

COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE IN PRISON

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ABSTRACT

Prison subculture is a group that is only found in isolation prison. In every social group as components can be distinguished: members, features and rules to ensure the identity and continuity of the duration of the group, psychosocial mechanisms created to achieve the objectives, supporting elements internal consistency group, institutions and the system of

social control, patterns of interactions, institutions and measures to regulate contact and relations with other groups, which together form a meta-language crime. A feature of prison subculture is an informal system of rules, norms and values, and is considered to be deviant subculture.

KEY WORDS

prison slang, tattoo, prison subculture, sign language

PRISON SLANG

The concept of criminal slang had found interest already in XVIIIth century. In 1867, judge K. Estraycher wrote in *Gazeta Polska*: "Judicial practice made it easier for me to explore this inaccessible for the uninitiated language. Getting to know the villains' speech is needed during judicial practice. Exploring it had frequently served me as a mean to discover a criminal. There is plenty dictionaries written for authorities; there was even a gypsy-jewish grammar used by prisoners written in German language. It was published in Frankfurt, in 1704. Language of criminals – not quite perfect – is used as a way of communication in Germany and France, therefore Security Service is organizing convents on which advices about villains' language are being given. Scholar could idly rack his brain about etymology of certain words. Their names clearly shows that they were being created by some high-class prisoners!".

Prison slang was also a subject of interest of Polish National Police during interwar. "Authors of the publication had been proving that Public Safety Service would do their best when during the investigation all technical means that nowadays, according to the newest results of

criminological knowledge, police is in possession of and that can reveal the truth of a criminal if used correctly'.¹

There are numerous dictionaries of prison slang. One of them is Klemens Stępnia's dictionary in which he gives us a definition of "grypsowanie" (a cant, secret language typical for prisoners). He presents it as a prison slang, but also – as a secret, illicit way of communication between convicts using slang and mimic alphabet, that is communication by gestures. This mimic alphabet is called 'rózaniec'² (polish for 'rosary'). Available on the market is also a book by Maciej Szaszkiewicz³, which includes an information of one of the ways to communicate called 'miganka', that is a mean of a nonverbal communication, which consist on a signs showed with the fingers of both hands or just one hand or even a part of face. It is used in situation when interlocutors can hear, but cannot see each other or simply don't want to be heard by others. Presenting letters with

¹W. Ludwikowski, H. Walczak, *Żargon mowy przestępców*, Warszawa 1923, s. 24.

²K. Stępnia, *Słownik gwar środowisk dewiacyjnych*, wyd. Zarys, Warszawa 1986, s. 36.

³M. Szaszkiewicz, *Tajemnice grypsunki*, wyd. Unikat Kraków 1997, s. 45.

one hand or a face part happens when one of the hand aren't free. In that case – a cheek can replace an line of a letter and inflated cheek – an circle or a “tummy” of a letter.

The attempt of a decomposition of prisoners' code in the mid 60s was taken by Jacek Morawki. He determined that codes of gestures and mimicry that criminals use on liberty serve as a mean of communication not only when committing a crime, but also to warn others of a threat that's ahead. And so – the trademark used in a situation of that kind is so called 'ślip', a slight squint of left eye and a glance of right eye in a direction of a nose and a sign that consist on bending right forefinger and touching a thumb with it. Among warning signs there are: repeatedly bending or pointing of finger, usually a thumb, breaking a match in fingers. Another kind of codes presented by book's author are different signs used by prisoners without their liberty: both-handed alphabet “łapki”, showing letter in the air, a kind of communication that uses grating as an equivalent of different letters, Morse code (using a thumb or knocking on the wall or radiator), passing information by ray of light or a mirror⁴. The topic of communication between prisoners was also took by Zbigniew Bożyczko, who deeply described the way of pickpockets.⁵

SIGN LANGUAGE OF CRIMINAL ENVIRONMENT

Sign language is a way of communication between the convicts, wards of reformatory, but also free people. It wasn't examined enough yet and still requires studies on this form of coded language.

So called 'finger' alphabets are nowadays an inherent element of sign language among deaf. They are older than sign language itself. They were created by people that could normally hear for their own use. First historical information dates back to XII century, when finger alphabet was created by tacit Cistercians. First one to describe

⁴J. Morawski, *Gestowe i mimiczne kody przestępców*, "Problemy Kryminalistyki" 1965, Nr 58, s.12.

⁵Z. Bożyczko, *Kradzież kieszonkowa i jej sprawca*, wyd. Praw., Warszawa 1962, s. 44.

⁶ B. Szczepankowski, *Podstawy języka migowego*, Wyd. WSiP, Warszawa 1988, s. 29.

⁷ B. Szczepankowski, *Lektorat języka migowego*, Wyd. WSiP, Warszawa 1986, s. 67.

and presented whole finger alphabet used in monasteries and then in teaching deaf people was Spanish Franciscan, Fray Melchior de Yebra.⁶

In Poland, finger alphabet was introduced in 1817 by priest Jakub Falkowski, who was a creator of the Institute of Deaf-mutes – first school for deaf. As a result of a development of sign language in many countries, also finger alphabets (which are an unbreakable part of them) managed to create some differences among them. Great Britain decided to keep XVIIth century both-handed alphabet. This English alphabet came to Poland in XXth century and until 1949 was used by scouts in a field games and in some prisons⁷.

