



<https://doi.org/10.70728/b.series.fil.v08.i08.110>

THE THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION OF ARGOT AS A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PHENOMENON

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Abstract: Argot is one of the most disputed terms in the description of socially marked vocabulary. In different linguistic traditions it has been used for the secret speech of criminal groups, the restricted vocabulary of occupational communities, the informal language of subcultures, and, more broadly, any group-specific lexical repertoire that is difficult for outsiders to understand. This terminological variation has often caused argot to be treated as a complete synonym of jargon, slang, cant, cryptolect, or sociolect. The present article examines the historical development and theoretical scope of argot and proposes a set of criteria for distinguishing it from adjacent phenomena. The study is based on comparative, descriptive, historical-semantic, and functional analysis of ten representative sources published between 1628 and 2022. The findings show that neither secrecy nor group restriction alone is sufficient to define argot. A more reliable account must consider the type of speaker group, communicative purpose, intended opacity, degree of outsider accessibility, lexical specialization, social evaluation, and the possibility that argotic items may spread into general colloquial usage. In its narrow sense, argot is a deliberately opaque lexical subsystem associated mainly with socially closed or marginalized groups and used for concealment, recognition, and solidarity. In its broad sense, it overlaps with jargon and slang as a group-marked register. The article argues that this overlap should be represented as a continuum rather than as evidence that the terms are identical. Such an approach clarifies the place of argot within sociolinguistics and offers a practical basis for the consistent use of the terms argot, jargon, slang, cant, cryptolect, and anti-language in English and Uzbek linguistic research.

Keywords: argot, jargon, slang, cant, cryptolect, sociolect, anti-language, secrecy, group identity, colloquial vocabulary.

Introduction. The vocabulary of a language is never socially uniform. Speakers choose different lexical resources according to their age, occupation, social network, institutional role, communicative setting, and relationship with their interlocutors. Some of these

resources are shared widely and belong to ordinary informal speech; others are limited to a small group and may be intentionally concealed from outsiders. Argot occupies the most controversial part of this field because it combines social restriction, informality, identity, and, in many cases, secrecy. As a result, the same repertoire may be called argot in one study, jargon or slang in another, and cant, cryptolect, or anti-language in a third.

The history of the word contributes to this uncertainty. The French term argot became prominent in descriptions of beggars, itinerant traders, thieves, and other socially closed groups. Olivier Chéreau's *Le Jargon ou Langage de l'Argot réformé*, first issued in the seventeenth century, is a central documentary landmark because its title explicitly links jargon with the language of Argot [1]. The work does not establish a single etymology, but it demonstrates that argot was already associated with a socially recognizable community and a specialized lexical repertoire. Earlier and parallel European traditions used other labels, including cant in English, Rotwelsch in German, germanía in Spanish, calão in Portuguese, and furbesco in Italian. These names did not denote perfectly equivalent phenomena, yet all of them participated in the historical construction of the idea of a restricted or concealed group vocabulary.

The semantic development of argot was not linear. A word that initially evoked secrecy and the social underworld gradually acquired broader meanings. During the growth of modern cities, items associated with closed groups entered popular literature, journalism, theatre, songs, and everyday urban speech. In Paris, especially, lexical forms associated with lower-class and criminal milieus became part of a much wider vernacular repertoire. Lodge's account of Parisian French shows that lexical variation is inseparable from urbanization, social stratification, mobility, and the changing relation between popular speech and the standard language [2, pp. 228-248]. Once an argotic expression becomes recognizable outside its original group, its secrecy weakens, but its social associations may remain.

The etymology of argot must be treated with particular caution. Earlier commentators connected the term with several formally similar words: a verb associated with begging or bargaining, the French name for a cockerel's spur, the name of Argos, and expressions interpreted as 'bird language.' These proposals are historically interesting because they reflect different understandings of the speakers – beggars, traders, criminals, or people using an unintelligible code – but formal resemblance does not establish genetic origin. The earliest documentary uses show how the term functioned socially more securely than they show where it came from. For this reason, the present study separates the uncertain origin of the lexeme from the better documented development of the linguistic concept.

