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THE ARGOT USED BY CLOTHING MERCHANT IN TEHRAN

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Abstract

The same way jargon is used, many salespeople have been using argot to secretly talk to each other in the presence of their customers. Specifically, in Tehran the clothing merchants use a secret form of argot known as the Benavi language. This language is mainly the result of the semantics and sound changes in the Jewish language which is spoken by Jews who live in Tehran. Most of the words in the Benavi language are the grammatical adoption of nouns and adjectives, and a few of them are conjugates of the verbs. Numbers in the Benavi language are also borrowed from the Jewish language; some of them are very similar and some are an alteration of the original form, while the numeral and counting systems are innovative and different from the Jewish language.

Keywords: argot, jargon, speech community, numeral system, slang

L'ARGOT UTILITZAT PELS COMERCIANTS DE ROBA A TEHERAN

Resum

Així com es fa servir l'argot, molts venedors l'usen per parlar en secret entre ells en presència dels seus clients. Específicament, a Teheran, els comerciants de roba usen una forma secreta d'argot coneguda com a idioma benavi. Aquest idioma és principalment el resultat dels canvis semàntics i fònics de l'idioma hebreu que parlen els jueus que viuen a Teheran. La majoria de paraules del benavi són l'adopció gramatical de substantius i adjectius, i algunes són conjugacions dels verbs. Les xifres benavi també provenen de l'hebreu; algunes s'hi assemblen i altres són una alteració de la forma original; els sistemes numèrics i de comptatge, però, són innovadors i diferents de del jueu.

Paraules clau: argot, comunitat de parla, sistema numèric

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EL ARGOT UTILIZADO POR LOS COMERCIANTES DE ROPA EN TEHERÁN

Resumen

De la misma manera que se usa la jerga, muchos vendedores usan el argot para hablar en secreto entre ellos en presencia de sus clientes. Específicamente, en Teherán, los comerciantes de ropa usan una forma secreta de argot conocida como idioma benavi. Este idioma es principalmente el resultado de cambios semánticos y fónicos del idioma hebreo que hablan los judíos que viven en Teherán. La mayoría de las palabras del benavi son la adopción gramatical de sustantivos y adjetivos, y algunas son conjugaciones de los verbos. Los números en benavi también provienen del hebreo; algunos son muy similares y otros son una alteración de la forma original; en cambio, los sistemas numéricos y de conteo son innovadores y diferentes del idioma judío.

Palabras clave: argot, jerga, comunidad de habla, sistema numérico

1. Introduction

Language is the most important form of communication among members of every society. Each society is composed of many different social groups, but due to the heterogeneous nature of the society each one of these groups uses the language differently. Even individual members of a specific group may use the language in their own way as idiolect. Language is influenced and guided by society and it is not possible to study it without learning about the context of the society. The descriptive study of society's effect on the way language is used is called sociolinguistics. Mesthrie (2006: 472) believes that, unlike pragmatics and discourse analysis, which is mainly concerned with usage of the language, or Sociology, which focuses on the effect of language on the society, sociolinguistics primarily emphasizes the social embedding of the language, the way it is used in the society, and its effect on social behavior and human interaction. Saussure (1959: 14) considers language as a social fact which is greater than individuals. From his perspective, utterances are individual phenomenon, called parole, while language is a system of utterances which exists only by considering a collection of all the paroles. This contrasts with Chomsky (1965: 3), who argues that Linguistic Theory should be concerned only with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community (Mesthrie 2006: 473).

Speech community is defined as people who speak the same language with the same vocabulary and grammar, but who have different levels of education,

occupation, social class, gender, and age. This divides a specific speech community into several groups, such that each one of these groups has its own social regulations and rules, and all the members have agreed upon and are committed to following them. Consequently, different sociolects are formed as all the members of each Speech Community follow the same general rules with only minor differences in accordance with their group's regulations.

Variation of language enables us to differentiate between individual members of groups, communities, states, and nations (Wolfram 2006: 333). Variations fall into two categories: Regional and social variations. Regional variations include dialect and accent which result from the geographic distance between speakers of the linguistic community. Consequently, over the long term, this may result in the loss of homogeneity of the language, and the formation of different variations of the language. These changes are limited and follow rules, such as the changes primarily occur in vocabulary. Even though several variations of the language may result, the speech community remains intact.

