

English Slang Etymology Revisited: From Lowlife Origins to Highfalutin Extravaganza

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The present paper provides a detailed etymological account of two hypotheses accounting for the formation of the linguistic sense of the word slang in English lowlife milieu, named the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis and the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis. The English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis, in turn, is found to constitute four possible patterns, differing in whether the linguistic sense of slang constitutes an elaboration of its previous senses as 1) 'a piece of land'; 2) 'a cast or a pitch'; 3) 'a deceptive practice' or, by extension, 'an underworld occupation'; or 4) 'to abuse, to banter with'. The obtained etymological results confirm the tenability of the first three patterns of the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis. Conversely, the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis proves linguistically unsubstantiated, while the fourth pattern of the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis is found to be both morphologically and chronologically erroneous.

Keywords: English slang, slang etymology, Romani, Anglo-Romani, (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis, English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis.

1 Introduction

Throughout its chequered history, both glorious and ignominious, English slang has evolved from a peripheral sociolect majorly neglected by mainstream linguists until the late 20th century and extensively condemned by the upper class into a trendy lect generously publicized by the mainstream media and admired by the youth the world over as the ultimate mouthpiece of social protest. Yet, the relative scarcity of slang research in the 17th through mid-20th centuries (excluding English slang lexicography; for more detail, see Coleman 2004a, 2004b, 2008, and 2010) does not imply its subsidiary place in English society. Conversely, the determinants of slang development, propagation, and diversification were the strong class divide in London as opposed to smaller localities alongside the ever-increasing role of etiquette and language as class indicators from the 16th century onward (Coleman 2012: 143). Thus, the “rags-to-riches” rise of a once-marginalized language phenomenon not only proves its viability and prospectivity over time but equally accounts for its terminological vagueness and etymological obscurity. It is the latter issue, i.e. the etymology of the term *slang* in its linguistic sense, that constitutes the focus of this research.

Prior to discussing the complex evolution of the linguistic sense of *slang*, a brief explanation thereof is logically due. In essence, the word *slang* possesses four linguistic senses, which have consecutively complemented one another. According to “The Oxford English Dictionary”, the earliest linguistic sense was “the special vocabulary used as a secret language by thieves, beggars, itinerant pedlars, etc.”, first documented in 1756 (OED, s.a.). Later, starting from 1790, the ambit of *slang* extended to incorporate “formal or technical language specific to a particular group of people; the jargon of a specified class, profession, interest group, etc.” (ibid). Finally, the chronologically and semantically closely related third and fourth linguistic senses absorbed the two previous ones. The third sense, “words and phrases which are very colloquial or informal, typically consisting of coinages, arbitrary modifications of

existing words, playful or colourful figures of speech, coarse or offensive words, etc.”, was first recorded in 1771, whereas the latter, “a variety or style of speech or writing characterized by the use of such words and phrases, or by other features regarded as nonstandard”, dates back to 1797 (ibid). Yet, the main problem was that the two latest (and broadest) senses did not supersede their “predecessors” but coexisted alongside both of them. This eventually led to what was dubbed “the current semantic paradoxicality of slang, which consists in a violation of a type-of relationship between the hyperonym (colloquial language) and its two hyponyms (argot/cant and jargon), since the three are simultaneously embraced by one and the same umbrella term” (Borys 2023b: 6-7). This paradoxicality, which has survived into the 21st century and still prevents slang researchers from reaching a consensus regarding the definition of *slang*, can be systemized as a chronohierarchy: 1) cryptoelect → 2) (cryptoelect +) professiolect → 3) (cryptoelect + professiolect +) lect (Borys & Garmash 2019: 53-54). Therefore, since the sequential accumulation of the four senses of *slang* in question has already been accurately documented and chronologized, in this paper I focus on the etymology of the earliest linguistic sense, i.e. that identifying *slang* as *argot/cant*, whose emergence has been triggering heated academic debate for almost two centuries now.

Providing an adequate and unarbitrary definition of slang is complicated even further by the fact that the actual difference between *argot/cant*, *jargon*, and *slang* is frequently viewed as not static but dynamic, largely owing to its context dependence. In this regard, Eble notes that “slang cannot be defined independent of its functions and use” (Eble 1996: 12). Furthermore, as rightfully claimed by Coleman, “the same words might represent a facetious witticism in one setting and a deadly challenge in another” (Coleman 2012: 151-152). This could be exemplified by what I would figuratively term the “evaluative U-turn” of the lexical item *nigga* in the African American setting, which rose from a derogatory exonym coined and employed by racist Caucasians to a word with blurred evaluative connotation, which can be positive, negative, or neutral when used as an endonym by African Americans: “If someone says, “That’s my nigga” or an elongated “Myyyyyy nigga,” then that is positive. If someone says, “Fuck that nigga,” then that is negative. Neutral would be something like, “Niggas is wildin.” That could refer to people in general, Black people, white people. I have friends and family who apply “nigga” to a variety of people, regardless of race.” (Mays 2021: 195). According to Smitherman, the word *nigger*, alongside its phonological allolex *nigguh*, possesses at least four distinct connotations to African Americans, expressing personal affection or endearment; cultural negritude; disapproval of a person’s actions; neutral reference (Smitherman 1977: 62). In her later book, Smitherman arrives at the same conclusions that “the impact of words depends on who is saying what to whom, under what conditions, and with what intentions” and that “meanings reside in the speakers of language” (Smitherman 2006: 51). Her approach is fully upheld by Adams, who argues that slang is not a mere lexical phenomenon but rather “a linguistic practice rooted in social needs and behaviors” (Adams 2009: 6). Elaborating upon the sociolinguistic status of the substandard item *mongo*, the linguist concludes as follows: “If art thieves strip your walls of mongo, *mongo* is argot; if sanitation workers pick up mongo at the curb, then *mongo* is jargon; when you and I talk about rummaging for mongo because we just read Ted Botha’s book and we’re all about the next big thing, then *mongo* is slang. Slang, jargon, and argot aren’t essential characteristics of a word; one or another of them applies depending on who uses the word, in what situation, for what reasons.” (ibid: 9). Therefore, in present-day English, the difference between the three sociolects boils down to pure pragmatics.

