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### **‘Principle of Pithiness’ in US Prison Slang**

#### ABSTRACT

The present paper introduces ‘the principle of pithiness’ in US prison slang, which assumes that, in order to communicate successfully, prisoners need to use language that is terse and vigorously expressive. Such function is served by figurative language as it is rich in meaning, emotional content, and, simultaneously, is economical in form. Using prison-specific metaphors and metonymies, prisoners provide new quality: without the thorough study of the prison context prison slang is esoteric to the outsider. Therefore, the paper is also a voice for integrating linguistic analysis with that of the context (cf. Kövecses 2015).

Keywords: prison slang; principle of pithiness; metaphor; metonymy

#### 1. Introduction

Since time immemorial scholars of various disciplines took interest in metaphor as a tool illustrating a point in discourse. For Aristotle metaphor was “exotic language” (1995: 109), George Cambell called it “allegory in miniature” (1868: 97), while Ogden and Richards believed it to be used in order to “express or incite feelings and attitudes” (1946: 149). I. A. Richards had even more definite thoughts when he stated: “Most words [including metaphors; ADR], as they

pass from context to context, change their meanings; and in many different ways. It is their duty and their service to us to do so.” (1936: 11) For many decades now the field of Cognitive Linguistics has been witnessing increased interest in the studies of metaphor and metonymy as processes underlying basic conceptual structure of the human mind. Since George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) published their seminal *Metaphors We Live By*,<sup>1</sup> linguists have been uncovering new examples for concepts derived from embodied experiences that get realized in language. Although the topic has been tantalizing linguists for a long time, its significance still has not been fully appreciated. Mark Johnson notes that it has “the status of central problem” (1981: 3), and David Davinson believes this is because metaphor is “little guided by rules” (1981: 200).

Nonetheless, the discussion on metaphor never ceases. In *Where Metaphors Come From* Kövecses writes that “a crucial property of the linguistic symbols [i.e. such as metaphors; ADR] used in communication is that they impose a perspective on presenting the world” (2015: x), which makes linguistic symbols distinguishable from the non-linguistic ones. The author believes that linguistic symbols “inherently construe the world [in that] they present it from a given perspective” (ibid.). That perspective is contextualized in the sense that “contexts are organized by cognitive schemas consisting of a limited number of relevant categories people use to analyse and understand the communicative situation” (Van Dijk 2009: 249). From this it follows that only a segment of immediate information is made use of in any communication and that this segment serves as a basis for the presentation of a speaker’s view of the world and the way that presentation is construed. Metaphors ideally serve this function. The fact that conceptualizers unconsciously make use of and successfully unravel metaphors and metonymies is an argument for treating them as being stored (as well as the imagery they evoke) in long-term memory, which is in line with Gibbs’ findings presented in his article

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<sup>1</sup> It should be brought to the reader’s attention that the idea of a conceptual metaphor, although not called that way, is already present in Richards (1936).

“Categorization and Metaphor Understanding” (1992). As human metaphoric system is embodied, each experience we have feeds our conceptual system, which itself is metaphoric (cf. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 2009). Nevertheless, metaphors arise in contexts, and context forces itself into the linguistic practice of conceptualizers, as metaphor “can actually occur in the social-physical practice of a society” and thus it “becomes embodied cultural practice” (Kövecses 2006: 136).

Within some contexts, well-established traditional or conventionalized metaphors emerge and are not recognized as metaphors as it may be presumed that because in their long-term exposure the same parts of our brain get activated repeatedly we become accustomed to them. Within other contexts, the need for novel, created ad-hoc, metaphors arises, as metaphors have the ability to draw similarities between the unknown and that we already know. Contexts that undergo constant alteration may be the best area of study here. It seems probable that exposed to novel circumstances, the human mind, attempting to understand the context better, will create (possibly) limitless amounts of original metaphors. In such a context, the analysis of its unstable or untraditional (non-standard) tongue may further contribute to the discussion of the conceptual (cognitive) structure of the human mind.

