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Names of geometric shapes in Polish criminal slang: preliminary observations

Słowa kluczowe: figury geometryczne, polska gwara przestępcza, gwara więzienna, metafora

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Introduction

The article aims to explore the use of names of geometric shapes in Polish criminal slang. As showcased in previous studies, the names of geometric shapes are used beyond the original mathematical context in everyday language. Therefore, it might be expected that the names of geometric shapes are used in criminal slang as well. To check if these terms indeed occur in Polish criminal slang, an analysis of two dictionaries of Polish criminal slang is carried out. The study is meant to show if the names of geometric shapes are present in Polish criminal slang, and if this is the case, what names of shapes are used and what meanings they have. Since criminal slang is a means of clandestine communication known for the creativity of its users, the analysis is expected to bring examples of the use of names of geometric shapes non-existent in other varieties of Polish.

Characteristics of criminal slang

Criminal slang is a specific type of slang used by criminals, in particular prison inmates. The features of slang, such as being a sign of rebellion and serving the function of social isolation mentioned by Szymańska (2013), are even more salient in the case of prison slang. Since prisoners wish to communicate in a way which would be incomprehensible to prison wardens, innovation resulting from creativity is an important aspect of prison slang. As a result, unusual meanings are attributed to already-existent words or new terms are created.

The negation of a general, official norm equals the necessity to create a new system of rules and values to which the individuals need to stick in order not to get rejected. In this aspect, criminal slang is a type of subculture language. In subculture communication, the identificational function plays a major role as it helps to distinguish members from non-members of a given group, as Satkiewicz (1994: 12–13) observes. In the case of prisoners, the rules one has to follow are a part of the “second life”, the against-the-norm existence typical of prison inmates, which gives the prisoners the feeling of belonging and helps them to keep their self-esteem. The general rule is a complete lack or a very low level of respect for social norms functioning in the general society, as pointed out by Szymanowska (2003: 243–244). Satkiewicz (1994: 13) adds that in prison slang, one may use words having a magical function, which is attributed, among others, to the symbolic value of shapes. Shapes are present in art, including geometrical tattoos where they have a clear connotation: a triangle represents the number three, the passing time or the Holy Trinity, the human body, mind and spirituality; a circle symbolises infinity and unity, while a square is associated with stability and it may represent the four seasons or parts of the world (eTatuator.pl). The rich symbolism of shapes can be found in numerous sources, e.g., in the dictionary of symbols by Kopalinski (2019) or the dictionary of Biblical images and symbols by Lurker (1989).

As observed by Oryńska (1991: 81), the particularities of the language of certain social groups are noticeable in its lexis. Slang as a means of communication is different from professional jargon as it is a complex microsystem that caters to the needs of its speakers by providing a separate lexical system for dealing with the reality in which they function. The researcher claims that a significant feature of slang, including prison slang, is a notably higher percentage of nouns than in standard spoken and written language (Oryńska 1991: 83). This can mean that in the case of prison slang, the use of nouns is even more evident because of the character of the place, the people involved (wardens, other inmates, etc.), the penitentiary itself, and the objects found there as well as a list of the crimes committed and items related to them (money, tools, etc.). In brief, prison slang contains terms used to describe the prison reality.

Use of names of geometric shapes in non-scientific contexts

The use of the names of geometric shapes in non-scientific contexts and phraseology, as well as the use of their names in Polish slang in general, is an object of other studies (Karczewska 2023; Karczewska n.d.). However, the focus on criminal slang as a prototypical type of slang can be explained by the fact that the clandestine nature of this communication system is intriguing. Therefore, a high level of creativity and innovation is expected. If possible, an explanation of the reason why a given shape has particular slang meanings is presented. New meanings attributed to already existent geometric terms through metaphor and metonymy are an example of neosemantisms, one of the three categories of neologisms indicated by Buttler (1962: 241). According to Zabawa (2017: 94) and other researchers, neosemantisms are words or terms that have acquired new meanings. Pastuchowa (2008: 107) observes that

in the process of new meaning attribution through metaphor and metonymy, three stages can be identified, namely the stage of creativity, when a word is used in a metaphorical meaning, the stage of imitation, when a metaphor is used consciously, and the stage in which the relation between the basic and the extended meaning is disrupted. The role of metaphor in everyday communication was thoroughly explained in the study by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and analysed on numerous examples in various languages and their varieties. Metaphors are frequently used in Polish criminal slang as well, which confirms the observations by Ułaszyn (1951) mentioned in the study by Sowińska (2013: 109) that the language of thieves abounds in metaphors.

