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PAGES OF LATVIAN HISTORICAL SLANG DICTIONARY: *DZERŠANA* ('DRINKING')

Abstract For Latvian linguists, the study of slang was not a topical matter until 1970. The literary language and dialects have always been perceived as research priority, and the non-literary language was not considered an object of serious scientific work for a long time. There was a more or less pronounced derogation of the non-literary language. Only a few enthusiasts showed scientific interest in it. Recently, research on Latvian slang has taken major steps with the publication of a dictionary *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca* (Latvian Slang Dictionary) by Ojārs Bušs and Vineta Ernstone in 2006. This study aims to describe the challenges and solutions that have arisen during the development of the unpublished *Latviešu vēsturiskā slenga vārdnīca: dzeršana* (Latvian Historical Slang Dictionary: *dzeršana* ('drinking')). The analysed linguistic material is compiled from written sources (from the 17th century onwards), speech notes (from the late 1970s onwards), and student surveys (from the second half of the 1990s onwards). Since *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca* contains mainly lexis from the last 30–60 years, the paper basically focuses on the period from the origins of Latvian slang until the Second World War.

Keywords Latvian historical slang; special slang; slang dictionary; *dzeršana*

1. Introduction

There are several reasons for the relatively late start of research into Latvian slang. Firstly, the study of dialects and literary language has always been valued and considered more important than other layers of language. Secondly, especially during Soviet times, the non-literary language was associated with an official negative attitude and even a generally undifferentiated battle against this part of the language. Probably, thanks to the studies of English slang in Soviet linguistics and efforts in other neighbouring countries, some studies on slang appeared (e.g., Bušs, 1979). It took several years for the ice to finally break in this field. Although there is a dictionary of slang in Latvian (*Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca*) by Ojārs Bušs and Vineta Ernstone (2006), some problems directly or indirectly related to slang have not yet received sufficient attention. One of the unexplored topics is the historical development and research of Latvian slang from its origins. The aim of this study is to provide an insight into the Latvian historical slang units that characterise the thematic field – 'drinking' (in Latvian – *dzeršana*). To achieve this goal, a descriptive approach is used and an analysis of an unpublished dictionary of Latvian historical slang in the thematic field – drinking – developed by Juris Baldunčiks (1950–2022) is carried out. This slang dictionary has not yet been completed, but is in the development phase. A brief description of the dictionary article is given in Chapter 4 of this paper.

2. The Need for Research on Latvian Slang

The Cambridge Dictionary defines slang as a very informal language used by particular groups of people; it is more often spoken than written and includes words that are not polite. So, these words, which belong to the level of slang, cannot be considered literary ones. The use of the term ‘slang’ in Latvian – *slengs* – was pioneered by Bušs in 1979, who used it to refer to all non-dialectal, non-literary vocabulary of the Latvian language (Bušs, 1979, pp. 68–77). In the following twenty to thirty years, the Latvian term *slengs* (slang) was also used in researches on the language of young people, and Ernstone’s (1998, pp. 32–36; 2000, pp. 23–24) studies of non-literary vocabulary also included this term. Bušs (1979) divides slang into a common and special one, where a common slang consists of the common non-literal non-dialectal elements of language, and a special slang consists of the non-literal non-dialectal lexical layers of professionally or socially differentiated groups. This study analyses special slang because it focuses on a specific thematic group – ‘drinking’ (Latvian – *dzeršana*) and looks specifically at historical slang – from the beginning of the collection of slang items to the Second World War.

Firstly, there is a need for research that would shed some light on the historical development of Latvian slang. Here it is also necessary to return to the question of the differentiation of the Latvian language into sub-systems, which has so far been treated incompletely, sometimes even with a biased ideological overlay. Sufficiently rich linguistic material needs to be gathered to be able to pinpoint the historical period when the stylistic understanding of non-literal elements of language began to form and consolidate in the consciousness of educated Latvians (this does not mean vulgarisms and the explicitly “naughty” vocabulary against which pastors already spoke in the Old Latvian period).

Secondly, there is a need to correct some of the positions in contemporary Latvian stylistics, as the conservative views of Rozenbergs have dominated this field for too long (his work in the last decades in the study of non-literary language was basically ignored). Stylistics is a subfield of linguistics in which subjective judgements are much more common than in other fields, so a system of lexical analysis that minimises subjectivism is needed. For example, Rozenbergs (2000, p. 129) says that ‘trend words’ (Latvian – *modes vārdi*) can be at different levels in relation to the norms of literary language:

1. they can be at the level of literary written language (e.g., Latvian – *cīnīties* (‘fight’), *joma* (‘sphere’), *klāsts* (‘range’), *leģenda* (‘legend’), *viennozīmīgi* (‘straightforward’));
2. they may be at the level of literary written language (e.g., Latvian – *foršs* (‘cool’ as slang for ‘very good’), *senči* (‘rents’ as slang for ‘parents’), *stilīgs* (‘vogueish’ as slang for ‘stylish’), *perfekti* (‘ace’ as slang for ‘good, correct, intelligent’));
3. they may be at low colloquial level (*učuks* (‘teach’ as slang for ‘teacher’), *vot* (‘jigs’ as slang for ‘so there’), *kruts* (‘zooly’ as slang for ‘cool’)).

