

## Subculture *versus* Macro Culture: Hipster Language\*

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### **Abstract:**

New words are the carriers of new realities that circumscribe as many worlds, universes or realities. The word *hipster* (i.e. a relatively popular, familiar youth worldwide), opens a number of issues related to addressing the phenomenon from a linguistic, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and economic perspective. Thus, we are faced with a phenomenon, a product of subculture, which makes its presence felt through the macro culture by aspects of lexis, mentalities, attitudes and behaviour. In terms of linguistics, *hipster language* itself may present interest (because it generates a certain mentality), and so do the terms designating *hipster speak*, i.e. loans from English, entering the Romanian language, and other languages, their adaptation to the language system, their productivity and any stylistic values. This *linguistic fashion* indicates a social pattern that requires an analysis of the phenomenon from a cultural, linguistic and, last but not least, an economic point of view.

**Keywords:** langue, parole, lexical borrowing, mentalities, social code, language code

In the Romanian language, *hipster* indicates a person who admires and adopts the latest trends in fashion, technology and style etc. ♦ a superficial person – From Engl. *Hipster*; Source: *dexonline*.

The word *hipster*, Anglicism or rather, recent Americanism, is not recorded in academic dictionaries of the Romanian language. The above definition was found only in *dexonline*, which updates the database with recent records. In English, the situation is different. The *Urban Dictionary* states:

*Hipsters are a subculture of men and women typically in their 20s and 30s that value independent thinking, counter-culture, progressive politics, an appreciation of art and indie-rock, creativity, intelligence, and witty bante [...].*

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Also, *Webster Dictionary* states about it: a person who is unusually aware of and interested in new and unconventional patterns (as in jazz or fashion). It is significant for us to know the first mention of the word in English: *Webster Dictionary* indicates: *First Known Use: 1940*.

*Oxford Dictionary* brings the same specifications – i.e. a person who follows the latest trends and fashions, especially those regarded as being outside the cultural mainstream – along with an indication of its origin: 1940s (used originally as an equivalent term to **hepcat**): from **hip** + **-ster** and of the series of derivatives: **hipsterish**, **hipsterism**.

*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2010: Douglas Harper (1941) explains the origin of *hipster* as: “one who is hip”; from **hip** (adj.) + **-ster**. Meaning “low-rise” in reference to pants or skirt is from 1962; so called because they ride on the hips rather than the waist (cf. **hiphuggers**).

The term *hipster* was first used in the late '40s, with reference to a member of the African-American community. A decade later, *hipster* was white, but still fascinated by everything related to “colour”: from the exotic and otherness of the black culture (sexuality, violence and so on), to the jazz created by Afro-Americans. In both cases, knowledge was the point of resistance. By information obtained beforehand, a *hipster* distanced himself from the majority, and he was able to oppose a culture of racial problems (on <http://muzica.metropotam.ro/articole-despre-muzica/Ce-e-hipsterul-de-ce-folosim-termenul-la-tot-pasul-si-de-ce-ne-e-frica-de-el-art6071091996/>).

Turning to the Romanian language, although unregistered in dictionaries (not even in *Marele Dicționar de Neologisme – Great Dictionary of Neologisms*, 2006), the word *hipster* is part of the active vocabulary of the young (teenagers, students) from the urban environment and it is used in the audiovisual and written media. That is why it may be viewed as a phenomenon that cannot be neglected, taking into account at least the economic impact of *hipster fashion*. We can find the term in the Romanian written press, in a series of derivatives, like: *hipsterism*, *hipstereală*, *hipsteriță*, *hipsteresc*, three of them formed with the help of Romanian suffixes (*-eală*, *-esc* and *-iță*), the other one created by derivation from an English word formation pattern, with the suffix *-ism*. As it is also mentioned in dictionaries of the English language, the term *hipster* belongs to a subculture, indicating a form of resistance, of opposition to all that represents the mainstream or macro culture. Yet, paradoxically, the *hipster social pattern* that defies all rules, has conspicuously established itself in the urban areas and, therefore, in the vocabulary of urban environment, including the press. The written as well as the audiovisual press carry the word towards the

literary language, *hipster* tending to leave the level of *parole*, as it is shown by our various press articles:

