

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE BODY:
VIOLENCE IN THE SUBCULTURES OF
CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN YOUTH

DANIELA DOBOȘ
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași

Abstract:

For a long time, with few exceptions, Romanian linguistics took no interest in native slang, but after 1990 this has made a dramatic comeback in more than one way. One of the crudest versions of new slang, with touches of violence and licentiousness, turning the unsayable into sayable, is that currently used by young Romanians. It has been justly argued that such linguistic outlet came as a logical consequence, after the demise of communism, of the former censorship and wooden tongue. The paper sets out to put this oft-deplored linguistic phenomenon into perspective and analyse the main linguistic means employed in shaping it up.

Keywords: *slang; subculture; violence; licentiousness.*

While in the case of English and other European languages such as Spanish or German research on youth language has been growing steadily ever since William Labov's epoch-making 1972 study of Black English Vernacular in New York City, in the case of Romanian such research, with few exceptions, is all but absent, despite the fact that youth speech is becoming ever more 'visible', thanks to the media and to what Rodica Zafiu (2010) has termed "the democratization of writing: anyone may now write and be read in the public space". Generally speaking, interest in youth language may be related to the fact that, as Eckert (52) has noted, "adolescents are the linguistic movers and shakers [...] and as such a prime source of information about linguistic change"; other researchers too argue that it is in the language of the young that linguistic innovations first appear (Stenström et al. x).

It has been established that youth language is in fact composed of a great variety of youth styles, which are due to age, social, cultural and geographical factors. The important role of the peer group in the formation of identity, not

only as behaviour but also as language, has been amply analyzed by Bernstein (1972), Gumperz (1972), Cheshire (1982) and Eble (1996) among others, while still others emphasize that uses of language are acts of identity which signal the groups the user wants to be associated with, e.g. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985). Youth language is characterized primarily by the use of slang, taboo words, especially with sexual reference, and an overuse of pragmatic markers (Stenström & Jørgensen 2). This vocabulary, Jackson & Zé Amvela (134) note, then becomes a badge of membership of the subculture.

Sense can also be made of youth language in terms of Lacanian master-signifiers as identity-bearing words. In the Lacanian view, a human subject “is no longer a substance endowed with qualities, or a fixed shape possessing dimensions or a container awaiting the multifarious contents that experience provides: it is a series of events within language” (Bowie 76). According to Lacan, language users are divided subjects of language, subjected to inside and outside forces which call into question each one of their singular independent ‘I’-nesses. As Bracher (23-4) puts it, master-signifiers arise from the urge “to have an identity in which I can recognize myself and be encountered and recognized by others”. Being such a signifier “allows subjects to feel good about themselves and also provides the sense of temporal continuity and coherence essential to identity, since the signifier can be reproduced and communicated” (Bracher 1993, 24). A master-signifier can be any word that a subject identifies with or against, such as ‘*băiat de băiat*’ (denoting, in current Romanian youth speech, extreme ability/ shrewdness).

Klaus Zimmerman (2009, 130) has recently emphasized that “although youth language as a modern subcategory of non-standard varieties seems to manifest itself as a new form of variety incipient throughout the world in the 20th and 21st century, it reveals local specifics”. Thus, while it cannot be denied that youth language/ youngspeak/ youth styles are well-defined categories, recent cross-cultural comparative studies suggest that individualism and collectivism are the most important dimensions of cultural variation. Societies with a collectivistic orientation stress a tightly knit social framework with the rights and needs of the group as dominant; in contrast, individualistic societies like the Western ones stress individual achievements and the rights of the individual (Hall 1976; Feldman & Rosenthal 1991 in Legaudaite 2009). Romanian collectivism, which is to be clearly distinguished from Far-Eastern collectivism regarded as norm, is a result of fifty years of Soviet influence on the one hand, and its geographical location in South-Eastern Europe, or “on the threshold of the Orient” on the other, the effects of which can be seen very clearly in the context of the current degraded socio-cultural environment.

If systematic Romanian studies on youth language are all but absent, as noted before, there has nevertheless been a corresponding renewed interest in slang after 1989, when the Romanian vocabulary underwent profound revisions,