Slang is a type of informal linguistic variation and is not a part of standard vocabulary; it is mostly used in speech, and not in academic writing. Typically, slang is restricted to a specific context or group and is considered a constantly changing linguistic phenomenon. Slang is classified both by geographic areas and social classes and is used only in specific institutions or centers with regular social interaction, such as schools, prisons, military bases, and so on. Slang is mainly used to show a sense of subcultural belonging and group membership, and is usually developed in small, intimate, and informal settings among people with the same level of education and interests. Creativity and sense of humor are other important aspects of slang; many slang words refer to taboo aspects of life, where secrecy is important (Klerk 2006: 407-408).

Argot is another type of linguistic variation. Some studies consider slang and argot as the same, while others do not (Eble 2006: 413). In this article, argot is considered as different than slang.

In the Persian language, argot is also called “Lotar”. Yarshater (2009) believes the term Lotar means “non-Torah” and presumably it was carried over from the Jewish language into Persian. Argot is considered a good method of communication for people who do not follow the law or norms of the society and must hide their thoughts, goals, and secrets. In extreme cases, argot can become an anti-language (Eble 2006: 413). In summary, argot is mainly created, developed and used by two groups of people: First, offenders who need to hide their crimes, such as thieves, inmates, prostitutes, or addicts; and second, social violators who disagree with the current norms of the society, such as teenagers, rebels, and nonconformists.

A few informal argot words used by thieves and bandits are found in French texts from the 14th century. However, the official term *argot* is used for the first time in texts from 15th century (Calvet 1994: 14). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1991) defines argot as a set of words and phrases used by a group that is difficult for others to understand. The *Petit Larousse dictionary illustré* (1986) defines *argot* as particular words of social groups or employees. Words used by local people or words borrowed from other languages can be considered as argot (Calvet 1994: 13). Argot words are impermanent and can fade away over time, but it is possible that they may recur and even become a part of the current speech community (Caradec 1977: 7)¹.

2. Argot used by clothing merchants

Salespeople use words and expressions related to their occupation. This type of linguistic variation is called “Jargon” or “Professional Language”. Jargon is the language specific to an occupation or profession and is used in the context of the community’s common spoken and written language. Some special words, phrases, terms and expressions are used during a conversation (Allan 2006: 109). But some salespeople use words and terms other than Jargon when interacting with customers or others, in order to hide their thoughts and intentions. This language relates to taboos; taboos

¹ Several books about argot are published in French. These include Vidocq’s work about argot in the 19th century (2007), Larchey (1998), Dauzat (2007), Caradec (1977), Calvet (1994), Le Bretom (1975), Schwob (1999), Bouchaux et al. (2002). In Persian a book titled *A Persian Dictionary of Argot* was published in 2003 which was inhibited immediately.

refer to a forbidden discussion or behavior which can be subject to censor (Allan & Burridge 2006: 237). An example is the human sexual organs, which are always subject to some sort of taboo; those of women are usually more strongly tabooed than those of men (Allan & Burridge 2006: 7), evident in findings of this study.

In this paper, the Benavi language is introduced which is mainly the result of the semantic and sound changes made to the Jewish language spoken by Jews who live in Tehran. This language is considered as another type of linguistic variation and is originated from Hebrew, this is while the clothing merchants call it “Benavi”. Jews have been living in Tehran for many years, but it is well known that wherever they live, they speak with slight differences from their non-Jewish neighbors. Minor differences include Hebrew words; significant differences include syntax, phonology, and lexicon. Therefore, the term Jewish Language refers to any type of linguistic variation used by Jews that is different from the language used by non-Jewish people. At the same time, Jews know the language used by non-Jewish people and use it in conversation with them. The Jewish language has an interesting structure as it is based on a type of non-Jewish language, but with many words borrowed from old Hebrew, Aramaic, early Jewish Language, and some other related languages (Spolsky & Benor 2006: 120-124).

In Iran, clothing merchants are one group of professionals who use the Benavi language in front of their customers. Here, a field-based data collection technique is used to gather information on the Benavi language by interviewing clothing merchants. The information gathered is categorized into two groups: The first group includes the linguistic and syntactic findings; the second group includes numbers and system of numeration which are used by clothing merchants. In the next section, the Linguistic findings will be discussed first, followed by the numeral system.