The deaf is a group most frequently using ideographic signs of sign language. But there were some situations of using finger alphabets among other groups. In 1964-1965 there was a trial of introducing polish sign language among scouts, unfortunately – this initiative never went out of the capital. It probably happened because of scouts who were arrested for political reasons in the 40s and 50s of XXth century⁸. Analysis and comparison of dactylograms of prison's language with English alphabet confirm thesis of partly common history of these signs⁹.

THE MEANING OF TATTOOS IN PRISON SUBCULTURE

Prison tattoos are visible mainly in movies or at random passersby. They come in different sizes and shapes – starting from tattoos made by using simple method of blue shapes or paintings and finishing at truly artistic, usually colorful. And even though in Poland not too often we can see them as expanded as on Prison Break's main hero, they also deserve some of our attention because of their communicative character.

In 90s, prison tattoos were a meaningful part of hierarchy in prison life. You could not talk about them or explain their meaning while on a liberty. Nowadays, mores are much more simple, you can easily find a competent literature in this

⁸ J. Perlin, B. Szczepankowski, *Polski język migowy opis lingwistyczny*, wyd. WSiP, Warszawa 1992, s. 14.

⁹ Por. B. Szczepankowski, *Lektorat języka migowego*, wyd. WSiP, Warszawa 1986.

matter; very powerful source of knowledge in the Internet.

Reprehensible reputation of a tattoo, widely known both in Poland and many other countries in Europe, is connected with a stereotypical judging of this form of body decoration with criminal tattoos.

It is hard to precisely present when prisons' and tattoos' environments connected in a hard to separate for normal people integrity. A. Jelski writes "you can't get rid of such possibility that prison tattoo used to be identified with physical marks which were made by stigmatization through tattooing". The history of European prison tattoo is not well documented and to some extension – mysterious. There is many hypothesis on this subject which looks for a popularization the art of 'environmental' tattoo during sea expeditions of J. Cook – mostly in harbors and city centers that gathers many representatives of so-called margins of society.¹⁰

Apart from stereotypes on tattoos, undeniable seems to be an observations that the environment of prisoners both now and before willingly reaches to this kind of body decoration. Common reason of tattooing prisoners connected to criminal groups are:

- Desire to amaze closest environment both in prison and on the liberty;
- Desire to make certain marks that are a form of making contact and a method of accenting one's belonging to certain environment;
- Pressure of recent fashion of social environment;
- Projection of social satisfaction that occurs in penitentiary and on the liberty;
- Internal objection to the need of isolation;
- Desire of sexual stimulation that is fulfilled with tattoos with sexual contents;
- Desire of preserving the most important events of prisoners' life.

Tattoo is a personal belonging of a prisoner that cannot be taken away from him by an administration of penitentiaries. In view of different symbols used in prison and criminal tattoo and

their different placement, full and deep classification of their distribution is nearly impossible. One of the most accurate classification is a group of J. S. Korbiela and K. Malinowski that divided prison and criminal signs on: general signs (universal, that are used both in prison and on the liberty), signs that express one's attitude and volition (voluntary and compulsory symbols), signs that shows hierarchy or level of interference, signs that includes a specific kind of prison activity (declare membership in certain pack, determine the way of action or qualifications), signs of taking a penalty in prison (comprehensive, symbolizing amount of convictions, crests or full names of prisons in which the sentence was taken), signs of protest (political mottos, mottos against government or fate), signs that describes sexuality of a prisoner (sexual deviations, mostly erotic), but also others, connected to one's personal life, decorative or religious.¹¹

Seemingly random placement of tattoo motives are clear only to chosen prisoners. A cipher that helps them read a lot more information about the owner of the tattoo. It means, that tattoo of a prisoner or a criminal is one of the last kinds of tattoo in which strict rules have been preserved. To counteract unusual results of prison subculture, Central Facility of Prison Service Training in Kalisz Poland has organized a symposium. In after-symposium material called 'Prison subculture in detention center and penitentiaries' it was underlined that the essential element of prison subculture is its language, system that for strangers and the uninitiated is incomprehensible. Next to the language, a specific way of communication between convicts that has a conspiracy function is trespassing information through gestures and mimicry.¹²

The examination of this language serves to understanding the mean of communication between prisoners and using this knowledge in deciphering criminal environments. The issue of

¹¹ A. Malinowski, *Tajemnice tatuażu i magia kolczyków*, wyd. Bryza, W-wa 2005, s. 54.

¹² Por. Materiały, referaty, sprawozdania z Konferencji nt.: Podkultura więzienna w aresztach śledczych i zakładach karnych, Warszawa 1994.

¹⁰ S. Przybyliński, *DZIARA*..., s.67.

big cognitive and practical advantages that can become a subjects of interesting researches is a way of communication between criminals. To improve action of judging system very important is the research that leads to its correct reading and thanks to that – makes it easier to understand for people from outside this group, especially justice authorities, prosecutors and policeman.

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