

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Timothy Frye, Director

Columbia University 420 West 118th Street, New York, NY 10027

www.harriman.columbia.edu

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A Torba of Cool: Ukrainian Slang Today

“If society doesn’t like profanities so much, why do we keep creating new ones when the old ones lose their bite?” asks author and publisher Svitlana Pyrkalo, who compiled the world’s first dictionary of Ukrainian slang in 1998. We use concepts like slang, jargon and argot as both a way of differentiating ourselves from others and as a way of belonging to a group. Slang can be a means of resistance – positioning someone as different from the establishment. It can be used for a “humorous interpretation of reality” – talking about bodily functions when polite society considers them taboo. Slang can criticize and satirize, especially in authoritarian states. Or it can be a means of signaling power, as when Ukrainian women managers tend to use more slang than those in lower positions. The *torba* (rucksack) of uses of slang places it at the heart of an important debate about the nature of language and national identity.

Traditionally, slang in Ukraine was considered part of “non-literary language”, which mostly covered swearing, local dialects and *surzhyk*, or Russian-influenced Ukrainian. There is also argot, which usually refers to the historic language of secret societies, and jargon, which covers the professional or social language of specific groups like musicians, the media or even criminals. For some purists, all “non-literary” language should be wiped from existence, but this fails to appreciate the foundations of what is modern Ukrainian. Ivan Kotlyarevsky’s epic 1798 poem *Eneida*, credited as the first modern Ukrainian literary work, was filled with the jargon of seminary students and published by a pirate publisher. In this way, the Ukrainian “standard” language had non-literary language baked into it. As Pyrkalo notes, “the norm developed at the same time as the deviation from the norm.”

The most common uses for slang stem from subjects that were or are considered taboo in polite society. Alcohol is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the biggest slang group, followed by reproductive functions and gastrointestinal terms. Ukrainian borrows heavily from other languages, including Russian, English and Yiddish. However, it is not always easy to distinguish which came first, as in fact many words seemingly adopted from Russian or Yiddish were actually Ukrainian in origin. For example, *lokh*, a popular term in Russian meaning a simpleton, comes from Ukrainian.

Despite efforts by Pyrkalo and others to document the uses of slang in the country, many groups like criminals and addicts are underrepresented in dictionaries because they often speak in Russian. In recent times, there has been a focus on finding and propagating “authentic” Ukrainian slang from the countryside and local dialects – but can it be transplanted into urban areas? There has been some diffusion, but young people in cities continue to use Russian words because Ukrainian slang is not sufficiently developed and literary Ukrainian sounds absurd in informal speech. So while the Ukrainian slang word for blackberry, *afena*, has come to refer to police officers in a decidedly local flavor (the term derives from the color of their uniforms), Russian words like *prikol* (joke or gag) have endured despite attempts to de-Russify them.

This begs the question – should one have a *proscriptive* or *descriptive* attitude toward slang – is there a duty to record how it should be spoken, or how it really is? Should Russian-influenced *surzhyk* be included in dictionaries, even slang ones? Does including them somehow validate *surzhyk* as acceptable speech? Such questions speak to the heart of a debate about how Ukrainians should approach their own language.

Some could chalk this up to the insecurity of Ukrainian speakers, or as a battle between Ukrainian and Russian. When Pyrkalo worked as a correspondent for the BBC Ukrainian service, the story that generated the most passionate debate was over the transliteration of the English term “know-how.” Should the Ukrainian text use “g” or “h” as a more authentic translation? Many people responded with demands that “know-how” should become “*no-gan*”, and the debate erupted among countless contributors.

These kinds of debates may seem ridiculous, but they are important for a number of reasons. There is a political component to slang use: Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko made a conscious decision to present herself as both more feminine and more authentic, stressing local dialects and crafting speeches specific to the areas where she campaigned. There is also the linguistic reality of the country – Russian and Ukrainian language are intertwined in the daily lives of many Ukrainians, and Pyrkalo believes that it is important to record the use of slang, “authentic” or not.

Language is constantly changing (using hippy slang like *shuzhy* would instantly date you), and one cannot invent slang to force on people – attempting to de-Russify common words like *tusovka* (get together) by making it *tusnia* have not caught on for the most part. Ukrainian still needs an urban colloquial language with which young people can identify, but Pyrkalo concludes that the language will continue to develop naturally. It is the job of academics and educated people to research the etymology of the language and track trends in its use. A word of wisdom to future speakers: Slang cannot sound like the standard equivalent – it needs to be “colorful, slightly funny, slightly foreign.”

Reported by Alex Metelitsa, M.I.A. Candidate