2.1 Linguistic findings

These finding include nouns, adjectives, and some conjugated verbs which are presented in two separate tables; 75 percent of the findings are nouns and adjectives, and the rest are conjugated verbs. See Table 1 and Table 2.

| Term | Meaning | Category | Example | Meaning |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------|--|--|
| āduri | A looky-loo | N | Dāf ādurie. | The customer is a looky-loo. |
| āquz | A looky-loo Cheap product | N | Qāleb āquze. Jens āquze. | The customer is a looky-loo. The product is cheap. |
| āquzim āquzin | A looky-loo | N | Dāf āquzime. | The customer is a looky-loo. |
| oteylu | Guy | N | Oteylu čanime. | The guy is rich. |
| orbā orbā'i ovrā'i | Junk Inspector | Adj N | Jens orbā'ie. Havāset bāše, orbā'i umade. | The product is junk. Be careful, an inspector is here. |
| elef | Cigarette | N | Elef bede. | Give me a cigarette. |
| bāy-fād | Fellow customer | N | bāy-fād ro sedā kon biyād. | Call his/her fellow. |
| babur baburi | A return A customer who wants to return his/her purchase | N N | Jens baburie. Qāleb baburie. | It's a return. A customer is here to return his/her purchase. |
| bez | A looky-loo | N | Dāf beze. Dāf bez šod. | The customer doesn't want to buy anything. The customer didn't buy anything and left. |
| beneče | Child | N | Barāye beneče mixām. | I want this for a child. |
| paršāli | One size fits all | N | Paršāli hā ro bede. | Give me "One size fits all" products. |
| pilis | Price Sex | N N | Piliseš 100 tomane. Hamureš kon barāye pilis. | The price is \$100. Hit on her. |
| čanim | A rich buyer Paying customer | N N | -Dāf čanim šod? -Dāfe čanim - če čanime! | Was he/she a paying customer? Did he/she buy anything? A paying customer What a high-quality item! |
| hamur | Gullible Nuisance | Adj Adj | Hamureš kon. Dāfe hamure. | Trick him. The customer is gullible. |
| dāf dāfi dāfu | Customer A pretty female customer | N N | Qālebe čanim Ajab dāfi! | A rich paying customer What a pretty woman! |
| dāvār dābār | Whore | N | Dāvār ro bečer. | Look at that whore. |
| duče | Little boy | N | Jens barāye duče ast. | They're little boy's clothes. |
| ziqā | Defective A looky-loo Restroom Defective clothes | Adj N N N | Jens ziqā ast. Dāf ziqā naše. Dāf ziqā ast. Beram ziqā. Jens ziqā ast. bede bere. | The product is defective. Don't lose the customer. The customer is a looky-loo. I'm going to the restroom. The product is defective. Sell it. |
| ziqi | Junky | Adj | Jense ziqi | A junky product |
| sar-dāf | Friend Boyfriend Husband | N N N | sar-dāfešo sedā kon. Yāru sar-dāf dāre. | -Call her friend. She has a husband. |
| šādol šāder šādor | Breast | N | Šādole dāf ro bečer. | Look at her breasts. |
| šādolme šāderme | Breast Big-breasted woman | N N | Šādolme ye dāfu čanime. | She has nice breasts. |
| šādayn | Breast | N | Šādayne dāfu ro bečer. | Look at her breasts. |

| | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|-----------------|--|--|
| šāfu | An inferior product Inferior | N Adj | Lu bāš, šāfue. Dāfu šāfu miše. | Don't tell him/her. The product is inferior. We may lose the customer. |
| šāqul | Breast | N | Šāqule dāf ro bečer. | Look at her breasts. |
| šāvāsun | Password | N | Šāvāsune cart | The card's Password |
| šexār | Wine | N | Šexār bepilisim. | Let's drink wine. |
| šeqer šeqeri | Liar also Lie | Adj Adj N | Dāf šeqere. Farhād šeqer Šeqeri dāri minevisi. Šeqeri mige. | The customer is a liar. Farhad is a liar. What you're writing is pointless. He is lying. |
| šal | Price Money | N | Šaleš ro hesāb kon. | Calculate the selling price. |
| Šalme | Price Money | N | Šalmaš čande? | How much is it? |
| šune | A good buyer | N | Šunašo gereft. Šunašo begir. | He ripped him/her off. Stick with him/her. He/she buys a lot. |
| qātun xātun | Discount Cheap Poor | N Adj Adj | Qātuneš kon bebare. Jense šalme qātun mixād. Qāleb šalme qātune. | Give her a discount so she'll buy it. He wants inexpensive products. The customer is poor. |
| qātunak | Little girl Small | N Adj | Barāye qātunak mixād. In jens qātunake. | -He/she wants it for a little girl. This product is small. |
| qāleb | Customer Guy | N | Qāleb ro bečer. | Pay attention to the customer. |
| gādul | Rich | Adj | Šalmaš gādule. | The customer is rich. |
| genāv gannāv genāf ganāf ganāvi gandāf gano | Thief | N | Ganāf-xor šodi. Ganāf naxori. Ganāfie. Qāleb Ganāfie. | -you were robbed. Take care that you are not robbed. This product is stolen. The customer is a thief. |
| lu | Nuisance customer | N | Lue. | The customer is a nuisance. |
| lubar | Thief | N | Lubare. | He is a thief. |
| māzed | Mother | N | | |
| mazdāvār | Son of a bitch | Adj | | |
| mahlā mahal | Expensive Rich | Adj | Šal ro mahlā Bezan. Dāf mahlā ast. | Charge him/her more. The customer is rich. |
| mišvāt mešpāt mišbāt | Whore Vagina | N | Dāf mišvāt umade. | The whore is here. |
| meyšugā | Crazy | Adj | Meyšugā ast. | He is crazy. |
| millā | Penis | N | | |
| neqāmā | Nuisance | Adj | Dāf neqāmā ast. | The customer is a nuisance. |
| vezze | Nuisance customer | Adj | Taraf vezze. | The customer is a nuisance. |
| hādor | Nuisance customer | Adj | Taraf hādore. | The customer is a nuisance. |
| horbā | - Nuisance -Ugly | Adj | Dāf horbā ast. | He/she is more trouble than he/she's worth. |
| yuf yufnā | Ass | N | Če yufi dāre! | She has a nice ass. |

Table 1. Nouns and adjectives used in clothing merchant's language

| Term | Meaning | Category | Example | Meaning |
|----------------------|--|----------|--|--|
| aped | Hide Reorganize | V | Šalme ro aped kon. Jenshā ro aped kon. | Remove the price tag. Reorganize the products. |
| ezidan | Go Kick out Charge | V | be'ez. Bez. Bez šo. Ezid. Be'zuneš. Šal ro mahlā be'zun. | Get out. Go. Get out. He/she went. Kick him out. Charge him/her more. |
| pilisidan | Eat Buy Ogle Sex | V | Šexār beplisim. Mipilise. Dāf ro mipilise. Bābā mā ro pilis kardi. | Let's drink wine. He is going to buy something. He ogles. You fucked with me. |
| tok dādan | Introduce Offer- | V | -Jens ro tok bede. Tok nade. | Introduce the product. Don't talk |
| čeridan | Look Pay attention Serve Understand | V | Bečereš. Hamaro mičare. | Look at her, pay attention, be careful, help her. She understands all of it. |
| čanim kardan | Take Sell | V | Dāfet ro čanim kon. Čanim kardam. | Get the customer to buy something. I got the sale. |
| dā'undan do'undan | Say | V | Šalme nade'un. | Don't tell him/her the price. |
| debundan | Say | V | Šalme debundi? | Did you tell him/her the price? |
| dastar | Ditch | V | Dastareš kon bere. | Ditch him. |
| genāv | Steal | V | Genāv nakone. | He/she may steal. |
| gandāfi | Steal | V | Dāf gandāfi nakone. | The customer may steal. |
| lu ² | Quiet Lose | V | Lu baš. Luuuu... Moštari lu šod. | Be quiet. Do not talk. We lost the customer. |
| nāks ³ | Have | V | Pirhan nākse. | We don't have shirts. |
| vez | Go | V | Moštari vez šod. Vezeš kon. | He/she left empty handed. Get rid of him. |
| viyā kardan | Take | V | -Šalme ro viyā kon. Viyā kon. In viyā ast? Šalme viyā kon. Šalme viyā kon. Viyā šode. Dāfeš ro viyā kard barāye mā. | Take the money. Stick with him/her. He/she is going to buy something. Do you have this item? Tell him/her the price. Give me some money. He's arrived. He introduced us to his customer. |
| neqāmā | Picky Yell Fight | V | -Qāleb neqāmā mide. Neqāmā bezan be taraf. | -The customer is picky. Yell at him. |

