

## SLOVAK FOLK TRADITION IN ETHNOLINGUISTIC STUDIES OF THE CARPATHIAN-BALKAN AREA

ANNA PLOTNIKOVA

**Abstract:** The article is devoted to an analysis of Carpathian-Balkan studies conducted by the Russian Academy of Sciences since 2006. The Slovak tradition is an important one, as it displays characteristics which are common to the Carpathian region as a whole. Furthermore, there are a number of Carpathian-South Slavic and Carpathian-Balkan parallels in terminology and related phenomena in folk culture.

**Key words:** ethnolinguistic; Slovak tradition; Carpathian–Balkan area; terminology; cultural dialects.

For many years now, Slovak cultural and language folk traditions have captured the interest of those involved in Slavic studies at the Moscow School of Ethnolinguistics. An integral part of Slavic studies is dedicated to reconstructing old Slavic culture, as demonstrated by an ethnolinguistic dictionary on the geography of ancient regions entitled *Slavic Antiquities* (see Tolstoy et al. 1995-2009). Work conducted by Slovak researchers studying national rural culture in areas where folk tradition characteristics share common Slavic roots and are close to the language and culture still found in other Slav regions was an important resource (for instance, in Polesye, among the Kashubs and so on, see work by N. I. Tolstoy (1995, 50). Ethnolinguists in Moscow working on the sources of and methods for reconstructing old Slavic folk culture included research by scholars from various Slav countries. Knowing more about studies on Slovak cultural tradition was enormously helpful (Horváthová 1989). It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Slovak cultural and language materials in studying Slavic traditions as a whole and for reconstructing old Slavic folk culture. This is particularly true of elements of mountain folk culture that have been preserved. Furthermore, Slovak cultural and language folk traditions are especially of interest since they display traits common to the entire Carpathian region, including Carpathian–South Slavic and Carpathian–Balkan linguistic similarities (primarily, vocabulary) and related folk culture phenomena.

Since 2006, ethnolinguistic research has been conducted at the Russian Academy of Sciences into the Carpathian cultural and language community in the Balkans. The main aim in studying Carpathian regional traditions, including Slovak ones, is to clarify the phenomena and processes linking each of these traditions to general Carpathian phenomena and Balkan-Slavic and Balkan phenomena as well. Between 2006 and 2009, two general research projects were conducted as part of the Program of the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The first was on the Adaptation of Peoples and Cultures to Changes in the Natural Environment, Social and Anthropogenic Transformation and the second was The Carpathian-Balkan Dialect Landscape: Language and Culture in Interaction.

Initially, the Carpathian-Balkan ethnolinguistic studies department set rather modest tasks in studying Carpathian traditions. Those involved in the project already had a significant set of field materials as groundwork, gathered in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia using an integrated questionnaire (Plotnikova 1996) (fieldwork had been conducted in 32 Balkan Slavic villages).<sup>1</sup> The aim therefore was to extend the field of research northward of the Danube, i.e. to cover part of the Carpathian Region (Romania and Western Ukraine) and East-Slavic Carpathian traditions (Western Ukraine).

The Carpathian ethnolinguistic data that had been gathered and the work conducted in the Balkans were to become the basis for studying the cultural and language traditions of the Carpathian-Balkan continuum in order to determine key areas for establishing how ethnogenesis occurred amongst Slavs and other Balkan peoples. Synchronic cultural and linguistic research on the area aimed to establish the genesis, sources, borrowings and ways in which lexical and associated cultural phenomena were disseminated in the Slavic and East-Romanic traditions. Analysis of cross-cultural and language phenomena can provide a basis for creating a cultural-linguistic atlas of the Carpathian-Balkan region thanks to ethnolinguistic methods for analysing linguistic phenomena and closely interconnected cultural phenomena.

The ethnolinguistic questionnaire for studying folk traditions includes these main themes: Folk Calendar, Family Rites (Births, Weddings and Funerals), Agrarian Rites and Folk Mythology. It works on the “from meaning to word” principle and the questionnaire is a means of detecting the cultural phenomena that are most significant to the tradition being researched. Thus, the vocabulary associated with the traditional folk culture of the village and the related cultural phenomena occupy a central place during fieldwork. Further research work is being conducted on two interconnecting areas: in terms of dialect vocabulary (the original Romanic/Slavic tradition units were taken from various historical periods) and in terms of the corresponding cultural phenomena which may be original, common to a number of traditions and so on. The success of the project is dependent on whether fieldwork results obtained within a single programme in different regions can be compared. In investigating the Carpathian-Balkan areas, an important method is ethnolinguistic cartography where both lexical and extralinguistic (cultural) data are shown on the same map.

