

Translation of Criminal Discourse in Ch. Dickens's "Oliver Twist"

Nowadays as the criminology has become a frequently discussed topic, as it was in the 19th century, there are lots of criminological films and novels that are translated into various languages, depicting the image and discourse of the criminals. In this regard the study of criminal discourse is rather important, as it can help avoid being cheated and affected by criminals, facilitate the relationship between the criminals and custodial authorities, as well as help us, translators, to analyze and translate criminological works. This article presents the main translation problems regarding the discourse of the criminals.

Key words: criminal, criminological terms, cant, prison argot, discourse, translation.

Language that allows its speakers to communicate with each other without being understood by others, that is, by people with whom its speakers come into contact on a more or less regular basis but from whom certain kinds of information must be withheld, is called secret language. The specialized language, used by criminals, to keep communication about their intentions and actions from being understood by their victims or the authorities, is called cant or argot. Indeed, the word jargon, now used to refer to the technical language of trade or

profession, was originally used to refer to the secret language of twelfth-century French criminals. Julie Coleman (2004) has provided a valuable delineation of cant, jargon, and slang, where **slang** is defined as the ephemeral term used by any in-group in order to distinguish them from other groups; **jargon** is defined as a professional language allowing for precise discussion of topics related to the given vocation; and **cant** is defined as a language used to obfuscate meaning completely from those not accepted by the in-group, ordinarily for criminal intent. Coleman doesn't define argot, the term favored in contemporary prison scholarship to encompass the cant, jargon, and slang found at penal institutions (Einat 200: 309).

Criminal language has been used as a class badge and as a means of masking the true meaning of its discourse to potential victims. This intent has long been documented by the police of numerous countries, and those who use such languages have given them precise names. Thus the terms Rotwelsch (in Germany), argot (in France), furbesco (in Italy), germania (in Spain), and cant (in England) have all been used at different times to designate the language of the criminal classes.

The use of criminal discourse is typical not only to criminals, pickpockets, thieves, but also to prisoners. Thus, criminal discourse comprises in itself also prison discourse. Our study shows that the value of studying prison discourse is immense. Studying the characteristics of criminal discourse we see that knowing the language of criminals, one can avoid being cheated and affected by them. Over time, even some custodial officers not only knew the meanings of the inmates' argot, but also used it constantly in their daily speech and

demonstrated their enthusiasm to decipher the unique language of prisoners. Studies have shown that inmates feel that a person who speaks in terms of their lexicon is something other than a stranger. The value of studying prison discourse is immense. It might facilitate improved communication between prisoners and custodial authorities.

In this article I have represented a theoretical approach to the criminal language – prison argot and thieves’ cant with their functions, and in order to show the importance of studying criminal discourse I have analyzed the use of cant and argot in Charles Dickens’s well – known novel “Oliver Twist” and the problem of their translation into Armenian.

The theoretical and practical significance of my research is not only to show the role of discourse in communication, but also to provide students with necessary knowledge of meanings of cant words and their usage in order to understand such words in literature, songs and movies.

Criminal Discourse and Prison Argot

The ongoing use of texts in their communicative environments, that is, in their contexts, is called *discourse*. Every discourse has to be studied in its social context, in the culture and situation in which it appears. And here the style of discourse plays a significant role. Styles differ from each other; we are therefore able to speak of a variety of styles, i.e. in speaking or writing, the speaker/writer has a number of different possibilities of phrasing what he would like to say. For example, we can say the

word *money* in different ways in different language styles, e.g. *money* is the normal/standard occurrence of this word, we can say *cash* in a more colloquial way; *funds, capital, finances* is a domain-specific style of referring to *money*, and the more informal words of saying it are *dosh, brass, lolly, wonga, ackers*, which are more commonly used by the criminals.

Criminal discourse is characterized by the use of argot or cant by thieves, prisoners, etc. **Argot** or **cant** is a more distinctive version of slang, in which the purpose of the specialized language is to conceal the meaning of the communication from others. Actually, the term **slang** itself originally, meant the same as the term argot and came from the language of criminals and beggars; as slang came into more popular usage, it lost this distinctive meaning (McShane 2005:64). Overlapping with slang is **thieves' cant**, *Rogue's cant* or *peddler's French* the old jargon of the underworld. Thieves in England would flash the patter (talk the slang) to allow pickpockets to communicate without notice. Even the Bobbies (policemen) could not understand the patter flash of the pickpockets. The sentence *Draw dragons from the dummy* makes no sense to the majority of English speaking people, which was precisely the point behind Patter Flash, or the language used by thieves and pickpockets in 19th century England. A rough translation of this sentence would be: *Steal gold coins from the coin purse!*