Table 2. Verbs used in clothing merchant's language

There are five columns within each table for, respectively: The term or expression; the meaning of the term; syntactic category; example(s); and the meaning of the example(s). The examples show how the terms are used in one or several

² Sometimes the last vowel is elongated, like: *luuuu...*

³ This verb is only used in negative form.

contexts. Fourteen terms can be used with many different pronunciations, For example: *Dāf* (*dāfi*, *dāfu*), *orbā* (*orbā'i*, *ovrā'i*), (*genāvi*, *genāv*, *gannāv*, *genāf*, *gandāf*). The rest of the terms has the same pronunciation. For most of the verbs the infinitive form is provided, such as “pilisidan,” unless the term does not have an infinitive form, such as “nāks.”

2.2. Numeral system

In Benavi, numeral and counting systems are also different. They were originally in Hebrew. Digits one to nine can be pronounced in different ways, and one of the pronunciations is very similar to Hebrew. The numeral systems of digits one to nine in both Jewish language and clothing merchant’s language are presented in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

In every language, the complex numeral expressions are formed via four basic mathematical operations (Gvozdanović 2006). For example, in French, multiplication is used to construct number 80; summation is used to construct numbers 21 to 24; and juxtaposition is used to construct numbers 17 to 19. Alternately, in Jewish, juxtaposition is used to construct numbers 11 to 19, where digits 1 to 9 are placed next to digit 1 to create numbers 11 to 19. See Table 3 and Table 4.

| Meaning | Word |
|---------|--------|
| 1 | axat |
| 2 | štayim |
| 3 | šaloš |
| 4 | arba? |
| 5 | šameš |
| 6 | šeš |
| 7 | ševap |
| 8 | šmone |
| 9 | teša? |

Table 3. The one digit numbers used in Jewish language

| Meaning | Word |
|---------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | exād ehād ehāt |
| 2 | šeney šuney šene šetaym |
| 3 | šāluš šelošāt |
| 4 | arba' |
| 5 | xamiš xameš |
| 6 | šišim šeš |
| 7 | haftim hafim šivā ševa |
| 8 | haštīm hašim šene šemone |
| 9 | nohim tiš'ā teša' |

Table 4. The one digit numbers used in clothing merchant's language

Clothing merchants use their own numbering system, which is different than that of Jewish people. In this argot, numbers are constructed and named in an innovative way by considering digits of a number as a sequence of symbols next to each other. Instead of placing digits one to nine next to number ten and using juxtaposition, digits are placed next to digit one and an arbitrary name is allocated to the resulting number. For example, to construct number 15, digit five is placed next to digit one, instead of number ten, and is pronounced 'exād xamiš' (one five). Numbers 11 to 19 and other exceptions, like 44 (arba' arba'), are constructed by following the same rule. See Table 5 and Table 6.

| Meaning | Word |
|---------|---------------------|
| 11 | ehād asārā |
| 12 | šene asārā |
| 13 | šāluš asārā |
| 14 | reva? (arba?) asārā |
| 15 | xamši asārā |
| 16 | šišā asārā |
| 17 | ševā asārā |
| 18 | šemunā asārā |
| 19 | teš?ā asārā |

Table 5. The two digits numbers used in Jewish language (limited to numbers 11 to 19)

| Meaning | Word |
|---------|--------------------------|
| 11 | ehād ehād exād ehād |
| 12 | ehād šeney exād šeney |
| 13 | exād šāluš |
| 14 | exād arba' |
| 15 | exād xamiš |
| 16 | exād šišim |
| 17 | exād hafim |
| 18 | exād hašim |
| 19 | exād nohim |

Table 6. The two digits numbers used in clothing merchant's language (limited to numbers 11 to 19)

3. Conclusions

Language is an abstract phenomenon which is the realization of social and regional variations in every linguistic community. Argot is one of the social variations of language and Benavi is one of the argots which is the alteration form of Jewish language created by clothing merchants in Tehran. Probably, there are the same or similar kind of Argot used by clothing merchants in other cities of Iran, and also different kinds of argot created and used by people in other professions. The outcomes of Benavi's linguistic investigation indicate that the clothing merchants use this language mainly to create a barrier or distance between their customers and themselves. The findings also indicate some level of distrust between merchants and

customers, dealing with customers from different social classes, gender discrimination toward female customers which is an ongoing problem in Iran, and having secret conversations about cost and quality of the products in the presence of customers.

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