whereby referential gaps and items devalued through negative communist connotations were quickly filled in by seductive English lexemes¹ (for comparison, a similar process occurred after 1820, when French neologisms replaced the former Greek and Turkish ones), e.g. *polițist/milițian*; *job/slujbă*; *proiect/plan*; *planning/planificare*; *board/comitet*, combined with calquing, e.g. *a apical/ a face o cerere /a se înscrie*; *interviu/ discuție în vederea angajării* a.s.o. (see Chelaru-Murăruș 2006). There are also examples of English lexemes which have received Romanian derivations in youth slang, e.g. *fuleală* (< adj. *full*; a crowded/overpopulated place); *filingos* (< n. *feeling*; touchy; over-affectionate); *loser/luzăr* (stupid person); *lif* (< n. *life*): *care mai e liful tău?*; *homles* (< *homeless*; a person with no future). Many linguists have also noted the increasing pressure exerted by the colloquial slangy registers on the language of public communication and the media, deemed to be a normal psychological reaction to the former immobility of the wooden tongue (Stoichițoiu-Ichim 2001; Zafiu 2001; Chelaru-Murăruș 2006). At the same time, Adriana Stoichițoiu-Ichim (110) remarks that in contrast to the ample research on slang everywhere, Romanian research is much poorer and constantly behind its extremely dynamic object.

This situation has been accounted for in terms of the long hiatus in research during communism, when Al. Graur, for instance, former author of a 1934 study on the Gypsy origins of a large part of Romanian slang, now used ideological arguments to criticize its continuity (231), and Gh. Constantinescu-Dobridor (38) declared that “the continued ‘cultivation’ of the Romanian language results in the waning of these items [slang], and will finally oust them completely together with the former ways of thinking that created them”. In fact in the 1980s a number of media campaigns, e.g. “*A patriotic cause- the defence of the Romanian language*” (SLAST 34, 1982), branded slang items to be “noxious impurities” resulting in language “degradation” and “pollution”, while admonishing fiction authors who “let words circulate much too freely in their books” (SLAST 46, 1986; see also Zafiu 192-93). Even though, unlike Stalin, Romanian communist party officials did not theorize or attempt to regulate language problems (other than the legification of ‘*tovarăș*’ as the default address formula), there is sufficient evidence of political manipulation of language registers (see, for example, the case of fiction author Eugen Barbu, his novel *Groapa* and his magazine *Săptămîna*).

The functional identity of slang cannot be denied: Jean-Pierre Goudailler (1997), for instance, describes three of its functions – the cryptic, jocular and identifying; Lars-Gunnar Andersson and Peter Trudgill (69-81) identify 13 of its characteristics and Eric Partridge (294-95) cites 16 reasons for its use, while

¹ An excellent parody capturing the essence of this phenomenon is *Americanofonia*, by the Romanian pop group *Taxi*.

claiming that “slang is radical”, “puts off restraint”, “will often be clear, even though it must be distasteful; it will be familiar, even though it must be coarse”; “it is realistic, naturalistic, unromantic” (297). Partridge also invokes anthropological arguments: “slang is the individual speaking from the racial substratum, while conventional language is the language of expedience, of social deference, and reverence for the past” (297). More recently, Edwin Battistella (86) claims that “slang is used to create a kind of linguistic solidarity or status by identifying oneself with a group out of the mainstream or by setting oneself apart from conventional values through a style of toughness and ironic detachment”, all of which also holds for youth language. Chapman (xii) earlier distinguished two types of slang based on its group delimiting function: primary slang, “the pristine speech of subculture members”, and secondary slang, which is used in any informal interaction, as “a matter of stylistic choice rather than identification”. Note should be made of the fact that if slang is easily recognizable but proves difficult to identify with any degree of precision, defining it appears to be even more of a problem. Battistella (89) aptly remarks that “in attitudes toward slang, we continue to find a contest between those who view nonstandard language as a danger and those who see it as having contextual utility”.

In present-day Romanian, Oana Chelaru-Murăruș (2006) is by no means alone in remarking that “the colourful youth slang is infinitely more visible than in the past”, while also identifying a ‘hard’ subcategory of licentious erotic slang as exemplified in the writings of several young fiction authors published by *Polirom* (e.g. Alexandru Vakulovski and Claudia Golea, among others). Few would deny that the current degraded socio-cultural context is taking its toll on the language practices of the young, while school appears unable to discharge its formative function and many graduates’ native language skills are poor (Murăruș 2010). Present-day Romanian youth is, predictably enough, heterogeneous, being nevertheless generally characterized by a powerful vulgar and violent linguistic streak, centred on sundry extremes: from basic needs to sexuality to value judgments.