It is important to realise that while shapes are notions precisely defined in geometry, their names function in language within non-scientific contexts which are based on certain connotations that were attributed by the speakers of the language. Scientific knowledge is then juxtaposed with common knowledge in which the pragmatic approach prevails over the theoretical one, as Bartmiński (2007: 35) claims. Bartmiński (2003: 63) further explains that the usage of language depends on one's system of values and perception of the world. By definition, the point of view of criminals and their system of values is expected to differ from the perspective of the entire society. Therefore, a new usage of language is expected, and by the new usage, one can mean the creation of new lexemes, their use in new contexts or with new meanings. The idea behind the unusual language use is the intention to create a secret code incomprehensible to individuals from the outside. Therefore, it might be difficult if not impossible to decode all the meanings involved. Still, an attempt will be made to analyse the use of names of geometric shapes in Polish criminal slang.

Methodology of the analysis

The study aims to check if the names of geometric shapes are used in Polish criminal slang and what meanings are attributed to them. The study is preliminary in its character, so the main aim is to analyse available printed sources on criminal slang lexis in order to have a general insight into the use of names of geometric shapes in Polish criminal slang. As names of shapes occur not only in their primary context, i.e. scientific discourse, but also in everyday language to refer to various referents of perceived resemblance to the prototype shape, their use is expected in Polish criminal slang as well.

The first part of the study is a search for the names of geometric shapes among the entries registered in the selected dictionaries. Several names of geometric shapes and solids were taken into account: *koło/kółko* 'circle/disk', *kwadrat* 'square', *trójkąt* 'triangle', *prostokąt* 'rectangle', *trapez* 'trapezium', *kula* 'ball', *romb* 'rhombus', *stożek* 'cone', *sześcian* 'cube' and *walec* 'cylinder'. It is to be checked which of these names of shapes are registered in the dictionaries of Polish criminal slang. The second part of the study is an analysis of the meanings of the names of geometric shapes registered by the dictionaries mentioned. The last part of the study is an attempt to understand through which mechanisms non-scientific meanings were attributed to the names of shapes.

Research material

The analysis is based on two dictionaries of Polish criminal slang: *Słownik tajemnych gwar przestępczych* [Eng. *Dictionary of clandestine criminal slang*] edited by Klemens Stępniań and Zbigniew Podgórzec (1993), hereinafter referred to as *STGP*, as well as *Słownik gwar przestępczych* [Eng. *Dictionary of criminal slang*] edited by Klemens Stępniań and Zbigniew Podgórzec (2013), hereinafter referred to as *SGP*. They seem to be the only Polish dictionaries of criminal slang available. As both dictionaries were edited by the same scholars and they refer to the same phenomenon, i.e. Polish criminal slang, numerous entries are repeated in both dictionaries. Still, the twenty years which separate the publication of the two dictionaries may have allowed the editors to revise the first dictionary and include new entries in the more recent one. The fact that the dictionaries were published more than thirty and ten years ago, respectively, can mean that the entries registered might be outdated. In addition, as Szymański (2013: 108) observes, when a given slang item gets registered in a dictionary, it loses its slang character as it becomes known to speakers from the outside of the original group using it. Nevertheless, for the present preliminary analysis, the dictionaries were selected as a source of knowledge on the use of names of geometric shapes in Polish criminal slang as the most comprehensive publications on this variety of Polish.