It is not clear what criteria the linguist used to form the second and third groups of examples. One doesn't even have to be a stylistic expert to realise that only Latvian words *stilīgs* and *perfekti* fit into everyday speech. It is also questionable whether the words of the third group really illustrate a low colloquial level. All the words in this group, as well as *foršs* and *senči*, are included in *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca*; this leads to reflections on the stylistic division of lexis used in Latvian stylistics.

3. Difficulties and Possible Solutions in Latvian Slang Research

It would be necessary to analyse in detail a wide range of border lexis from the literary and non-literary layers, as well as non-literary lexis, and to develop a new stylistic classification. The task also involves defining the boundaries of slang. This is one of the most difficult questions in slang research. Being aware of the diversity of this linguistic layer, it is obviously necessary to look for features that allow linguistic units to be included into or excluded from slang. For example, the stylistic division of vocabulary is supposed to impose an order on those lexical layers that do not belong to the neutral lexicon, but the experience of some dictionaries makes this doubtful, since a single restrictive reference, e.g., *sarunvaloda* ('colloquial speech') can denote linguistic units with different stylistic intensity, *smuks* ('pretty'), *stripa* ('line') and *rukāt* ('swot'), *šļuka* ('shot') in *Latviešu literārās valodas vārdnīca* (LLVV; Dictionary of Latvian Literary Language); the last two words are also included in the *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca* (LVSV).

It is possible to use a stylistic shade scale (Skrebnev, 2000, p. 56), in which the neutral base lexis forms a relative zero bar and lexical items with plus and minus signs are arranged above and below it. There is a gradation in both directions, so there are also levels for lexis with a minus sign:

1. minimally coloured colloquial vocabulary, which in most cases is not at all perceived by the language users and is basically used without situational restrictions,
2. moderately coloured colloquial vocabulary, which most Latvian speakers can distinguish from neutral vocabulary without much effort, and
3. strongly coloured non-literal vocabulary, which the average statistical Latvian speaker uses only in certain situations and with certain communicants (an exception might be the communication environment of today's young people).

We can assume that slang includes all lexical items that are below the minimally marked colloquial lexicon. This is roughly the approach taken by the authors of *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca* (Bušs & Ernstone, 2006, p. 7). The same can be said about many English slang dictionaries. Of course, this scale can also be subjective, based on various factors (knowledge, upbringing and life experience, breadth of social contact, etc.).

It is necessary to study various sources of Latvian slang and their historical changes in more detail. There are many borrowings in Latvian slang. They are

often referred to as barbarisms, but the usual 21st century interpretation of this term no longer seems scientific enough, as it is largely based on insufficiently objective criteria. The division of barbarisms (initial and developmental barbarisms) by Ozols (1961; 1967, pp. 452–460) is also the view of a linguistic culture specialist who has not himself studied the mechanism of acquisition of words of foreign origin, so the reasoning of his classification does not really coincide with the actual motives and circumstances of word borrowing, as well as the prevailing ideas in research on borrowings. Perhaps this concept, specifically used in Latvian linguistics, should be gradually excluded from the study of borrowed and non-literary languages.

4. Description and Characteristics of the Lexis of the Latvian Historical Slang Dictionary

In order to find out the origins of Latvian slang in the thematic field of ‘drinking’, first it is necessary to summarise the lexis related to alcoholic beverages and their consumption found in Latvian written sources, to get acquainted with the development of the corresponding lexis in contact languages, as well as to look into the history of the production and distribution of alcoholic beverages.

The most important drinks in this group are beer, wine, and vodka (including other spirits). Wine is a very old drink, dating back thousands of years. In Latvian, the word *vīns* (‘wine’) is an ancient derivative (found in 16th century written sources), most probably from Germanic languages, where it was used as early as the 8th century (Kluge, 1999, p. 882).

Beer is also a very old drink (Dumpe, 2001). The Latvian word *alus* (‘beer’) is probably an old Germanic derivative, but other opinions have been expressed about the etymology of the word (Karulis, 2001, p. 68).

