CIRCUM-PANNONIAN ISOGLOSSES: THE ABSOLUTE SUPERLATIVE

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1. Introduction

Petar Skok noticed (1920:87) that Serbo-Croatian [SC] *jako* 'strong' and Roumanian [Rm] *tare* 'strong' describe a subtle isogloss, in that both are etymologically deictics.[1] He was not interested in the fact that, in addition to meaning 'strong', both can also serve as 'very'. This is one of the points that I will pursue further here. I will also try to depict the deployment of the devices used for forming the absolute superlative ('very') in the entire area indicated in my title, i.e., roughly the area occupied by Sn, SC, Hg, Rm, Sk and Cz. My own expertise is restricted to Rm and Hg; I have therefore had to rely on lexica[2] and the good offices of a number of colleagues[3] for information on the Slavic languages involved. Since we are dealing with a segment of the lexicon which calls for great finesse in gauging the precise meanings of competing elements—very few words, it turns out, are restricted to meaning only 'very'—my limited judgment in selecting the items to be included in the discussion may have biased the discussion itself. The better informed reader is therefore asked to make the necessary adjustments.

In another paper (Austerlitz 1988) I have tried to plot the devices for 'very' on the map of all of Europe. One of the results is the following. There are two large areas in Europe in which the device for rendering the absolute superlative is borrowed (so to speak) from the quantifier meaning 'much, many', as in, e.g., Mc and Bg (*mnogu, mnogo*), where these words are polysemous in that they discharge the function of 'much' as well as that of 'very.' I will work on the assumption that 'much' is primary and 'very' secondary in the languages where this is the case. One area where these languages are deployed is along the entire Mediterranean, stretching from Turkish, Greek and Albanian westward as far as Portuguese and even Basque. (In a few instances a minor formal distinction between quantifier and superlative is—still—evident: Galician and Castilian *moito/moi* and *mucho/ muy* 'much/very'.) The other area in which 'much' and 'very' merge formally is a second waterway, the one stretching from the Atlantic in the West to the Baltic in the East, from Icelandic to Swedish. In addition to these two waterways, which must evidently be connected with the 'much/very' isogloss, there are other geographical areas which house similar concentrations of devices which serve to convey the function of the absolute superlative. One of these, in particular, will occupy us in what follows. For a carefully reasoned discussion of Europe as a linguistic area, see Décsy 1973.

2. Methodology

2.1. The terminology and apparatus for classification, and the various devices that serve to express 'very', will be given five labels; with their meanings, they are as follows. (1) MAGNITUDO: the semantic overlap between 'large' and 'very' so that the synchronic association between the two is obvious to the naïve speaker, as e.g. that between SC *veoma* 'very' and *veliki* 'big'. (2) POTESTAS: the analogous overlap between 'very' and words referring to (a) power, (b) ability—also within a synchronic framework—as in the case of SC *jako* 'strong/very', where POTESTAS refers to power, and Cz *moc* 'very' (cf. 3.6.), where POTESTAS refers to both power and ability. (3) QUANTITAS: the overlap between

'much' and 'very' as indicated for Mc and Bg above, or as in the case of It *molto*. (4)
OPACITY: instances where a given device for 'very' can not be synchronically associated
with any other item in the lexicon or grammar, as, e.g., Sn *zelo* 'very', which is impen-
etrable to the naked, naïve eye. (5) CRYPTO-DEIXIS: in the case of SC and Rm, where
jako and *tare* are on the surface, synchronically, instances of POTESTAS, although
diachronically they exemplify OPACITY; i.e., instances where historical deictic origin
does not shine through.

    2.2.   The terms COMPETITOR and COMPETE are used to refer to situations in which
two or more devices vie with each other in order to serve as 'very.' Since there is no such
thing as a synonym, some competitors will hover close to the mark, others farther away.
In the interests of completeness, all forms which can carry the meaning 'very' (before an
adjective) have been included. Their semantic latitude, i.e., the degree to which these
forms also carry other meanings, is indicated in Table I and in the discussion. Excluded
are locutions such as 'awfully', 'terribly', and 'exceptionally' because they are eminently
transparent (non-OPAQUE), metaphorical, mainly of interest to stylists, and unrelated to
the question here discussed.