Searching for new meanings of names of geometric shapes in the slang of criminal groups

Upon the search for the names of geometric shapes in the dictionaries, it was stated that only four of them, namely *koło/kółko* 'circle/disk', *kwadrat* 'square', *trójkąt* 'triangle' and *kula* 'ball' were registered by the dictionaries in question. In the following part of the paper, the entries will be analysed in the same order. The meanings of each of the names of shapes will be discussed with the aim to trace, if possible, the way in which the new meanings were attributed to the names of geometric shapes.

1) *Koło/kółko* 'circle', 'disk'/ 'small circle', 'small disk'

The first name of the geometric shape to analyse is *koło* 'circle', 'disk' and its diminutive form *kółko*. *Koło* is a polysemous word in Polish with eleven definitions provided by the dictionary of Polish (*Słownik języka polskiego PWN*). Among these definitions, there is a scientific definition that describes *koło* as a part of a plane bounded by a circle.¹

It has to be explained that the Polish noun *koło* refers to the shape of a circle or disk, but it also has the meaning of the 'wheel'. Obviously, the polysemy of the word is due to the shape of the wheel, which is circular. In the dictionaries of prison slang, the noun *koło* and its diminutive *kółko* have several definitions, all of which will be discussed.

The first meaning of the name of shape, according to *STGP* and *SGP*, is *pojazd mechaniczny* 'motor vehicle'. It is present also in expressions such as *cztery kółka*, literally

¹ All translations of the definitions are done by the author of the paper.

'four wheels', which refers to a car, or *dwa kółka* 'two wheels', referring to a motorcycle or a bicycle. In this case, the *pars pro toto* synecdoche is used: a part of the car stands for the entire vehicle. In addition, the dictionaries register the expression *z kółka*, literally 'from a wheel' meaning 'by wheel, by car' which can be associated with *z buta* 'from a shoe' meaning '(to go somewhere) on foot'. The dictionaries register also *na kółku/na kółkach* 'on a wheel/wheels' referring to pickpocketing performed in urban means of transport.

The second meaning of *koło/kółko* is *kierownica* 'a steering wheel', which is typical not only of criminal slang but also of informal Polish. It is present in the expression *usiąść za kółkiem* 'to sit behind a wheel', i.e. 'to sit behind a steering wheel'. In this case, the meaning of the steering wheel is literal.

The third meaning of *koło/kółko* refers to the act of stealing a motor vehicle, usually a car. One can *chodzić na koła/kółka*, literally 'to go picking wheels' just like other people go fishing or picking mushrooms. As the case of metonymy, *koła/kółka* can also indicate a thief stealing cars (the name of the action is replaced with the person performing the action). In addition, *koło/kółko* is used to refer to a driving licence, which shows that different referents related to the car can be indicated with the name of this geometric shape.

A car-related metaphor is present in the expression *leżeć do góry kołami*, literally 'to lie with the wheels up' defined as 'to sleep, to relax, by extension – to be lazy'. The meaning is based on the image of a car being upside down, so unable to move, while human limbs are compared to wheels due to their function as both wheels and limbs are used to move around.

Apart from the car-related definitions mentioned above, the noun *koło/kółko* is used in the sense of 'a group of thieves' which can be rendered as a *circle of thieves* in which a circle has the standard meaning of 'a group of people with family, work, or social connections' (*Cambridge Dictionary*). The criminal aspect of these "work connections" is present in the meaning described. The idea of the circle representing a group of people, which is present in standard language as well, may be connected with the fact that when meeting, people often sit next to each other in the form of a circle which stems from the action of sitting *around* a fire. Moreover, the circular shape shows the equality of the people meeting.