With such aim in mind, this paper discusses the highly neglected area of linguistics, prison slang, whose analysis must take into account the changeable nature of prison norms imposed by elite prisoners and of the volatility of inmates who, in turn, introduce their own moral and behavioural standards. Culture-bound and rich in understatement, prison slang is an inexhaustible source of metaphors and metonymies, which serve as ideal means for camouflaged expression, hence the use of ‘the principle of pithiness’. Analysis reveals that prison slang is rich in both conventionalized metaphors and metonymies (e.g. the PART FOR WHOLE or PLACE FOR PERSON metonymy), and novel ones, revealing the originality of speakers-as-conceptualizers (e.g. DYING PERSON IS A FILLER OF A CONTAINER metaphor, discussed later in this paper).

The analysis here will focus both on the overall context of prison and on prison slang. It will be argued that, due to the peculiarity of the context, in order to communicate effectively on different levels (prisoner-prisoner, prisoner-jailer, prison gang-prison gang, etc.) prisoners need to apply what we call 'the principle of pithiness', in response to the necessity of expressing oneself and conveying information in as few words as possible. The aim is to suggest that much of inmate language is metaphor- and metonymy-based and only by following this principle can prisoners establish a prison code that serves a successful exchange of information with fellow prison parties (jailers or inmates). In addition to this, owing to the fact that "metaphor interpretation varies within context, and, thus, metaphor and context are closely linked" (Kövecses 2015: 7), the topic under scrutiny here cannot be successfully discussed without the focus on the broad prison context. The paper will thus disavow traditional linguistics (i.e. the generative grammar approach), which seems to offer a mere promise of success but fails to integrate language analysis with real-life communication and the context in which such a communicative practice sees light of day.

## 2. Data

The example for the analysis in this paper has been chosen from the collection of nearly 4000 prison expressions that have been compiled from the three-volume *Green's Dictionary of Slang* published in 2010 and several online prison glossaries<sup>2</sup> published from 2000 to 2016 by correctional officers or former convicts. The choice fell to this particular utterance, as it is extremely rich in figurative language, serves as an ideal example of the complexity of prison slang and has been written down by a language user who has personal experience of the context. The utterance under discussion here comes from <http://prisonwriters.com/>, a website solely created to give prisoners a place to publish their non-fiction stories that concern the prison reality; therefore, it can be safely assumed that our example comes from a trustworthy source.

### 3. Analysis

Dumas and Lighter state that “annoyance and frustration await anyone who searches the professional literature for a definition or even a conception of SLANG that can stand up to scrutiny” (1978: 5). It is true that the discussion on the nature of slang has not brought, till this day, a satisfactory definition of slang. Perhaps such a definition is impossible to be compiled. However, it has come to our attention that most of the work on slang does not investigate into the socio-cultural structure of the community or social group that speaks it, let alone attempting an analysis of the language closed behind bars. A possible explanation of this phenomenon may be that slang has been rarely pursued, as it has always been classified as non-standard, opaque, rude, or nonsensical. However, a close look at any slang-speaking social group, including inmates, will also answer the question of why slang is unintelligible for outsiders: it is designed to be. Its main goal is to exclude unwanted parties from conversations that should remain secret (cf. Halliday, 1976). Additionally, as language users identify themselves with the community they belong to, the language used within such groups needs to speak for the members and be recognizable among other tongues. In speech communities each speech use is expected to be appropriate to the norms imposed by the community, as it has been noticed that “language and communication often provide important and sometimes crucial criteria by which members both define their group and are defined by others” (Kroskrity, 2001: 106). Therefore, slang is a code that can be deciphered only by its users (cf. Saussure’s idea that language is a code of symbols; 1857-1913) in a special context.<sup>2</sup> As noted by many scholars so far, Cowley (2004) and others too take the stance that “language cannot be context-free and that every contextualization is unique” (as discussed by Kravchenko, 2007: 654).

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<sup>2</sup> Here, I use the term ‘code’ only in relation to prison slang to stress the fact that it is obscured to third parties and can only be comprehended by the participants of the same communicative act. This is not to say that all human language is a code. As has already been noted by many scholars (cf. Kravchenko, 2007, or Love, 2007), evidence points to the contrary.