Up to the present, the exact origins of English slang have remained disputable owing to a number of factors. Firstly, slang has long been relatively sparsely represented in both academic and non-academic literature (excluding fiction). The determinants of the scanty coverage of slang in academic literature (until the late 20th century, except for lexicographic works) include “the long-standing marginalization of slang studies”, “the perduring prevalence of prescriptivism over descriptivism in linguistics” as well as “the vast underestimation of the impact of slang on the formation of national languages” (Borys 2023a: 81). The motivation behind insufficient non-academic slang documentation in its beginnings has to do with the fact that, initially, the sociolect was exclusively produced and reproduced by the underworld, which resulted in its public stigmatization to the same extent as its speakers’ activities. As a result, slang items were largely seen as an exotic and cryptic “seasoning” interlarding narration and animating disreputable characters’ language rather than “a full-course meal” in its own right. In the 18th century, for instance, slang was largely condemned as mordant corruption of standard English or as unregulated and unstandardized speech butchering English, which, in turn, gave life to such scathing labels as “perverted language”, “conversational mimicry”, “the conversation of fools”, and “low, vulgar unmeaning language”, to name but a few (Lighter 2005: 227). Secondly, when the first record of *slang* in its linguistic sense was made in the mid-17th century, namely in 1756 (Lighter 2005: 228; OED, s.a.), the only primary documentation technology available was writing. Consequently, if a word or phrase was not thought of as fit for being perpetuated on paper for any reason, whether its nonstandard or substandard nature or else its reference to a taboo concept, it failed to be documented altogether, interring both its historical background and cultural charge to never be retrieved again. The social pressure was so intense that even the lexicographer Francis Grose, who had compiled the first recognized dictionary of English slang entitled “Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue” in 1785 (Grose 2004), thought it appropriate to exclude, bowdlerize, or redefine certain of his entries in the second edition published in 1788, with a number of words preserved handwritten in his own working copy, only to fortuitously pass into the hands of a London bookseller in 2013 (Décharné 2016: 48). Thirdly, what complicates the determination of the accurate etymology of *slang* is the coexistence of its multiple obscure senses, which end up blurring the boundaries between polysemy and homonymy (see OED, s.a.), as well as of several (false) cognates in other languages that English has come into close contact with, such as Dutch, French, or Norwegian (see Green 2016: 5-6). Fourthly, English possesses a number of etymological doublets (or rather multiplets) of *slang*, whose derivational and semantic interaction with the latter remain equally unclear.

Consequently, the bicentennial trends towards the marginalization, stigmatization, and ignorance of slang have largely contributed to its obscurity, which, in turn, has resulted in the emergence of under a dozen competing hypotheses accounting for the etymology of *slang*. Among these, I would like to focus my attention on two hypotheses, which, for the sake of convenience, will be referred to as *the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis* and *the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis*.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide a detailed etymological account of the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis and the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis in their integrity and complexity. In particular, the present research seeks to address four main research questions, arranged in a logical sequence:

- 1) systemizing the heterogeneous linguistic evidence relatable to the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis and the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis;

2) structuring the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis as a complex unity of interrelated yet distinct etymological patterns;

3) developing a comprehensive typology of the patterns constituting the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis.

2 Previous research

Initially, the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis and the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis constituted one vague supposition since, socially, both Anglo-Romani and English cant users were largely seen as fringe groups speaking “distorted” English. To make matters even more complicated, nowadays there is no historical evidence capable of corroborating or disproving the fact that, on the one hand, English cant was extensively spoken by the English Romani, or, on the other, English cant users actively employed Anglo-Romani in their milieu. Moreover, the scope of linguistic interaction between Anglo-Romani and English cant remains equally undefined.

Retrospectively, the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis assumes that the English term *slang* originates from the “titular” Anglo-Romani language of the Romani subgroup inhabiting what is now known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which constitutes an English-based mixed language exploiting lexical and syntactic elements from Romani. Conversely, the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis takes it that the linguistic sense of *slang* is supposed to stem from a sociolect (presumably, English cant) spoken by beggars, hawkers, itinerant showmen, thieves, vagabonds, and other socially stigmatized groups.

Despite lacking in conclusive evidence, which would imply an obvious need for further research, the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis is frequently mentioned but, at the same time, scarcely investigated by slang researchers, etymologists, and lexicographers. The speculation that slang may have Romani etymology is reported, whether supported or rejected, by Green (2016: 3-8), Hotten (1864: 234), Liberman (2008: 191, 196), Lighter (2005: 229), Maitland (1891: 247), Mattiello (2008: 34-35), Partridge (2015: 2), Platt Jr. (in Liberman 2008: 191), Sampson (1898: 85-86), Skeat (1888: 560), Taylor (1873: 308), and Whitney (1895: 5683).

Although the first recognized dictionary of English slang, “Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue” by Grose (2004), dates back to 1785 and is hailed as “a declaration in favour of free speech, and a gauntlet thrown down against official censorship, moralists and the easily offended” (Décharné 2016: 47), it does not provide any etymological information in the *slang* entry. In essence, *slang* and *canting* are cross-referenced, the former being simply defined as “cant language” (Grose 2004: 260) whilst the latter being ascribed the sense “a kind of gibberish used by thieves and gypsies called likewise pedlars French, the slang” (ibid: 56). Yet, the pragmatic association with the Romani in no wise implies its etymological deducibility from their language.

The first lexicographer to assume the Romani origin of *slang* was Hotten: “*Gipsy*, SLANG, the secret language of the Gypsies, synonymous with GIBBERISH, another Gipsy word” (Hotten 1864: 234). However, the scholar did not provide any reference to Romani or Anglo-Romani evidence in order to corroborate his claim. The hypothesis was subsequently reaffirmed by Maitland in his “The American Slang Dictionary” (Maitland 1891: 247), the etymon missing likewise.

The first etymologist to academically substantiate the Romani etymology of *slang* was Taylor, who concluded that the linguistic term was transferred to English from a sociolect shared by the Romani, thieves, hawkers, and itinerant showmen, its initial referents being roadside strips of wasteland where these socially stigmatized groups would make their encampments. To underpin his conjecture, Taylor equally drew parallels between *slang* and *flash* as the two sociolect names deriving from place names, a deappellative one (from a strip of land called *slang*) and a deonymic one (from a village called *Flash*) respectively (Taylor 1873: 308).

Taylor's assumption was complemented by criticisms by Skeat regarding the sheer improbability of referring to a lect as a camping-place or a travelling-show (Skeat 1888: 560). Instead, the researcher proposed an alternative etymology, which was pragmatically associated with the Romani but, at the same time, not necessarily deducible from their language. The linguist surmised that “*a slang* (from the verb *sling*, to cast) may have meant ‘a cast’ or ‘a pitch;’ for both *cast* and *pitch* are used to mean a camping-place, or a place where a travelling-show is exhibited; and, indeed, Halliwell noted that ‘a narrow slip of ground’ is also called a *slinget*.” (ibid).

Conversely, Platt Jr. admitted the possibility of using the name of a place to designate a language spoken there, substantiating his argument with the etymology of the language name *Urdu*, whose original form *Urdu-zabān*, literally ‘camp language’, was subsequently shortened to *Urdu*, the phrase meaning being fully condensed in the new form. Another important detail furnished by the etymologist was the idea of deriving the linguistic sense of *slang* from the base *slang patter* instead of from the earlier non-linguistic senses of *slang* (in Liberman 2008: 191), which, therefore, identifies the immediate derivation pattern as elliptization instead of semantic change.