Youth slang items in general fill in all the open word classes: adjectives (as intensifiers or interjections), e.g. *criminal*, *teroare*, *pericol*, *demențial*, *mortăciune*, *bestial*, *f*tere*; nouns and noun phrases, e.g. *mare sculă*, *bulangiu*, *pîrțar*, *tîrtan*, *zăbălos*, *muilă*, *cap în gard*, *ștoarfă/pocnitoare* (ugly female), *hoit* (unimportant person); verbs and verb phrases, e.g. *a o arde* (do sth or have sexual relations), *a o frige* (to do sth or to fight), *a da în gît*, *a i se rupe* (expressing indifference); *a-i beși mintea* (to think or express atypical ideas); *a se sparge în figuri* (to put on airs), *a-și băga gheara /unghia-n gît* (expressing anger); *a o lua în freză/gură*; *a-i scoate (cuiva) plombe*; *a-i rupe (cuiva) fața*; *a rupe (pe cineva) în două* (expressing failure or threat); *a-i cădea ochii în gură*, *a rîde cu mațele pe pereți*, *să mor eu/să mori tu*, *să-mi trag palme*, *să-ți bați*

copiii (functioning as intensifiers, expressing amazement), *să-mi bag picioarele* (as criticism), *du-te-n pana /pușca mea/puii mei; dă-ți foc, du-te și te-mpușcă; ți-e cald cu dinții-n gură* (all functioning as expletives or threats); adverbs, e.g. *la plesneală* (tentatively); *la sînge* (thoroughly). It can be noted that a large number of such lexemes and expressions serve to metaphorize the human body by taking it apart and automizing various items as objects or subjects of concrete actions.

Violent language is an effect of the physical and political violence in present-day Romanian society, according to George Pruteanu. Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (2001) provides an in-depth analysis of various forms of violence in Romanian society, related to their causes: the desire to overcome social injustice, marginalization, exclusion, insecurity; with the young, nonconformism and the impulse to indulge in various kinds of deviant behaviour (sex, drugs, alcohol). In violent language, Slama-Cazacu identifies formalized items, now clichéd, e.g. *a omorî în bătaie, a bate pînă-i sună apa-n cap*; in contrast, current youth slang preserves its full stylistic force, as proved by its widespread use by the young generation and also by translators who have had recourse to online slang dictionaries such as 123.urban.ro. To translate, for example, Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* and *Filth*, Andra Matzal, by her own account, became fully aware of the lack of a useful up-to-date dictionary of Romanian slang. That online self-made linguists and their slang dictionaries should be miles ahead of academia is only logical, considering the easy access to all the various forms of communication, from face-to-face informal contexts to the Internet, e-mail, chatting and others, which have redefined informal speech and notions of closeness and distance. The excessive prudishness shown by the authors of the established Romanian dictionaries is also criticized by Radu Pavel Gheo (2005). On the other hand, the absence in Romanian of a middle ground, or intermediate register in licentious matters, has often been deplored, by Bujor Nedelcovici among others. In the afterword to his novel *Provocatorul*, he makes a point of the fact that he included French words and expressions instead of Romanian ones for the atmosphere, but also because words relating to the human body have a vulgar ring in Romanian, where they are used as swearwords and obscenities.

It is generally accepted in youth language research that music plays an important part in terms of identity construction, as "a driving force in nearly all youth cultures. Music is a special means of marking distinction from other generations and age groups, and has many different functions in young people's search for their own identity" (Mark 64). Different types of music in fact stand for different ideologies and make sense of the world in different ways. Sarah Thornton too (2003) argues that it is impossible to understand the distinctions of youth subcultures without systematic investigation of their media consumption, as "within the economy of subcultural capital the media is [...] a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge".

In present-day Romania, the definite socio-cultural context for the creation of youth speech is represented by urban neighbourhoods, circumscribed by dismal communist blocks of flats – ‘*blocurile gri*’, in the words of the music group B.U.G. Mafia, the spokesgroup for ‘*băieții de cartier*’ as products of the communist “industrialization age” and current prime creators of slang. Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (2001) attests to the popularity of B.U.G. Mafia – “the impact of this media is enormous” – their music/message was known to practically all her interviewed subjects. B.U.G. Mafia is a prime representative of Romanian hip-hop, who use violent language in an apparent attempt to attract attention to the plight of urban neighbourhoods and their brutality; this revolt, expressed in the sexual and excremental registers, is simply shocking, e.g. „Sugi p**a cu poezia ta/ Pe stradă-n toată țara poezia-i Mafia/ ...îmi bag p**a-n mă-ta/ Degeaba te holbezi la mine/ Că nu-mi pasă de tine”. ”Mai trageți și voi concluzii și vă mai facem noi contuzii/ Hei Uzi bagă-l în perfuzii”; ”Nu mai plînge-aiurea/ am să-ți zbor căpățîna”. Such and similar violent expletives serve to defy and intimidate outsiders (‘*fraierii*’); other groups – Paraziții and RACLA (Rime alese care lovesc adînc) aim at similar lack of subtlety. Predictably, violence also affects women in the texts of these bands: they are abused and dehumanized in an impressive number of ways, to the point of being turned into inanimate objects (see also Iacob 2002). Such incentives to physical aggression and even murder preserve their full violent potential. As Ruxandra Cesereanu (2003) remarks, in present-day Romania, “vulgarity and obscenities are considered weapons of an enforced purging of prejudice”.