**Hipster? Hipstereală? Hipsteresc?** *Trânțește o talpă groasă cu colanți colorați și o fustă de tul și gata, ești hipster! Ascultă câteva piese hipsterești, de genul Nouvelle Vague – și ești de-al lor! Barbă, fular, păr vâlvoi și privire pierdută semn că te dor ochii de la citit prin ochelarii model wayfarer (obligatoriu!) și ești fix în peisaj... dacă mai și menționezi că umbli în locuri cu nume ca “tricicleta”, “tutungeria” sau “percheziție”...ești pe val.<sup>1</sup> (<http://metropotam.ro/La-zi/Ce-e-hipsterul-in-viziunea-bucurestenilor-art3283708855/>)*

Or:

*Ca să revin la începutul articolului, ideea că atitudinea hipsterească ar însemna o lipsă de implicare socială e absurdă.<sup>2</sup> (<http://muzica.metropotam.ro/articole-despre-muzica/Ce-e-hipsterul-de-ce-folosim-termenul-la-tot-pasul-si-de-ce-ne-e-frica-de-el-art6071091996/>)*

In Romanian, *hipster* is a most-recent word; in fact, it is the word of 2014, just as *selfie* was decreed that of 2013. Although it appeared in the America of the 40s, *hipster* has resurfaced in the past decade not only in America, but it was hence borrowed not only by the Romanian language, but also by other Romance languages, as well as by German.

Conversely, the *Denglish* trend, i.e. the penetration of words from German into English, surprised linguists and English-language press observers. Heine comments an excerpt from the *New York Times* (**Uber-cool Hipsters Embrace the German Language** on <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/culture-vulture.html>), where German words are used:

*In Blended Adam Sandler once again proclaims himself both uber-doofus and ultimate mensch.*

The sentence contains three words from German. According to Heine, the *hipsters*, who are native speakers of English, use borrowings

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<sup>1</sup> Here is a translation of an excerpt from the Romanian press, where we identified new words created by derivation from the Engl. *Hipster* + Romania suffixes like: *-er*, *-eală*, *-esc*: **Hipster? Hipstereală? Hipsteresc?** *Slam on thick-soled pumps and colored tights and a skirt of tulle and, there, you are a hipster! Listen to a few hipsterești tunes, like Nouvelle Vague – and you are one of them! Beard, scarf, dishevelled hair and lost look, signal that your eyes hurt from reading through glasses model WAYFARER (a prerequisite!). And you are straight in the landscape; and if you also mention that you frequent places with names like “tricycle”, “tobacconist” or “raid”... you’re on the roll. In Romanian, the underlined terms get stylistic values and pejorative connotations.*

<sup>2</sup> *To return to the beginning of the article, it is absurd to imagine that a hipsterească attitude would mean a lack of social involvement.*

from German. Some argue that the phenomenon is transient and that it is due to the Germans in the *World Cup 2014* victory.

The new generation, which is struggling with a deep identity crisis, imposes its new vocabulary, giving itself individuality even on the level of language:

*...in Romania, the word **hipster** has made its presence in the last year within demonstrations against RMGC, but it is often used in a pejorative sense,* Teodor Tita, content manager of digi24.ro., states in an interview (<http://www.digi24.ro/Stiri/Digi24/>).

Thus, *hipsters speak*, or *hipster language*, represents not only a language, but a matter of attitude and a state of spirit. This attitude, like the term itself, proves to be difficult to define, because the essence of the *hipster phenomenon* is not to be caught in patterns, nor to accept the rigidity of any intellectual pre-established frame. Being a *hipster* means to be fluid, not to be captive to any form of social or spiritual, or even artistic pattern.

An elitist spirit, an *anti-kitsch* attitude, aesthetics along one's entire behaviour, peculiar tastes in music, in fashion, an attention for details, for everything they consume, would probably direct our attention towards the *dandy* typology. Still, the *hipster* typology assumes a sort of social activism and an implication in everything that means damage or alteration of nature. Beyond the alleged snobbery, a *hipster* shows contempt for material values, defying a consumer society that transforms individuals into slaves of objects or of material goods. The *hipster* makes no effort to integrate into society. The *present-day hipster* is accused of a lack of ideology, but in truth he carries a mix of anarchism, of punk and anti-capitalism, of environmentalism and, sometimes, a post-racial attitude (<http://muzica.metropotam.ro/articole-despre-muzica/Ce-e-hipsterul-de-ce-folosim-termenul-la-tot-pasul-si-de-ce-ne-e-frica-de-el-art6071091996/>).