    Table I is a list of the forms in question, as I have been able to identify them. For Sk
I found only one form; Hg and Rm have two competitors each; Sn, SC and Cz have five
each. Column IV accommodates instances of non-OPACITY, i.e., items with which a
given word for 'very' is lexically (and, ocasionally, grammatically) associated, *without the
benefit of etymology*. Column VI contains etymologies. These are presumably beyond the
ken of the naïve native speaker. They are included because they play a central role in the
discussion of SC, Rm and Hg, and also in order to provide the reader with an idea of how
far a given word for 'very' can wander from its etymon. As is to be expected, some entries
in Columns IV and VI overlap, as in four cases out of five in Cz. On the other hand,
judgments on IV and VI were not always easy to come by and may require revision.

3. Data

    In this section I identify the words for 'very' in the six languages in detailed 'profiles',
to reveal the features which account for competition among them, and to assign each a place
in the semantic sub-system. Etymological information should be regarded as incidental,
except in the case of SC, Rm and Hg, as will become apparent in 4. and 5.

    3.1.   The most striking thing about Sn is that Columns I, II and III are empty; in other
words, Sn has no devices involving MAGNITUDO, POTESTAS, or QUANTITAS. This
is the only language in our sample which displays this particular profile. As if to compen-
sate for this, Sn is rich in OPACITY, viz. *zelo* (which has a cognate with the same meaning
in languages from all three branches of Slavic) and *baš*. The last word is archaic, marginal,
and etymologically problematic (cf. Bezlaj 1977:13). The three remaining Sn forms, *celo*,
prav and *zares* (= *za-res*, *res* 'truth') are straightforward, as their associations (the
lexically-semantically related forms in Column IV) attest. *prav* will turn out to be of special
interest in 5.5. below.

    3.2.   SC has five forms, of which one, *vrlo*, is OPAQUE. The other four, *veoma*,
puno, *jako* and *mnogo* are all polysemous and therefore transparent, each in its own way.
jako is discussed immediately below in connection with Rm *tare*. *mnogo* points to the
Mediterranean QUANTITAS-belt, cf. 5.4.. The mark "x" in Column I for *puno* is in
parentheses because 'full' is, properly speaking, not an instance of QUANTITAS, but has
been arbitrarily adjudged so in this case, in order to contrast *puno* with *mnogo*.

    3.3.   Strictly speaking, Rm *foarte* is OPAQUE because it has no counterparts in the

TABLE I

		I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Sn	zelo					x	violent
	celo				wholly, even		entire
	prav				correct		right
	zares				indeed, truly		truth
	baš				really, truly	x	?strike
SC	vrlo					x	?excel
	veoma	x			√ large		large
	puno			(x)	full		full
	jako		x		strong		DEICTIC
	mnogo			x	much		much/many
Rm	foarte		(x)		(?)	(←)	strong
	tare		x		strong		DEICTIC
Hg	nagyon	x			√ large		large
	igen				yes; in excess		?DEICTIC
Sk	veľmi	x			√ large		large
Cz	velmi	x			√ large		large
	velice	x			√ large		large
	tuze				tough, stiff		tough/stiff
	moc		x		√ able		might
	hodně			x	much (&c.)		proper

I : MAGNITUDO
II : POTESTAS
III : QUANTITAS
IV : other meanings or simplex from which derived; the symbol √ is read as: "associate with the root, not with any particular inflected or derived form."
V: OPACITY
VI : etymon

basic native vocabulary. The modern learned vocabulary, however, contains about nine neologisms modeled on Fr or It which force transparency on *foarte* 'very': *forță* 'power, strength, force', *fortifica* 'fortify', etc.. This duality accounts for the parentheses in columns II, IV and V and detracts from the OPACITY of this word. In contrast, *tare* is clearly transparent and homophonous with 'strong.' Stylistically, *tare* 'very' is somewhat more rustic and expressive than *foarte*. Both competitors have family connections with 'strong': *tare* through homophony, and *foarte* etymologically and through the set of obviously related neologisms. *tare* is however from a Latin deictic (*tāl-* 'such a') and therefore has precisely the same pedigree as SC *jako*, which also is historically a deictic and synchronically homophonous with 'strong'.

3.4.   The two Hg competitors for 'very', *nagyon* [nɔd'on] and *igen* [igen], participate in a complicated network of intersecting ploysemies, which also holds *túl* [túl] within its grip, cf. Table II.

TABLE II

1		'too; in excess'	
2	*túl*	*igen*	*nagyon*
3	'beyond'	'yes'	'big' ADV
4		'very'	

1 = competition between *túl* and *igen* for 'too, in excess'
4 = competition between *igen* and *nagyon* for 'very'
3 = other roles of the competitors involved.