As early as in the 17th century, Latvian written sources contain both the word *vīns* (‘wine’) and the word *alus* (‘beer’) in various lexical combinations. However, beer seems to have been more popular, since it was with the word *alus* that appears in written sources as one of the first slangisms: *alus muša* (‘hard drinker’), in Latvian – ‘*dzērājs*’ (Fürecker, comp. with German *Bierfliege*).

Primitive distillation of alcohol was known in some parts of Europe probably as early as in the 11th century. In the 12th century, spirits were made in both southern and western Europe (Americana, 1992), in the 15th century, the production of different types of vodka expanded, and in the 16th century spirits spread throughout Europe. As early as in the 13th century, the Latin (*aqua vitae*, *aqua ardens*, etc.) also appeared in Middle High German *brantwīn* (from the German verb *brennen* with the meaning of ‘distilling’) (Kluge, 1999, p. 131). By the early 17th century, the word had been adopted in several Germanic languages (e.g., Low German, Dutch, English) and some other languages. In Latvian, it was first recorded in G. Mancelius’ dictionary.

The linguistic material collected by Baldunčiks (more than 600 entry words and phrases) has been compiled from written sources (from the 17th century onwards), speech recordings (from the late 1970s onwards), and student surveys (from the second half of the 1990s onwards). There are basically only three types of sources in the group of articles: 1) dictionaries, 2) fiction, 3) periodicals (mainly humorous essays, feuilletons, short reports on incidents related to drinking, legal or illegal sale of alcoholic beverages, etc., humorous dialogues). Since *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca* published in 2006 largely contains lexis from the last 30–60 years, this article mainly focuses on the period from the beginning of Latvian slang to the Second World War.

Slang terms related to drinking (drinking to get drunk) basically form four groups:

1. terms for drinks by type (*blakšūdens* (for ‘whisky’), *dzimtene* (for ‘vodka’), *konis* (for ‘cognac’), *šampis* (for ‘champagne’) etc.) or type and volume (*ampula* (for ‘a very small bottle’), *kočiņš* (for ‘a vessel of a capacity of one quarter of a litre’), *polšs* (for ‘a half litre bottle of vodka’) etc.);
2. drinking activity or process designations (*iekampt*, *ķemmēt*, *mest*, *plaut* (all Latvian slangisms for ‘to drink’), etc.);
3. designations of drunkenness (*autā*, *labā dūšā*, *pilnā*, *šarabī* (all Latvian slangisms for ‘drunk’), etc.);
4. designations of drinkers (*alkašs*, *kodējs*, *metējs*, *siņķa* (all Latvian slangisms for ‘a drunkard’), etc.)

In addition, there are other smaller subgroups, such as designations of drinking, alcohol outlets, alcohol containers, and hangovers.

As the dictionary is in the development phase, below is a small insight into the key parts of the dictionary article with explanatory notes. The current structure of the dictionary is a list of entry words (slang words and other slang language units), for which explanations in Latvian and examples of usage from various historical sources are searched and added. One example of a dictionary article is shown in Example 1 below. The example shows how *baltais* // *baltiņš* // *baltais dzidrais* – that are slang words for Latvian *degvīns* (‘vodka’) – were used in the source, the Latvian newspaper *Cīņa*.

- (1) Example of a Latvian historical slang dictionary article for designations of *degvīns* (‘vodka’)

baltais // *baltiņš* // *baltais dzidrais* – *degvīns*

[..] ceturtajā vietā izstāvēju *balto*. (Cīņa No. 202, 1877, p. 2)

[..] jānopelna vēl viens *baltiņš*. (Cīņa No. 202, 1877, p. 2)

baltais dzidrais (Cīņa No. 116, 1954, p. 4)

The example shows that the structure of the dictionary article is simple, basically offering an explanation of slangisms in Latvian literary language and examples of usage from historical sources. Phraseologisms, phrasemes and idioms (e. g. *apdzēries kā lūks* (for ‘very drunk’), *āžu dīrāšana* (for ‘vomiting’)) are also included as entry words and they have the same structure.

5. Conclusions

For a long period of time, research on Latvian slang lexis remained on the periphery of interest, as other theoretical problems had to be solved. Slang, as an unexplored part of the Latvian language, is valuable for researching because it shows a specific language layer spoken by a certain group of people under certain circumstances. Research into specialised slang materials requires a thorough collection of data. Historical slang about the thematic group ‘drinking’ reflects a specific set of linguistic units, which can be divided into groups and compiled into a dictionary, including examples and explanations of slangisms. This resource could be useful for researchers and translators in understanding the language, society, and culture of the time.

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LVSV = *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca*. Bušs, O., & Ernstone, V. (2006). *Latviešu valodas slenga vārdnīca*. V. Zvaigzne ABC.

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