The plan was to spend three years carrying out fieldwork in Romania, Western Ukraine and the mountainous regions of Slovakia, collecting, analysing and researching cultural and

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, questionnaires on ethnolinguistic studies of Slavs in the Balkans in three issues of (Uzeniova 2004, Trefilova 2004, Plotnikova 2006).

linguistic material in the Carpathian-Balkan region. The next stage was to collect the data, write reviews of the expeditions, assemble and analyse the fieldwork material, compile the ethnolinguistic maps and publish the material. After the first three years of work, a collection of articles was published entitled *The Carpathian-Balkan Dialect Landscape: Language and Culture in Interaction* and dedicated to the memory of G. P. Klepikova (Plotnikova 2008). The book contained results of field studies conducted in the Southern Carpathians (the Vylchi areas in Oltenia, Romania) using ethnolinguistic questionnaire for the first time north of the Danube (Golant 2008). The first step in the ethnolinguistic study of the Carpathian-Balkan region was the successful administration of the questionnaire in the Southern Carpathians since it was the motivation for beginning the work given the lack of field data on the Romanian part which is both Carpathian and Balkan (and considered to be the northern part of the Balkans by some academics).

Between 2009 and 2011, research was continued in the same field as part of a project on “The Carpathian Cultural and Language Community in the Balkan Context”.<sup>2</sup> The research findings were published in the second issue of a series of collected articles *The Carpathian-Balkan Dialect Landscape: Language and Culture in Interaction* (Plotnikova 2012), which devoted attention to field studies on Carpathian traditions including non-Slavic–Romanian and Hungarian ones (see Anisimova 2012; Golant, Plotnikova 2012). As part of the second three-year long project, ethnolinguistic research was conducted into the folk traditions of the autochthonic Hungarians living in Slovakia (villages where the Palocki Hungarian dialect is spoken) as well as in Hungary (villages where the Trans-Danubian dialect is spoken). Researchers were particularly interested in folk traditions following a single Hungarian cultural and language continuum.<sup>3</sup> An ethnolinguistic field trip to visit the Hungarian community in Slovakia provided invaluable information on Slavic lexis (i. e. Slovak) in the cultural vocabulary of Palocki Hungarians in Slovakia (for instance, *morva:n'*—a round loaf given to the bride before her wedding, *druzhb :k*—man who may be from the bridegroom's family and who attends the bride at the wedding ceremony and then visits the home of the bride) and others. Further comparison of Hungarian cultural dialects in Hungary and Slovakia will enable the researchers to ascertain common features and differences in the lexical terms used in folk culture

The third three-year long project on the topic (The Carpathian-Balkan Territorial Dialects: Reconstructing Traditional Culture Using Linguistic Data, 2012-2014, the section programme of the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences—Language and Literature in the Context of Cultural Dynamics) is mainly devoted to reconstructing folk culture using data on vocabulary and phraseology and taking into account the extralinguistic contexts of the terms reflected in certain “monuments” (see Tolstoy, Tolstaya 1983, 14)—dialect texts collected during field research. The tasks may be characterized in the following way: (1)

<sup>2</sup> The Genesis and Interaction of Social, Cultural and Linguistic Communities research program of the Branch of the Institute of Philological Disciplines at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>3</sup> Questionnaire-based field studies were conducted by D. Y. Vashchenko (Anisimova) in Slovakia (2009), the Hungarian village of Ipelštíké Úľany in the Hont area of southern Central Slovakia, and in Hungary itself (2010), the villages of Shashka and Dulakesi, the mountainous massive of Bakon in the north-western Hungary (see Anisimova 2012).

collecting field material and describing lexical terms used in traditional folk culture obtained through ethnolinguistic research of certain territorial dialects using the same questionnaire (see Plotnikova 1996); (2) identifying corresponding ethnolinguistic contexts in which these folk culture terms are used; (3) comparing linguistic and cultural data in various Carpathian-Balkan traditions, including the dialect material obtained using questionnaires on Serbian, Macedonian, Bulgarian and Bosnian traditions; (4) detecting archaic cultural semantic lexemes common to Carpathian and Balkan traditions and territorial analyses (for instance, *\*kračun*, *\*polazník*, *\*šarkan'* and so on); (5) conducting linguistic and cultural analyses of lexical terms used in traditional spiritual culture, including reconstructing archaic meanings in various stages of historical development.