He is also accused of creating nothing. In fact, the only thing he can do in a consumerist society is to embrace a *hipster attitude*.

A history of the *hipster typology* is configured: it begins with the American *hipster of 40s*, then *the hipster of 90s* and *the hipster of 2000*. In Romania, only the last one is present, because *the hipster of 2000* was born in the middle of contemporary society struggles.

According to this typology, *hipster speak* is designed as a language of generalities, focused basically on expressing emotional states, not rational ideas. *Hipster vocabulary* includes English words or terms with changeable meaning, depending on intonation. The meaning of the same words, like *freak* or *cool*, depends on the context. So, *hipster language* is mainly an emotional language, a sort of code of emotions or of

nuanced perceptions. Among the well-known *hipster words*, *cool-uncool* are already considered a *cliché*. Like most social groups, *hipsters* have their own specific way of communication. They converse using certain terms and being abreast with the latest news in *slang* is a basic condition of being a *hipster*:

*Obsedați de cool, am putea adăuga. Cumpără ce e cool, ascultă ce e cool, citeșc ce e cool și apoi dezaprobă tot ce a fost până atunci cool. (Ghidul hipsteritelor on <http://www.gq.ro/radar/10268086-ghidul-hipsteritelor>)<sup>3</sup>.*

The new concept of *eco*, meaning “clean” (“organic”), is familiar to *hipsters* and it is a source of new terms, like *eco-friendly* or *eco-chic*. *Eco living* means being in harmony with nature but, more than that, it means a healthy lifestyle.

A *hipster* is purchasing clothes, good music (on old vinyl), books etc. as a way to secure his social and cultural status. He is always *trendy*; he is a *biker* because it is much cooler to ride a bike than drive an expensive car; that, apart from being a factor of pollution, it is also a sign of material arrogance. If the *hipster* is male, he will probably wear a beard and an old wool jacket; if she is a female, she may wear vintage clothes, and grandmother’s old broche. They drink green tea and eat organic food, they pretend they listen to good music and are interested in Literature or Art.

On the linguistic level, concerning Romanian vocabulary, words that are part of a *hipster*’s universe (*biker, cool, clean, eco, eco-friendly, eco-chic, fake, freak, fresh, trendy, uncool* etc.) strengthen the English element by a high rate of frequency; they can be new borrowings or lexical creations.

So, *hipster language*, just like the term itself, proves to be prolific both in English and in other languages that borrow from it. In the Romanian language, it shows its productivity and it also gets stylistic values present in the audiovisual and the print media. On the lexical level, it is obvious that Romanian gains a word which will prove its vitality in time, even though it is used especially by students and teenagers from the urban environment; in a way, its vitality is partially proved by the process of morphological adaptation it undergoes (we have mentioned the forms articulated with the definite article, *hipsterul*, and the feminine noun form obtained with the Romanian suffix *-iță*: *hipsteriță*, that has diminutive value). It creates a social pattern and a

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<sup>3</sup> *Obsessed by cool, we may ad. They buy what is cool, they listen to what is cool, they read what is cool and after that they disapprove everything was cool until then. (Hipsteritelor' Guide on <http://www.gq.ro/radar/10268086-ghidul-hipsteritelor>).*

phenomenon that implies fashion, food, entertainment, music, literature, all of them triggering a terminological stock that generates a specific language. And, as any language creates a way of thinking, a representation of reality, *hipster language* means a certain affectivity, a certain emotion and vision of the world.

On the social level, the *hipster attitude* and the *hipster language* indicate a form of opposition, of resistance against the Western world that is in free fall because of the rush for riches. The *hipster* option is for what could remain authentic in such a world, where even the concept of *hipster* may represent a source of money in itself.

The contemporary world crisis means reconsidering the system of values. It is a world seeking a new identity. The features of a subculture will always influence the macro culture; in this sense, we should pay attention to the *hipster phenomenon* both on the social and the linguistic level, considering it a symptom of a sick world where spiritual roots and authenticity are in danger due to the failure of the concept of *material paradise*.

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