

KULTURWÖRTER, ERIC LOANS, THE BALKAN SPRACHBUND, AND THE TABOO OF OBSCENITY

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The year 2023 represents the centenary of Nikolai Trubetzkoy's (1923) original formulation of the Balkan linguistic league (языковой союз), although it was in his (1930) iteration that he specified shared *kulturwörter* as one of its diagnostic characteristics. More recently, Friedman & Joseph (2014, 2023) have proposed the concept of words Essentially Rooted In Conversation (ERIC loans). ERIC loans differ from culture words in that they are typically borrowed conversationally as a result of multilateral, multigenerational, mutual multilingualism, i.e. the conditions that lead to a sprachbund (which we treat as nativized in English, like *pretzel* or *gestalt*). In a sense, ERIC loans are types of culture words, namely those associated with the culture of conversational interaction among speakers. Their connection to Trubetzkoy's conceptualization of the significance of loanwords in recognizing a sprachbund provides a basis for their characterization as being indicative of sprachbund formation. Such conversational loans include kinship terms, numerals, pronouns, adpositions, negatives, complementizers, vocatives, and various discourse elements. Another category of ERIC loans, one that does not receive adequate study because of its nature, is that of taboo expressions, especially obscenities and abusive language.

Taboo language includes, but is not isomorphic with, obscenities. Thus, for example, the Albanian Muslim use of *mish miku* 'meat of the friend' as a euphemism for *mish derri* 'pig meat, pork' involves a taboo (against mentioning an unclean animal) without involving an obscenity. Obscenity is tabooed reference to sexual and excremental areas and activities subject to emotional aversion and inhibition. Words which openly (noneuphemistically) describe the tabooed organs, substances, or actions are tantamount to exposing what should be hidden, and our ability to expose the forbidden by using words gives these words a kind of magical power (Henderson 1975: 1, 7). It is this

ability to uncover what is forbidden, and thus to shock, anger, or amuse, combined with social control, that has inhibited the study of obscenity in the Balkans as elsewhere. Nonetheless, as Henderson demonstrated for Ancient Greek, obscenity has much to teach us about language use, and, in the Balkans, obscenity adds to our knowledge of language history and contact.

In addition to sexual and excretory acts and organs, there are two other categories connected to obscene usage, both of which can be described as *culturally contingent*. One of these — *people & animals* — corresponds to Razvratnikov's (1979) *social institutions and other expressions*. These are terms like *kurva* 'whore', found (*mutatis mutandis*) throughout eastern Europe (ultimately from a feminine ū-stem from Late Common Slavic **kurī*) and the widespread Balkanism *kopile* 'bastard' (of uncertain origin).

A category that overlaps with but is distinct from obscenity is *blasphemy*, which can either be deployed obscenely, or, in some languages, even fulfill some of the functions of sexual or excretory obscenities in other languages. Thus, for example, in Canadian French, *Tabernak!* literally 'Tabernacle' is uttered under circumstances where US English would use *Fuck!*, Polish *Kurwa!*, Russian *Блядь!*, or German *Scheiße!* As Stavyc'ka (2008: 33–34) points out, languages can be characterized by general preferences for references to the sexual, the excretory, or the blasphemous. In this respect, obscenity in the Balkan languages tends to be sex-oriented.

For purposes of analysis, we can identify three core obscenities for Slavic in general, and these constitute the core for the non-Slavic Balkans as well. Evidence for this focus is seen in the Macedonian transcripts of conversations among VMRO-DPMNE politicians and their allies published as *Вистината за Македонија* at Vistinomer (2016) and Prizma (2015). These texts contain numerous obscene expressions, e.g. *з'золижач, гомнојадци*, etc., all fully spelled out with the exception of three core obscenities, which are sometimes — but not always — slightly censored: *e.e, n...a, k.p*, i.e., *ебе, пизда / тичка, кур*.

Historically, obscenities tend to arise in two ways: 1) by the contamination of an earlier native euphemism, and 2) by borrowing from another language, in which case the quality of obscenity may or may not differ from the source. Both origins are realized within the Balkans and are thus worthy of study. Balkan Slavic obscenity — like Slavic obscenity in general — has a remarkably conservative core, and, contrary to the folk belief shared by all the Slavic-speaking peoples, the core obscenities are not foreign importations but rather direct inheritances from Indo-European and Common Slavic.

In fact, Slavic, including Balkan Slavic, has been a donor of core obscenities to non-Slavic languages, e.g. Balkan Romance *pizdǎ~kizdǎ* and Hungarian *picsa*. Of the other two core obscenities in Balkan Romance, *futǎ* is a direct inheritance from Latin *future*, while *pulǎ* is a contaminated euphemism from Latin *pullum*. The semantics of *pulǎ* correspond exactly to South Slavic *kur(ac~ec)*. Note that Bulgarian diverges from the rest of South Slavic in using *nymka* and *xyŭ*. The former (which is also known in eastern Macedonia) may be influenced by Romanian *pușă* (itself an inheritance from Latin), with semantic reversal, although derivation from the root in Common Slavic **pŭtica* has also been suggested (and is more likely for Kashubian *pŭta*). For Albanian, *kar* is apparently a borrowing from Romani, while *pidh* is a dialectal Indo-European inheritance shared with Slavic and Nuristani (Hamp 1968, Mallory & Adams 1997: 507), although at some later date Albanian also borrowed the Slavic as *pizdĕ*, *pičkĕ*, etc. Albanian *qij* also appears to be a native inheritance, since Arbërisht has *qinj* and not **qlinj*, so Latin *[in] cĭnō* cannot be the source. Greek obscenities are all native, but *γάμο*, and *μουνί* are both obscenified euphemisms unconnected with Ancient Greek, while in the case of *πότσος*, although it is derived from the same Indo-European root as AGk *πέος*, is an obscenified nursery word from the o-grade of **pes* rather than a continuation of the original obscenity, which is e-grade. Turkish *am* goes back to Old Turkic, *am* in the same meaning, while *sik* — as both noun and verb — is from OT *sij~sið* ‘urinate, copulate [of animals]’. Romani *kar* already had its referent in Prakrit, while *kuřel* and *mindž* are obscenified inherited euphemisms.

Outside the core, Turkish is a consistent source for all the Balkan languages, and Romani provides items in some languages. Thus, for example, Trk *pezevenk*, *orospu* (older & dialectal *orospi*) and *siktir* are found in all the Balkan languages, although in modern times there is now considerable variation from language, and even from speaker to speaker, regarding whether any given expression is considered very rude, mildly rude, old-fashioned, or obsolete. Romani *mindž* is borrowed into many languages both within and outside the Balkans, but there is considerable variation regarding how well-known the term is in any given language.

From the example of the Balkans, we can say that core obscenities tend to be resistant to borrowing, and usually depend on the obscenification of earlier native euphemisms. Balkan Romance and Albanian both present exceptions, and Slavic plays a role in both languages. From a Slavic perspective, Bulgarian is an outlier within the Balkans, and the possibility of Romance

influence is present but not certain. From an Indo-European perspective, Balkan Slavic, like Slavic in general, is especially conservative (but the West is less so than the South or East, Friedman 2024), although Albanian shares some of this conservatism. It could be argued that the sociolinguistic positions of Turkish, Greek, on the one hand, and Romani, on the other, at opposite ends of a scale of prestige, insulated them from borrowing these terms, while the role of Slavic as donor reflects its relative importance, perhaps as a late-comer vis-à-vis Romance and Albanian. Outside the core expressions, Turkish has an important role, but other languages also participate.

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