Owing to the fact that prison culture is not “an isolated system springing solely from the conditions of imprisonment” (Irwin & Cressey, 1962: 145), the inmate tongue arises out of many different factors. It is the resultant of the prison reality, the genuinely created but also influenced from the outside, and a thorough insight into its semantics may reveal many aspects of life in penitentiaries and of those who reside there. With a high degree of certainty, the influence of the prison society on the language is extreme. On the relation between language, thought, and culture, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) once wrote that

The spiritual traits and the structure of the language of a people are so intimately blended that, given either of the two, one should be able to derive the other from it to the fullest extent. ... Language is the outward manifestation of the spirit of people: their language is the spirit, and their spirit is the language; it is difficult to imagine any two things more identical (Humboldt, cited in Salzmann, 2007: 49)

From this it follows that language (or broadly speaking human communication) and society are mutually inclusive; one cannot exist without the other and both influence each other to a great extent. Definitely, (any form of) language is sine qua non for a group of people who interact persistently with each other. In addition to this, Sapir had a very definite thought on the subject when he stated that “language is a guide to ‘social reality’” (1929: 209). Social reality is multi-levelled; a thorough study of its language should entail such factors as the shared territory, age, sex, race, ethnicity, occupation, etc. of the speakers, the political authority, the cultural expectations and realizations, the institutionalization, and many more, i.e. all constituents that are the result of a society formation, and that provide information on its infrastructure. Samovar and Porter observed that “language is the primary vehicle by which a culture transmits its beliefs, values, norms, and world views” (1994: 16). For this reason, it can be propounded that language is culturally reflexive, and should not be studied in isolation (cf. Kövecses, 2015).

Related to the discussion here is the analysis of the example that originated in an American penitentiary. It will be propounded that

only by examining the context can we comprehend its meaning and importance in the prison social reality. After all,

the cognitive effort of the interpreter of linguistic signs (the observer of communicative verbal behavior), although reducing the degree of indeterminacy characteristic of the sign use and hence its purported 'meaning', yields results which are, to an extent, predetermined by one's unique experience of the relevant physical, biological, social, historical, cultural, etc. parameters of the communicative situation.' (Kravchenko 2007: 659)

The example can be as follows:

I have the keys for my Car but my Road Dogs are disappearing on me. One was 5150 and Did the Dutch, one left on Back Door Parole, one is a BB Filler on his way out. Two are in The Hole (one for Keistering a cell phone), one is jacked up on Brake Fluid (he's got L Whop), one's a J-Cat sent to the Ding Wing, one is a Dump Truck who caught the Ninja, one was picked up by a Meat Wagon after getting Molly whooped. The only one left is a Fish who's obsessed with a Kitty-Kitty. And me.

The example draws our attention to the intensive metaphoricity used by the speaker.<sup>3</sup> Each sentence is rich in meaning and contains at least three phrases that, without the proper understanding of the context and prison slang, can carry a wide spectrum of far-fetched senses. We can speculate, however, the message conveyed in different contexts before moving on to the actual meaning of each single expression. For instance,

1. The speaker may be discussing their many pets. In that case, 'dogs' and 'kitty-kitty' are used literally. Each pet is given a peculiar name.
2. The speaker may be discussing their friends. All of the friends are given distinctive nicknames.
3. The speaker may be a driver who is picking hitchhikers on the road. The speaker gives nicknames to each of them based on the stories they tell him during the long trip they take together.
4. The speaker may be a drug-user who is discussing his drug-using friends.

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<sup>3</sup> The spelling (capital letters) of particular words cannot be accounted for as there are no sources that would corroborate its originality for prison slang is (mostly) spoken.

