

## Challenges in understanding media discourse on drugs: use of slang

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***Abstract:** The primary goal of every news media is to produce such news items that would retain the interest of the regular readers and attract the attention of new and greater audiences. In order to achieve this goal they occasionally resort to the use of slang. Slang, however, might be difficult to understand especially for a non-native speaker of the language. That is why its understanding can be challenging and sometimes reference to dictionaries might be necessary for the meaning to be grasped. The aim of this paper is to analyze the slang terms referring to different types of drugs which occur in the discourse of the Bulgarian and the British media.*

***Key words:** drugs, media discourse, slang.*

### Introduction

Life is a gift that every human being receives only once. From there, it becomes everyone's personal duty to preserve it and to create it. On being asked what the most important thing in life is, almost every person would probably answer that for him/her and their close ones it is to be alive and well. Yet, everyday media present news of innocent human lives lost in various unfortunate circumstances: road accidents, floods or other natural disasters, cases of murder, terrorist attacks or dreadful diseases. Some of these examples show that there are cases when people are exposed to dangers over which they have no control. At other times, the deliberate attempts of certain individuals become the cause for a number of deaths. Still, a more frightful fact is the existence of another group of people who tend to put at risk their own lives through becoming involved in the vicious practice of drug abuse.

Drugs are a serious global problem and a solution to it has been sought for a very long time but is seemingly nowhere near to be found. On the contrary, the drug market is rapidly expanding as new and even more dangerous substances are introduced every year. Drug abuse is affecting not only those who start using drugs, but also many families and the community in a certain way. It is a cause for many illnesses and plays a major role in a number of social problems such as violence, child abuse, drugged driving and other criminal acts. What is worse, typically the group of the population that gets most easily influenced by the use of drugs is that of adolescents. Since this is a matter of great social

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significance, governments are constantly initiating new reforms to their drug policies, and together with many organizations and health centres, they work on finding the optimum solution to prevent the production, trafficking and abuse of drugs.

This paper is part of a bigger study on the presence of drugs in the Bulgarian and British media discourse. The object of the research are articles discussing drugs published in different Bulgarian and British newspapers.

The focus of the paper is on slang as it is among the devices that add more colour to the language used in the articles while depicting the ways of thinking about drugs and drug use. Such an analysis will also show the interference between the two languages as a result of the ongoing process of globalization.

The two methods used in the paper are Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Content Analysis. Van Dijk (2001: 352) defines critical discourse analysis as a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. While CDA could be defined as a prescriptive method of analysis, content analysis, which is frequently defined as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson 1952: 18), is more of a descriptive method which can be used as the basis for CDA and nicely complements it.

The corpus for the paper is extracted from the electronic versions of four newspapers: Standart /St/ and Dnevnik /Dn/ from Bulgaria and The Independent /In/ and The Daily Mail /DM/ from the UK. The number of articles selected manually is 117 from Standart, 98 from Dnevnik, 108 from The Independent and 109 from The Daily Mail or 432 articles in total.

All four newspapers belong to the serious press and are chosen as a source of media materials for this study as the information they provide is more reliable compared to that in the tabloid newspapers. Therefore, they manage to produce a “picture” of reality through articles discussing drugs and drug use not only as a personal, social and health issue, but also as a political and socio-economic one.

## **Analysis**

Slang is a type of highly informal language which consists of words or phrases that are used only by a particular group of people. In contrast to Standard language which is taught and adopted by the masses because of being the socially accepted form, the use of slang involves a great element of personal choice and as a result reveals a lot about the psychological, social, racial, religious, political or other beliefs of the group of people who use it (see Kenwood 1969). At the same time, this type of informal language creates a sense of identity among group members

and serves as a way of concealing their thoughts from outsiders.