This historical movement creates a theoretical problem. If argot is defined only as a secret language, widely known expressions of argotic origin must be excluded even when speakers still perceive them as socially marked. If it is defined as any group vocabulary, however, the term becomes almost indistinguishable from jargon or sociolect. A useful definition must therefore account for both the prototypical core of argot and the transitional cases at its boundaries. It must also recognize that social varieties change: secrecy may be

lost, group membership may expand, and formerly stigmatized items may become ordinary colloquialisms.

The problem is particularly relevant to comparative terminology. English linguistics commonly reserves argot for a restricted or underworld vocabulary, while French usage often allows argot to cover much of the semantic territory expressed by English slang. Russian and Uzbek traditions have also used argo and jargon with different degrees of overlap. Direct translation can consequently create false equivalence: the same label may refer to different objects, and different labels may refer to nearly the same repertoire. The aim of this article is to reconstruct the principal interpretations of argot, identify the features that unite them, and propose an operational model capable of handling both narrow and broad uses of the term.

Literature Review. Modern reference works preserve the narrow historical interpretation. Brown and Miller define argot as the special vocabulary of close-knit groups, typically groups of low social status such as beggars and thieves [4, p. 33]. This definition contains three important components: a lexical rather than fully grammatical object, a cohesive speaker group, and a traditional association with socially marginal communities. It does not say that every item must be completely incomprehensible to outsiders, but the idea of restricted circulation is clearly present.

Bussmann offers a definition that reveals the historical expansion of the term. In its strict sense, argot is described as a secret language corresponding roughly to cant and used by beggars and thieves in medieval France. In a broader sense, it can denote specialized vocabulary or a set of expressions used by a particular group or class and not widely understood by the rest of society [5, p. 84]. The two parts of this definition explain why scholarly disagreement persists: one tradition treats secrecy and marginality as defining features, whereas another treats them as frequent but non-obligatory features of group language.

Uzbek linguistic terminology has generally adopted the broader social interpretation. Hojiyev describes argo as an artificial or specially formed language consisting of lexical units peculiar to a social group or category – students, athletes, drivers, or thieves and difficult for other people to understand [6, p. 15]. This account makes outsider difficulty central but does not limit argot to criminal communities. It therefore places occupational, age-based, and interest-based groups within the same category. The advantage of this approach is its inclusiveness; its disadvantage is that argo can become coextensive with jargon unless additional functional criteria are introduced.

Historical lexicography also demonstrates that the social range of non-standard vocabulary has continually widened. Coleman's study of early cant and slang dictionaries shows a movement from word lists presented as the language of criminals and the poor toward dictionaries that also included fashionable, urban, and generally unconventional vocabulary [3, pp. 183–192]. This transition matters because dictionaries did not simply record stable varieties; they helped construct public images of who used cant or slang and why. Once

restricted words were printed, glossed, and circulated, their alleged secrecy was inevitably altered.

The coexistence of national labels further complicates comparison. English cant, German Rotwelsch, Spanish germanía, Portuguese calão, and Italian furbesco arose in distinct historical settings and carried different evaluations. Some referred mainly to itinerant or criminal groups; others expanded toward unconventional urban or occupational vocabulary. They should therefore be treated as partial functional analogues, not automatic translations. Their common ground lies in the social restriction of lexical knowledge, while the degree of secrecy, mobility, stigma, and professional specialization differs. The history of these labels also shows that terminology is shaped by institutions courts, police, literature, schools, and dictionaries as well as by the speakers whose practices the labels are intended to describe.

Allan and Burridge directly address the overlap among jargon, slang, argot, and cant. They note that the boundary between jargon and slang is disputed and that the relevant senses of argot and cant overlap with both categories. They associate argot historically with thieves and rogues but also with mobile occupational groups such as actors, beggars, chimney-sweeps, soldiers, sailors, and artisans. In their model, the functions traditionally assigned to argot can be described through the broader concepts of jargon and slang [7, pp. 67-70]. Their analysis supports a functional rather than purely label-based comparison.