There is high probability that given a new context, the utterance may relate to a story not mentioned here. In addition to this, each of the metaphoric expressions can have a plethora of unrelated interpretations, as, in the words of Richards, “a word is always a cooperative member of ... the utterance and therefore cannot properly ... have a meaning of its own” (1936: 69). The first impression upon hearing this utterance is that it belongs to the street vernacular, the language of the youth. According to [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com), an online dictionary of slang, the phrases can take, among others, the following meanings:<sup>4</sup>

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|---|--|
| 1. <i>Key</i> :                             | 10. <i>J-Cat</i> :   |
| a) Kilogram, usually referring to narcotics | a) Dedicated and obsessed with the British band Union J  |
| b) A keyboard instrument                    | b) Not intelligent   |
| c) A well-loved guy                         | c) (Prison slang) Mentally unstable  |
| 2. <i>Car</i> :                             | 11. <i>Ding Wing</i> :   |
| a) A place where you can have intercourse   | a) (Prison slang) A psychiatric ward   |
| b) Papers used to smoke marijuana           | 12. <i>Dump Truck</i> :  |
| c) A poem                                   | a) A derogatory term for a criminal defence lawyer who accepts large numbers of clients with the intention of pleading them guilty as quickly as possible in order to make |
| 3. <i>Road dog</i> :                        |  |
| a) A close friend                           |  |
| b) A travelling companion                   |  |

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<sup>4</sup> Not all meanings provided by the dictionary are given here due to the limit of the present paper. Also, some of the phrases are unavailable.

- c) Beer money on volume
4. *5150*:  
 a) A person who disobeys the law  
 b) A guitar amplifier  
 c) Police code for 'mentally ill'
5. *Back door*:  
 a) An anus  
 b) A code built into a software  
 c) An action done in secret
6. *BB*:  
 a) A bunk bed  
 b) A Blackberry phone  
 c) A 'Big Brother' reality show
7. *Hole*:  
 a) An anus  
 b) Whitewater feature of a river in which part of the current drops into a relatively deeper space in the river bed, moves back up toward the surface, and then recirculates upstream  
 c) An unpleasant place
- b) (Hospital slang) A patient who's spewing from both ends  
 c) A highly unintelligent person
13. *Ninja*:  
 a) A word used to avoid using the word 'nigga'  
 b) A game in which two or more people play by slapping each other on the hand  
 c) A Kawasaki motorcycle
14. *Meat Wagon*:  
 a) An ambulance  
 b) A police van  
 c) A very large and overweight woman
15. *Molly*:  
 a) A pure form of MDMA (ecstasy)  
 b) A female best-friend  
 c) A 'molotov coctail'
16. *Whoop*:  
 a) To get beaten up badly

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 8. <i>Keister</i> :                                 | b) To really like someone to the point where you follow them around |
| a) A person's bottom                                |   |
| b) A safe   | c) To have a crush on somebody                                      |
| c) A suitcase that opens up into a display of goods | 17. <i>Fish</i> :   |
| 9. <i>Jacked up</i> :                               | a) A Canadian or US-American online poker player                    |
| a) Not working properly                             | b) A drag queen who looks like a real woman                         |
| b) High   | c) (Acronym) First In Still Here                                    |
| c) Pregnant   | 18. <i>Kitty-Kitty</i> :  |
|   | a) Lesbian intercourse  |

Those far-fetched interpretations bring to mind certain peculiarity about prison slang, namely the impossibility to unravel its content without accounting for its relation to penitentiaries. In order to appropriately study the example above this should be followed by a discussion of the socio-cultural mechanisms of American facilities that have a strong impact on the language inmates form.

We begin with a short description of the specific living conditions present in American prison facilities. According to Human Rights Watch,<sup>5</sup> the conditions in many American prisons are “barely tolerable”. Further on, the report adds that “surging prison populations and public reluctance to fund new construction produced dangerously overcrowded prisons” (ibid.). In addition to this, the treatment of prisoners by correctional officers is far from decent. In the same document we read that “across the country, inmates complained of

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<sup>5</sup> Available at <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/advocacy/prisons/u-s.htm> [access 30.01.2017]

instances of excessive and even clearly lawless use of force” and “abusive conduct by guards was reported in many prisons” (ibid.). Amnesty International in their report as of 1998<sup>6</sup> states that

in many facilities, violence is endemic. In some cases, guards fail to stop inmates assaulting each other. In others, the guards are themselves the abusers, subjecting their victims to beatings and sexual abuse. Prisons and jails use mechanical, chemical and electro-shock methods of restraint that are cruel, degrading and sometimes life-threatening. (p. 34)

Not only are the living conditions unbearable but also is the conduct of many correctional officers and fellow inmates. Prisoners use physical and mental violence to exert power over each another. Sexual abuse is not rare. In the same report, Human Rights Watch adds that

prison staff often allowed or even tacitly encouraged sexual attacks by male prisoners. Despite the devastating psychological impact of such abuse, there were few if any preventative measures taken in most jurisdictions, while perpetrators were rarely punished adequately by prison officials. (ibid.)