What is common for slang words and phrases is that many of them have short lives and are being replaced by new ones the moment they disappear, but there is also the opposite case when certain slang terms become so widely used that they eventually enter standard English. *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (2006) provides a list of thirteen reasons why slang is employed:

- 1) In sheer high spirits; 'just for the fun of the thing';
- 2) As an exercise in wit or humour;
- 3) To be 'different' – to be novel;
- 4) To be picturesque;
- 5) To be startling; to startle;
- 6) To escape from cliché's and long-windedness;
- 7) To enrich the language;
- 8) To give solidity and concreteness to the abstract and the idealistic, and nearness to the distant scene or object;
- 9) To reduce solemnity, pain, tragedy;
- 10) To put oneself in tune with one's company;
- 11) To induce friendliness or intimacy;
- 12) To show that one belongs to a certain school, trade or profession, intellectual set or social class. In short to be in the fashion – or to prove that someone else isn't;
- 13) To be secret – not understood by those around one.

The term slang is often inaccurately used as a synonym of colloquial speech and jargon when there is actually a substantial difference between the three. Colloquial speech is a type of informal language used and understood by everybody which consists of different contractions and abbreviated utterances and may or may not include slang in itself. The distinction between slang and jargon, on the other hand, is that jargon is the specialized language used by the people of a particular profession, such as medical jargon or legal jargon while slang is associated with teenagers, criminals, immigrants, drug addicts, etc. and is often considered a language of vulgar nature used by disreputable people. Journalists often make use of slang, colloquial phrases and other colourful lexis in order to enrich their language, to add some new shades of meaning and make descriptions more striking and vivid. Such words and expressions are a good way to attract readers as long as they are used within the limits of journalistic correctness.

The drug slang which is of interest to the present study is abundant in terms referring to the various drug types and to drug users and continues to be enriched with new ones every day. At the same time, a comparison of the slang terms used in the Bulgarian and the British newspapers would be able to show to what extent the Bulgarian language uses English borrowings as a result of the globalization of language and transfer of information.

The first group of slang terms consists of various **nouns** used in reference to marijuana:

- [1] Palin said *weed* was legal and not a big deal when she was growing up /sh/ (DM/ 20.11.2015);
- [2] Двама ученици бяха заловени от полицаи преди да се напушат с *трева* (Two students were caught by police officers before getting high on weed – St/ 4.11.2015);
- [3] More than 20 pounds of *pot* in the gift boxes and hidden in a spare tire were uncovered, according to authorities /sh/ (DM/ 4.12.2015);
- [4] През септември

музикантът основа и собствено списание за марихуана, *Mary Jane* (In September, the musician also launched his own magazine on marijuana, *Mary Jane* – Dn/ 11.11.2015); [5] ‘*Skunk*’ cannabis can cause significant brain damage /h/ (In/27.11.2015); [6] Woman told dispatcher her son was high on ‘*spice*’ – a term that refers to synthetic drugs /sh/ (DM/ 23.11.2015); [7] Изследванията показват, че в състава ѝ влизат смес от трева и психотропни химически вещества със силно действащ характер от типа “*Снайтс*” (Analyses showed that its content included a mixture of weed and psychotropic chemical substances with strong effect from the *Spice* type – St/ 26.09.2015); [8] Just HALF a joint of cannabis causes psychosis-like effects in healthy people that’s similar to schizophrenia, say experts /h/ (DM/3.12.2015); [9] В най-лошите си периоди трябваше да пуша по един *джойнт* всяка сутрин само за да мога да функционирам нормално (In my worst periods I had to smoke a joint every morning just to be able to function normally – Dn/ 21.09.2015); [10] No doubt, too, a good number are enjoying a *big old spliff*, which, since last month, is perfectly legal (In/ 27.11.2015)

The slang terms *weed* and the Bulgarian *трева* (‘grass’) are among the most common references to marijuana. The meaning of the two terms, however, is not the same – when we say ‘weed’ we usually mean something that is seen as a nuisance or garbage that we want to get rid of, while ‘grass’ is a more generic term that is likely to be associated with the colour green and something that is nourishing and fresh. The use of the lexeme ‘weed’ in the context of a political issue such as the one on the legislation of marijuana may suggest either that the term has already entered the standard English, or that it was intentionally used by journalists in order to add some more colour to their language.