The hypothesis was finalized by Liberman, who not only highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of his predecessors' assumptions but also formulated the following etymological reconstruction: *slang* ‘a piece of land’ → ‘the territory used by tramps for their wanderings’ → ‘their camps’ → ‘the language used in these camps’ (Liberman 2008: 191). Even more importantly, the scholar retrieved a valuable yet previously overlooked article on slang etymology entitled “The Word Slang as a Field Name” by Sampson, published in 1898 in a local periodical called “Chester Courant” (ibid: 196). Although the research primarily reflected the author's personal observations, including his first-hand experience of mastering Anglo-Romani, and lacked the key attributes expected of present-day academic articles, it contained several linguistically sound ideas, which, more than a century later, Liberman would qualify as “the first consistent explanation of the origin of *slang*” (ibid). In summary, Sampson's outlook on the etymology of the word was as follows:

1) the term *slang* is of neither Romani (which the author refers to as “deep Gypsy” to differentiate it from what is now called Anglo-Romani) nor Shelta (a secret mixed language based on Irish vocabulary and English syntax currently existing as four varieties, namely English Shelta, Irish Gaelic Shelta, Manx Gaelic Shelta, and Scottish Gaelic Shelta, and spoken by the traditionally itinerant ethnic group known as the Irish Travellers (Velupillai 2015: 380-381)) origin;

2) the word *slang* is found in the cant used by itinerant non-Romani hawkers and van dwellers in three senses: a) *slang* [*the prads*] literally means ‘field [the horses]’, i.e. turn them loose for the night in some farmer's field; b) ‘a hawker's licence’; c) ‘any racy colloquialism, formerly synonymous with *cant*’;

3) among the three cant senses above, the etymonic one is that designating a field, the other two constituting its derivatives; thus, the phrase *slang patter* originally referred to ‘field talk’ (Sampson 1898: 85-86).

Finally, after a meticulous analysis of three major hypotheses accounting for the etymology of the term *slang*, Liberman sided with Sampson’s assumptions, the only point of disagreement concerning the statement that *slang* in the sense of ‘a field’ was an Old English word.

In the meanwhile, the hypothesis has drawn certain well-deserved criticism throughout its evolution.

The first and preeminent controversy concerns no attested Romani etymon ever to have been found (Green 2016: 5; Whitney 1895: 5683). Disproving Hotten’s unconfirmed claim regarding the Romani origin of *slang*, Partridge emphasizes that the word “was merely adopted by the Gypsies” (2015: 2). Sampson equally refers the slang researchers to Pott, Paspatis, and Smart and Crofton to underpin his statement that the word is not of Romani origin (Sampson 1898: 85). Indeed, neither “Die Zigeuner in Europa und Asien” by Pott (1844), nor “Vocabulary” in “Memoir on the Language of the Gypsies, As Now Used in the Turkish Empire” by Paspatis (1863), nor “Gypsy-English Vocabulary” in “The Dialect of the English Gypsies” by Smart and Crofton (1875) contain any mentions of *slang* or its cognates in Romani or Anglo-Romani.

The second “bone of contention” concerns Sampson’s unsubstantiated claim that “Nor, again, is the word ‘slang’ Shelta; that is to say, it does not belong to the ancient jargon fabricated many centuries ago from Old Irish, and which is the peculiar tongue of the Tinkers and other degenerate descendants of the old Irish ceards or metal-working castes.” (Sampson 1898: 85). The assumption is partially disproved by the evidence supplied by Macalister, who lists the word *slang* in the sense of ‘a chain’ in his Shelta-English “Vocabulary” (Macalister 2014: 213). The word, however, appears to be a borrowing from English cant, where the senses of ‘a watch-chain’, ‘a chain of any kind’, and ‘fetters, leg-irons’ were first documented in 1812 (OED, s.a.). A concomitant factor contributing to the assimilation of the word by Shelta speakers was the presence of an Irish false cognate *sreang* originally referring to a string or cord, but subsequently used to designate a wire or a chain. Therefore, the word *slang* did exist in Shelta but was, obviously, not of Shelta origin.

The third challenge stems from the fact that the absence of a Romani etymon rules out Romani as the donor language but does not dismiss the idea that the word *slang* might have penetrated the Anglo-Romani language from another language (for instance, English), possibly with a different meaning, only to be subsequently reborrowed by English in its new, linguistic, sense (such as Japanese first borrowing the English word *animation* and then English reborrowing the shortened Japanese word *anime* in a new sense). It is for this reason too as well as the close social interaction between the Romani and the other socially stigmatized fringe groups that I consider the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis in conjunction with the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis.

3 Methodology

The methodological approach taken in this study majorly relies upon etymological analysis coupled with onomasiological and semasiological analyses, and, to a lesser extent, phonological and cognitive analyses.

Etymological analysis is employed to trace the evolution of the linguistic sense of *slang* step by step from its Indo-European etymon. Alongside establishing the ultimate as well as intermediate etyma, the etymological multiplets of *slang* are also explored as the potential bearers of the original sense, which proves crucial when the latter was partially retained in one multiplet but completely lost in the others.

Onomasiological analysis is utilized to identify the exact motivations behind and mechanisms of deriving *slang* as a linguistic term from its older senses ‘a piece of land’, ‘a cast or a pitch’, ‘a deceptive practice’ (or, by extension, ‘an underworld occupation’), or ‘to abuse, to banter with’.

Semasiological analysis is applied to determine, catalogue, and hierarchize the senses of different levels constituting the diverse senses of *slang* and its etyma, which, in turn, allows for concluding the higher probability of one semantic shift over the other.

Phonological analysis, both general and comparative, is utilized to corroborate or refute the assumption that initial *sl*-clusters are characteristic of native Romani and/or Para-Romani vocabulary, which, if proving realistic, might imply the Romani origin of the word *slang*. In this context, Para-Romani is juxtaposed with Romani, the former representing a set of varieties originating from the latter (Bakker 2020: 353).

Cognitive analysis is used to establish the traditional conceptual metaphors accounting for the derivability of the word *slang* as ‘a long narrow strip of land’ from the Old English *slingan* ‘to wind, to coil’ via the Middle English *slyngen* with the same sense.

The methodology adopted in this paper roughly correlates with the research questions enumerated in the introduction and includes five stages:

- 1) assembling the existing language evidence from English, Romani, and Para-Romani attributable to either the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis or the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis;
- 2) organizing the evidence collected within each of the two hypotheses for convenience of further research;
- 3) establishing the detailed etymological patterns and, if necessary, subpatterns underlying each hypothesis;
- 4) verifying the correspondence of each hypothesis to the cultural, historical, and social evidence;
- 5) delimiting the least controversial and, consequently, most plausible of the hypotheses and / or their specific patterns under analysis.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis

With regard to the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis, *slang* is deemed to stem from a certain etymon either in Romani, or in Anglo-Romani, which was used from the 16th century until the 19th century throughout what is now referred to as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Yet, this supposition proves untenable for several reasons.