In addition to the competition between *túl* and *igen* for 'too, in excess' and that between *igen* and *nagyon* for 'very', the last two words also display a morphophonological irregularity: the expected vocalisms before the adverbial suffix *-n* would normally yield *[nɔd'ɔn] and *[igæn] rather than the forms given. I have no explanation for these anomalies, other than to point to the fact that, first, [e] and [æ] are not distinguished in most dialects, so that the suffixes [-æn] and [-en] easily merge, and, second, as *disjecta membra* of the grammatical system as a whole, but as partners in the competition for 'very', the two share a feature which marks them as belonging to a small class of their own.

nagy is 'large, big'. None of the attempts to explain the constituents of *igen* is convincing. Its attestations (since the 13th and 14th centuries, cf. Benkő 1967-76) suggest diverse phonological shapes and meanings; its etymology is equally unclear. I will here join the camp which assigns *igen* to the deictic paradigm (cf. Table III) and suggest that it may be a surrogate of **igyen*:

TABLE III

úgy	'in that way'	*így* 'in this way'
ugyan	'WH-ever'	**igyen*
		↑
		igen 'very, too, yes'

úgy [ūd'] : *így* [īd'] 'so'
ugyan [ud'ɔn] is an adverbial expansion of the adverb *úgy*

igen [igen] is shown attempting to usurp the space occupied by *igyen [id'æn]
The phonological discrepancy between the two, (-[d'æ]- : -[ge]-), as shown
here, is not as dramatic in all dialects or at all times.

In the index to Décsy's 1985 edition of the Munich codex (1466), *igen* is registered five
times, always with the meaning 'very'; *igyen* and *ígyen*, both of which are now archaic,
are tabulated three times and once respectively. The short of it is that in the 15th century,
when *igyen* still existed, it still bore the meaning 'so' (as did *így*, which still exists, always
with long [î]) and showed no signs of merging with *igen* 'very'.

3.5. For Sk, only *vel'mi* could be identified. It is obviously related to the root for
'large'; the final -*i* is adverbial.

3.6. Cz *velmi* has the same profile as Sk *vel'mi* and, with *velice* 'very', is related to
vel(i)ký. *tuze* is archaic. Its semantic spectrum recalls similar profiles in Frisian and
Finnish, where 'very' adumbrates 'dense'. For *moc*, which is very common in the
colloquial language, cf. *moci* 'be able', *mohutný* 'mighty', *mocnina* 'mathematical
power', *mocnost* 'power'; these will explain the mark in Column II. Finally, *hodně*,
simply glosssed as 'much, a lot', is related to *hodný* 'good, kind'. This semantic latitude
and the testimony of related forms (such as *vhodný* 'appropriate') suggest the compromise
'proper' for the underlying etymon. It is significant that none of the five forms cited for
Cz is OPAQUE.

4. Geography

The languages in the area cohere along the lines dictated by one or another specimen
of 'very', e.g., SC *veoma*, Cz *velmi*. The Schematic Map displays the six contiguous
speech communities and the three principal sets of affinities which they describe. The
three are: MAGNITUDO (the family relationships of 'very' to a member of the class
'large'); POTESTAS ('very' as related to 'strong' or 'able'); and CRYPTO-DEIXIS (cf.
4.2.).

4.1. Cz, Sk. Hg and SC form a Sprachbund (see Table I, Column I) in that each of
them has at least one representative in the category MAGNITUDO: Cz has two. An
analogous development is found in USb (*wulcy*) and BR (*vel'mi*). It is rare in the rest of
Europe (East Frisian, Maltese?). Significantly, Rm and Sn are not members of this
confederation; observe their position on the map.

4.2. The term CRYPTO-DEIXIS is intended to encapsule the notion that a word is
deictic only etymologically, and that over the course of time a deictic meaning has faded
and yielded to another, non-deictic one. Thus Rm *tare* and SC *jako* are doubtlessly, and
Hg *igen* is presumably, of deictic origin. All three have lost all overt reference to deixis
and all three function as 'very'. The Sprachbund they thus form is covert; hence 'CRYP-
TO-DEIXIS'. The subtlety of the affinity is all the more striking if one considers (a) the
degree of relationship (or absence of relationship) obtaining among these three lan-
guages, and (b) the time-depth presumably required for the maturation of such an affinity.
Or is linguistic convergence spontaneous?