The Slovak region came to the attention of Russian scholars in the early stages of the Carpathian-Balkan ethnolinguistic research. In 2007/2008, the first ethnolinguistic research trip was organized in the Slovak (Western) Carpathians. E. S. Uzeniova distributed the same questionnaire in villages of the Malá Fatra district in Central Slovakia (the villages of Blatnica, Bystríčka, Dubové and Belá) and in the village of Zuberec (Orava, northern Central Slovakia). Since the Slav Balkan regions are some distance from the Slovak areas under investigation, there are clearly substantial differences in language structure and dialectical features; nonetheless, lexical, semantic and cultural similarities were observed in a number of topics not only in common Slavic analogies but also in cases which can be defined as demonstrating Carpathian-Balkan uniformity. In the villages in the Malá Fatra district, for instance, recorded items include *víla* (functional context: as if these mythological beings might gather and dance on a bridge). In Orava items included: *polazník*—a sprig of willow intertwined with ears of blessed corn (shepherds would take them to their masters' houses at Christmas) and so on.

It is noteworthy that the ethnolinguistic field data for the Carpathian area led to greater interest in published sources on dialects and lexicography and regional ethnology, particularly those that describe the valley called Bošácka dolina in the White Carpathians (Holuby 1958), the Tatra mountains and adjacent foothills (Olejník 1978), but also Zamagurie (Podolák 1972) and other central regions.<sup>4</sup> Such resources were particularly valued since they contained a systematic selection and comparison of the data and traditional culture within the general Carpathian context. Thus, there is confirmation that there is a lexeme that is well-known in the Carpathian and Balkan regions—*polazník*<sup>5</sup>—and it is analysed in E. Horváthová's *The Calendar Year in the Customs of Our People* (*polazňar*—the first guest-shepherd; *polazeň*—a sprig brought by a shepherd at Christmas for his master to hit the cattle with to make them healthy (Horváthová 1986, 62-63). Terms analysed in *Zamagurie* include *pudlažnicka*, meaning a Christmas sprig ensuring the fertility of cattle and a bountiful crop, and *pudlažník*—a Christmas tree (in the village of Osturňa, the sprig must not be hung on a house in mourning) (Podolák 1972, 230,234). *The Vocabulary of Slovak Dialects* is more extensive showing word-formation variations of the lexeme, indicating the

<sup>4</sup> There are mid-20th century descriptions of the mountain village of Žakarovce in the Horehronie region (see Mjartan 1956).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, a review of Carpathian and Balkan traditions of this type “*Polazník*” in *The Slavic Antiquities* (Tolstoy, Tolstaya 1995-2009, 4, 128-131).

rite, action, subject, and ritual attribute. The word for a sprig—*polazník* (var.: *polazovník*) has been recorded in samples of the dialect from the western part of the Banská Bystrica region (Králiky); in the region of Dolný Kubín (between the Malá Fatra massif and Liptov villages—village Osádka). The term *polazovat'* (*polazúvat'*) has been recorded in the village of Pucov (Dolný Kubín) and in Kysucké Nové Mesto (north of the Malá Fatra) (Ripka 2006, 943-944). It is of note, that the data was collected in Central Slovakia, in the foothills of the Tatra mountains. It seems to be important that there is a transfer of meanings in the magic issuing from the executor of the rite (the first guest, shepherd, man, lucky man) to the tools of the rite used to spread the magic (a sprig of particular types of trees ensuring fertility, a good harvest and the prosperity of the household). Fieldwork confirmed that in the village of Orava (Zuberec) the term meant a sprig brought by a guest-shepherd. This testifies to the space-time continuity in the distribution of the term within Slovakia and the adjacent Carpathian region.