Firstly, the Romani etymon of *slang* has never been identified (Whitney 1895: 5683). Borrow’s “Romano Lavo-Lil: Word Book of the Romany; Or, English Gypsy Language” (Borrow 1905) as well as Matras’s appendix lists (Matras 2010: 178-231) of Anglo-Romani words and the underlying Romani roots (the latter being referred to by the author as “Romani

predecessor expressions” (ibid: 218)) contain as few as three potential etyma of *slang*, namely *lang* (ibid: 211, 230), *lang(o)* (Borrow 1905: 41), and *lenge* (Matras 2010: 223), which, however, are to be immediately discarded upon initial onomasiological analysis. The first item *lang* means ‘tall’ and, according to Matras, constitutes a borrowing from the German *lang* ‘long’ (ibid). Yet, the word is more likely to have been borrowed by Anglo-Romani from Middle English, where *lang* designated both ‘long’ and ‘tall’ (Mayhew & Skeat 1888: 129). The second etymon-to-be, *lang(o)* ‘lame’, constitutes a borrowing from the Hindi लंगड़ा (*laṅgarā*) ‘limp, lame’. From the present-day colloquial English perspective, this sense might be regarded as potentially associated with slang in that the latter represents “lame”, i.e. imperfect, language. However, both the source Hindi and target Anglo-Romani lexemes do not possess any figurative senses, referring to lameness as a physical disability only. The third lexeme, *lenge*, designates the personal pronoun “they” in the dative case. As a result, none of the items above is qualifiable as the etymon of the English *slang*.

Secondly, phonological analysis reveals that Matras’s Anglo-Romani lists do not feature any initial *sl*-clusters (see Matras 2010). Borrow’s dictionary contains one lexeme beginning in *sl*-, *slo*/*slum*, which means ‘to follow, to trace, to track’ and is linked to the Russian verb with the same sense *следовать* (*sliedovat*) (Borrow 1905: 60). It is disputable whether the two words are etymologically related considering the discrepancy in the root-final consonants /-m/ and /-d/ (cf Proto-Indo-European **sleyd^h-*). Surprisingly, a word with a similar form, *chām*, and virtually identical sense, ‘to accompany’ (Golap Chandra Borua 1920: 206), is found in the non-Indo-European (Tai-)Ahom language. Although Early Romani was an Indo-European language of Indo-Aryan ancestry, the hypothesis cannot be completely ruled out. The fact is that the now-dead (Tai-)Ahom language once representing the Kra–Dai family was spoken in what is now known as the Indian state of Assam from the 13th century to the 18th century, only to become completely supplanted by Assamese. Consequently, the contact between the two languages is not impossible if we consider their territorial vicinity.

Furthermore, a larger-scale phonological and semantic investigation upon other Para-Romani language data corroborates the statement that the initial *sl*-cluster is not typical of native Romani vocabulary and, if detected, is part of a lexical borrowing from **(1) Slavic** or **(2) Germanic languages**, e.g.

(1) in Austrian Lovari: *slobodo* ‘free’ and its derivatives (see Cech & Heinschink 2002: 44), possibly via the Romanian *slobod* ‘free’ (cf Proto-Slavic **svobodà* ‘freedom’);

(1) in Burgenland Romani: *slavitiko* ‘Slavic’, *Slovakija* ‘Slovakia’, *Slovenija* ‘Slovenia’, and their derivatives (see Halwachs & Ambrosch 2002: 95) (cf Proto-Slavic **slověninъ* ‘Slav’); *sluga* ‘farmhand’ (ibid) (cf Proto-Slavic **slūgà* ‘servant, attendant’); *schlesinka* ‘spleen’ (ibid: 100) (cf Proto-Slavic **selzenъ* ‘spleen’); *schliva* ‘plum’ and its derivatives (ibid) (cf Proto-Slavic **slīva* ‘plum’);

(1) in Hungarian Romani: *szlábón* ‘weak; thin’ and *szlibongyászni* ‘to thin’ (Géza 2000: 90) (cf Proto-Slavic **slābъ* ‘weak’); *szlobodoj* ‘free’ (ibid), possibly via the Romanian *slobod* ‘free’ and reinforced by the Hungarian *szabad* ‘free’ (cf Proto-Slavic **svobodà* ‘freedom’); *szlugá* ‘servant, attendant’ (ibid), reinforced by the Hungarian *szolga* ‘servant’ (cf Proto-Slavic **slūgà* ‘servant, attendant’);

(1) in Kalderash Romani: *slábo* ‘lean’ or ‘weak’ and its derivatives (see Demeter & Demeter 1990: 269) (cf Proto-Slavic **slābъ* ‘weak’); *slóbodo* ‘free’ or ‘may’ and its derivatives (ibid) (cf Proto-Slavic **svobodà* ‘freedom’); *slúga* ‘servant’ (ibid) (cf Proto-Slavic **slūgà* ‘servant, attendant’);

(1) in Russian Lovari: *слободо* (*slobodo*) ‘free’ or ‘may’ and its derivatives (see Tsvetkov 2001: 77) (cf Proto-Slavic **svoboda* ‘freedom’);

(2) in Austrian Lovari: *šlajferi* ‘grinder’ (Cech & Heinschink 2002: 47) (cf German *Schleifer*);

(2) in Burgenland Romani: *schlobaunk* ‘slaughtering block’ (Halwachs & Ambrosch 2002: 100) (cf German *Schlachtbank*).

It is noteworthy that, in the context of the Para-Romanis used in German-speaking areas (namely Austrian Lovari and Burgenland Romani), initial *sl*-clusters are analyzed on a par with initial *schl/šl*-clusters on account of the development of the Old High German *sk* to the Middle High German *sch* and the subsequent replacement of the cluster-initial /s/ with /ʃ/ (Howell 2002: 42; Kokkelmans 2020: 226-227).

Thirdly, the fact that the word *slang* proves unattested in the Romani language is equally confirmed by Sampson: “As a student of Romani, may I point out that whatever the word ‘slang’ may be, it is certainly not of Gypsy origin. It is not found in a single English or continental Gypsy vocabulary, nor have I ever heard it used by Gypsies, even as a loan word.” (Sampson 1898: 85).

Therefore, the (Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis has no conclusive evidence to draw upon, since no Romani or Anglo-Romani etymon exists. In addition, the word-initial *sl*-cluster proves unattested in European Para-Romanis, as confirmed by evidence from overall six mixed languages (Anglo-Romani, Austrian Lovari, Burgenland Romani, Hungarian Romani, Kalderash Romani, and Russian Lovari).

4.2 English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis

As far as the English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis is concerned, the word *slang* is supposed to have undergone a string of semantic shifts, which constitute four patterns, deriving from the following initial senses: (1) ‘a piece of land’; (2) ‘a cast or a pitch’; (3) ‘a deceptive practice’ (or, by extension, ‘an underworld occupation’); or (4) ‘to abuse, to banter with’.

(1) The first English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis pattern derives the linguistic sense of *slang* from the sense ‘a long narrow strip of land’ in compliance with the sequence best phrased by Liberman: *slang* ‘a piece of land’ → *slang* ‘the territory used by tramps for their wanderings’ → *slang* ‘their camps’ → *slang* ‘the language used in these camps’ (Liberman 2008: 191).