4.3. Skok's observation—which he called a *décalque linguistique*—was that the
deictic change into 'strong' was not due to chance: "der Zufall is hier ausgeschlossen,"
(1920:87), even though he cites an ancient Greek model for the overlap between 'such a'
and 'strong.' Perhaps it was the momentum gained in the change from deictic to POTES-
TAS that propelled the next step: POTESTAS → 'very' in SC and Rm. The sequence
deictic → POTESTAS → 'very' seems to be rare. Cz *moc* reflects just one of these steps

SCHEMATIC MAP
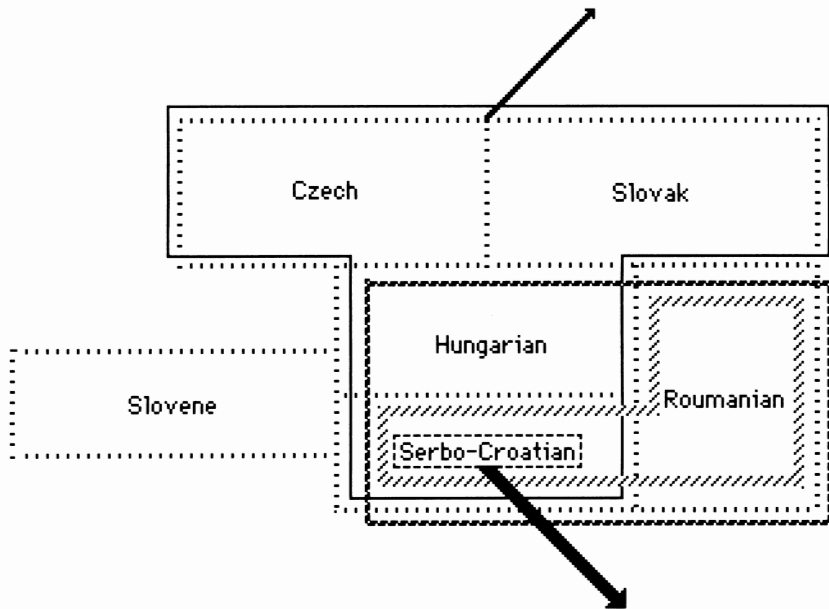
AREA	INDEX	SPEECH COMMUNITIES	
		CORE	OTHER
———————	MAGNITUDO	Cz Sk Hg SC	➡ Sorbian, E. Slav.
·–·–·–·–·–	CRYPTO-DEIXIS	Hg SC Rm	
//////////	POTESTAS	SC Rm	
– – – – – –	QUANTITAS	SC	➡ Levant, Atlantic

('able' → 'very') and is not a genuine instance of POTESTAS. BR *nadta*, literally 'above that', which also serves as 'very', contains a deictic but lacks the POTESTAS component.

5. Conclusion

Here I combine geographic facts and the linguistic information distilled above with speculations about history.

5.1. Combining what we know about the history of the Slavs in the area South of the Danube with what we can assume about ancient Balkan and Illyrian Romance, we are justified in supposing that the progression from deixis to 'strong' (SC, Rm) is an old feature, perhaps the oldest in the entire area concerned. Can we divine a focus of dispersion? Was it Romance? *foarte*, the Rm competitor of *tare*, also reflects the second step in the progression, that from 'strong' to 'very'. This is a Romance feature, also found in Fr *fort* and in Occitan (Provençal) in the sense of 'very'.

5.2. If Hg *igen* is indeed of deictic origin, it mirrors the development from deictic to 'very' found in SC and Rm, but lacks the middle step, 'strong'. Does this mean that, when Hg entered the stage around the 9th century, the deictic component of *jako* and *tare* was not yet completely bleached out? And that Hg was nevertheless caught up in the momentum of the change to 'very'?

5.3. Next to this deictic affinity of 'very' in SC, Rm and Hg, there is the more extensive area of its affinity with 'large' (MAGNITUDO): SC, Hg, Sk, Cz and points to the North-East (USb, BR). This correspondence is absent from adjacent language groups — Germanic, Baltic, Baltic-Finnic. Did the model ('large' → 'very') arise on Slavic soil? On West Slavic soil? (Note that the correspondence is absent from Polish.) The presence of the feature MAGNITUDO in SC, and its absence from Sn and from the Slavic languages South of SC, suggests a continuum formed by an early variety of Cz and Sk and an early variety of SC. Again, we know from the history of the Slavs that there was such a continuum.

