

Aghasi Tadevosyan, Nikol Margaryan

Explanatory dictionary of criminal (“thief”) slang

Summary

During a lecture held at one of Yerevan’s colleges, one of the students discussed the prevalence - and impact - of semi-criminal behavioral norms in daily life, concluding that this phenomenon plays a significant role in regulating relationships within neighborhoods and communal areas. Without it, they argued that “life can descend into chaos.” This behavior is often associated with the ‘thief’ subculture and its distinct speech patterns, which are familiar to many in Armenia.

Despite exerting significant influence on public life and behavior, this phenomenon has, however, remained a taboo topic in Armenia, with no serious research devoted to it until now. This explanatory dictionary marks the first attempt to address this issue. What sets this dictionary apart is its comprehensive approach; not only does it provide explanations for the words and concepts underpinning the ‘thief’ language but also delves into their societal impact, particularly the impediments they pose to the development of democracy and civil society. Consequently, the significance of this work extends beyond lexicology: it holds sociological importance. Additionally, this dictionary can act as a valuable resource for policymakers.

The dictionary consists of two parts. The first and primary section covers the concepts and words commonly used in criminal slang. The second part includes two analytical articles. The first article explores the culture that shapes the vocabulary and concepts of criminal slang, tracing its historical development and dissemination. The second analyzes the adverse effects of it on public life, examining the key factors and circumstances that foster the spread and advancement of this anti-social and anti-democratic phenomenon.

The dictionary comprises more than 200-word entries. Each entry provides the meaning of the word (mean.), its origin (orig.), historical background (hist.), conjugation (conj.), and the alternative sense (alt. sense). The *meaning* section encompasses the word’s usage within the criminal subculture and colloquial street speech. In the *origin* section, we focus not only on the linguistic origins of the word but also on its etymology – the story of its inclusion in criminal language. Occasionally, we present the linguistic origins of the word to enhance clarity. The *history* aspect covers the formation and development of the concept within Armenian or foreign environments, including its adoption from foreign languages into Armenian, and more. The *conjugation* entry includes linguistic expressions formed by combining the given word with others or by altering its endings. Lastly, in the *alternative sense* section, you’ll find details about how the word is used in various contexts – whether it’s in criminal slang, street slang, or colloquial speech. You’ll also discover which generation typically employs the word.

Additionally, we provide information about behavioral practices influenced by the word's usage, along with details regarding other usage.

The influence of the so-called 'thieves-in-law' (or 'gogh' in Armenian) in Armenia began to intensify in the 1950s. These 'thieves-in-law' constituted the highest-ranking criminal group within the Gulag¹ and prison systems during the era of Stalinism and exerted control over all other inmates. This dominance spread across the former Soviet Union, including in Armenia. In criminal slang, 'thieves-in-law' are also referred to as 'zakonnik' ('zakon' means 'law' in Russian).

'Zakonnik'

Mean.: *An authority with the highest status in the criminal world*

Orig.: *Loanword from the Russian criminal phrase 'законник'. It consists of the root 'закон' (zakon) and the suffix '-ник' (-nik), which originate from the Old Russian and Old Slavic 'законъ' (law, canon).*

Hist.: *It has been active within a criminal context since the early 1930s, primarily within Gulag camps and prisons across the former USSR.*

Alt. sense: *The word gained popularity both in the Gulag camps and prison environment and on the streets. It made its way from prison to the streets without any change in its meaning. It is synonymous with the term 'kerob².' In face-to-face conversations, the 'thieves' weren't typically addressed with the word 'zakonnik;' instead, they were more commonly referred to using the term 'kerob.'*

The primary factor that led to the proliferation of the 'thieves-in-law' influence in urban settings was the release of a significant number of the Gulag camps' population as part of an amnesty following Stalin's death in 1953. Many convicts, who had spent decades in the Gulag camps, were set free, carrying with them the behaviors, traditions, and language of the criminal world into civilian life. Many of the released convicts were notable for preserving their unity and for their efforts to establish influence within the working-class population. During the 1970s and 1980s, in cities like Yerevan, Gyumri (formerly Leninakan), and Vanadzor (formerly Kirovakan), criminal concepts and their associated behaviors and customs had permeated everyday life to such an extent that one could argue they became the foundation for organizing relationships among men, especially young ones.