In Slovak sources the final data in the ethnolinguistic field trip materials indicates that there are Proto-Slavic terms typically used only in cultural contexts in the Carpathian area. For instance, in Central Slovakia (Žakarovce, between Spiš and Gemer) there is a lexeme *džmij* (from \**zm̥yb*) meaning a spirit providing richness; a master “produces” it from the egg of a black hen and keeps the egg in his left armpit for 9 days in silence. On the ninth day a wet black chicken (*džmij*) is hatched, bringing money for its master; the chicken likes to sit near the fireplace because it is wet (Mjartan 1956, 466). In other words, the field data shows that this is a typical mythological creature in Carpathian tradition. It belongs to the group of spirits that provide wealth and bring danger to people. In traditions from other areas it has a different name: *domovyk* in Carpatho-Ukraine and *spiriduș* in Romania. Such parallels in a number of cultural terms and extralinguistic context from folk myths can be observed in Upper Hron, the Tatras, Bošácka dolina (a valley in the White Carpathians) and so on. Examples include: *striga*, *veštica*, *mamuna* and others. Each of them deserves special attention.

A rather integral folk myth image which features significant Carpathian-Balkan uniformity in functions and outlook, on one hand, and names, on the other, is the *vila*—Slovak, in Serbian and Croatian *vila* (on the genetically and typologically related lexemes of Macedonian *samovila*, Bulgarian *samodiva* see (Plotnikova 2004, 614-625). There is also a map plotting the usage of these names and the extralinguistic contexts in the cultural and linguistic continuity of Southern Slavs). Published examples of references to the mythological creature in Slovakia (mainly in narratives—*bilichki* and folk beliefs) are centered in the mountainous regions of Central and Western Slovakia (see Holuby 1958, 361-368; Valentsova 2002, 24-25). Field materials collected so far using the ethnolinguistic questionnaire (a field trip by M. M. Valentsova to the villages of Liptov in 2011)<sup>6</sup> support existing information on the term and related extralinguistic contexts. According to notes made M. M. Valentsova, although *vila*—a beautiful woman who brings bad or good luck to people—is known in Slovak villages “from fairy tales”, respondents described them as beautiful creatures dressed in white and with long hair to be seen early in the morning in

<sup>6</sup> In 2011, they studied the villages of Liptovská Teplá, Ivachnova, Turík, Lúčky, Potok using M.M. Valentsova's questionnaire.

a meadow, the mountains or more often near water. The *víla* dance in a circle, sing and talk, entice young men through dance—and the men remain unconscious (interlocutors called this state *víla vylákala*—*víla* enticed); if a man returns home tired and bedraggled it is said to be a consequence of the *víla* dancing, which beats, carries, chases and tears into him (*víla ma málala*, *víla ma nosila*, *naháňala a trhala*—village of Turík). The notion that harmful effects might be wrought by the charming *víla*'s dance on a man who happened to cross into their circle (or step in their footsteps) has been recorded among Balkan Slavs (the regions of Homole, Nish and other regions in Eastern Serbia; some regions in Bulgaria and Macedonia (Plotnikova 2004; 209, 626-632). The attraction these fairy creatures hold for young men is a popular folk motif in Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria.

Similarities in the spiritual folk culture reflected in the vocabulary and phraseology of Slovaks and Southern Slavs have been observed in various spheres of life: family rites, the folk calendar and mythology. The way in which folk ideas are verbally communicated deserves special study since language retains folk beliefs lost over time. Studying them helps us to reconstruct the old culture according to the cultural and language areas defined during research into Carpathian-Balkan similarities and convergences. Reconstruction can be performed in, at least, two ways: (1) on archaisms found in the lexis of the folk culture and related topics, including geographical dissemination; (2) on the mechanisms of the folk culture typical to the Carpathian area, which bear similarities to those in the Balkan world-view. Thus, it is possible to conduct in-depth research into cultural dialects in the Carpathian-Balkan region both in genetic and typological terms.<sup>7</sup>