‘Hip-hop’ is a broad term referring to “a rebellious cultural response from the working and lower income African American youth to perceptions of their economic and social stigmatization” (Tate 1999), one which nevertheless encourages “thuggish violence, misogyny, clownish behaviour and crude materialism” (Crouch 2008). On the other hand, the godfather of hip-hop himself has reputedly found out what everyone else knows: dirt sells. Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (2001) also details the evolution of hip-hop in Romania, “where it has been amplified by all manner of underground elements and by subsuming the concept of ‘*cartier*’, while also throwing into the mixture the traditional Romanian repertoire of swearwords, curses and obscenities, plus the difficulties of economic transition life”. That music with violent lyrics increases aggressive thoughts and emotions has long been established by research. In fact aggression is not the confine of hip-hop only; many very young poets, for instance those known as ‘*douămiști*’, prefer aggressive and salacious language and imagery: see for example Marin Mincu’s *Generația 2000*. In his review of the volume, literary critic Gheorghe Grigurcu (2005) has two explanations for the phenomenon: first, “a subliminal reaction to the various interdictions of totalitarianism, which have led to a considerable amassment of repressed individual energies that have finally exploded”, and second, Romanian

literature's overdue 'duty' to the subject of the relationship between the two sexes". He nevertheless deplores the anthologized poets' "reduction of eroticism to sexuality and of sexuality to the crudest vulgar language, angled from the fetid swamps of slang".

Ruxandra Cesereanu has written extensively about "the outbreak of the violent mental imagery in Romanian postcommunism", which was only the natural emotional outcome after the disappearance of censorship and the notorious wooden tongue (148). The "language slum"/ *mahalaua lingvistică* is part of "Romania as slum"/ *mahalaua România*. In "Cuvântul care ucide" (174) she quotes Alain Brossat (1998), who notes the crisis and deterioration of language in the 20th and 21st centuries as a result of political and everyday violence, which is in turn related to "the animalization of interhuman conflict", whereby opponents are no longer perceived as adversaries, but as enemies to be linguistically bestialized. If this is dispiriting, even more so is one of the conclusions in Ruxandra Cesereanu's writings, namely the Romanian propensity for slum, or a general tendency for the 'slumming' of everything, including language and culture in general, in which many, or most Romanians acquiesce.

It can nevertheless be argued of course that humans in general have long been known to use language for aggressive purposes. In the case of Romania, aggressive language shows continuity: the most frequent verbs in the documents of the former communist *Securitate* are 'to crush'/ *a zdrobi*, 'to repress'/ *a reprima*, 'to destroy/suppress'/ *a desființa*, 'to annihilate/exterminate'/ *a nimici*, 'to liquidate/wipe out'/ *a lichida*, 'to raze'/ *a stârpi*, 'to knock down'/ *a da de pământ* (for 'to kill by shooting') (Cesereanu 160). Thus the violence in present-day Romanian, which is most visible in young people's slang as we have shown, can also be seen as a direct result of the violence inflicted on the Romanian people by communism and its ideology, this "novel beast", in Alain Besançon's words (19-20).

Argumentation furnished by author Radu Pavel Gheo in his book *DEX-ul și sexul* (2005) appears to confirm my suggestion. Thus he dismisses specific complaints that the Romanian language has suffered degradation in the last twenty years, and to prove this he begins by quoting a particular experience retold by historian Neagu Djuvara in his *Amintiri din pribegie*, namely his first travel by train in Romania after fifty years' absence, in 1990, when he witnessed a dialogue between two young men in the same compartment whose every three or four words were accompanied by "angry but self-satisfied references to a stout phallus" (*p**a mea...*). Neagu Djuvara was understandably shocked, and confessed that he had never in his youth witnessed similar callousness in public, but concluded that the two represented 'Ceausescu-styled' literates. R. P. Gheo also quotes Mircea Cărtărescu's heeding that after 1989, intellectuals lacking real contact with 'the profound country' have been confronted with a wave of witlessness which is but the nation's natural state unleashed, and agrees with this

in writing that “the confusion and aggressive vulgarity are in no way the result of post-1989 society. The language spoken by common people hasn’t undergone radical changes between 1989 and today. [...] Thus language today is the exchange currency for the abject, base and submissive living during communism”. Indeed, language use is intimately linked to the prevailing mentality in society. In his famous *Course*, Saussure notes that it is widely believed that “language reflects the psychological character of the nation that speaks it” (310). We can only hope that this assumption is false.

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