The dictionaries provide further examples of the use of this name of shape in Polish criminal slang. The similarity of the shape of a given object and a circle is noticeable when *koło/kółko* refers to a ring, a marriage ring or a signet ring. The objects mentioned indeed have the shape of a circle, so the attribution of the name of the shape to the objects of this shape is a case of metonymy. The following meaning of *koło/kółko* 'bread' (i.e. 'a loaf of bread') is also due to its circular shape, as in Poland some loaves of bread are round. In addition, metonymy might explain why a diamond can also be referred to as *koło/kółko*. One might wonder why it is just diamonds and no other gems as most of them are circular. First, diamonds are the most valuable gems being an object of theft, and second, it is not excluded that in the future, the meaning of the term will get extended. It has to be added that according to the dictionaries, the name of the shape is used for those diamonds which serve as tools for cutting glass.

The same mental operation is activated when the term *koło/kółko* is used to name a (twenty) dollar coin, a gold coin outside of regular circulation. The coin is clearly round, so the resemblance of shape is a key feature in the attribution of the meaning. Regardless of semantic aspects, it would be interesting to explain why this reference to the American coin is present in Polish slang. Moreover, the “financial” aspect of the name of the shape was extended, which leads to the popular informal meaning of *koło* (usually in the plural form *koła*) for a thousand or a million zlotys (Polish currency). Oryńska (1991: 94) explains that *koło* is both the value of thousand zlotys and a thousand-zloty bill (before the redenomination in 1995, now the highest bill’s denomination is 500 zlotys). As stated, the meaning mentioned goes well beyond prison slang, it is used by teenagers and adults in different situations. According to the study by Lewandowski (2007), it is also used in punk slang. This proves that in some cases, criminal slang lexis is adopted by average language speakers similarly to words originating from other jargons.

The word *koło/kółko* is also used to indicate a revolver. The reference might be related either to the shape of bullets or, more probably, to the shape of the cylinder *revolving* around a central axis, which is the key element of that type of gun. It is an example of the mental and linguistic operation of synecdoche in which one feature of an object is chosen to represent an entire referent.

An interesting example is the instance of using the name of the shape *koło/kółko* to refer to a prison sentence, in particular one year of imprisonment or a life sentence. It has to be added that Oryńska (1991: 91) provides the meaning of *koło/kółko* as life sentence only, which indicates some discrepancy between the sources. Time (or rather, certain periods of time) can be conceptualised as a circle since it is divided into repetitive cycles (a day, a month, a year), which can be observed, e.g., in the phrases such as *all year round*.

In the dictionaries used in the analysis, the following meanings of *koło/kółko* are also given: ‘a shoe’, ‘a leg’, ‘a walking area in a prison or a flat’. Neither of the referents is round in shape (rooms in a flat, as well as a walking area, are usually rectangular), so the reasons behind the attribution of the meanings presented are much more obscure. It might be a sign of creativity of slang users who add new meanings to already existing lexemes. The meaning of *koło* as a ‘flat’ is noticeable in the expression *iść/śmigać na koło*, literally ‘to go/snap onto a circle’ meaning ‘to go to rob a flat’, which confirms the productivity of the term.

The last example of the use of *kółko* is a prison slang description of a psychiatrist as *ten z kółkiem* ‘the one with a circle’. The motivation of the present meaning requires further analyses. Nevertheless, all the examples given above prove how semantically diversified the name of the geometric shape *koło* is, which testifies to the creativity of slang users who, in turn, wish to communicate in a secret way.

2) *Kwadrat* ‘square’

Another name of a geometric shape which can be used to refer to a flat is *kwadrat* ‘square’, used not only by prison inmates but also by teenagers and other slang users. According to the definition provided by *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, *kwadrat* is

a quadrangle with all equal sides and right angles. Still, the name of the shape can be used in non-geometric contexts. In her paper on prison slang, Oryńska (1991: 94) mentions the meaning 'flat' attributed to the shape name. Obviously, for prison inmates, their cell is their home. According to the *STGP* and *SGP*, *kwadrat* can have the following meanings: 'house'/'home' (unlike in English, this distinction is nonexistent in Polish), 'flat', 'kiosk', 'cell', 'room', 'shop', 'premises', 'country'. It can be easily observed that the name of the shape indicates different types of premises and buildings, most of which or at least some of their parts (e.g. rooms in a flat) are square in shape. Both dictionaries provide the expressions *lecieć na kwadrat*, literally 'to fly onto a square', which means 'to go home' and *przyśmigać na kwadrat*, literally 'to snap onto a square', which means 'to rush to the flat'.