Another peculiarity of criminal discourse is the use of prison argot in prisons. The oral form of the unique language of

prisoners, i.e. cant, seems to have appeared in Britain in early in the 16th century, and in America, as well as Australia in the 18th century. Prison argot has many roots, including the vocabulary of criminal gangs, racketeers, jazz/rap artists, prostitutes, beggars, tramps, and those involved with the drug trade, e.g. rat means betrayer, pokey - prison, and barmy – insane prisoner, etc. which have become accepted as part of mainstream vocabulary. Alice Becker-Ho (1994) has traced the roots of the Romany contribution to underworld argot, much of which remains in use in penal environments: *shiv*, for a makeshift knife, is derived from Romany, as are *bing*, for prison, *racket*, for crime. As to guards, they have their own jargon in prisons as well, and indeed, on occasion, their own cant which prisoners have drolly designated *Pig Latin* (Cardozo-Freeman 1984: 253). *Inmate* is a good indicator of the style of guard jargon, which tends to be governmental and evasive.

Cant dictionaries appeared in England in the 17th century. Their purpose was to help protect the law-abiding public from criminals who populated the streets. One of the more authoritative of such dictionaries is that by Eric Partridge (1950), which has about 45,000 entries from British, American and Australian prisons. A *New Canting Dictionary* (London 1725), advertised itself as being “useful for all sorts of people (especially Travelers and Foreigners) to enable them to secure their money and preserve their lives.”

However, attempts to systematize cant are often met with difficulty. Cant is essentially an oral language, so compiling

a list of cant words and their meanings doesn't convey the true context in which they are used.

Analysis of Criminal Discourse in “Oliver Twist” and Its Translation into Armenian

Crime was a huge problem in London in the 1830s, when Dickens was writing. Novels and plays about crime were hugely popular. Some novelists wrote about crime because they had a particular point to make about the source of criminal behavior, or possible solutions to the crime wave. Other novelists wrote about crime just because they knew it would be sold. “Oliver Twist” was hugely popular, but Dickens definitely had a point to make: he wanted to show how criminals really lived, in order to discourage poor people from turning to crime. He also wanted to show how external influences created criminal behavior as much or more than natural criminal urges.

In “Oliver Twist” criminals use cant, which is understood only by the members of them. Oliver doesn't know cant, or criminal's slang – but neither do we. We're in the same position as Oliver, here – in need of a translator. Thus, I have analyzed “Oliver Twist” to distinguish the parts where the Thieves' Cant has been used. I have taken the translation done by Arta Bazaryan. The translation of criminological terms is indeed rather difficult. In many cases finding the right equivalent is impossible and the best translation method here is the descriptive translation. But, first of all, the translator should discover all the criminological terms, find out their meanings in

cant or slang dictionaries and not in standard language dictionaries, as the meaning of a slang or cant word really differs from that of a standard language word. In the following examples we'll see that not précising the meaning of a slang word can lead to a wrong and not adequate translation and distort the whole image and impact.

For example:

Why, the traps have got him, and that's all about it,' said the Dodger, sullenly.

— Նա ծուղակն ընկավ, հասկացա՞ր, ահա և բռլորը, —
ասաց Ստահակը խոժոռվելով:

The translator here used the word *ծուղակ*, for the word *traps*, but in criminal dictionaries the word *trap* means a policeman and has nothing to do with the primary meaning of the word *trap*. The translator should have written it this way: “Ոստիկանները բռնեցին նրան”.

Other examples concerning this problem are:

'Give her a whiff of fresh air with the bellows, Charley,' said Mr. Dawkins;

— Փուրքով մարմուր օդի հոսանք անաջացրու, Չա՛րլի,
— ասաց միստր Դոքինգը:

In criminal language the word *bellows* means lungs. As far as I understand the speaker wants Charley to give artificial respiration to the girl, which is more understandable when taking into consideration the situation and taking the criminal

meaning of the word *bellows*. Besides, this translation is not clearly understandable to the reader.

'He'll come to be scragged, won't he?'

— Նա մի օր վեր կբարձրանա, ճիշտ չէ՞:

Վեր կբարձրանա is not a good way of expressing the meaning of the word *scragged*. In *cant dictionaries* it means to hang on the gallows. And I don't get the idea of the translator in the target text. The speaker just intended to say “*Նրան մի օր կկախեն*”.