To begin with, according to “The Oxford English Dictionary”, the word *slang* (in some dialects *slanget/slanket*, *sling*, or *slinget/slinket*) referring to ‘a long narrow strip of land’ was first documented in 1610: “There runneth forth into the sea a certaine shelve or slang, like unto an outthrust tongue.” (OED, s.a.). In the meantime, the dictionary editors identify the origin of the lexeme as obscure, which I venture to question for two reasons, formal and semantic. Firstly, as far as the form is concerned, one of its allomorphs fully coincides with the Modern English reflex *sling* of the Old English *slingan* and the Middle English *slyngen* ‘to wind, to coil’ of Indo-European origin. Another exact match is the Old English *slang*, a first and third person singular past form of *slingan*. Secondly, with regard to the meaning, the senses ‘long’, ‘narrow’, and ‘strip’ cognitively correlate with the visual image of a snake, one of whose basic physical characteristics is the ability to coil. It is equally corroborated by etymological evidence from Old High German, where *slango* meant ‘a snake’ (Hellquist 1922: 783). Thinking of a path in terms of a snake (conceptual metaphor A PATH IS A SNAKE) is commonplace both in English (as in the collocations *a serpentine path*, *a path slithers*, *a path snakes*, or *a path twists*)

as well as in other languages (for instance, the Latin borrowing *serpens* ‘a snake’ in Slavic languages, namely the Czech *serpentina*, the Polish *serpentina*, the Russian *серпантин* (*serpantin*), the Serbo-Croatian *serpentina*, the Slovak *serpentina*, and the Ukrainian *серпантин* (*serpantin*), as well as in Germanic languages, namely the German *Serpentine* and the Swedish *serpentinväg*, all referring to a winding mountain road). Therefore, the formal and semantic evidence collected gives ample grounds for maintaining that *slang* referring to a piece of land ultimately derives from the Proto-Indo-European **slenk-* or **sleng-* ‘to wind’ (Pokorny 2007: 2776).

Taylor was the first scholar to have considered the social factor behind the semantic development of *slang* designating a lect: he drew a fine analogy with how thieves’ cant *flash*, in a similar vein, developed its contemporary linguistic sense: “In a wild district of Derbyshire, between Macclesfield and Buxton, there is a village called Flash, surrounded by unenclosed land. The squatters on these commons, with their wild gipsy habits, travelled about the neighbourhood from fair to fair, using a slang dialect of their own. They were called the Flash men, and their dialect Flash talk; and it is not difficult to see the stages by which the word FLASH has reached its present signification. A slang is a narrow strip of waste land by the roadside, such as those which are chosen by gipsies for their encampments. To be “out on the slang,” in the lingo used by thieves and gipsies, means to travel about the country as a hawker, encamping by night on the roadside slangs. A travelling show is also called a slang. It is easy to see how the term SLANG was transferred to the language spoken by hawkers and itinerant showmen.” (Taylor 1873: 308). However, as the exact sequence of the semantic shifts was not identified, Taylor’s hypothesis came under certain reasonable criticism in that it remained unclear which one of the several proposed items (a strip of land, hawkers’ temporary encampment, or a travelling show) served as the immediate etymon of the linguistic sense of *slang* as well as which exact semantic derivation pattern was involved.

Commenting on Taylor’s assumption, Skeat observes that “surely no one would dream of calling thieves’ language a *travelling-show*, or a *camping-place*” (Skeat 1888: 560). Yet, Platt Jr. counters Skeat’s argument concerning the etymological and semantic incongruence between the senses referring to a camping-place or a travelling-show, on the one hand, and the lect spoken there, on the other. As an expert on what would now be arbitrarily referred to as exotic languages, Platt Jr. provided the language name *Urdu*, which represents a shortening of *Urdu-zabān*, literally translated as ‘camp language’, subsequently shortened to *Urdu* ‘(lit.) camp’, to instantiate his stance: “This curtailment of the phrase rather increases than diminishes the analogy with the English, since Fielding and all other early users of the term have *slang patter* instead of *slang*, which thus appears to be an abbreviation of same nature as *Urdu*. We cannot... call a language a camp, but we can call it camp patter.”, as cited by Liberman (2008: 191). Indeed, *urdū* initially referred to the royal camp of Shāhjahānābād (Hakala 2016: 97), currently known as Old Delhi. In this respect, Hakala highlights the competition going on “between, on the one hand, *reḡhtah* as a linguistic register functioning within the limited social domain of poetic composition and, on the other, the *zabān-i urdū* (language of [the] Urdū), that is to say, the spoken language associated with particular places like Shāhjahānābād and other centers aspiring to replicate the courtly culture of the Mughal capital.” (ibid: 96), which, from a modern sociolinguistic perspective, can be reinterpreted as a clash between two lects: a poetic koiné dialect and a spoken koiné dialect (or sociolect, considering its qualification as a courtly jargon by Hakala (ibid: 97)). Therefore, Platt Jr.’s evidence clearly traces the pattern underlying the semantic shift from a place to a lect spoken in that place, with ellipsis accounting for the

retention of the phrase-initial subordinate element only: cf *Urdu-zabān* → *Urdu* and *slang patter* → *slang*.

The phenomenon of ellipsis, i.e. the deletion of a segment of the original form of a phrase or sentence, with the original meaning being fully retained in the new form, is not uncommon in English slang. Recent coinages comply with several derivation patterns, including:

- 1) “adjective+noun → adjective” (e.g. *regular* ‘a skateboarder who skates with the left foot to the front’ from *regular-footed skateboarder*);
- 2) “noun¹+noun² → noun¹” (e.g. *cheesecutter* ‘a wedge-shaped hat’ from *cheesecutter cap*);
- 3) “noun¹+noun² → noun²” (e.g. *dew* ‘rum that has been manufactured illegally’ from *mountain dew*);
- 4) “numeral+noun → numeral” (e.g. *five* ‘five pounds’ from *five pounds*);
- 5) “verbal phrase → [constituent] noun” (e.g. *egg* ‘to perform poorly’ from *lay an egg*);
- 6) “verbal phrase → [constituent] verb” (e.g. *tickle* ‘to prime an engine’ from *tickle the pot*) (Borys 2021: 17).

It is the second pattern, namely “noun¹+noun² → noun¹”, that underlies the ellipitization of *slang patter* to *slang*.

Indeed, the first record of the phrase *slang patter* dates back to 1758: “(...) the master who teaches them should be a man well versed in the cant language, commonly called the *Slang Patter* (...)” (OED, s.a.). The phrase equally proves to be the first unambiguous mention of slang in its language-related sense, since, depending upon Green’s claim that such senses as ‘a line of work’ or ‘to cheat, to swindle, to defraud’ were documented before 1756, namely both in 1741 (Green (2016: 2)), the earliest generally recognized record of *slang* in 1756 may refer not to a lect of itself but alternatively to a criminal line of work or a swindling practice, based on the contextual analysis of the extract from William Toldervy’s novel “History of Two Orphans”: “Thomas Throw had been upon the town, knew the slang well.” (OED, s.a.). This assumption is also underpinned by Lighter (2005: 228) as well as the editors of “The Oxford English Dictionary”, who remark that “the reference may be to customs or habits rather than language” (OED, s.a.).

