

Examining the Phenomenon of Code Switching in the Language of Recidivists

URICSKA Erna

As with every specialty, police have their own use of subject jargon and special terminology. The language of the police is a combination of punctual, administrative gobbledygook which aims to be economical, efficient and necessary for their work. This kind of language also combines the special vocabulary of the different social groups in the criminal underworld. This work aims to show how this special, code-mixed combination of language appears in use in recidivists' vocabulary examining the characteristics of the so called code-switching.

Introduction

“It is of criminal importance for practitioners of law enforcement to master the language of criminals as it is indispensable to make their work easier and successful since, on the one hand, it enables them to change information without misunderstanding, on the other hand, detectives, the secondary users of the argot, may gain reputation as by it”.¹ It is common knowledge that there are two members involved in the process of law enforcement: a criminal and a detective. During my work I examined how a recidivist's language changed as a result of the vocabulary and way of speaking used many times during the communication with practitioners of law enforcement.

Statistics on Recidivism

A cultural change occurred in the research of social history of crime in the 1990s as experts began to turn to narrative sources and text analyses.²

Previously, criminal statistics were looked at and judged in different ways. On the one hand, it was said that there was no point in dealing with them, “since they lacked the motives of the perpetrator's behaviour and they were not capable of providing information about the reason for criminal activities. On the other hand, it was said that statistics could give partial information on how crime would evolve in the short and long run”.³ Personally, I have to agree with the second opinion, because criminal statis-

1 Mátételkiné (2006) 240.

2 Perényi (2006) 1.

3 Perényi (2006) 1.

tics can serve as cornerstones for different researches carried out in several fields in our lives, e.g. linguistics, sociology and psychology.

Statistics on recidivism and recidivists that were carried out by the Florida Department of Corrections in the United States of America in 2010 were indispensable for completing my work. It was essential to know precise numbers and proportions to carry out linguistic research, draw conclusions and to come up with further considerations.

During the analysis of the statistics which came to light in May 2010 we realised that about 30 percent of criminals become recidivists. This proportion is higher among those criminals who commit crimes against property, e.g. thefts and burglaries. In this case this data can reach up to 60 percent. The proportion of recidivism and the numbers of recidivists are influenced by the length of the period post release. Unfortunately, the number of reoffending criminals rises with the length of time (expressed in months) after release.⁴

Code-switching in the Language of Recidivists

In this research I attempt to show how language elements of practitioners of law enforcement appear (should they appear) in the language of a recidivist, i.e. in thief language. We will also see whether there are any language prints from official terms in the language of recidivists after several occasions of communication facilities with practitioners of law enforcement.

Firstly, we have to be familiar with the special language of law enforcement to be able to decide whether it is police jargon or only another language element. Magdolna Mátételkiné Holló claims that “like every special field, police have their own usage of language with special terminology. This extremely rich vocabulary which seems to be exotic to outsiders is characterised by the mixture of *termini technicus* (the plural form of *terminus* is *termini*, or *terminuses*) and argotic expressions. The language of policemen is a combination of punctual, administrative gobbledygook which aims to be economical and efficient and necessary for their work. A so called *technolectus* and this type of language also combines with the special vocabulary of the different social groups from the criminal underworld, or their so called *sociolect* or social dialect”.⁵

“The detective and the criminal share the same territory and use the same language. There is a bilateral relationship between the person who tries to observe and respect the law and the person who breaks the law. While they live and fight in a very tight symbiosis, they use the same phraseology during their interaction”.⁶ If we take this opinion for granted, this process could probably have effects on both sides.

It is common knowledge that criminals use a special, intensive terminology. During my work I found that the phenomenon of code-switching is present in the language of criminals to borrow prestige or for other reasons.

4 Florida Prison Recidivism Study, Releases From 2001 To 2008. 9.

5 Mátételkiné (2006) 240.

6 Mátételkiné (2006) 240.

The following conversation took place between a police officer and a recidivist thief. The original, English version of the text is necessary for the proof of the hypothesis.

During the conversation **P** stands for *policeman* in English sentences, **R** stands for *rendőr* in Hungarian sentences, **T** stands for *thief* in English sentences, and this letter would be the same in Hungarian sentences (as the word *thief* and *tolvaj* begin with the same letter).