## References

- Anisimova, D. Yu. (2012). *Etnolingvisticheskiye materiali iz vengerskoy derevni Ipoysedemash, Slovakia*, pp. 424-455. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Golant, N.G. (2008). *Etnolingvisticheskiye materiali iz kommuni Melyaya, Ruminiya*, pp. 271-323. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Golant, N.G., Plotnikova, A.A. (2012). *Etnolingvisticheskiye materiali iz Muetenii (okrug Buzeu, sela kommuni Merey, Minzelesht', P'etroasele, Skortsoasa)*, pp. 361-423. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Holuby, J. L. (1958). *Národopisné práce*. Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo SAV.
- Horváthová, E. (1986). *Rok vo zvykoch nášho ľudu*. Bratislava: Tatran.
- Horváthová, E. (1989). *Traditsionniye yunosheskiye soyuzы i initsiatzionniye obr'yadi u zapadnikh slav'yan*, pp. 162-173. Moskva: Nauka.
- Klepikova, G.P. (Ed.). (1992-2009). *Issledovaniya po slav'yanskoy dialektologii*, pp. 1-14. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Plotnikova, A.A. (Ed.). (2008). *Karpato-balkanskiy dialektniy landshaft. Yazik i kul'tura. Pamyati Galini Petrovni Klepikovoy*. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Plotnikova, A.A. (Ed.). (2012). *Karpato-balkanskiy dialektniy landshaft. Yazik i kul'tura*. oskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.

<sup>7</sup> The work was conducted as part of the general research program at the Section of Language and Literature of the Branch of the Institute of Linguistics at the Russian Academy of Sciences entitled Language and Literature in the Context of Cultural Dynamics in the Carpathian-Balkan Territorial Dialects Project: reconstructing Traditional Culture using Linguistic Data.

- Mjartan, J. (Ed.). (1956). *Banícka dedina Žakarovce*. Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo SAV.
- Olejník, J. (1978). *Lud pod Tatrami*. Martin: Vydavateľstvo Osveta.
- Plotnikova, A. A. (1996). *Materiali dla etnolinguisticheskogo izucheniya balkanoslav'yanskogo areala*. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Plotnikova, A. A. (2004). *Etnolinguisticheskaya geografiya Yuzhnay Slavii*. Moskva: Indrik.
- Plotnikova, A. A. (2006). Etnolinguisticheskiye materiali iz s. Teovo v Makedonii (oblast' Velesa, region Azota). *Issledovaniya po slavyanskoy dialektologii 12*, pp. 192–227. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Podolák, J. (Ed.). (1969). *Horehrorie. Kultúra a spôsob života ľudu*. Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo SAV.
- Podolák, J. (1972). *Zamagurie. Národopisná monografia oblasti*. Košice: Východoslovenské vydavateľstvo.
- Ripka, I. (Ed.) (2006). *Slovník slovenských nárečí*. Bratislava: Veda.
- Tolstoy, N. I. (1989). *Slav'yanskiy i balkanskiy fol'klor. Rekonstruktsiya drevney slav'yanskoy dukhovnoy kul'tury: istochniki i metody*. Moskva: Nauka.
- Tolstoy, N. I. et al. (Eds.). (1995–2009). *Slavyanskiye drevnosti. Etnolinguisticheskiy slovar' v 5 tomach*. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Tolstoy N. I. (1995). *Yazik i narodnaya kul'tura. Ocherki po slav'yanskoy mifologii i etnolinguistike*. Moskva: Indrik.
- Tolstoy, N. I., Tolstaya, S.M. (1983). *O zadachakh etnolinguisticheskogo izucheniya Poles'ya. Polesskiy etnolinguisticheskiy sbornik*. Moskva: Nauka.
- Trefilova, O.V. (2004). *Etnolinguisticheskiye materialy iz s. Stakevtsy, r-n Belogradchika* (Severo-Zapadnaya Bulgaria). *Issledovaniya po slavyanskoy dialektologii 10*, pp. 354–398. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Uzeniova, Ye. S. (2004). *Etnolinguisticheskiye materiali iz tsentral'noy Bulgarii* (s. Dilboki, oblast' Staroy Zagory). *Issledovaniya po slavyanskoy dialektologii 10*, pp. 267–297. Moskva: Institut slavyanovedeniya RAN.
- Valentsova, M. M. (2002). *Slovatsko-yuzhnoslav'yanskiye sv'yazi: etnolinguisticheskiye parallel'i. Slav'yanskoye yazikoznaniye*. Materiali konferentsii (Moskva, iyun' 2002 g.), pp. 17–28. Moskva: Institut russkogo yazika.

Institute of Slavic Studies,  
 Russian Academy of Sciences,  
 Leninsky Prospect, 32- ,  
 119334 Moscow,  
 Russian Federation  
 E-mail: annaplotn@mail.ru