5.4. The central position of SC as depicted in the preceding three paragraphs becomes all the more vivid as we remember that SC also houses *mnogo*, thus qualifying as a member of the QUANTITAS (Mediterranean) belt. "Central position" can be taken in its literal meaning: the totality of the SC manifestations of 'very' radiates vectors to the North (West Slavic), to its immediate non-Slavic neighbors (Hg, Rm), and to the South (Mc, Bg and points far beyond these, from the Levant to the Atlantic).

5.5. Finally, Sn projects a profile which points in a totally different direction. Let us recall that ranges such as the Julijske Alpe, the Savinjske Alpe, and Pohorje are formations at a significant remove from the Dinaric Alps and chains further East. It should therefore not be surprising that speech communities at home in Slovenia and Slavonia would display reflexes of contacts with communities at home further to the West such as Western Romance, Germanic, ultimately even Celtic.

The South Slavic continuity with West Slavic (see 5.3.) seems to bypass Sn, judging from this evidence. On Table I, Columns I, II and III are empty for Sn. Sn has two OPAQUE forms (column V) while the other languages have one at the most.

zelo, as we have seen, shows coherence with other parts of the Slavic world. *celo* is a case of what elsewhere is called TOTALITAS, cf. Sn *cel* 'entire'; a similar overlap is found in Latvian and Basque. *zares* recalls a correspondence found in a Celtic species: Welsh *gwir*, Irish *fíor*. Both of these also serve as 'very' and are connected with 'true, truly' (as is, for that matter, English *very*, via Old Fr from Latin). Sn *prav*, with its obvious connection with 'correct, right' recalls Welsh *iawn* 'very = right', as also in German *recht*

gut, but with a genuine superlative function. Finally, if *baš* also carries the meaning 'really, truly' it has a profile similar to that of *prav*. Are these Celtic echoes in Sn? Are they also calques, perhaps mirroring early contacts between Celtic and Sn? The correspondences are striking: they suggest the idea that they were impishly planted by Celtic monks.

We need more work in history.[4]

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1. Abbreviations for languages: Bg = Bulgarian, BR = Belorussian, Cz = Czech, Fr = French, Hg = Hungarian, It = Italian, Mc = Macedonian, Rm = Roumanian, SC = Serbo-Croatian, Sk = Slovak, Sn = Slovene, USb = Upper Sorbian.
2. Standard Slavic lexica, including etymological dictionaries, are not listed in the bibliography.
3. Milan Fryščák (New York University) for Czech; Radmila Gorup (University of California, Berkeley) and Edward Stankiewicz (Yale University) for Serbo-Croatian; Tom Priestly (University of Alberta) for Slovene. I also acknowledge the help of Daniel Abondolo (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London) for Hungarian.
4. Some of the historical ideas touched on here issue from many years of collegial and stimulating interchange with the *jubilarius*. Those not fortunate to be his colleague are referred to his book (Lencek 1982). *Vse najboljše, dragi Rado, in še na mnoga zdrava leta!*

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POVZETEK

OBPANONSKE IZOGLOSE: ABSOLUTNI PRESEŽNIK

Po svoji pomenski sestavi se beseda 'zelo' v glavnem drži besednih družin s pomenom 'veliko' ali 'mnogo' v srbohrvaščini (sh.), romunščini (rom.), madžarščini (madž.), slovaščini in češčini. Manj razširjeni so taki tipi kot sh. puno 'popolnoma, zelo' in vrlo in češko tuze 'trdo, čvrsto, togo' in moč, ki je sorodno z 'možno, lahko'. Do tod je obravnava sinhrona. Tipično za sh.-rom. os je sh. jako in rom. tare, ki sta zgodovinsko obe kazalniški obliki (tare ← latinsko tāle 'takšno'). Razen tega je madž. oblika igen s svojo široko večpomenskostjo ('zelo', 'prekomerno', 'da') etimološko morda tudi kazalnik (prim. így/úgy 'na ta/tisti način'). Na zahodnem robu tega področja, slovenske oblike zelo, celo, prav, zares in baš težijo k dokaj različnim besednim družinam. Posebno zanimiv je zares s keltskimi vzporednicami; prim. angleško very. Podobno namigujeta na keltske vzporednice tudi slovenski obliki prav in baš.