Then, the slang term *skunk* which is frequently used on its own or *skunk cannabis* as it occurs in the present case refers to a different and much more potent variety of marijuana which is said to produce strong psychosis-like effects due to higher levels of some of the main active ingredients. Another article refers to the same type of marijuana as *skunk weed*: [11] [...] the real problem we have instead is the increasing use of strong cannabis, such as skunk weed, which can cause very severe psychotic reactions (In/ 30.11.2015). In this instance, journalists chose to put an emphasis on the popularity and potency of skunk weed as a means of attracting public attention and raise their awareness.

The term *pot* which occurs in example [3] is another synonym for marijuana that was formed thorough shortening of the Spanish word ‘potiguaya’ which comes from ‘potación de guaya’ – a wine or brandy in which marijuana buds were soaked in order to extract their flavour. The literal translation of this phrase means ‘the drink of grief’ (Dictionary.com). One more reference to the same drug is *Mary Jane*, yet this time it is used as the name of a magazine dedicated to discussing marijuana and all topics related to it, not to the drug itself.

Two of the examples mention another type of drug referred to as *spice* and its

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\* The term ‘grass’ is used as a slang for marijuana in English as well, yet, no such use appeared in the present corpus.

borrowing into Bulgarian ‘спайс’. As noted in [6] this is a synthetic type of drug and consists of a mixture of herbs and shredded plant material sprayed with a synthetic compound similar to tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). It is also known as ‘fake weed’, ‘Black Mamba’ or ‘synthetic marijuana’ but its effects are often very different and much stronger than these of marijuana.

Another example mentions the street names of three different sorts of marijuana: [12] A couple of tattooed girls in their twenties check out the stock as we stick our noses into jars of *Blue Dream*, *Maui Wauai* and *Purple Gorilla*, priced around \$15 (£10) a gram (In./ 27.11.2015). *Blue Dream* is one of the best preferred strains of marijuana due to the effects it produces and this is probably where its name originates from for when the colour blue appears in a dream it is associated with peacefulness, tranquility and infiniteness. The street name *Maui Wauai* (also spelled Maui Wowie/Wawie/Wowee) comes from the name of the island Maui where this sort of marijuana is cultivated and the exclamation ‘wow’ which expresses astonishment. The last type of marijuana got the interesting name *Purple Gorilla* from the violet colour of its oversized buds.

Since marijuana is a drug which is smoked, there are also terms like *joint*, its equivalent Bulgarian borrowing ‘джойнт’, and *spliff*, all of which stand for marijuana cigarettes. Another similar term that does not appear in any of the articles is ‘blunt’. However, there are some differences between these three types of marijuana cigarettes – both joints and blunts contain only cannabis, but the latter uses tobacco paper which can be distinguished by the thicker weight and dark brown colour, while joints are rolled with lighter and slightly transparent papers. Spliffs, on the other hand, are a mixture of tobacco and cannabis which are rolled in the same paper as joints but also often have a paper filter called a crutch (Leafly.com).

The next group of articles contains examples of different **street names** that some drugs are given based on the various forms and methods through which they can be consumed:

[13] You’re about to snort *coke* on the side of the road?’ Abts-Olsen asks the driver who replies, ‘no!’ (DM/ 6.12.2015); [14] Ирландия разреши *коката* и хероина /h/ (Ireland decriminalized coke and heroin - St/ 4.11.2015); [15] EXCLUSIVE: Smoking ‘*meth* or *crack*’ at lunchtime on a New York subway car – scene which horrified a mother and made passengers flee car because of stench /h/ (DM/ 24.11.2015); [16] Drug dealers selling fake urine kits and *ice* as a PACKAGE DEAL to help users cheat narcotics tests at work /h/ (DM/ 24.11.2015); [17] I had taken other drugs in the past like *speed*, ecstasy and *acid* (DM/ 3.12.2015); [18] *Legal highs: Poppers* should not be banned, MPs say /h/ (In/ 23.10.2015); [19] 16-годишна в болница заради “*чай*” за пушене /h/ (16-year-old girl in hospital because of “tea” for smoking – St/30.11.2015); [20] Пред лекарите отровените тийнейджъри споделят, че са пушили така наречената “*билка*” (The poisoned teenagers share with the doctors that they had smoked the so called “herb” – St/ 28.11.2015)

