

NON –LITERARY VOCABULARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract: *The given article is dedicated to non-literary vocabulary of English language. The following tasks are planned to achieve the above mentioned aim: to give information about classification of non-literary vocabulary, to collect information and data concerning the non-literary vocabulary.*

Аннотация: *Данная статья посвящена нелитературной лексике английского языка. Для достижения указанной цели планируются следующие задачи: дать информацию о классификации нелитературной лексики, собрать информацию и данные, касающиеся нелитературной лексики.*

Key words: *neologism, slang, cant, jargon vocabulary, literary vocabulary, standard English, non-literary) vocabulary, neutral words,*

Ключевые слова: *неологизмы, сленг, кантизм, жаргонная лексика, литературная лексика, стандартный английский язык, нелитературная лексика, нейтральные слова*

There is a term in linguistics which by its very nature is ambiguous and that is the term *neologism*. In dictionaries it is generally defined as a new word or a new meaning for an established word. Everything in this definition is vague. How long should words or their meanings be regarded as new? Which words of those that appear as new in the language, say during the life-time of one generation, can be regarded as established? It is suggestive that the latest editions of certain dictionaries avoid the use of the stylistic notation "neologism" apparently because of its ambiguous character. If a word is fixed in a dictionary and provided that the dictionary is reliable, it ceases to be a neologism. If a new meaning is recognized as an element in the semantic structure of a lexical unit, it ceases to be new. However, if we wish to divide the word-stock of a language into chronological periods, we can conventionally mark off a period which might be called new.

There is hardly any other term that is as ambiguous and obscure as the term *slang*. Slang seems to mean everything that is below the standard of usage of present-day English. Much has been said and written about it. This is probably due to the uncertainty of the concept itself. No one has yet

given a more or less satisfactory definition of the term. Nor has it been specified by any linguist who deals with the problem of the English vocabulary.

The first thing that strikes the scholar is the fact that no other European language has singled out a special layer of vocabulary and named it slang, though all of them distinguish such groups of words as jargon, cant, and the like. Why was it necessary to invent a special term for something that has not been clearly defined as jargon or can't have? Is this phenomenon specifically English? Has slang any special features which no other group within the non-literary vocabulary can lay claim to? The distinctions between slang and other groups of unconventional English, though perhaps subtle and sometimes difficult to grasp, should nevertheless be subjected to a more detailed linguistic specification. Webster's "Third New International Dictionary" gives the following meanings of the term: Slang [*origin unknown*] **1:** language peculiar to a particular group: as **a:** the special and often secret vocabulary used by a class (as thieves, beggars) and usu. felt to be vulgar or inferior: argot; **b:** the jargon used by or associated with a particular trade, profession, or field of activity; **2:** a non-standard vocabulary composed of words and senses characterized primarily by connotations of extreme informality and usu. a currency not limited to a particular region and composed typically of coinages or arbitrarily changed words, clipped or shortened forms, extravagant, forced or facetious figures of speech, or verbal novelties usu. experiencing quick popularity and relatively rapid decline into disuse.

The "New Oxford English Dictionary" defines slang as follows:

"a) the special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character; language of a low and vulgar type. (Now merged in c /cant/); b) the *cant* or *jargon* of a certain class or period; c) language of a highly colloquial type considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense."

Slang is nothing but a deviation from the established norm at the level of the vocabulary of the language. V. V. Vinogradov writes that one of the tasks set before the branch of linguistic science that is now called stylistics, is a thorough study of all changes in vocabulary, set phrases, grammatical constructions, their functions, an evaluation of any breaking away from the established norm, and classification of mistakes and failures in word coinage.¹

This quotation from a well-known scientific study of slang clearly shows that what is labelled slang is either all kinds of nonce-formations – so frequently appearing in lively everyday speech and just as quickly disappearing from the language. Here are some more examples of words that are considered slang:

to take stock in – 'to be interested in, attach importance, give credence to'

bread-basket – 'the stomach' (*a jocular use*)

to do a flit – 'to quit one's flat or lodgings at night without paying the rent or board'

rot – 'nonsense!'

the cat's pyjamas – 'the correct thing'

So broad is the term 'slang' that, according to Eric Partridge, there are many kinds of slang, e.g. Cockney, public-house, commercial, society, military, theatrical, parliamentary and others. This leads the author to believe that there is also a *standard slang*, the slang that is common to all those who, though employing received standard in their writing and speech, also use an informal language which, in fact, is no language but merely a way of speaking, using special words and phrases in some special sense. The most confusing definition of the nature of slang is the following one given by Partridge:

¹ Виноградов В. В. О культуре речи и неправильном словоупотреблении. «Литературная газета», 1951, 11 декабря, № 146.

"...personality and one's surroundings (social or occupational) are the two co-efficients, the two chief factors, the determining causes of the nature of slang, as they are of language in general and of style."²

On the other hand, some lexicographers, as has already been pointed out, still make use of the term 'slang' as a substitute for 'jargon', 'cant', 'colloquialism', 'professionalism', 'vulgar', 'dialectal'. Thus, in his dictionary Prof. Barnhart gives the label *sl* to such innovations as "**grab** – to cause (a person) to react; make an impression on", which, to my mind, should be classed as newspaper jargon; "**grass or pot** – marijuana", which are positively *cant* words (the quotation that follows proves it quite unambiguously); "**groove** – something very enjoyable," "**grunt** – U.S. military slang", which in fact is a professionalism; "**gyppy tummy**, British slang, – a common intestinal upset experienced by travellers", which is a colloquialism; "**hangup** – a psychological or emotional problem", which is undoubtedly a professionalism which has undergone extension of meaning and now, according to Barnhart also means "any problem or difficulty, especially one that causes annoyance or irritation."