One final question concerns how the Old English *slingan* ‘to wind, to creep’, which had lost its original sense and become *slyngen* ‘to sling, to hurl, to throw away’ in Middle English, reclaimed its initial meaning in Modern English, given that the original seme referring to gliding motion was retained as peripheral only in two present-day senses of the verb *sling*, which are quite rare, though: ‘to advance, walk, etc., with long or swinging strides’ and ‘(of a millstone) to swing from side to side’ (ibid). The initial sense ‘to wind, to creep’ was majorly relegated in Modern English to two etymological multiplets of *sling*: 1) *slink* ‘to move, go, walk, etc. in a quiet, stealthy, or sneaking manner’ and 2) *slinge* ‘to slink, to skulk, to lounge, to loaf’ (ibid). Yet, the dialect word *slinge* was first documented in 1747, which postdates the first record of *slang* as ‘a long narrow strip of land’ by more than a century. Therefore, in order to explain the etymology of *slang* in Modern English, it is necessary to examine the evolution of *slink*.

The etymological multiplets *sling* and *slink* were first documented in Old English as *slingan* ‘to wind, to creep’ and *slincan* ‘to creep’ respectively. The split of the common etymon might have occurred as early as in Proto-Germanic, considering the reconstructed forms **slingan* or **slinkan* with the sense ‘to slink’ (Kroonen 2013: 455). The Old English *slincan* fully retained its sense in the Middle English *slynken*, whence the Modern English sense ‘a

strip of land' might have developed. It is equally very likely that the two etymological multiplets interchanged their forms in Old and Middle English, given the coexistence of the array of synthetic grammatical forms, the spelling irregularity, and the lack of a national language standard.

Consequently, piecing the first English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis pattern together, the full etymological reconstruction is as follows: Proto-Indo-European **slenk-* / **sleng-* 'to wind, to creep' → Proto-Germanic **slingan* / **slinkan* 'to wind, to creep' → Old English *slingan* 'to wind, to creep' ~ *slincan* 'to creep, to crawl' → Middle English *slyngen* 'to sling, to hurl' ~ *slynken* 'to creep, to crawl' → Modern English *slang* / *slanget* / *slanget* / *sling* / *slinget* / *slinket* 'a long narrow strip of land' → Modern English *slang patter* 'a sociolect spoken on encampments by the roadside' → Modern English *slang* 'a sociolect spoken on encampments by the roadside' → Modern English *slang* 'any substandard sociolect'.

(2) The second English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis pattern derives the language-related sense of *slang* from the sense 'a cast / a pitch' in compliance with the pattern *slang* 'a cast / a pitch' → *slang* 'a camping-place / a travelling-show place' → *slang* 'the lect spoken in this place' (based on Skeat 1888: 560).

Despite criticizing Taylor's assumption that the linguistic sense of *slang* stems from the denomination of a strip of land, hawkers' temporary encampment, or a travelling show, Skeat did not reject it altogether but ventured a different base for semantic derivation: "[...] it is likely that a *slang* (from the verb *sling*, to cast) may have meant 'a cast' or 'a pitch'; for both *cast* and *pitch* are used to mean a camping-place, or a place where a travelling-show is exhibited; and, indeed, Halliwell notes that 'a narrow slip of ground' is also called a *slinget*." (ibid). This assumption accounts for the cause-and-effect relationship existing between *slang* as an action and *slang* as a place reserved for the action, but, alas, brings us none the closer to unravelling the mystery surrounding how a place name extended to designate a lect spoken in that location.

Yet, if Platt Jr.'s complement unveiling the missing intermediate element *slang patter*, which was later elliptized to *slang*, is applied to Skeat's conjecture, the obtained semantic derivation pattern makes perfect linguistic sense: *slang* 'a cast / a pitch' → *slang* 'a camping-place / a travelling-show place' → *slang patter* 'the lect spoken in this place' → *slang* 'the lect spoken in this place'.

The only remaining etymological problem that this derivation pattern is fraught with consists in the fact that no Modern English lexicographic evidence exists revealing the use of *slang* as either a verb (in its root form) or a noun bearing the sense 'to cast/to pitch' or 'a cast/a pitch' respectively, the sense being assigned to the verb *sling* only. Furthermore, it is highly improbable for a stylistically neutral word designating a common action to evade all documentation in Early Modern English. It appears more likely, though, that the Middle English past forms *slang* and *slange* of the verb *slyngen* already possessing the sense 'to sling, to hurl, to throw away' may have served as a derivation base which would account for the retention of the central action and direction semes of *slang(e)* 'threw' as the peripheral semes of *slang* 'a camping-place / a travelling-show', i.e. a tent or a collection of tents slung for a particular purpose.

Therefore, the second English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis pattern presupposes the following full etymological reconstruction: Proto-Indo-European **slenk-* / **sleng-* 'to wind, to creep' → Proto-Germanic **slingan* / **slinkan* 'to wind, to creep' → Old English *slingan* 'to wind, to creep' → Middle English *slyngen* 'to sling, to hurl, to throw away' → Modern English *slang* 'a camping-place / a travelling-show place' → Modern English *slang patter* 'a sociolect spoken in camping-places / travelling-show places' → Modern English *slang* 'a sociolect

spoken in camping-places / travelling-show places' → Modern English *slang* 'any substandard sociolect'.

(3) The third English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis pattern assumes the derivation of the linguistic sense of *slang* from the sense 'a deceptive practice' or, by extension, 'an underworld occupation' (based on Green (2016: 2) and Lighter (2005: 227-228)).

Analyzing the origins of slang, Green provides a brief account of the senses predating the first documented usage of *slang* referring to a sociolect: "What remains the earliest recorded use of the word in the context of non-standard language is dated to a play of 1756. There is, however, evidence through the 1740s of alternative senses, of which all are underpinned by some idea of duplicity: a line of work (first found in 1741), nonsense (1747), and, as a verb, to cheat, to swindle, to defraud (1741) and, the first suggestion of speech, to abuse or banter with (1749)." (Green 2016: 2).

Lighter's commentary on the earliest mention of slang as 'a line of work' underpins Green's conjecture: "The early examples of usage allude uniformly to criminal deception. Earliest of all and especially curious is the appearance of the unexplained form *slango* in *The Amorous Gallant's Tongue* of 1740 (...): "You, Fellow-traveller, what do you do for a living? You, Cole, what *Slango* do you go upon?" " (Lighter 2005: 227). A noteworthy detail here consists in establishing the negative connotation of *slango*, which is associated with the language of the underworld.

To reinforce his argument, Lighter equally conjectures a connection between *slango* and *slang* as common names, on the one hand, and *Slango* as a proper name, on the other: "It is tempting to fancy a connection between *slango/slang* and the name of the servant Slang, an important character in Henry Carey's comic opera *The Honest Yorkshire-Man*, first performed in 1735. Not only is the plot driven by Slang's strategy of disguise, he being described as "an arch fellow" among a cast that includes characters significantly named Gaylove, Muckworm, Sapscurll, and Blunder, but also his speeches are identified throughout by the printed abbreviation Slang." (ibid: 228). Although, technically, *Slango* can be an obscure name which only happens to bear a certain phonetic resemblance to *slang*, the undoubtedly semantically transparent names of Slang's fellow characters suggest the opposite.