The most commonly used term in reference to the drug cocaine in its powder form is the shortened and simpler street name *coke*, as well as the Bulgarian equivalent *кока*. The British example provided above shows the use of the lexeme *coke* in its occurrence in the speech of a police officer. The choice of journalists to include direct speech in their writings is a commonly used technique and it is probably due to their desire to add more colour to the language used and at the same time to give more credibility to the story presented in the article. When cocaine is in the form of crystalline lumps of concentrated cocaine it is referred to by the term ‘crack cocaine’ or merely *crack*, as it could be found in [15], with the name coming from the loud cracking noise that is produced when it is heated in water to be smoked. Some other names cocaine is given are ‘flake’, ‘chalk’, ‘snow’ and ‘sugar’ for its powder form, and ‘crystal’ or ‘rock’ for its solid one.

The drug methamphetamine is often called by the shortened name *meth*, while when found in its crystal form it is referred to by the slang term *ice*. The use of capital letters in the headline where *ice* is mentioned aims to place emphasis on the fact that drug dealers are not only stimulating workers to use the drug, but they also offer them a way to manipulate test results and as both of these actions are wrong and harmful the presentation of such information would inevitably provoke shock and disturb readers. The slang term *speed*, on the other hand, is slightly misleading as it can refer to different types of drugs – it can be used either as a street name for methamphetamine which is produced and sold illegally, or for amphetamines which are in pill form but are crushed in order to be snorted. The origin of the term comes from the effect of the drugs in speeding up the workings of the brain. The other slang term *acid* also mentioned in [17] refers to the drug LSD.

*Poppers* is another slang term mentioned in one of the British articles used for a group of chemicals called alkyl nitrates that are usually found in the form of liquid in small brown bottles and inhaled for recreational purposes and sometimes for the purpose of enhancing sexual experiences. As the caption in [18] suggests they fall into the category of drugs called *legal highs* – a new term that refers to new psychoactive substances (NPS) which are designed to imitate the effects of drugs such as cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy. Although they are called ‘legal’ as they are not restricted by drug control legislation, at least for some time after they are created, they are still as dangerous as illegal drugs, if not more due to the chemicals used in their preparation.

Other two slang terms which appear in the discourse of Bulgarian newspapers are *чай* (‘tea’) and *билка* (‘herb’). They are used to refer to a new type of drugs containing a mixture of herbs which are sprayed with synthetic substances and smoked like marijuana cigarettes. However, their effect is much stronger and often causes aggressive behaviour. These types of drugs are often discussed in the media because as could be seen by the provided examples they are

most popular among students and teenagers and such negative tendencies are considered newsworthy.

Some more examples of interesting street names given to the different types of drugs are included in the following group:

[21] And taking party drugs (pills, *pingas*, *googs*) seems like a fun option and you don't think anything life changing could happen to you,' he posted at the weekend (DM/ 23.11.2015); [22] Cheap heroin alternative *Krokodil* is widespread in the ex-USSR, risking HIV spread and record increases for the last decade have been recorded in Bulgaria, Armenia, Belarus and Turkey (DM/ 26.11.2015); [23] Family pay tribute to son, 20, who was killed by his bandmate who stabbed him 32 times while high on psychedelic drug called *Mr Happy* /h/ (DM/ 22.11.2015)

The terms *pingas* and *googs* mentioned in [21] are street names for the drug ecstasy which are most commonly used in Australia and as the example suggests they are not as harmless as they seem. Another article refers to *Krokodil* – a common slang term used for the drug desomorphine which is most popular in Russia and as is pointed out in [22] also in some of the ex-USSR countries. The name *krokodil* (from the Russian word for 'crocodile') is given to the drug for its effect of causing skin and muscle to rot from inside, leaving dark patches resembling the skin of a crocodile. It is also commonly known as 'Russian Magic', 'Poor Man's Heroin', and 'zombie drug'. One of the British newspapers also refers to a drug called *Mr Happy*, however, as we can understand from the headline, its use does not bring any positive consequences. It is a new type of psychedelic drug also called 'smiles' and its name probably comes from the smiling faces printed on the packages in which the drug is sold.