P: So, Willie how much you get for that GPS you lifted last night?

R: Na, Willie, mennyit kaptál azért a tegnapi újított GPS-ért?

T: GPS?

T: GPS?

P: You know the little satellite deal. Tells you how to get from one place to the next.

R: Tudod, az a kis műholdas kütyü. Ami segít eljutni egyik helyről a másikra.

T: I know what a GPS is, thin man. It's an "aconym" for Global Positioning Satellite.

T: Tudom, mi az, ropi csávó. Egy akoním arra, hogy Globális Pozicionáló Satellite.

P: "Aconym"?

P: Akoním?

T: Oh, you like that, huh?

T: Ez tetszik, mi?

P: I do.

R: Nagyon.

T: Yeah, Big Willie's, smart like that. Abbreviations and whatnot. Like sonar. Standing for Sound Navigation and Ranging. Or PIN- Personal Identification Number.

T: Ja, Big Willie vágja az ilyeneket. Az ilyen rövidítéseket. Mint a szonár. Az a "hang navigáció és távolságmérés". A PIN? Személyes azonosító szám.

P: That's very impressive. How about this one? TYAIJ. That's stands for Throw Your Ass In Jail. Which is exactly what I'm going to do if you don't tell me what went down last night.

R: Ez tényleg nagyon komoly. És mit szólsz ehhez? SVMASZ. Azt jelenti sittre váglak, mint a szél". És pontosan ez fog történni, ha nem tudom meg, mi volt tegnapi éjjel.

T: Afraid, I don't have an answer for you on that FAQ, my brother. But if I hear anything on your gunslinger, I'll give you a holler.

T: Sajnos, erre a GYIKra nem tudom a választ, testvérem. De ha hallok valamit a cowboyáról, majd megcsörgetem.

P: Yeah, I'm sure you will.

R: Abban biztos vagyok.

T: No, if you don't mind, IMOH, I'm out of here.

T: És most, ha megengedi, ISV, azaz itt se' vagyok.

After reading and analysing the conversation it can be seen that the phenomenon of code-switching is present both in the language of the law enforcement practitioner and that of the recidivist. The communication of law enforcement practitioners has an effect on the language of recidivists, since they observe a special terminology, word formation and way of speaking. This pompous, involved style is picked up by them. Recidivists try to imitate this style of language used during interrogation as a *pseudo-jargon*. It can be explained by circularity or parody of the special language use of the police force. However, it may also happen that they only want to put themselves in a good light in this environment.

Abbreviations are any shortened forms of words, such as acronyms and initials (they are often confused with acronyms). They can usually be found in the range of expressions of jargon of the practitioners of law enforcement. Besides these, clipping is a good example for creating new terms for a special group like the police. In the case of clipping new words are created by shortening polysyllabic words, e.g. *vic(tim)*, *perp(etrator)*, *lab(oratory)*. This process can be seen on the criminal side as well. Instead of creating new words, they give new meaning to already existing words and expressions, e.g. *FAQ* means *frequently asked question*, but this initial means *fu...answered question* in argot. The jargon of law enforcement, more precisely the imitation of jargon in abbreviations appears as a kind of parody during the conversation, as exhibitionism from the thief. He uses special English terms in shortenings as if he wanted to impress the policeman.

Linguistic elements used by the thief are remarkable, as he uses two professional terms during the interrogation. In this way he refers to the word formation methods of jargon of law enforcement. These words are *aconym* and *abbreviations*. The first one is clearly incorrect – the proper term is *acronym* and it is a type of *abbreviation*. It is possible that the recidivist thief is familiar with the word *acronym* and may have heard this word mentioned. However, he did not know the correct pronunciation, and attempted to use it in an elementary, childish way during the conversation.

New varieties of meaning can be created by name transfers in the expressions of argot. They are usually based on similarities or contacts. Here, the word *gunslinger* doubtlessly belongs to the vocabulary of argot, as it is an outdated expression. Its synonym is: *cowboy*. The appearance of the word *gunslinger* is encompassed with wit and humour. Its use is a typical case of name transfer in this contact. There is also a new variety of meaning with its use. The main aim is to kid and josh the police practitioner, and the reader knows that this is not about a western movie with a cowboy protagonist, but the thief simply used *gunslinger* instead of the words *killer*, *murderer* or *slayer*.