Clearly, the conditions inside American penitentiaries are nowhere near perfect. Under such circumstances, violence breeds violence. With respect to the prison language, it is largely influenced by the everyday reality that the inmates are exposed to. This reality is responsible for forming hate, but also the bond between inmate-friends may be even stronger than outside. In the prison world, which may be characterised as brutal and subject to disorder, when inmates experience identical or similar treatment, the bond results in the special way of talking about each other. This special talk is visible in the example under analysis.

The speaker takes up the topic of his gang, of which he is the leader (*I have the keys for my Car*, where *Car* stands for ‘gang’), and discusses the situation in which the members of his gang have found themselves. The first of the members was mentally unstable (*5150* in

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<sup>6</sup> Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AMR51/035/1998/en/> [access 31.01.2017]

Welfare and Institutions Code is 'mental health disorder')<sup>7</sup> and committed suicide (*did the Dutch*). The second member died in prison. The phrase *Back Door Parole* implicates release from prison but through the back door, not front as in traditional parole. The third member caught an illness, and would soon pass away. The speaker refers to this member as a *BB filler*, where *BB* stands for 'body bag'. When there is no chance for survival, the speaker deindividualizes and dehumanizes his friend in an attempt to prepare himself for the inevitable. It serves as an intended means of coping with a difficult situation. As for the next two members of the gang, they were sent to solitary confinement (i.e. *the Hole*) for seriously breaking the rules of the facility. The first of them concealed contraband in his rectum (*to keister* 'use the lower portion of your digestive system as a storage bin for contraband'). The other one must have offended the system as well, although the actual reason is not provided. Needless to say, either he was responsible for conducting illegal activity or, based on the reports indicated above, he could not be dealt with in any other way. The sixth member is serving life without parole (*L Whop* = **L**ife **W**ithout **P**arole). The vision of spending the rest of his life in prison without the possibility of an earlier release must have affected the prisoner emotionally and even perhaps influenced his behaviour, what resulted in the decision of putting him on psychiatric medications. The seventh one is too mentally unstable (*J-Cat* stands for 'Category J' in the penal code) to remain part of the general prison population and was directed to the psychiatric unit (*Ding Wing*), where he would remain for an indefinite amount of time. The eighth member is a lackadaisical person (*Dump Truck*) who was diagnosed with HIV (*the Ninja*). Although the speaker does not state it directly, it can be assumed that the future is not bright for this gang member. The next prisoner involved himself in a fight and was so severely beaten (*getting Molly whopped*) that he had to be taken by an ambulance

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<sup>7</sup> Source:  
[https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=WIC&division=5.&title=&part=1.&chapter=2.&article=1](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=WIC&division=5.&title=&part=1.&chapter=2.&article=1) [access 31.01.2017]

(*picked up by the Meat Wagon*) to the hospital. The two remaining inmates are the new first-time offender (referred to as *the Fish* in penitentiaries) whose mind is extensively preoccupied with a female correctional officer (*Kitty-Kitty*) and the speaker.

In view of the prison reality, one that is severe and complex, the traditions of power inequality have continued to maintain. In each society, inequality can be exercised on various levels (Hofstede, 2001: 80):

1. Physical and mental characteristics (This is a basic fact of human existence.)
2. Social status and prestige
3. Wealth
4. Power
5. Laws, rights, and rules ('Privileges' are private laws.)

