Slavic Slang Lexicography

Georgi Armianov

Georgi Armianov, Bulgarian Academy of Science

Slavic Slang Lexicography

Abstract

The paper considers specific problems concerning slang dictionaries in Slavic countries. Some shortcomings are pointed out, as well as differences between the standard languages and their social dialects. The most important difficulties encountered in the process of compiling a dictionary of slang are examined, such as: the size of the dictionary, the list of the words included, the form of the headwords, lexico-semantic relations, difficulties caused by the specific Slavic system of the verbal aspect and the gender of the nouns, etc. Some solutions in the light of the lexicographic experience of the author are proposed.

1. Slavic Dictionaries of Slang

1.1 Dictionaries of slang are a common lexicographic practice in Western Europe but there are comparatively few such dictionaries in Slavic countries, although some were published at the beginning of this century, and some more recently.

1.2 Unfortunately, in many of these books a number of faults can be found, primarily due to the lack of serious lexicographic conception, but also due to the existence of many restrictions, imposed by the political regimes in these countries after the Second World War.

1.2.1 For instance, in the most popular "A Small Dictionary of Czech Slang" standard words like *enface, anschluss, bas-relief* and others were put together with words from the students' slang and professional jargon (Hubáček 1988).

1.2.2 In Russia those dictionaries from the beginning of the century reflected only the language of the underworld (Handzinskii 1926; Potapov 1927), while the majority of the newest are either published abroad and are too small (Chalidze 1977), or represent the speech of the prisoners of post-war concentration camps (Koscinskii 1980), and, as such, are not purely dictionaries of slang.

1.2.3 In Bulgaria a small dictionary of students' slang was published in the early 30s but it contained about 400 words, with some belonging to the robbers' argot, and some others taken from regional dialects (Voinikov 1930). In 1989 and 1993 two new dictionaries were published and they covered the greatest part of contemporary Bulgarian students' slang (Armianov 1989; Armianov 1993).

1.2.4 In Poland in the early 1970s "A Dictionary of Students' Slang" was published but only 7 copies were sold – all other were confiscated and any subsequent conclusions or analysis is impossible (Skuba anka 1974).

2. Basic problems

2.1 First of all we should consider the linguistic nature of slang in Slavic languages. In all Slavic countries, slang is particular to the national language, and, in general, it has the same grammatical features as the basic linguistic formation which can be not only the standard language but any regional dialect also. At the same time, slang can possess similar or identical features as colloquial speech or argot, and, very often, it is difficult to separate it from other non-standard formations.

2.2 Second, in these countries slang exists mainly in spoken form (though some books written in slang exist) and in the process of its usage it is difficult to identify any constant grammatical rules. That is why, when compiling a dictionary of slang, it is of great importance for the lexicographer to resolve in advance some problems of a lexicogrammatical and practical lexicographic character.

3. The type of the dictionary of slang

3.1 In principle, slang dictionaries reflect linguistic features of one or more social formations in the framework of the national language. From this point of view they should be classified as monolingual, but it is obvious that slang units cannot be mutually explained, they cannot define each other as can standard language words. No matter how rich, colourful, broad etc. any slang is, it cannot serve as a metalanguage, it must be translated or explained by the standard language and then the dictionary becomes a bilingual one.

3.2 On the other hand, many slang words cannot simply be translated into the standard language with the help of one or more synonyms. Definition should consist not only of a certain number of compulsory integral and differential characteristics of the word but also of sufficient information about its origin, sphere of usage, grammatical patterns, and, if necessary, any restrictions imposed. It makes the form of the entry more similar to those in an encyclopaedic dictionary than in a bilingual or in a thesaurus.

3.3 For this reason Slavic slang dictionaries, according to their global appearance, can be defined as of a mixed type, combining in themselves typical characteristics of mono- and bilingual dictionaries, as well as features of thesaurus and encyclopaedic ones.

4. The size of the dictionary and the list of words

4.1 As the social dialects in Slavic countries are quite different from each other, it is hard to give a simple answer to this problem. The comparatively underdeveloped slang system in Bulgaria assumes the possibility of a full list of lexical units in all slang varieties and a dictionary of slang would hardly exceed the size of a medium-sized dictionary. Moreover, it is a linguistic tradition in this country (and in Russia as well) to separate slang from professional language and then to divide the second one into two parts: jargon itself and professional slang, considering the jargon only as a special vocabulary but not as a social dialect (Stoikov 1968: 232).