Indeed, the associations with criminal activity are equally reflected in the lexicographic definition of *slang* as "a line of work or business" (OED, s.a.), later referring specifically to "a dishonest or fraudulent activity, occupation, or scheme" (ibid) as well as in the contextual analysis of the same quotation by Lighter: "The sense 'underworld occupation' in the 1740 citation recurs a half century later, now in the familiar form *slang*, in George Parker's invaluable description of English criminality, *Life's Painter of Variegated Characters* (...): "How do you work now?" ... 'O, upon the old *slang* [of impersonating a mute], and sometimes a little *lully-prigging* ['stealing wet linen off the hedges' (Parker's gloss)].' Here the word *slang* clearly denotes a hoodwinking trick." (Lighter 2005: 227-228).

Yet, the earliest mention of the verbal sense of *slang* 'to cheat, to swindle, to defraud' (1741) clearly antedates its nominal sense as 'humbug' or 'nonsense' (1747).

The former – verbal – sense 'to cheat, to swindle, to defraud' dates back to 1741 and is first found in the "Account of the Malefactors executed at Tyburn" by the Ordinary of Newgate, the chaplain of Newgate prison: "The next exploit Jenny went upon was, *Slanging the Gentry Mort rumly with a sham Kinchin*." (Green 2011: 31), the reference being made to one of London's ace street thieves and pickpockets Mary Young (nicknamed Jenny Diver by her gang in recognition of her remarkable pickpocketing (or "diving") talent). Her signature scheme was known as the "pregnant pickpocket" (worded as "*Slanging the Gentry Mort rumly with a sham*

Kinchin” in the extract above): “She had had a false pair of arms and hands made, and made herself look pregnant, concealing her real hands under her dress. Then she would seat herself at church between two elderly ladies, each of whom, say, had a gold watch. When the watches were later found to be missing, the ladies immediately dismissed the pregnant young woman from suspicion, since her hands had not left her lap all through the service.” (McLynn 2013: 126). In the end, the flimflam lady’s brilliant criminal career came to an untimely end when she was hanged on Tyburn’s gallows on 18 March 1741 (Green 2011: 31).

Conversely, the latter – nominal – sense ‘humbug’ or ‘nonsense’ was first recorded in 1747, or six years later than the verbal sense ‘to cheat, to swindle, to defraud’, in the coffee-woman’s biography “The Life and Character of Moll King” recounting the story of a brothel-keeper’s life: “I heard she made a Fam To-night, a Rum one, with Dainty Dasies, of a Flat from T’other Side; she flash’d half a Slat, a Bull’s-Eye, and some other rum Slangs.” (Green 2024).

Therefore, the nominal sense of *slang* as ‘humbug’ or ‘nonsense’ derives from the verbal sense ‘to cheat, to swindle, to defraud’ and not the reverse.

Yet, there remain three inconsistencies associated with the third English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis pattern.

The first problem boils down to the vague denotation of the noun *slang* in the historical contexts above, which allows for several possible interpretations and, therefore, complicates the etymological reconstruction. For instance, both *slango* in “The Amorous Gallant’s Tongue” and *slang* in “Life’s Painter of Variegated Characters” can be interpreted not necessarily as ‘a line of work’ but equally as ‘trickery’.

The second issue arises upon establishing the immediate etymon of *slang* as ‘a line of work’. “The Oxford English Dictionary” labels this sense as obscure and pertaining to cant, the ultimate source being not apparent (OED, s.a.). Furthermore, although the sense is listed in the entry for *slang* in its linguistic sense, the lexicographers admit the possibility that “some of the senses may represent independent words” (ibid). My conjecture is that, since the senses ‘a line of work, especially criminal’ and ‘to cheat, to swindle, to defraud’ were both first documented in 1741, the former might stem from the latter. As confidence tricksters often earned their living by swindling people out of their money or other possessions, such activities might have been seen as a job of itself. Hence the semantic shift from *slang* as ‘to cheat, to swindle, to defraud’ (remotely relatable to the Old English *slingan* ‘to wind, to creep’ based on the clash between the literal and figurative dimensions of the shared semantic component ‘an indirect way’) to *slang* as ‘a line of work, especially criminal’.

The third inconsistency stems from the fact that the evolution of the Old English *slingan* into the Middle English *slyngen* was accompanied by the supersession of the original sense ‘to wind, to creep’ by the novel sense ‘to sling, to hurl, to throw away’. Therefore, on the one hand, the Middle English sense of winding or creeping from which the previously discussed Modern English sense of swindling is remotely derivable proves either undocumented or non-existent altogether. On the other hand, attempts at deriving *slang* as ‘to cheat, to swindle, to defraud’ from the documented Middle English sense ‘to sling, to hurl, to throw away’ do not seem viable since, judging from English language evidence, deceiving is in no way relatable to throwing. This idiosyncrasy, nonetheless, does not apply to other languages, and the semantic derivation pattern ‘to throw’ → ‘to deceive’ is detectable in the Finnish *heittää* ‘(of an estimate) to be inaccurate’ (originally ‘to throw’); in the Hindi फेंकना (*phēknā*) ‘to bluff, to lie, to make a false promise’ (originally ‘to throw’) and its Urdu cognate ٲٲٲ (*phēknā*) ‘to bluff, to lie’ (originally ‘to throw’); in the Japanese 倒す (*taosu*) ‘to leave unpaid; to cheat’ (originally ‘to throw down’); in the Russian *кудамь* (*kidat*) ‘to cheat, to swindle’ (originally ‘to throw’) and its

Ukrainian cognate *кидаїло* (*kydailo*) ‘swindler’ (from *кидаму* (*kydaty*) ‘to throw’); in the Turkish *atmak* ‘to tell lies’ (originally ‘to throw’) and its Azerbaijani cognate *atmaq* ‘to fool, to swindle’ (originally ‘to throw’). The motivation behind this semantic shift stems from the conceptual metaphor A PERSON IS AN OBJECT, with depersonalization being based on likening a person having fallen under a manipulator’s influence without their knowledge and/or consent to a projectile propelled by the application of a certain force.

The solution to this problem may be found in assuming the possibility of the form interchange between the numerous verb forms of the etymological doublets *slingan* and *slincan* in Old English as well as *slyngen* and *slynken* in Middle English, as in the case with the first English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis pattern deriving the linguistic sense of *slang* from ‘a long narrow strip of land’.

As a result, the third English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis pattern involves the following full etymological reconstruction: Proto-Indo-European **slenk-* / **sleng-* ‘to wind, to creep’ → Proto-Germanic **slingan* / **slinkan* ‘to wind, to creep’ → Old English *slingan* ‘to wind, to creep’ ~ *slincan* ‘to creep, to crawl’ → Middle English *slyngen* ‘to sling, to hurl’ ~ *slynken* ‘to creep, to crawl’ → Modern English *slang* ‘to cheat, to swindle, to defraud’ → Modern English *slang* ‘a line of work, especially criminal’ → Modern English *slang patter* ‘a sociolect spoken by criminals’ → Modern English *slang* ‘a sociolect spoken by criminals’ → Modern English *slang* ‘any substandard sociolect’.