The use of the label *sl* in this way is evidently due to the fact that Barnhart's Dictionary aims not so much at discrimination between different stylistic subtleties of neologisms but mainly at fixation of lexical units which have already won general recognition through constant repetition in newspaper language.

The term 'slang' is ambiguous because, to use a figurative expression, it has become a Jack of all trades and master of none.

In the non-literary vocabulary of the English language there is a group of words that are called *jargonisms*. *Jargon* is a recognized term for a group of words that exists in almost every language and whose aim is to preserve secrecy within one or another social group. Jargonisms are generally old words with entirely new meanings imposed on them. The traditional meaning of the words is immaterial, only the new, improvised meaning is of importance. Most of the jargonisms of any language, and of the English language too, are absolutely incomprehensible to those outside the social group which has invented them. They may be defined as a code within a code, that is special meanings of words that are imposed on the recognized code – the dictionary meaning of the words. above good and true English, spoken in its original purity by the select nobility and their patrons.

If there be any gemman (=gentleman) so ignorant as to require a translation, I refer him to my old friend and corporeal pastor and master, John Jackson, Esq., Professor of pugilism; who, I trust, still retains the strength and symmetry of his model of a form, together with his good humour and athletic as well as mental accomplishments." (John Murray. "The Poetical Works of Lord Byron")

Slang, contrary to jargon, needs no translation. It is not a secret code. It is easily understood by the English-speaking community and is only regarded as something not quite regular. It must also be remembered that both jargon and slang differ from ordinary language mainly in their vocabularies. The structure of the sentences and the morphology of the language remain practically unchanged. But such is the power of words, which are the basic and most conspicuous element in the language, that we begin unwittingly to speak of a separate language.

Jargonisms do not always remain the possession of a given social 'group. Some of them migrate into other social strata and sometimes become recognized in the literary language of the nation. G. H. McKnight writes:

"The language of the underworld provided words facetiously adopted by the fashionable world, many of which, such as *fan* and *queer* and *banter* and *bluff* and *sham* and *humbug*, eventually made their

² Partridge, Eric. Op. cit., p. 5.

way into dignified use."³

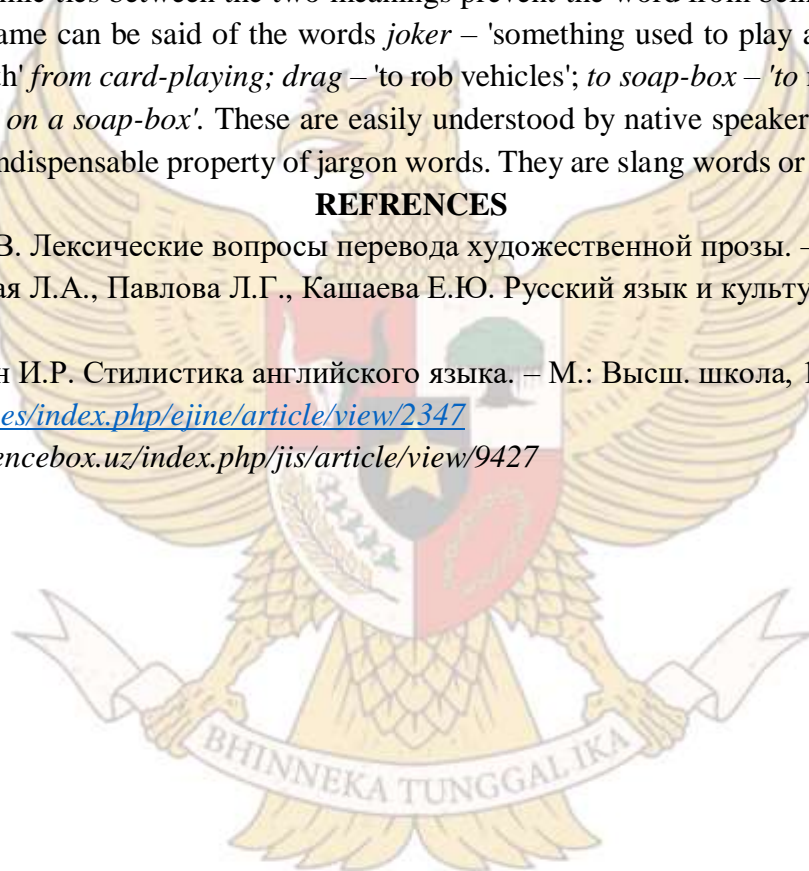
Jargonisms, however, do break away from the accepted norms of semantic variants of words. They are a special group within the nonliterary layer of words.

There is a common jargon and there are also special professional jargons. Common jargonisms have gradually lost their special quality, which is to promote secrecy and keep outsiders in the dark. In fact, there are no outsiders where common jargon is concerned. It belongs to all social groups and is therefore easily understood by everybody. That is why it is so difficult to draw a hard and fast line between slang and jargon. When a jargonism becomes common, it has passed on to a higher step on the ladder of word groups and becomes slang or colloquial.

The word *brass* in the meaning of 'money in general, cash' is not jargon inasmuch as there is an apparent semantic connection between 'the general name for all alloys of copper with tin or zinc' and *cash*. The metonymic ties between the two meanings prevent the word from being used as a special code word. The same can be said of the words *joker* – 'something used to play a trick or win one's point or object with' *from card-playing*; *drag* – 'to rob vehicles'; *to soap-box* – 'to make speeches out-of-doors *standing on a soap-box*'. These are easily understood by native speakers and therefore fail to meet the most indispensable property of jargon words. They are slang words or perhaps colloquial.

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³ McKnight, G. H. Modern English in the Making. N. Y., 1956, p. 552.