4.2 The situation in the Czech Republic, Poland, Russia, and to a certain degree in Serbia and Croatia, where the full range of corporative and professional slangs exits, imposes a different approach – compiling separate dictionaries of particular slang or groups of slang, and, as a further step, creating a complete dictionary on the basis of those smaller ones.

4.3 A very interesting question about the list of words arose for me some years ago when I worked on the "Dictionary of Bulgarian Slang": where and how to present the phrasal units and idioms whose meaning cannot be derived from their components? In other words, where none of their components has its own slang meaning.

4.3.1 One possible answer could be to place them among other entries according to the alphabetical order of their first auto-semantic element. This is the path which many authors have taken and which facilitates the reading of the dictionary (Andrich 1976; Sabljak 1981).

4.3.2 However, one might ask – is it correct to talk about auto-semantic elements in structures which have integral meaning and which are not a simple sum of the meanings of their components? From lexico-semantic point of view this is a very reasonable question one possible answer to which could be to make a dictionary where such phrases and idioms are arranged in alphabetical order according to their first formal element. But I see a disadvantage here in that this approach may break the semantic structure of some words and may separate others belonging to the same grammatical category. For example, Bulgarian *kiriz* 'a robbery' and *perde kiriz* 'a secret glance' appear in different places (Armianov 1993: 72–173).

4.3.3 Another possible technique is to create a separate section of the dictionary where all phrasal structures and idioms, as well as typical slang toponyms and urbanonyms, could be united in an autonomous list according to their first formal element. The existence of such a section should be pointed out in the preface which would avoid all the technical and linguistic problems mentioned above (see Armianov 1993:155).

5. Headwords

5.1 The problem of choosing a headword is of great importance in the Slavic languages, and especially in those where there is no infinitive of the verb (as Bulgarian and to a certain degree Serbian and Croat) or where there is a strong gender system of the nouns which influence the form of the adjectives, participles and some pronouns.

5.1.1 It is obvious that the headword must be clear enough in its form and, at the same time, as close as possible to the slang pronunciation. That's why some Slavic scholars prefer to give the headword a mixed form between transliteration and transcription (Stoikov 1945). Other lexicographers prefer to normalize the slang words according to the rules of the standard language because in the theoretical part of the dictionary they have explained the most typical features of the social dialect (Andrich 1976; Sabljak 1981; Armianov 1993).

5.2 Next problem arises from the fact that in many Slavic slangs a word exists in two, three or more phonetic variants, and it is hard to choose which of them should be a headword. For instance, Bulgarian slang word *babushkera* 'old lady' (probably of Russian origin) exists in 7 variants and 3 of them are in masculine gender (Armianov 1993:15–16). This imposes the need for a formal grammatical or semantic characteristic to be singled out and then all variants should be included in the framework of the entry after the note: "*Other forms*".

5.3 Another serious question concerns the basic form in which nouns, pronouns and verbs are given. The tradition in Slavic lexicography is that nouns of masculine, feminine and neuter gender are presented separately, and in their singular form. However, there are many examples of slang words which exist only in the plural, or which, despite their grammatical structure could be used with reference to another gender or sex. For example, the word *daska* which in Serbian, Croat and Bulgarian slangs has a form for feminine gender and means 'a woman with small breasts' (Andrich 1976:4; Sabljak 1981:28; Armianov 1993:14) in some regions can refer also to a person of male sex, meaning respectively 'weak man'.

5.4 Also, when the semantics of the word is naturally connected only with a person or a creature of female sex, such as in words which mean 'pregnant', 'to abort', etc., there has to be a change in this rule. Then, the form of the headword should be in feminine gender, and within the definition the author must point out the limits of usage.

5.5 The case is different with the representative form of the verbs. This problem concerns those Slavic languages (Russian, Bulgarian, Polish, etc.) and their slangs where the verb aspect has a grammatical but not a lexical indicator. This means that almost all verbs have two different aspect forms, respectively conjugations for perfective and imperfective aspects. It is then necessary to choose one of these forms as the basic one. In the Bulgarian standard language dictionaries most of the headwords of the verbs are in their form of imperfective aspect, but in slang the majority of verbs are used in the perfective aspect, and there are also many examples where the verb has one form for both aspects. This creates additional problems: are there real forms of imperfective aspect in slang spoken practice? How and where do these forms have to be represented and how, because a definition in perfective aspect is unusual given the background to traditional Slavic lexicography, are these verbs to be defined?