A different theoretical line treats socially oppositional varieties as anti-languages. Halliday defines an anti-language in relation to an anti-society: a social formation that exists within another society but constructs an alternative reality through relexicalization, metaphor, and semantic transformation [8, pp. 570-584]. This theory is highly relevant to criminal argot because secrecy is not its only possible function. Alternative naming can strengthen solidarity, reinterpret social experience, and symbolically resist external authority. Nevertheless, not every occupational jargon or youth slang constitutes an anti-language; the concept applies most clearly when linguistic opposition corresponds to a sustained oppositional social organization.

Agha reconsiders the problem from the perspective of register and metapragmatics. He argues that slang cannot be understood as a fixed list of deviant words. It is a socially evaluated register whose forms and values change across speakers, situations, and periods. He places cant and criminal argot within the broader historical class of slang registers but warns against treating such repertoires as autonomous languages [9, pp. 306–330]. Speakers normally command the grammar of the surrounding language and select a socially marked lexical layer only in appropriate contexts. This approach shifts analysis from 'Which words belong to argot?' to 'Who recognizes these forms as argotic, in which interaction, and with what social effect?'

Recent research has also questioned the assumption that linguistic opacity always proves an intention to conceal wrongdoing. La Mattina's study of colonial descriptions of Libyan argots demonstrates how researchers interpreted figurative or unfamiliar forms through

political ideas about clarity, secrecy, and social opposition [10, pp. 191–214]. The study is important methodologically: an outsider's failure to understand a form does not by itself establish that speakers designed the form as a secret code. Opacity may result from limited competence, cultural knowledge, metaphorical practice, or ordinary group-specific convention.

The reviewed literature consequently produces two stable but competing models. The narrow model defines argot through social closure, deliberate opacity, and a historical connection with criminal or marginalized groups. The broad model defines it as socially restricted vocabulary whose users share an occupation, interest, age, or status. Both models capture real usage, but neither is sufficient alone. The narrow model excludes the diffusion and transformation of argotic forms; the broad model erases the distinction between argot and adjacent group registers. A layered definition is therefore required.

Methodology. The study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical methodology. Its material consists of ten sources selected to represent four kinds of evidence: an early documentary attestation of the term, historical and sociolinguistic accounts, authoritative linguistic dictionaries, and modern theoretical studies of register, secrecy, and anti-language. The sources cover English, French, and Uzbek terminological traditions and range chronologically from Chéreau's seventeenth-century text to a twenty-first-century reassessment of linguistic opacity.

Historical-semantic analysis is used to trace changes in the denotational scope of argot. The method does not assume that the present meaning can be derived mechanically from a disputed etymology. Instead, documentary use, dictionary definitions, and changes in the social distribution of the relevant vocabulary are compared. This distinction is essential because etymological hypotheses explain the possible origin of a word, whereas the history of a concept depends on how successive communities and scholars have used that word.

Comparative definitional analysis identifies the semantic components repeated across sources. Each definition is examined for the following features: type of speaker group, degree of social closure, communicative purpose, presence or absence of intended secrecy, outsider accessibility, linguistic level, social evaluation, and relation to standard or general colloquial language. The method also records whether argot is treated as a language, a variety, a register, a sociolect, or a lexical subsystem.

Functional analysis is then applied to distinguish the reasons for using argotic forms. Concealment, in-group recognition, solidarity, economy, expressiveness, resistance, humor, and identity display are treated as separate functions even when several occur simultaneously. Finally, a continuum model is used to explain boundary cases. Rather than forcing every repertoire into one mutually exclusive category, the analysis determines how strongly it displays the prototypical properties of argot and how it overlaps with jargon or slang.