Apart from the street names given to drugs, there are some articles which contain **slang nouns referring to drug addicts** as well:

[24] "These are not crazy people. These are not *potheads*," she said (In/ 16.11.2015); [25] But they are happy with Ms Dunant who, cheerfully describing herself as an '*old stoner*', confessed to having broken the law of England for 40 years (amazing as it may seem, possession of cannabis is still technically illegal), having been 'using' cannabis throughout her adult life. (DM/ 6.12.2015); [26] He thinks drugs services are for '*smackheads*' (i.e. people on heroin), not him (DM/ 21.11.2015)

The lexeme *pothead* is used as a street name given to people who habitually smoke marijuana. Also, the term *stoner*, or as it occurs in [25] *old stoner*, is used for regular users of the same drug. The term *smackhead*, as described in the example, occurs as a reference to those who have a severe addiction to heroin. It originates from the word 'smack' which derives from the Yiddish 'schmeck' (a word for sniff) and 'head' which stands for the drug user. Since it is considered highly inappropriate for journalists to use such a derogatory language in their work, in all three examples they have found a way to include these terms through reproducing the speech of some of the participants in the described events.

Other publications show use of **verbs connected with the act of taking a drug or the wearing off of its effects:**

[27] Confessions of a white-collar heroin addict: Meet the corporate high flyer who manages to hold down \$100,000-a-year job while *shooting up* the deadly drug every day /h/ (DM/2.12.2015); [28] ‘By the end of the meeting I was *coming down* – when you’re *coming down* really hard from heroin it’s almost impossible to keep your eyes open (DM/2.12.2015); [29] And in 2013 a video of a 22-month-old child in Centralia being *fed* marijuana from a bong was handed into police (DM/ 3.12.2015)

The first two examples in this group are taken from the same article and are connected to the drug heroin. The phrasal verb *shoot up* present in the headline describes the act of injecting a drug with a hypodermic syringe and the latter *coming down* is a slang term used with the meaning “to experience diminishing effects of a recreational or hallucinogenic drug” (see thefreedictionary.com). Then, in [29] we see an interesting use of the verb *feed* which is usually used when we refer to eating food. However, here *feed* is used as a synonym of ‘smoke’ for bongs are devices used for smoking marijuana, tobacco or other herbal substances.

This last group consists of **phrases connected to drugs and drug use** which occurred in some of the materials:

[30] You can never re-create that initial *buzz* you get from your *first hit*, so you’re forever *chasing the dragon* (In/ 28.10.2015); [31] The cell phone footage showed the young boy *taking a hit* from the top of the device while his 24-year-old mother, Rachelle Braaten laughed uproariously with a group of adults (DM/ 3.12.2015); [32] Pricey doses of between \$30-35 *per hit* make smoking wasteful for addicts who get a *stronger high* by injecting straight into their veins, especially considering that the average user will need four or more a day (DM/ 29.11.2015); [33] Britain is the largest market for the *designer drugs* in the EU with 670,000 people aged 15 to 24 experimenting with them, according to a study by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in 2013, with experts warning they pose a major health risk despite the label of “*legal highs*” (In/ 23.10.2015); [34] *Дизайнерска дрога* вкара двама затворници от Централния софийски затвор в “Пирогов” (Designer drug put two prisoners from Sofia Central Prison in “Pirogov” – Dn/ 7.11.2015); [35] Знаех, че не искам да се връщам пак към пристрастяването към алкохола и *друсарските купони*, но също така бях наясно, че нямам силата да откажа и да кажа “не” (I knew I didn’t want to go back to the addiction to alcohol and the stoner parties but I was also aware that I didn’t have the power to refuse and say “no” – St/ 3.09.2015)