As stated above, the meaning of *kwadrat* as 'flat' is widely known and used in informal language. By metonymy, a party run in a flat is called *kwadrat* as well, so a place where a given activity takes place (sic!) stands for the activity itself. One of the activities which may take place in a flat is prostitution, therefore, in Polish criminal slang, a prostitute working in a given flat does it *na kwadracie* (literally 'on a square', i.e. 'in a flat').

When discussing the shape of square, it is necessary to mention *kwadrat*os, a term for a state administration clerk. One can speculate on the origin of the term, i.e. whether it originates from the meaning of *kwadrat* 'room' referring to an 'office', so that a person working there is semantically and formally connected with the workplace, or whether it is related to the fact that clerks, as a part of the bureaucratic system, might be "rigid" and conservative in their attitude, as other informal meanings of *square* might suggest (see: Karczewska 2023). The same way of reasoning might be observed in the case of *kwadratowy* 'square-shaped' used to refer to a state dignitary, as the high level of formality and rigidity of the person may be assumed. The use of the name of the shape with a negative connotation can be convergent with the meaning of *kwadrat* in Polish punk slang where the name of this shape refers to a stupid person (Lewandowski 2007). In addition, Oryńska (1991: 97) mentions an interesting meaning of *kwadrat*, that is 'a unit of amount of tea' as tea is treated as currency which can be exchanged for other goods. The meanings of *kwadrat* discussed in the present section confirm the creativity of criminal slang users and a wide range of meanings attributed to the name of shape.

3) *Trójkąt* 'triangle'

Apart from the names of a circle and a square, also a triangle, *trójkąt*, is used in Polish criminal slang. In its geometric sense, *trójkąt* is a shape created by three points which are not located in one line and three-line segments connecting these points (*Słownik języka polskiego PWN* online). The name of the shape which has a clear connotation of having three apices, i.e. three main points which can be applied in different contexts (see: Karczewska in press), in Polish prison slang is surprisingly limited in meaning. First, it may refer to a flat, which is difficult to explain as flats are usually square or rectangular in shape. This is an aspect which requires further studies and field research. Second, *trójkąt* can mean a way in which the outer layer, the armour,

of a strongbox is cut in order to get access to the valuables kept inside. The only explanation, though not supported by any research, might be that burglars indeed cut the armour in a way that the tool used leaves a mark which resembles a triangle. Again, appropriate field research is required to confirm the hypothesis.

4) *Kula* 'ball' / 'sphere'

The last name of shape registered by the Polish criminal slang dictionaries is *kula* 'a ball'. In geometry, a ball is a solid bounded by a closed surface whose all points are equidistant from the centre of the solid (*Słownik języka polskiego PWN* online). It overlaps in two of its meanings with *koło/kółko* as it may bear the meaning of 'a loaf of bread' and 'a thousand of Polish zlotys'. In the first case, it is the shape of the referent to explain the use of the name of the shape, as bread loaves are three-dimensional oval objects. The other meaning can again be associated with the shape of coins or, presumably, with the shape of digit zero.

The name of the solid *kula*, often used in the plural form *kule*, is also used to refer to 'a female breast' – the meaning, which is typical not only of the criminal slang, but it appears also in the school students' slang, as registered in the dictionary edited by Czarnecka and Zgółkowa (1991). The reference to the shape of breasts is clear, but it is interesting to note that while in Polish the shape is associated with female breasts, in English its equivalent, *balls*, is associated with testicles (see Karczewska n.d.). This example shows that the creativity of language speakers is difficult to predict as various associations can get activated in the human mind. The last entry with this name of the shape registered by the dictionaries is *kula śnieżna*, literally 'a snowball', a term used to refer to an ampoule of drug. Therefore, the name of the shape used reflects the shape of the ampoule while the term *snow* is used to refer to drugs which, presumably, have the form of white powder which resembles snow in colour and, probably, texture. It is again the similarity of form to justify the use of the name of the geometric shape.