Because the available evidence is primarily metalinguistic, the study does not claim to measure the frequency of individual argotic forms. Dictionary definitions are treated as evidence of scholarly categorization, not as direct transcripts of group interaction. Historical

claims are accepted only when they are compatible with the documentary chronology represented in the selected sources. This restriction helps prevent circular reasoning in which an item is first called argot because it is presumed secret and its appearance is then used as proof that the group practised secrecy.

Results. The first result concerns the linguistic status of argot. The evidence does not support treating ordinary argot as an independent language with a complete phonological and grammatical system. In most documented cases, speakers use the grammar of a shared language while replacing, extending, or reinterpreting selected lexical items. Argot is therefore more accurately described as a socially restricted lexical subsystem or register. The label 'language' remains useful in historical titles and in descriptions of strong anti-languages, but it should not be read literally in every case.

Second, the analysis confirms that group structure is necessary but not sufficient. Argot presupposes a community whose members share recurrent activities, knowledge, risks, or social experience. Close interaction allows unconventional meanings to become conventional inside the group. However, every profession and interest group develops specialized terms; if group membership alone defined argot, technical terminology and all professional jargon would automatically become argot. The additional question is whether the repertoire is used to regulate access, mark a social boundary, or create deliberate distance from outsiders.

Third, secrecy is best understood as a variable rather than an absolute property. At one end of the continuum are cryptolectal repertoires intentionally designed or repeatedly renewed to prevent comprehension. At the other end are widely known group expressions whose users seek solidarity or stylistic distinctiveness rather than concealment. Between these poles lie semi-opaque repertoires: outsiders may recognize the general domain but fail to interpret particular words, connotations, or interactional implications. Argot is most prototypical when opacity is both high and functionally relevant.

Fourth, outsider incomprehension must be separated from speaker intention. A listener may not understand medical terminology, regional vocabulary, youth expressions, or culturally specific metaphors, but this does not prove that the speaker intends secrecy. Deliberate concealment requires evidence from usage: rapid lexical replacement after exposure, explicit metalinguistic comments, avoidance in mixed-group settings, or consistent use when an overhearing outsider is present. This criterion prevents researchers from confusing their own limited knowledge with a linguistic strategy of concealment.

Fifth, argot performs a cluster of social functions. Concealment protects information; recognition allows members to identify one another; solidarity affirms shared experience; expressive renaming evaluates the social world from an in-group perspective; economy shortens frequently used concepts; and resistance rejects labels imposed by an external authority. Humor and verbal creativity may intensify all of these functions. A repertoire should therefore not be classified by a single isolated word. Its recurrent functions across interaction provide more reliable evidence.

Sixth, the relation between argot and jargon is asymmetrical. Jargon normally denotes specialized vocabulary associated with an occupation, discipline, institution, or activity. Its primary function is efficient and precise communication among knowledgeable participants, even though it may be difficult for outsiders. Argot may also arise in an occupational group, but its prototypical functions include social boundary-making and opacity. Thus a professional repertoire may contain both neutral technical jargon and an informal argotic layer. The two categories overlap, but intended restriction and social indexicality are stronger in argot.

Seventh, argot and slang overlap through informality, expressiveness, innovation, metaphor, and rapid change. The principal difference is their social distribution. General slang can circulate across a large speech community and may be understood by people who do not actively use it. Argot is more closely tied to a particular network and requires shared knowledge for competent interpretation. When an argotic item spreads through media or everyday conversation, it may be reanalyzed as slang. This is a change in social value and distribution, not necessarily a change in form.

Eighth, cant is primarily a historical English label whose meanings partly coincide with argot. It has referred to the language of beggars, itinerant groups, and criminals, and later to the specialized or insincere phraseology of a group. Because of this semantic history, cant is useful when discussing early English materials, but it is less productive as a neutral contemporary analytical term. Cryptolite is more precise when deliberate concealment is the central property, whereas sociolect is the broader term for any socially distributed language variety.