Another huge mistake done by the translator is the following:

'If he comes back, and leaves the boy behind him; if he gets off free, and dead or alive, fails to restore him to me; murder him yourself if you would have him escape Jack Ketch.

— Եթե նա վերադառնա տղային այնտեղ թողնելով, եթե նա վտանգից ազատվի և տղան ինձ չհանձնի ողջ, թե մեռած վիճակում, դու ինքդ պետք է սպանես նրան, եթե չես ուզում, որ նա ընկնի Ջեյք Բեյքի ձեռքը:

This is really a huge mistake made by the translator. When doing a translation the translator should pay a great attention to every word and expression, especially when he/she translates such a novel, with such a language deviation. Here the expression *to escape Jack Ketch* means to escape execution. But the translator did a literal, word-for-word translation, by writing ... *եթե չես ուզում, որ նա ընկնի Ջեյք Բեյքի ձեռքը*,

which is evidently not approved and is considered to be a huge mistake.

Another problem in translating a criminal work is that the translator shouldn't be afraid of using words from the colloquial layer of the language in the criminals' discourse, on the contrary it is the only way of keeping the criminal atmosphere and the real image of the characters.

For example:

'It's all arranged about bringing off the swag, is it?' asked the Jew.

— *Ավարը բերելու համար ամեն ինչ ծրագրվա՞ծ է, — հարցրեց Հրեան:*

Swag means a thief's plunder. The word *ավար* is not a proper choice here, as it is a word from a formal layer of the language, and doesn't correspond to the word used by the criminal. The word *թալան* in Armenian would be more suitable in this sentence.

Or:

'Don't make such a row,' said Sikes

— *Ի՞նչ էս այդքան աղմկում, — սուսց Սայքսը*

The word *աղմկել* is not a very good choice here, as here we deal with thieves, so we are more likely to use the word

djunp which is more colloquial and will definitely maintain the informal atmosphere in the target text.

The novel is also full of nonce words, which are used only for the nonce of the context. All nonce words are also neologisms that have not entered the lexicon of a language. Some nonce words have a meaning and may (or may not) become an established part of the language, while others are essentially meaningless and are useful for a certain situation. The translator may use this trick in the target text in order to preserve the impact and the intention of the author.

For example:

‘Where did he come from?’

‘Greenland

— *Որտեղի՞ց է եկել:*

— *Դեռահասուների երկրից:*

Here we have *Greenland*. Jack Dawkins, finding how “green” (inexperienced) Oliver is in their work at their first meeting, tells Charley Bates jokingly that he is from “Greenland”. In Armenian version *Դեռահասուների երկրից* is not the most suitable expression. When we want to qualify someone who is inexperienced, we call him *խալ է*, so here we can also use a nonce-word, by saying — *Խալաւնցից է*.

One of the huge mistakes of the translator here is the distortion of the image of a character by changing his speech.

This is a big problem, because while reading the English version we clearly understand that the person is a criminal, but while reading the Armenian version we cannot guess whether we deal with a criminal or not.

For example:

'Is this the Three Cripples?' asked Noah.

'That is the dabe of this 'ouse.' replied the Jew.

— *Սա «Երեք հաշմանդամներ» կոչված զինետոն ՚նն է,
— հարցրեց Նոան:*

— *Այդպես է կոչվում այս հաստատությունը, —
պատասխանեց հրեան:*

This young Jew, Barney, is employed at the “Three Cripples”. He has a chronic catarrh which affects his nasal sounds: [n] and [m]. He pronounces the sound [n] as [d], and the sound [m] as [b]. In the above-mentioned translation, we don't see this specific characteristic of the speaker. The translator might translate *dabe* (name) as *աղուղ*: The word *'ouse,*' (house) shouldn't be translated as *հաստատություն*, as an uneducated person will hardly use this word, especially someone having problems with pronouncing the words. We can here use the word *զինետոն*, by just changing the sound [ն] into [ղ]. The sentence will sound like this: — *Դա է զինետաղ աղուղը.*

Besides the word *կոչված* is unnecessary here. The speech of the criminals is more precise and brief.

From the analysis we can see that the translator hasn't wholly kept the criminal atmosphere and style which existed in the source text, because of the limited usage of slang words in Armenian, thus affecting the intention of the author, distorting the real image of the characters and why not affecting the understanding of the general message that the author intended to convey. We also came across with various problems concerning the criminological terms, and slang words. The main problem with them is that very often the exact equivalent in Armenian is missing. But the translator shouldn't just write a generalizing word, especially when it is from the formal layer of the language. Besides, the most general problem that exists in the translation is using so many formal and high-flown words, instead of using the colloquial words and expressions that are typical of the criminals.

