женщина.

– Да вашу мать, сколько можно? Включите телевизор, а потом *фестиваль* будете. Я понимаю, что сегодня праздник, все *бухают*. Но я хочу смотреть телевизор. Это моё законное право, вашу мать.

(Woman: – Well, you mother, how long is this going on? You switch the TV on and then you *party* (lit: “make a festival”). I know that today is a holiday, everybody's *boozing*. But I want to watch TV. This is my legal right, you mother.)

07.08.2000. г. Женщина.

– Не поняла юмора. Это чё за *приколы*? Возьмите трубку, козлы! Я не буду говорить с автоответчиком. Эта *шара не покатит*. Я сказала: снимите трубку, суки. Вот твари.

(Woman: I don't think that's funny. What kind of *joke* is this? Pick up the receiver, idiot. I'm not talking to that answering machine. These *gangsters don't move!* I said, pick up the receiver, you bastards. What a wretched bunch.)

01.08.2000. г. Женщина.

– Добрый вечер. Я хочу пожаловаться на того придурка, что меня подключал. Три канала не идёт. Мне такая *фигня* не надо. Или чините, или верните деньги. Я липу оплачивать не буду.

(Woman: – Good Evening. I want to complain about the idiot who connected my cable. Three channels don't work. I don't need any *shit* like that. Either they work or you give the money back. I'm not going to pay for a hoax.)

The given examples testify to the fact that slang not only lives in the life of the mass media but also in real life, everyday communication, and mostly as the means of expressiveness and expressing the emotive evaluation.

One of the spheres of formation and dissemination of general slang, besides the mass media and urban communication, is intra-family discourse. Enquiries of colleagues, who have children aged 12-13, testify to the fact that the usage of slangy words and expressions by the younger generation influences the literary standards of the older generation, who use slangy units for the expression of irony, emotive evaluation, and as the means for a play on words. Such words as *болтать* 'to talk nonsense', *балдёж* 'pleasure, relaxation', *балдёжный* 'easy-going, relaxed, pleasant', *достать* 'to get on sb.s nerves', *крутой* 'cool, great', *облом* 'bad luck, misfortune', *понт(ы)* 'cunning, trick', *примочки* 'gimmick, highlight, gag, joke', *прикол* 'joke, fun', *фигня* 'junk, crap', *шара* 'criminal youth gang', etc. were mentioned more often.

Proceeding from the assumption that general slang is not a social variety of speech nor a special language of a certain limited either professional or social group but is a functional-stylistic variety of the modern Russian language, the units of which are characterised by expressiveness, emotional evaluation, figurativeness, and familiarity, one should confess that the number of units of general slang is not so great as it is depicted in the "Explana-

tory Dictionary of General Jargon". It is a point of special interest to compare the lexical units of the above mentioned dictionary with the data of the "Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language of the Late 90s" (edited by Sklyarevskaya) (1998) and the "Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language" (by Ozhegov and Shvedova) (1997). The investigation was carried out under the author's supervision by the student N. Parshuk: From 450 lexical units of the "Explanatory Dictionary of General Jargon", only 112 are represented in Sklyarevskaya's dictionary and 70 units in the dictionary by Ozhegov and Shvedova. It is possible to suppose that the number of words correlated with the notion of general slang does not exceed 150-200, but the number is likely to increase.

In any case, the formation of general slang is a very active process of the development of the modern Russian language requiring thorough investigation especially within the context of the mass media.

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