Ninth, the anti-language model identifies the strongest form of argotic organization. An anti-language does more than conceal referents: it reconstructs meanings and social relations within an alternative community. Relexicalization may produce multiple competing names for socially important concepts, while metaphor and semantic reversal allow members to interpret experience through their own evaluative system. Yet the result is not that all argot is anti-language. The concept should be reserved for cases where linguistic practice is connected with a durable counter-social organization [8, pp. 576–582].

Tenth, argot is inherently dynamic. Its forms may lose secrecy through literary representation, dictionaries, law-enforcement documentation, education, migration, entertainment, or digital circulation. The group may respond by creating new items, narrowing old meanings, or shifting to a different strategy. Alternatively, it may retain the exposed forms because their main function has become identity rather than concealment. A synchronic word list therefore captures only one stage in a continuing process of circulation and re-evaluation.

Eleventh, argotic innovation relies on ordinary linguistic mechanisms used under exceptional social conditions. Metaphor, metonymy, semantic reversal, clipping, abbreviation, borrowing, phonological disguise, and the reassignment of familiar words can all produce group-marked forms. What makes such forms argotic is not the mechanism itself

but the social pattern of selection and interpretation. Metaphor occurs throughout language, and borrowing is common in every contact situation. In argot, however, these mechanisms may be concentrated around domains that matter to the group and may be repeatedly renewed when outsiders learn the established meanings. The result is a lexical system whose creativity responds directly to social circulation.

Twelfth, social evaluation influences both description and change. Outsiders may stigmatize argot as corrupt, dangerous, or linguistically deficient, while insiders value the same forms as precise, humorous, protective, or authentic. These competing evaluations help determine whether an expression remains restricted, becomes fashionable slang, or is abandoned. They also affect lexicography: a dictionary may present a word as evidence of deviance even when speakers use it routinely without an oppositional intention. Analysis must therefore distinguish the social value attributed to a form from its structural properties.

On the basis of these findings, argot can be described through three concentric zones. The core consists of intentionally opaque lexical repertoires of socially closed groups, especially where concealment and recognition are recurrent goals. The near-core consists of restricted group vocabulary that marks solidarity and identity but is only partly secret. The periphery consists of former argotic items that have entered broader slang or colloquial speech while retaining traces of their social origin. This model preserves the narrow definition without ignoring the historical broadening documented in actual usage.

Discussion. The results suggest that the long-standing dispute is partly caused by an attempt to define a changing social phenomenon through a single fixed feature. Historical definitions privilege the identity of users—beggars, thieves, itinerant workers, or other closed communities. Functional definitions privilege secrecy. Broader sociolinguistic definitions privilege group membership and outsider difficulty. Each perspective isolates a genuine property, but argot is produced by the interaction of these properties rather than by any one of them.

A prototype model resolves several apparent contradictions. Criminal argot remains the clearest historical prototype because it typically combines a close-knit group, recurrent risk, intentional concealment, specialized vocabulary, rapid renewal, and strong social evaluation. Occupational and youth repertoires resemble this prototype to different degrees. Their classification should depend on documented function, not on the prestige or moral evaluation of their speakers. A vocabulary does not become argot merely because outsiders dislike it, nor does it cease to be argotic simply because its users are not involved in illegal activity.

The distinction between lexical opacity and social opacity is especially important. A word may be semantically transparent but socially restricted because only insiders know when and why it is appropriate. Conversely, a word may be opaque to a researcher while completely ordinary within a regional or cultural community. Agha's register-based account shows that competence includes knowledge of the situations in which a form should not be used [9, pp. 310–311]. Argot must therefore be studied in interaction, not only in isolated glossaries.

The historical record also requires caution. Early dictionaries and literary representations are invaluable, but they are mediated evidence. Compilers may copy earlier lists, exaggerate secrecy to attract readers, or combine material from different communities. Printed glossaries can then alter the repertoire they claim merely to document. Coleman's lexicographic history demonstrates that changes in labels and audiences are part of the phenomenon itself [3, pp. 183–192]. A reliable study must therefore compare lexical evidence with social context and stated communicative practice.