If one is not familiar with the phrase *chasing the dragon* they would probably never be able to guess its meaning. In this particular case this phrase is used with a metaphorical meaning that refers to the pursuit of the ultimate high when using a particular drug. Otherwise, *chasing the dragon* is most commonly used to refer to the drug heroin and it comes from a method for smoking heroin where the drug is heated and the vapours which are ‘the dragon’ are ‘chased’ to be inhaled. What is meant by the term *buzz* used in the same example is the

sense of thrill and the phrase *first hit* stands for first dose of a certain drug. The noun *hit* is also used in the phrases *taking a hit* and *per hit* which occur in [31] and [32]. Another phrase that appears in the latter example is a *stronger high* where the noun ‘high’ is used for the intoxicating effect induced by drugs. The same lexeme is also often used as an adjective to describe the sense of being intoxicated.

A considerably new term that has been frequently mentioned by the media in the last few years is *designer drugs*, and its Bulgarian equivalent *дизайнерска дрога*. These are a type of drugs that belong to the earlier discussed ‘legal highs’, i.e. drugs that are designed to mimic the pharmacological effects of other drugs but are not classified as illegal and are not detected in drug tests.

Both the British and the Bulgarian example emphasize the harmful effects and negative health consequences caused by these drugs – in the first case this is stated explicitly, while in the second it is done through placing designer drugs in the role of actors and prisoners in that of victims and patients.

The slang phrase *stoner parties* used in the last example from this group suggests that nowadays there are such parties where people gather up to “get stoned”, i.e. to take some type of drugs. What should also be noted is that here drugs are mentioned in the same context with alcohol which despite of falling into the category of legal substances has proven to be no less addictive and harmful than illegal substances.

Based on the analysis above, it can be concluded that British journalists tend to use slang terms and phrases a lot more often to enrich the language with some more rare names of the drugs and to make articles more informative than the Bulgarian ones. Just as a comparison to the British media materials, looking at the entries provided on the web site of The MacMillan Dictionary in its section “Relating to using illegal drugs – synonyms or related words”, one can count around forty entries most of which are quite familiar and established in their use, while the analysis of only 200 articles from the British media compiled over a period of three-four months shows greater variety of lexemes used in relation to drugs – a fact which only speaks of the intensity in use, spread and pervasiveness of the drug lexis.

At the same time, by using this specific language of the street, British journalists make their articles both more intriguing and readable: the slang would provoke the interest of those who are not so informed on the subject as well as make the articles more addict-friendly thus adding to the general audience those who have used and suffered from the effects of these substances. In addition, using slang appeals more to the younger audience, as slang tones down the high-strung style of the serious press and makes it more understandable.

The Bulgarian examples, on the other hand, show that many of the terms used

in English, such as спайс ('spice'), джойнт ('joint'), кока ('coke') have entered and established their use in the Bulgarian media as well. It can be stated that this kind of colloquialization would also appeal to the younger generation who are more prone to using borrowings mostly influenced by the Internet and globalization in general.

Last but not least, the use of slang also contributes to the effectiveness of the information presented on the pages of the serious press as the impression created on the readers is stronger.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the corpus revealed extensive presence of **slang terms and phrases** used by journalists in order to enrich the language of their articles and to make them more intriguing, understandable and appealing to younger audiences. Among the most commonly mentioned slang terms in these articles were the **various nouns used in reference to the different types of drugs**. Their street names are typically created based on associations with the form in which the particular drug is consumed or the effects that it produces, but there are also some which were formed through a simple shortening of the original name of the drug.

Apart from the slang terms that are known by the majority of readers, some of the articles mentioned street names the origin of which was hard to find as they were rarely used and are popular only in certain regions like Australia. Other publications contained **slang nouns referring to drug addicts, verbs connected with the actual act of taking drugs** or the wearing of the effects and some additional **slang phrases used in reference to drugs and drug use**.

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