(4) The fourth English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis pattern assumes the derivation of the linguistic sense of *slang* from the sense ‘to abuse, to banter with’ (based on Green (2016: 2)).

According to Green, *slang* designating a lect may be derived from the earlier verbal sense ‘to abuse or banter with’, first documented around 1749 by Alexander Robertson of Struan in his collection “Poems”: “Whereat he storm’d, he star’d, he stamp’d, / He farted and he slang, Sir.” (Green 2024). Yet, the recorded form poses a major inconsistency upon initial morphological analysis, which ultimately disproves Green’s assumption regarding its status as the first mention of the verb *slang* in this sense. The point is that the given extract does not contain any verbs used in tenses other than the past simple: *storm’d*, *star’d*, *stamp’d*, and *farted*. Nor are any alternative tense forms employed in the whole stanza: “At which the Heroes were not damp’d, / But gave the Priest a Bang, Sir, / Whereat he storm’d, he star’d, he stamp’d. / He f----d and he slang, Sir.” (Robertson 1775: 144). Consequently, if the verb *slang* were used in the past simple, which, given the context, is obviously the only logical conclusion to arrive at, the correct form would be *slang’d* and not *slang*. On the other hand, if the verb were used in the present simple, which, however, runs counter to the context, the correct form would be *slangs* and not *slang* either. Given that neither of the two options proves to be the case in the original text, a third explanation emerges: *slang* in the given context is the past simple form of the irregular verb *sling*, which proves its status as the first mention of the verb *slang* in the sense ‘to abuse, to banter with’ to be erroneous.

The etymological evidence collected by a number of reputable etymologists, lexicographers, and slang researchers only further refutes Green’s surmise. Partridge states that *slang* as a verb referring to abuse or scold was first recorded around 1840 (Partridge 2015: 2). However, Farmer & Henley date the earliest documentation of the verb back to 1827 (in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s novel “Pelham”: “(...) we rowed, swore, slanged (...)”) and 1830 (in an anonymous translation of the play “The Knights” by Aristophanes: “(...) drunk he shall slang with the harlots (...)”) (Farmer & Henley 1903: 240). Farmer and Henley’s evidence is also corroborated by “The Oxford English Dictionary”, which relates the first intransitive use

to 1828 as the official publication date of “Pelham” (OED, s.a.), although it is obvious that the sense must have been known before (or was authored by Edward Bulwer-Lytton when writing the novel, in which case the coinage date would still have preceded the publication date). The earliest transitive use of the verb *slang* as ‘to abuse or scold somebody violently’ refers to 1844 (in Albert Smith’s novel “The Adventures of Mr. Ledbury and His Friend Jack Johnson”: “He could (...) slang coal-heavers (...) better than anybody else in London.”) (ibid). Klein equally highlights that it is the verbal sense of *slang* that derives from the nominal one and not the reverse (Klein 2003: 689).

Elaborating upon Klein’s conclusion concerning the primariness of the nominal sense reveals that *slang* as ‘abuse, impertinence’ was first documented in 1805 (in Thomas Campbell’s letter addressed to Walter Scott on 9 February 1805 from “The Private Letter-Books of Sir Walter Scott” edited by Wilfred Partington: “In five weeks, however, her slang broke out, and within the seventh she discovered the whole catalogue of Vices of which a very ugly woman can be guilty.” (OED, s.a.)), thus antedating the related verbal senses and, as a result, disclosing the underlying derivation pattern as *slang* ‘abuse, impertinence’ → *slang* ‘to abuse, to banter with’ (with the intransitive meaning emerging before the transitive one).

Therefore, the etymological evidence analyzed above incontrovertibly disproves Green’s assumption that *slang* denoting a lect may semantically derive from its verbal sense ‘to abuse, to banter with’, which postdates it by approximately 70 years.

5 Conclusions

The aim of the current study was to provide a detailed etymological account of two hypotheses accounting for the formation of the linguistic sense of the word *slang* in English lowlife milieu, namely the *(Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis* and the *English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis* in their integrity and complexity. Both hypotheses rest on the premise that the English term *slang* originates from either a language (Romani or Anglo-Romani) or a sociolect (presumably, English cant) spoken by beggars, hawkers, itinerant showmen, thieves, vagabonds, and other socially stigmatized groups.

The first, *(Anglo-)Romani External Borrowing Hypothesis*, which derives *slang* from a certain etymon in Romani or Anglo-Romani, has no conclusive evidence to draw upon, since no Romani or Anglo-Romani etymon exists. In addition, the word-initial *sl*-cluster proves unattested in native Romani word-stock, as confirmed by evidence from overall six European Para-Romanis.

The second, *English Internal Borrowing Hypothesis*, constitutes four patterns, differing in whether the linguistic sense of *slang* is an elaboration of one of the previous senses: 1) ‘a piece of land’; 2) ‘a cast or a pitch’; 3) ‘a deceptive practice’ (or, by extension, ‘an underworld occupation’); or 4) ‘to abuse, to banter with’. Whilst the fourth pattern proves to be chronologically and morphologically implausible, its three counterparts appear tenable and are respectively reconstructed as follows:

1) Proto-Indo-European **slenk-* / **sleng-* ‘to wind, to creep’ → Proto-Germanic **slingan* / **slinkan* ‘to wind, to creep’ → Old English *slingan* ‘to wind, to creep’ ~ *slinkan* ‘to creep, to crawl’ → Middle English *slyngen* ‘to sling, to hurl’ ~ *slynken* ‘to creep, to crawl’ → Modern English *slang* / *slanget* / *slanket* / *sling* / *slinget* / *slinket* ‘a long narrow strip of land’ → Modern English *slang patter* ‘a sociolect spoken on encampments by the roadside’ →

Modern English *slang* ‘a sociolect spoken on encampments by the roadside’ → Modern English *slang* ‘any substandard sociolect’.

2) Proto-Indo-European *slenk- / *sleng- ‘to wind, to creep’ → Proto-Germanic *slingan / *slinkan ‘to wind, to creep’ → Old English *slingan* ‘to wind, to creep’ → Middle English *slyngen* ‘to sling, to hurl, to throw away’ → Modern English *slang* ‘a camping-place / a travelling-show place’ → Modern English *slang patter* ‘a sociolect spoken in camping-places / travelling-show places’ → Modern English *slang* ‘a sociolect spoken in camping-places / travelling-show places’ → Modern English *slang* ‘any substandard sociolect’.

3) Proto-Indo-European *slenk- / *sleng- ‘to wind, to creep’ → Proto-Germanic *slingan / *slinkan ‘to wind, to creep’ → Old English *slingan* ‘to wind, to creep’ ~ *slinkan* ‘to creep, to crawl’ → Middle English *slyngen* ‘to sling, to hurl’ ~ *slynken* ‘to creep, to crawl’ → Modern English *slang* ‘to cheat, to swindle, to defraud’ → Modern English *slang* ‘a line of work, especially criminal’ → Modern English *slang patter* ‘a sociolect spoken by criminals’ → Modern English *slang* ‘a sociolect spoken by criminals’ → Modern English *slang* ‘any substandard sociolect’.

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Abbreviations

OED – The Oxford English dictionary

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