The anti-language concept remains valuable when applied with precision. It explains why some groups do not simply invent synonyms but reorganize social meaning. Nevertheless, La Mattina's analysis shows that researchers have sometimes interpreted unfamiliar figurative language through prior assumptions about criminality, resistance, or political danger [10, pp. 191–195]. The analyst must demonstrate oppositional social practice rather than infer it automatically from lexical difference.

For English–Uzbek comparative research, consistent translation is essential. The Uzbek term *argo* may be retained for a socially restricted lexical subsystem whose opacity, recognition function, or boundary-making role is salient. Jargon is preferable for specialized occupational or interest-based vocabulary whose main function is efficient group communication. Slang should denote highly informal, expressive, and socially evaluated vocabulary that may circulate beyond one closed group. Cryptoslect can specify intentional secrecy, while sociolect remains the superordinate term. These distinctions are analytical guidelines, not rigid walls.

The proposed definition is therefore as follows: *argot* is a socially restricted and predominantly lexical register used by a close-knit group to regulate access to meaning, recognize membership, reinforce solidarity, or articulate an in-group perspective; its degree of intentional secrecy and outsider accessibility may vary over time. This definition includes the historical criminal prototype, accommodates non-criminal closed groups, and explains how argotic units can move toward slang or general colloquial language.

This model also indicates directions for future research. Studies should combine participant observation, interviews, naturally occurring interaction, historical texts, and corpus evidence. Researchers should record who uses a form, with whom, in which setting, for what purpose, and with what evaluation. They should also distinguish active use from passive recognition. Such evidence can show whether a lexical item remains an in-group resource, has become general slang, or survives only as a stereotype reproduced by outsiders.

Digital communication intensifies these processes without eliminating argot. Restricted groups can create and circulate new forms rapidly, but screenshots, search engines, online dictionaries, and algorithmic recommendation can expose them just as quickly. The relevant opposition is no longer simply private versus public. A form may be publicly visible yet remain pragmatically opaque because outsiders lack the interactional history needed to interpret it. Conversely, a term may become widely understood while continuing to index

membership in the community that popularized it. Contemporary analysis must therefore examine circulation, uptake, and recontextualization in addition to lexical meaning.

Conclusion. Argot cannot be defined adequately as either a completely secret language or a simple synonym of jargon and slang. Its historical core lies in the restricted vocabulary of close-knit and often marginalized groups, but its forms may move into broader colloquial circulation. The decisive analytical task is therefore to describe the relationship among group structure, communicative function, opacity, social evaluation, and linguistic diffusion.

The comparison of historical documents, dictionaries, and modern sociolinguistic theories shows that the term has developed along two paths. The narrow interpretation emphasizes criminal or underworld speech and deliberate concealment. The broad interpretation covers the specialized vocabulary of social, occupational, age-based, or interest-based groups. These meanings are not mutually exclusive: they represent the core and expanded zones of one conceptual field.

The study leads to the following conclusions:

1. Argot is primarily a lexical subsystem or register rather than an autonomous language.
2. Its historical prototype is the deliberately opaque vocabulary of close-knit, socially marginal, or criminal groups.
3. Group restriction alone does not distinguish argot from jargon; communicative function and boundary-making must also be considered.
4. Secrecy is a scalar property: argotic repertoires range from cryptolectal systems to widely recognized identity markers.
5. Argot overlaps with slang through informality and expressiveness, but it is normally more closely tied to a particular social network.
6. Cant is mainly a historical English label, cryptollect specifies intentional concealment, and sociolect is the broader category.
7. Anti-language theory is most useful when lexical reorganization accompanies a durable oppositional social formation.
8. Argotic items may diffuse into slang and general colloquial speech, so their classification must be based on current use as well as historical origin.

In general, argot should be studied as a dynamic sociolinguistic continuum. A definition based on group, function, opacity, accessibility, and diffusion is more accurate than a definition based on one feature alone. It preserves the historical meaning of the term while providing a consistent framework for modern English and Uzbek linguistic research.

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