As prisoners and prison staff constitute a group of people who have developed patterns of behaviour, relationships, rules and standards pertaining to the organization of prison life through constant interaction, and who have formed a unique culture, one that is similar in many ways to other world cultures, but also contradictory to a great deal, all the levels observed by Hofstede can be found as well. The laws and regulations effective in American penitentiaries (both federal and state ones, as well as those formed by prisoners themselves, e.g. the inmate code) and the clash of the various individuals who hold non-compatible physical and mental characteristics, make the penitentiary an ideal ground for the production and reproduction of power, which in turn gets translated into the everyday social status of the prisoners. Those who hold power control others; their prestige is unusual: often they are masters of life and death. Such social factors function to constrain and repress people. Nevertheless, such a situational context exerts decisive influence on the created language.

Having in mind that the fight for power over the prison institution is perpetual, the knowledge of the prison paradigm represents the kind of knowledge that is an absolute must. According to Kecskés, "language encodes prior contexts and is used to make sense of actual

situational contexts, so *language is never context-free*" (2008: 388; italics as in original). From this discussion it follows that each utterance language users make is related to a particular situation in reality. True as it is, without context any utterance may be misunderstood; hence the above discussion on the possible interpretations of the example reflects the problem. Linell argues that "communicatively interacting members of a community partially share the meanings established in and through how people relate to each other and to objects, processes and circumstances around them" (2007; cited in Kravchenko, 2007: 660). What is vital in any communication act is the knowledge possessed by the participants, knowledge that could only be gained through interaction with the environment. Therefore, given that each society initiates and shapes its own culture and that culture is "a kind of extension of language", as well as "the inseparability of language and culture is quite strong" (Risager, 2015: 87, 88), the formation of prison slang is triggered by the actual situational context and the culture the context emerges in.

The prison context (including culture) is extremely rich in that it provokes the creation of metaphorical language. In such a highly complex context, the usefulness of 'the principle of pithiness' in the prison context is not to be underappreciated, as actual meanings may be influenced by many, even far-fetched, factors. Interestingly, as Kecskés observes, meaning is "the result of interplay between the speaker's private context and the hearer's private context in the actual situational context", and that

private context incorporates core knowledge (tied to prior experience), which is the public part of the private context, and individual-specific knowledge that may not be shared by the other members of the speech community because it is the individualized reflection of the sociocultural context (2015: 119).

This means that, in order to be properly interpreted, the speaker demands special knowledge from the hearer. It is clear that the speaker is personally involved in the prison reality; the speaker uses language particular to prison context, with meanings of individual words and phrases falling into place and creating a fully coherent whole. The hearer, on the other hand, is also a participant of this

context; he or she possesses specific knowledge that could only be acquired as a member of this community. To unravel the sense of the utterance, the hearer activates both types of knowledge Kecskés is discussing, namely the core one and the individual-specific one. In this case, the core knowledge entails prior experience related to a group affiliation, hierarchy (including leadership and membership), the act of dying and death, various social behaviours and different personalities (meaning that people differ from each other and act differently according to circumstances, thus it is the kind of knowledge that we gain through the observation and experience of the surrounding reality). The individual-specific knowledge most notably encompasses prison context, in which inmates soon learn that life is easily lost over matters that would seem trivial outside, that punishment comes quickly and unexpectedly, that inmates are expeditiously included in and excluded from groups, and that the fight for power and control over the institution is unrelenting and perpetual. By combining these two types of knowledge the hearer arrives at the meaning intended by the speaker and can thus relate to the situation being described.

Prisons not only change personalities but also the way language users speak. The speaker uses language that reflects his emotions towards the situation he found himself in. With great probability, the group was once powerful, and now it is decimated. In an attempt to cope with such a situation, the speaker prefers to use figurative over literal language. Here the metaphoric and metonymic language has the illustrative and emotional force: the hearer can imagine the situation each of the members is at, and, thus, sympathize with the speaker, hence the application of 'the principle of pithiness' proves itself useful. A different type of language (i.e. more literal, less complex) would not have identical influence on the hearer. Consider the same example:

I'm the leader of the group/gang I hang out with, but my buddies are disappearing on me. One went nuts and committed suicide, one died in prison, one is very ill and dying. Two are in solitary confinement (one for hiding a cell phone in his anus), one is jacked up on psychiatric medication (he has life without parole), one

is a crazy fool who was sent to the psych unit, one is a lazy slob who got HIV/AIDS, one was taken away in an ambulance after getting beaten up. The only one left is a new first-time offender who's obsessed with a female prison guard. And me.