5.6 The usual solution is to combine both forms in one headword, giving additional information as to which form is preferred. Only in the case of a verb of solely finitive aspect should the definition be interpreted using the verbs in the same morphological pattern of the standard language.

6. Definition

6.1 A brief look at the world of slang lexicography shows that most of the dictionaries are alphabetically organized with a list of synonyms following every main entry, although there are some examples of other types – in Jonathon Green's "The Slang Thesaurus" the words are gathered conceptually, in thematic groups (Green 1988). As was pointed out, the definition should be similar to those in any bilingual dictionary, with encyclopaedic and grammatical information where necessary. The main problem here arises from the fact that in all Slavic slangs the synonymic rows are extremely rich, sometimes exceeding 30–40 lexical units, phrasal constructions and idioms, and it is practically impossible to include all these synonyms in one entry.

6.2 As a solution in this case I see the compiling of an additional, ideographic part of the dictionary – similar to a thesaurus – where the slang synonymy would be completely presented. This part would facilitate greatly different type of research, and would be of considerable help not only to linguists but to translators and writers too. Such a two-part dictionary is not something new to Slavic lexicography, although it is quite rare – it can be seen in the dictionary of Dragoslav Andrich and in the "Dictionary of Bulgarian Slang" (Armianov 1993:185).

7. The citation file

7.1 Common practice up to now has resulted in many examples of slang dictionaries without citation files. Perhaps one of the reasons for this can be found in the undisputed truth that citations are given often simply to show that a particular slang word or form exists, and, on the other hand, that the interpreting of a great number of slang words needs and depends on a broad linguistic and other context. One interesting exception is the book "Outside the Borders of the Russian Dictionaries" where all words (mainly low colloquial, dialectical, cynical and vulgar) are illustrated by literary texts and even whole folk poems (Flegon 1973).

7.2 In my opinion, the whole entry, including its illustrative examples, must give enough information about the word, its meaning(s), sphere of usage, etymology, and the place and the point in time that it existed. For this reason the citation file in slang lexicography can be an extremely solid, vital basis for distinguishing one meaning from another in the framework of the polysemantic word, or one word from another, especially in the case of slang homonymy. Illustrative examples, no matter how small they are or to what degree they may reflect a word or its meaning, are of great importance. They provide the reader with necessary information about all the features of the slang word, its relation with other words and its paradigmatic and syntagmatic characteristics.

8. Conclusion

8.1 These are the most significant and the most important questions in the field of Slavic slang lexicography. I know from experience that below the surface there are others, no less interesting and difficult, but I hope that in the last few years some initial steps have been made. More and more dictionaries of the unconventional language appear, giving new and different angles on the issue and thus filling not only a linguistic but also a cultural lacuna in the Slavic countries.

References

Andrich, D. 1976. *Dvoesmerni rechnik srpskog jargona*, Belgrade.

Armianov, G. 1989. *Jargonat, bez koito (ne) mozhem*, Sofia, Logis+7M Publ.

Armianov, G. 1993. *Rechnik na bulgarskiya jargon*, Sofia, Nauka i izkustvo Press.

Ayto, J., J. Simpson 1992. *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Flegon, A. 1973. *Za peredelami russkih slovarei*, New York, Flegon Press.

Green, J. 1988. *The Slang Thesaurus*, Penguin Books, Harmonsworth, Middlesex.

Handzinskii, N. 1926. Blatnaya poeziya, in: *Zhivaya sibirskaya starina*, No. 5, Novosibirsk.

Hubáček, J. 1988. *Malý slovnik českych slang* , Ostrava.

Koscinskii, K. 1980, Slovar russkoi nenormativnoi leksiki, in: *Russian Language*, vol. 4, Boston.
Partridge, E. 1976. *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, New York.
Potapov, S. 1927. *Slovar jargona prestupnikov*, Moscow.
Sabljak, T. 1981. *Šatra - rječnik šatrovačkog govora*, Zagreb.
Skubałanka, T., L. Kaczmarek, St. Grabias 1974. *Słownik gwary studenckiej*, Warsaw.
Stoikov, St. 1945. *Sofiiskiyat uchenicheski govor*, Sofia.
Stoikov, St. 1968. *Bulgarska dialectologia*, Sofia.
Voinikov, P. 1930. Tarikatsko-bulgariski rechnik, in: *Rodna rech*, vol. 4, Sofia.