New Tendencies in Romanian Youth Slang as a Mirror of Social Changes

This article is dealing with the heterogeneous ways of speaking of young people in present-day Romania which are usually subsumed by Romanian linguists under the collective terms argoul tinerilor and limbajul juvenil / tinerilor (in German ‘Jugendsprache’). It draws into focus the latest developments on the level of the lexicon and their connection with the transformation of Romanian society. By way of introduction, the text explores the main features and functions of current youth slang. Generally, it is used in informal communication situations such as relational and physical closeness between the interlocutors, for instance to express highly emotional contents, to make them stand out against the others and to show discontent with social constraints or nonconformist attitudes. However, owing to the spread of the Internet and the new forms of communication such as e-mailing and chatting, the conditions of informal speech and the definition of closeness have changed. As an object of research, youth speech was discovered only in the interwar period. After the end communist era and the absolute restriction of the scientific freedom, there has been a rapid reawakening of interest.

As a basis for the following analysis, the fundamental topics and fields of interest as well as the most important methods of lexical innovation which comprehend borrowing from other languages, most notably from Romani and English, are discussed and illustrated using examples from own investigations (since 2003) and from a study written by Susanne Hecht (1998) who collected lexical material in Romanian schools and universities. Special attention is payed to the omnipresence of vulgar expressions and of taboo topics such as sexuality.

In order to understand the recent changes since the nineties, entries in Internet dictionary „123urban.ro” and an anonymous Internet survey are analysed and compared with the results of studies from the nineties. Evidently, the centres of interest remain the same: value judgements (mainly about persons), daily life and basic needs, intercourse relations, taboos, violence, extremes in every respect.

A bigger part of the former vocabulary is still relevant, though in addition to them a huge variety of neologisms, a few new topical aspects such as Internet and drugs and some very recent trends can be observed. For instance, additionally to older synonyms for „great” from the trade and crafts sector, some military and mechanical engineering terms (robot, tanc) have appeared. Furthermore, there is a clear trend to denote positive concepts by means of words for negative conditions and value judgements (retard, turbat, distrus, naspa) or vulgar terms (bitch, pulă).

In large part, the neologisms (predominantly metaphors and derivations) are still created with elements from standard or colloquial Romanian instead of borrowings from other languages. Superlatives and vocatives or rather filler words such as sclav or slugă are still used over-extensively. In this context, a short comparison of Romanian and German youth slang offers some more perspectives.

Seeing that youth slang is sensitive to general tendencies in society and therefore reflects them to a certain extent, concludingly the linguistic developments are outlined with reference to the Romanian society. The predominance of English loanwords in combination with the loss of importance of the Romani language show the growing popularity of American culture and lifestyle as well as a clear orientation towards western models. Apparently, youth slang is to an increasing extent emerging from the big urban centres and their youth culture.

If there is a trend towards „vulgarisation” of the language, is a question that has been much debated in Romanian public life. An argument in support of this hypothesis is the abovementioned lexical trend towards negativity and aggression. On the other hand, it should be taken into consideration that the recent Internet-based results can not be directly compared to the results of former studies for various reasons. First, there is a lack of written documents of colloquial Romanian before 1989, but studies from the interwar period and from other languages show that forceful vulgar expressions are no new topics. Just means and tempo of their distribution have increased. Beyond it, during former investigations, mainly based on surveys and questionnaires, the inhibition level of the target group has been much higher than the inhibition level of an Internet user who writes completely anonymously and without direct contact to the researcher and conversational partner.

From all this it follows that there is a bigger variety, authenticity and topicality of the words spread by Internet. The new forms of public provocation which have not been unthinkable some time ago such as the lyrics of Manele and Hip-Hop, literature with colloquial elements, products of the free press such as „Academia Caţavencu” can be seen as signs of openness, creativity and liberality, of pleasure in playing with the language and of the will to contrast the limbă de lemn (‘wooden language’) of the Ceauşescu era. The mix of registers and levels of the language, which has often been lamented, can also be interpreted as the revival of the traditional permeability of the Romanian standard language towards non-standard elements.