Conclusions

The present preliminary analysis shows that four names of the shapes are used in Polish criminal slang: *koło* (and its diminutive *kółko*), *kwadrat*, *trójkąt* and *kula*. The most significant number of slang meanings is attributed to the name of the shape *koło/kółko*, confirming the creativity of slang users. The mentioned names of the shapes, whose notions are precisely defined in geometry, acquire new meanings in prison slang, referring to items either related to the shape or totally unrelated to it. The shape-related meanings discussed are approximate or general, as, for example, not every flat or room is square in its shape (in fact, most are not). In some cases, though, the motivation is surprisingly clear, e.g. *kółko* 'ring' or *kule* 'female breasts', in which the name of the shape corresponds to the shape of the referent.

However, the multitude of meanings of the names of the shapes makes it more difficult to find the justification for attributing the shape name to a particular referent. The polysemy of the geometric terms can be perceived as a sign of the creativity of

prisoners as well as a possible proof that one of the major features of prison slang is its incomprehensibility to non-inmates. In addition, some of the meanings presented go beyond prison slang as registered in the dictionary of slang used by teenagers, especially students.

As the study was based on an analysis of entries registered by two dictionaries published over ten and thirty years ago, respectively, it seems necessary to corroborate the findings of the analysis with more recent material. It seems particularly important to juxtapose printed sources (which, especially in the case of slang, may become outdated in a short period of time) with oral testimonies of users of Polish criminal slang collected in field research. Still, the paper is an attempt to gain insight into the use of names of shapes in Polish criminal slang.

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Names of geometric shapes in Polish criminal slang: preliminary observations

Abstract

Names of geometric shapes, scientifically defined entities, may have non-scientific meanings which are worth studying. The article attempts to investigate if the names of shapes are present in Polish criminal slang, what these names are, and what meanings are attributed to them. In this way, a new semantic dimension of the terms is analysed. The study, based on two dictionaries of Polish criminal slang, shows that only four names of geometric shapes, namely *koło* ‘circle’, *kwadrat* ‘square’, *trójkąt* ‘triangle’ and *kula* ‘ball’, are present in prison slang. As the key feature of criminal slang is being incomprehensible for outsiders, a significant level of obscurity stemming from the creativity of slang users can be observed in the examples subject to the analysis. In some cases, though, the relation between the name of the shape and its referents is more evident. In addition, certain meanings of the names of geometric shapes are present also in other varieties of Polish (e.g. school or university jargon), which means that inter-slang borrowing is taking place, too.

Nazwy figur geometrycznych w polskiej gwarze przestępczej: wstępne obserwacje

Streszczenie

Nazwy figur geometrycznych, a więc jednostek zdefiniowanych naukowo, mogą mieć nienaukowe znaczenie. Artykuł jest próbą zbadania, czy i jakie nazwy figur geometrycznych pojawiają się w polskiej gwarze przestępczej, a także jakie znaczenie im towarzyszy. W ten sposób

można zbadać nowy wymiar semantyczny tych terminów. Badanie, oparte na dwóch słownikach polskiej gwary przestępczej, wskazuje, że w gwarze więziennej występują nazwy czterech figur geometrycznych: koła, kwadratu, trójkąta i kuli. Jako że główną cechą gwary przestępczej jest jej nieczytelność dla osób z zewnątrz, w analizowanych przykładach można zauważyć znaczący poziom niezrozumiałości wynikający z kretynności jej użytkowników. W niektórych przypadkach związek nazwy figury geometrycznej z referentami jest jednak wyraźniejszy. Ponadto pewne znaczenia nazw figur pojawiają się w innych odmianach polszczyzny, np. w gwarze uczniowskiej lub studenckiej, co oznacza, że między gwarami dochodzi do zapożyczeń.