The phrase: *give me a holler*, which belongs to the expressions of argot, means *to shout* here. Nobody thinks that the criminal would howl if he knows something about the crime. In this case the phrase of *let you know* is the most appropriate meaning. Knowing the specialties of criminal argot we can establish that excess joined with emotionalism is one of the ways how new meaning is created or added to the original word or phrase. The criminal argot is full of emotion, and critic can be followed. The way he

speaks to imitate the jargon of police practitioners is more vivid and lively than the real police jargon which is pompous, artificial and complicated.

When the questions asked by the police practitioner did not lead to any result the final point of the imitation of the officer is when the thief calls him *his brother* at the end of the conversation. This familiar language use exceeds its real meaning, as the criminal and the police practitioner share a kind of brotherhood in the process of law enforcement. This fact is proved in the English language, as terms like *my brother* and *my sister* appear not only in blood relationships but in other fields of human life as well, e.g. religion. The choice of words of the thief in the interrogation clearly expresses that they are on opposing sides of the process of law enforcement. The shared activity leads to an unwanted relationship and brotherhood.

Beside the expression of *my brother* a special tendency can be noticed. The police practitioner's way of speaking represents a kind of downward grading in vocabulary and language, while the criminal's struggling in speech eloquence illustrates an upgrade. This is probably for the sake of successful communication. As the members of communication are on the opposite sides of criminal procedure, it is inevitable to move a little to the other's direction. This connection may provide a meeting point of communication where two worlds meet and the process could be finished successfully.

Summary

The language use of criminals and law enforcement practitioners mix during the process of law enforcement. The so called code-switching appears during communication when these two social groups with different values get into verbal confrontation. During my work, an adequate example was given while expounding on the findings of the above mentioned author. The phenomena of code-switching appear not only in the language use of law enforcement practitioners but also in that of recidivists. It is used many times during communication with law enforcement practitioners. The language of these two groups may meet at an intersection (in a meeting point). The recovery of this point and the exploitation of possibilities at this point are mandatory to the successful process of law enforcement.

Finally, I need to mention that while criminal argot is built in police jargon integrally, code-switching appears only as an imitation in the language level of petty criminals. Code-switching used by petty criminals appears only on the surface but this is not integrally built into their language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Florida Prison Recidivism Study, Releases From 2001 To 2008. Forrás:

www.dc.state.fl.us/secretary/press/2010/recidivismstudy.pdf (2013. 11. 30.)

Mátételkiné Holló Magdolna (2006): Bilingvizmus a bűnüldözésben. In Gecső Tamás (szerk.): *Nyelvi kompetencia – kommunikatív kompetencia*. Budapest, Tinta Könyvkiadó.

Perényi Roland (2006): *A bűnözés mérése. Bűnügyi statisztika és bűnözéstörténet*. Forrás:

http://andorkaweb.tarki.hu/Konferenciak/Konferencia2006/Perenyi_Roland.pdf (2013. 11. 30.)

SUMMARY

A regiszterváltás jelenségének vizsgálata a visszaeső bűnözők nyelvhasználatában

URICSKA Erna

„A bűnüldözők számára kriminalisztikai jelentőséggel bír a bűnözők nyelvének megismerése, hiszen munkájuk megkönnyítéséhez és eredményesebbé tételéhez elengedhetetlen. Egyrészt a bűnözői nyelv ismerete lehetővé teszi a félreértések nélküli információcserét, másrészt bizonyos presztízt kölcsönöz a bűnüldözőnek, a tolvajnyelv másodlagos használójának.” Mivel a bűnüldözői folyamatban minimum két fő érintett, egy bűnöző és egy bűnüldöző, munkám során azt vizsgáltam, hogy egy visszaeső bűnöző nyelvezete változik-e, illetve ha igen, milyen módon és irányba alakul a többszöri bűnüldözői kommunikáció során hallott szókincs és beszédmód hatására.