Even after Armenia gained independence, this situation persisted with certain modifications, and it continues to significantly influence the worldviews, values, and

1 Gulag – Гулаг, Государственное управление лагерей (Rus.) – the concentration camp system for convicts, covering the entire USSR, particularly uninhabited areas of the Far North and Siberia. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's famous 'The Gulag Archipelago' (1973) for the first time revealed to the world the scale and terror of this system.

2 'Թերոբ' (Arm.) = 'Cherub' (Eng.), there is also an Armenian name Kerob.

behaviors of teenaged boys and young men to this day. The vocabulary used in the slang characteristic of this subculture consists mainly of *concepts* with specific meanings, often referred to as ‘panyat³,’ rather than ordinary words. Each ‘panyat’ carries a highly specific and distinct meaning, serving as a unique behavioral guideline that clearly differentiates ‘right’ from ‘wrong.’ To secure a certain status in everyday life, especially within neighborhoods and local environments, teenaged boys and young men must master this language, familiarize themselves with its concepts, and employ them in their interactions with peers of their age group. Any conduct that deviates from the norms defined by these concepts is deemed ‘wrong.’ Even if a ‘wrong’ action results from ignorance, it can be responded to with severe physical and psychological violence, and in some cases, even lead to homicide.

‘Wrong life’

Mean.: *1. The life of those who do not adhere to the principles and rules of the criminal world.*

2. The life of those who follow a different set of rules, unrelated to those from a criminal context.

Orig.: *The antonym of the ‘right life’ concept used in criminal language.*

Hist.: *It began to spread in local and street speech from the 1950s. After the Second World War (WW2), the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR declared a fight against code-bound thieves (‘thieves-in-law’). As a response, all those who refused to live a criminal lifestyle were labeled as leading a ‘wrong life’. This resulted in a ‘civil war’ between two groups of criminals – those who cooperated with the government (e.g. they participated in WW2) and those who refused. The war took place both in the camps and in civilian settings. Several tens of thousands of people were killed, and the ‘suki’ and ‘pridurki’ – those who agreed to cooperate with the State – prevailed.*

Alt. sense: *It is primarily used within the community of older and middle-aged individuals who are familiar with this slang.*

If we attempt to summarize the essence of this concept in one sentence, it can be described as being antagonistic towards state and civil institutions, while aiming to keep society, especially young men, under the dominance of the highest criminal authorities - the ‘thieves.’ According to this concept, the highest status in the public sphere is reserved for those who loyally adhere to this behavior. The latter are often referred to with a specific term: ‘good guys.’

³ ‘Panyat’ (цѡлѡшѡн) is derived from the Russian word ‘понятие’ (ponyatiye), meaning ‘concept’ or ‘notion’ in English.

'Good guy'

Mean.: *1. A man engaged in a life of crime and holding a respected position among other men, criminal and non-criminal.*

2. A young man in the neighborhood, living according to street criminal principles.

Orig.: *Russian word 'хороший' (khoroshiy), meaning 'good'*

Hist.: *The Armenian version has gained popularity since the 1970s.*

Conj.: *The good ones, good guys.*

Alt. sense: *It's a commonly used word. In street settings, this term was used to describe individuals living a criminal lifestyle. In army circles, a semantically similar term is 'yakhshi'⁴, referring to influential soldiers who resolve issues within the military unit.*

The dictionary was compiled based on qualitative research data collected through methods used by cultural anthropology. We conducted 45 in-depth interviews and 10 expert interviews. The in-depth interviews took place in correctional facilities and within neighborhood settings in large and medium-sized cities (such as Yerevan, Gyumri, and Goris) among individuals associated with the 'thief' subculture. We also considered generational factors when selecting interviewees. For the expert interviews, we engaged professionals with experience in working with convicts in prisons and conducting research on this issue.

Based on the interviews, a preliminary list of 350 words was compiled, from which 200 were selected to create the main word list for the dictionary. Several principles guided the selection. Firstly, it was essential for the words and expressions in the dictionary to accurately represent and comprehensively reflect the chronological evolution of the language. This list includes both relatively recent terms and phrases that have gained prominence, as well as those that are now rarely used. We also highlighted the semantic changes that some words and phrases have undergone over time. Based on their origins, the words included in the dictionary can be categorized into the following groups:

- Direct loanwords from Russian
- Translations of Russian jargon terms
- Armenianization of Russian words by adding Armenian verbs
- Addition of Armenian plural suffix to borrowed words
- Armenianized words through transliteration
- Words and phrases originating in Armenian criminal language.