Conclusion

The profound study of criminal discourse is rather important in terms of deciphering their language. Nowadays there is a blending of the language of the criminals with the language of the street especially when many young people nowadays hybridize the language of the criminal underworld with the language of the street in order to sound like tough guys.

All too often, the only encounter citizens have with cant and prison argot is in narrative films and novels. Thus, we can conclude that a thorough study of criminal discourse enables us

to understand cant and prison argot so as to analyze fiction works where criminal discourse is used, to characterize people who are considered to be criminals.

Criminology in literary texts is considerably better studied than in films. This is, because the language of literature as a whole is much better studied than the language of films. But the criminal discourse in films nowadays represents a huge problem, especially when being translated into other languages. Criminological films make us understand the crime better as the formal explanations of crime constitute an important means of shaping the characters and their discourse. But sometimes while watching a criminological film or reading crime novels, about criminals, tough guys, pirates or prisoners, we don't find them quite interesting and impressive because of the language, which is translated in Armenian particularly, in such a way, that it sounds really funny to listen to an uneducated criminal speaking like a professor. This is mainly because of the fact that the translators tend to keep the Armenian language pure, and so they avoid adding some colloquial or slang words to the speech of the criminals. But by doing this they distort the image depicted in the movie or in the source text of a crime novel, by changing the whole atmosphere and impact by just changing the language. Why are we so afraid of adding the colloquial layer of language into the language of films or literature? That doesn't mean that by blending the literal language with colloquial layer, if necessary, we distort our pure language. We have to understand that the colloquial language is also one of

the layers of the language, which we use in our daily life, in our daily speech and why do we complicate it, when it comes to literature or films? Why do we force the criminals to talk like professors, when we can just make them use their own language? Why don't we let the language flow naturally? The study of criminal language and its translation into Armenian is really a huge problem especially nowadays when there is a tendency to translate movies and screen them on TV in our native language. I greatly welcome this idea, but if we really want people to watch them or read the translated criminal novels we have to not just reproduce the words and speeches but use the language in a way it is intended to be used, in order to keep the atmosphere and make the same impact on the target audience. Let us not be afraid of playing with our language by making it more elastic and flexible and broaden its scope and usage.

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Մանյան Մարիաննա

ԵՊՀ

**Քրեական խոսույթի թարգմանությունը
2. Դիքենսի “Օլիվեր Թվիստ” - ում**

Ներկայումս, քանի որ քրեական թեմաները դարձել են հաճախակի քննարկման առարկա, ինչպես եղել է 19-րդ դարում, արդիական է դարձել շատ քրեագիտական ֆիլմեր և վեպեր ու պատմվածքներ, որոնք ներկայացնում են քրեական աշխարհի մարդկանց կերպարն ու խոսույթը, թարգմանել աշխարհի տարբեր լեզուներով: Այս առումով քրեական խոսույթի ուսումնասիրությունը մեծ կարևորություն է ներկայացնում, քանի որ դա կարող է օգնել խուսափել հանցագործներից, հեշտացնել հանցագործների և օրինապահ մարմինների միջև հարաբերությունները, ինչպես նաև օգնել մեզ՝ թարգմանիչներին, վերլուծել և թարգմանել քրեագիտական

աշխատանքները: Այս հոդվածը ներկայացնում և վերլուծում է քրեական խոսույթին առնչվող հիմնական թարգմանական խնդիրները:

Բանալի բառեր. քրեական, քրեագիտական եզրույթներ, քրեական ժարգոն, բանտային գաղտնալեզու, խոսույթ, թարգմանություն

Марианна Манян

ЕГУ

Перевод криминального дискурса в романе

Ч. Диккенса «Оливер Твист»

В наше время, так как криминология стала часто обсуждаемой темой, как и в 19-м веке, есть много криминологических фильмов и романов, изображающих образ и дискурс преступников, которые переведены на различные языки. По этой причине, изучение криминального дискурса является весьма важным, так как это может помочь избежать преступников, способствовать отношениям между преступниками и тюремной власти, а также помочь нам, переводчикам, анализировать и переводить криминологические работы. В статье представлены основные проблемы перевода касающегося криминального дискурса.

Ключевые слова: криминальный, криминологические термины, криминальный жаргон, тюремное арго, дискурс, перевод