

## Obscenity as a Window into Slavic Linguistic History

Slavic obscenity has received some diachronic attention (e.g. Hamp 1968, Isačenko 1964, Uspenskij 1996), but its study has been marginalized in Slavic countries. Trubačev's (1964-73) translation and annotation of Vasmer (1950-58) omitted the core obscenities *ebat'* (older *eti*) 'fuck', *pizda* 'cunt' and *xuj* 'cock, prick', and *bljad'* 'whore'. Stavyc'ka (2008) provides some comparative Slavic material, but there has been no attempt to map out the patterns of retention and innovation in Slavic obscenity, and these display significant phenomena.

Slavic obscenity is remarkably conservative from an Indo-European standpoint, arguably more so than any other branch. The root (j)eb- is cognate with forms indicating copulation in Greek, Sanskrit, and Sogdian, but evidence from Luwian and Tokharian show that the original etymon began as a euphemism that was obscenified by contamination in dialectal Indo-European. While universally preserved in Slavic, the verbal root is in retreat as the *vox propria* for 'fuck' in most of West Slavic, especially Sorbian, Czech, and Kashubian, less so in Polish, and not in Slovak. Similarly, Common Slavic \**peizdā* began as a euphemism on the Indo-European dialectal level, with cognates in Albanian and Nuristani (Hamp 1968, Mallory and Adams 1997). Bulgarian and Kashubian have specific developments, and Sorbian shows competition. An old isogloss separates South Slavic *kur* 'cock' from North Slavic *xuj* 'prick', with Bulgarian being transitional.

Since obscenities are subject to euphemization, which euphemisms become contaminated and displace earlier obscenities, leaving the older obscenities to either become obsolete or shift meaning, it would appear that in Slavic, obscenities underwent a process of decontamination and recontamination. Evidence for this is suggested in old South Slavic and East Slavic texts (Vinodolski Zakon, Old East Slavic Birchbark Letters). Alternatively, evidence from the Birchbark Letters could suggest that in the Middle Ages the situation, at least for *pizda* and *eb-* was like that in, e.g., modern Romani, where the single lexical item, *mindž*, can be translated 'vagina/vulva' or 'cunt' depending on the context, e.g. medical or invective.

By contrast it appears that, unlike terms for sexual intercourse and female genitalia, the male member was subject to the usual processes of obscenified euphemism replacement (with items that correspond lexically to English 'prick' and 'cock' in the North and South, respectively) at some time during the break-up of Common Slavic, i.e. the early Middle Ages. Based on the evidence of the Vinodolski Zakon and the Birchbark Letters, it can thus be argued that Medieval Slavic *eti* and *pizda* were obscene only contextually and did not become restricted to obscenity until the early modern period (evidence argues for the same treatment of Russian *bljad'*). Still, the Common Slavic for the male member may already have been restricted to obscenity, whence its replacement by the obscenification of new euphemisms, *xuj* and *kur*, after the break-up of Common Slavic.

The history of core obscenities in Slavic thus illustrates the importance of studying obscenities in general. In the case of Slavic: 1) The remarkable conservatism of two out of three Slavic core obscenities suggests either decontamination and re-obscenification or a period characteristic of languages for which context determines obscenity; 2) Those languages with the strongest Germanic contact are most likely to innovate obscenities, consistent with facts of German (Stavyc'ka 2008); 3) The male member was treated differently from both female genitalia and sexual intercourse and in this regard Bulgarian shows connections to East Slavic, pointing to Macedonian's closer connection to the rest of South Slavic vis-à-vis Bulgarian.

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