Certainly, this version appears to be more straightforward, and it does not evoke identical imagery nor it forces a specific response as the figurative one. It is safe to say that the hearer will pass by the information without any thorough consideration. In addition to this, the hearer will not contemplate the context. Therefore, to make a certain impression, the speaker chooses figuration. The language the speaker prefers is the resultant of many factors, i.e. the visual aspect of metaphors and metonymies, their compressed form-meaning relation (providing maximum information in a relatively limited number of words), the easiness of their formation, their accurateness in pinpointing reality, as well as their evaluative force. In addition to this, the prison context provokes specific linguistic behaviours: prisoners are not offered the opportunity to engage in extended conversations, even between the members of the shared group. Therefore, both the speaker and the hearer find themselves in numerous situations in which they are forced by the prison context to speak only briefly. Having this in mind, in order to pass necessary information, they have to resort to short, yet semantically rich language. Consciously used, metaphors and metonymies serve ideal means for comparison and bringing imagery into the dialogue. In addition to this, by bringing together two, even remote, concepts, they have an intensively persuasive nature; they allow, in short time, to understand and relate to the prison context. While it is accurate to note that fluency is a prerequisite in order to fully participate in the prison reality, once the common linguistic ground is achieved, figurative language only further aids the communicative process.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, to conduct a dialogue, the speaker has to take into account several factors, time and information load being among them. Therefore, what

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<sup>8</sup> By this I mean that metaphors and metonymies are extremely rich in meaning being scarce in word-count. Also, they have emotional, associative, and evaluative load.

the speaker uses I call ‘the principle of pithiness’, which acts as a specific mental leap. ‘The principle of pithiness’ assumes that, owing to the nature of the penitentiary, language used in prison reality is terse and vigorously expressive. Both the speaker and the hearer have limited time and resources to exchange necessary information, hence figurative language is chosen over the more literal counterpart.

#### 4. Conclusions

The context of the penitentiary intensively weighs upon all spheres of human life (physical, mental, emotional), therefore one of the functions of prison language is coping with those difficult situations that the prisoners are daily exposed to. Meaning-making in the prison situation may even reveal a greater degree of embodiment and context-dependence than is the case in other social contexts. Having that in mind, any linguistic analysis should integrate investigation of metaphorical and metonymical meaning-making with a thorough account of context. The highly complex prison context demands a special type of vernacular, one that would respond to the high demands of its users. Such a language should be rich in content but economical in form, strong and abrupt, mild and tranquil, or funny and relaxing whenever such a need arises. It seems that these demands are met by ‘the principle of pithiness’, which makes use of metaphors and metonymies, as they are emphatic and colourful, yet economical at the same time.

Both the production and the comprehension of metaphors and metonymies in prison slang can only be legitimately accounted for with a solid and systematic analysis of the prison context. Having that in mind, the current paper spoke, after Kövecses (2015), for integrating linguistic analysis of metaphorical and metonymical meaning-making with a thorough account of context, which, in the prison reality, forces itself into the communicative practices of prisoners. Only by relating to the overall structure of the penitentiary can prison slang be successfully studied. It is the context that forces itself into the dialogue; it is the context that controls the dialogue and

is controlled by its participants; and it is the context that alters the linguistic behaviour of the speakers.

It would seem that prisoners have time on their hands, and that they should not experience a shortage of time to conduct conversations. However, it is to the contrary: they are limited by the prison walls, their cells, and the daily organization of their prison lives. With successful information exchange on their mind, prisoners resort to the kind of language that makes it plausible. They resort to language that is rich in meaning, emotions, and imagery, at the same time economical in form. Having that in mind, prisoners apply 'the principle of pithiness'; they choose figuration as the type of language that serves all purposes mentioned above. It is this principle that allows them to speak their minds without unnecessarily arousing suspicion or interest as to the content. Owing to the principle, prisoners can express themselves in the way they feel most natural with; they can live the vision expressed by figurative language; and they are able to convey information the best way there is in the context.

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