⁴ 'Yakshi,' coming from ancient Indo-European origins, is used particularly in Turkish and Azerbaijani and means 'good' in English.

The dictionary contains words, phrases, and concepts that capture the essence of the slang, providing a comprehensive overview, even though it may not encompass the entire lexicon. It specifically includes groups of words and concepts that hold a special significance within 'thief' speech, including those that:

- Define the statuses and hierarchy within the criminal world; delineate the statuses and types of relationships within that world and among other inmates in the prison environment;
- According to the inmates' status, define their position within the prison facility, from cell assignments to communal spaces for detainees;
- Define the principles for interactions between inmates and prison authorities, outlining permissible and prohibited behaviors;
- Define what is permissible and what is not, making a clear distinction between 'right' and 'wrong;'
- Define the types of penalties for deviating from criminal concepts and breaching the norms and practices of criminal etiquette;
- Define the rights and obligations of members of the 'thief' world;
- Define the key institutions responsible for maintaining order and governance within the 'thief' world, including the financial and economic ones; define the mechanisms ensuring operation of these institutions.

The words featured in the dictionary extend beyond mere concepts and expressions confined to a criminal - or exclusively criminal - context. Most of these words are known even to individuals who have never been in prison. Many people have employed and continue to use these words in their daily interactions, be it in friendships, neighborhood dynamics, or even professional settings. However, as these criminal concepts have entered into people's everyday relationships, some of them have undergone adaptations and changes in meaning. This has led to the inclusion of meanings in the dictionary that are not only specific to the narrow criminal environment but also widely accepted in everyday life.

Various factors within neighborhood settings contributed to the spread of the criminal subculture. Foremost among them was the widespread distrust of the Soviet Union's justice system and legal institutions. Working-class citizens, being the most vulnerable to the arbitrary and corrupt practices of the judicial system, often avoided seeking legal solutions to evade unnecessary complications. Within these societal strata, the authority of neighborhood-based 'thieves', coming out of prison, gained popularity. They advocated for people to rely on them rather than the state's legal system when faced with injustice, resolving issues according to the 'right and wrong' principles defined by criminal concepts. In many cases, they effectively resolved everyday disputes, determining who was in the 'right' and who was in the 'wrong.' They punished

those who needlessly resorted to violence and intimidation, all the while insisting that people should follow criminal principles, ignore state laws, avoid working with authorities, and, most importantly, refrain from reporting the ‘thieves’ and ‘good guys’ to the police. By the 1960s and 1970s, the most condemnable action in everyday urban interactions was ‘gorts tal’ (to snitch).

‘Gorts tvogh⁵’ (snitch)

Mean.: A person who contacts or cooperates with judicial authorities to provide information about crimes and individuals involved in criminal activities.

Orig.: It gained prominence in the 1960s when details about the Stalinist repressions came to light, revealing that a significant number of criminal cases were initiated based on secret accusations (донос⁶). As these accusations led to legal cases against individuals, those who provided these accusations came to be known as ‘case givers.’ There’s a hypothesis that this term originated from the fact that the numbered folders containing a convict’s criminal file had the word ‘Case’ printed on them.

Hist.: It is equivalent to the Russian word ‘доносчик⁷’

Alt. sense: Not to be confused with ‘stukach’ who are representatives of the lower class of the criminal world.

The collected data indicate that while this subculture may have had certain educational and socio-cultural limitations in the past, over the subsequent 40 years or more its influence has expanded to include public education and university student environments. In other words, this phenomenon has undergone a transformation and has extended beyond the realms of criminal or everyday neighborhood interactions to infiltrate various spheres and institutions of public life. This slang is noticeable and, to some extent, representative even within the ranks of law enforcement personnel, the state administration system, and even among members of the National Assembly.

The dictionary serves as a diagnostic tool for understanding the widespread and deeply ingrained nature of this pressing issue. It can be viewed as the first step in more extensive research into this worrying phenomenon on the road to the formulation of policies designed to address it effectively.

5 Informant (derogative term). Literally translated as ‘case giver,’ in English also the term ‘employer’ is used. British alternatives would be ‘grass’ or ‘rat’ (although ‘rat’ – крыса – is used also in Russian and Armenian (լըխ) to denote an infiltrator) while USA ones would be ‘stoolie’ or ‘stool pigeon’

6 донос (donos) (Russian) – the English equivalents may be ‘squeal,’ ‘song’

7 доносчик (donoschik) (Russian) - snitch, informant, or squealer