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WHERE DIALECTOLOGY BEGINS:
VILLAGE SPEECH IN CONTEXT

Dialectology is an advanced and sophisticated discipline, in which Slavic countries in particular have made great achievements. These include dialectal dictionaries, individual descriptions of local dialects, scholarly investigations of specific dialectal phenomena, and above all, dialect atlases. Dialectal data are of value in both typological and diachronic studies. Dialectology has even provided the model for a successful representation of the close relationship among Slavic languages in atlas format, the All-Slavic Linguistic Atlas (OLA).

With all these resources at hand, dialectology has no lack of data. Yet there is one way in which dialectologists are at a disadvantage as opposed to linguists who study standard languages, especially their own. Namely, speakers of standard languages are always available for listening tests and the elicitation of informant judgments. But the dialectologist has only his or her notes, or the tapes made on a particular field trip. Consequently even those dialectologists who regularly work in the field are at a certain distance from their data once they return. And of course everyone else who consults any print dialectology source is at a much greater remove. Furthermore, since a central goal of dialectology is the study of diversity over a broad region, one must stand even further back in order to perceive the broader picture.

Yet everyone knows that linguistic analysis begins with language itself – with sounds, words, and sentences spoken in the communicative context. For dialectology, where data must by definition be obtained in the field from informants who have maintained the traditional inherited archaic forms of speech, the question of context is even more important. Here what matters is not only that sounds and words be spoken within the context of natural spontaneous discourse. It is also critical that this discourse take place within the speaker's own native environment,

within the traditional culture of the village with which this speech style (or “dialect”) is associated. All dialectologists know this, of course; it is an axiom of field work. But how does the dialectologist recover the experience of that speech context after leaving the village? And how can s/he communicate this to everyone else – other dialectologists, linguists who work only with standard languages, or the general public?

We are fortunate to live in an age where access to digitalized sound recordings is now readily available. Taking advantage of this fact, I have set up an interactive database centered around audio recordings made in the village context. This database, entitled *Bulgarian Dialectology as Living Tradition*, presents 177 segments (or “texts”), representing 68 villages from across the entire landscape of the Republic of Bulgaria (and drawn from a large archive of field recordings made together with Bulgarian colleagues over a period of nearly thirty years). The segments were selected with two basic criteria in mind: each should illustrate the most salient features of the dialect in question, and each should constitute a well-formed instance of discourse that gives some insight into traditional life or worldview. Texts are otherwise unedited, with the aim of providing not only data of dialectal phonology, morphology and syntax, but also instances of natural conversation.

Texts are presented in transcription (both in Cyrillic, according to conventions of Bulgarian dialectology, and in a modified IPA transcription) and in English translation. Texts are divided into lines, which are numbered for the purposes of data retrieval, and each line is provided with a time code which allows one to locate the relevant point in the accompanying audio file. Each individual word or unit of speech – each “token” – is annotated (or “tagged”) at three different levels. The first set of tags gives basic grammatical information and an English gloss. The second set of tags gives the standard Bulgarian lemma associated with the dialectal form; if there is no recognizable standard form, or if the dialectal word is used with a markedly different meaning, then a “dialectal lexeme” is created, and marked as such. The third set of tags gives information of interest at various levels of linguistic structure. Most of these tags, though phrased in synchronic

terms, describe the results of diachronic processes and index the traits normally catalogued in dialect descriptions. This set of tags also allows the indexing of syntactic and lexical phenomena of interest.

The purpose of these tags, of course, is to allow users to search the database for items of interest at these various levels. The lexical tags allow the user to see all the possible phonetic implementations, within the corpus of these 177 texts, of any one lemma; and the other tags allow one to group together data about other facts of linguistic interest. By this grouping, one is able to obtain the sort of “bird’s eye view” of dialect diversity that one sees in an atlas. The coverage is admittedly much more modest, and – since the data were gathered according to the conversational method and not by elicitation – much less systematic than in an atlas.

What is important, however, is that any one token located through such a search can immediately be tracked back to the full and natural context in which it was spoken. Each token is marked for the text within which it occurs: the name of the text and the line number within that text allow one to locate the exact point within the transcribed segment, and the time code associated with that line allows one to locate the exact point within the accompanying audio recording.

Each text can be viewed in four different “displays”, all of which maintain the same basic organization of numbered lines. The first, called Token display, provides the line (in modified IPA transcription), interlinear glosses, time codes, and an English translation which attempts to render not only the content but also the style of the original, so as to convey the flavor of the situation. The second, called Line display, gives only the original line and the English translation; this makes it much easier to read each text for content only. The third, called Cyrillic line display, is for the Bulgarian academic audience accustomed to reading dialect texts in the notation used in Bulgaria; this includes only the line itself plus the time codes. The fourth, called Lexeme display, is similar to Token display except that standard Bulgarian lexemes replace the interlinear glosses. The audio track is available as an accompaniment to all four displays.

The URL of the website is [<http://bulgariandialectology.org>]. Basic information about the project is available now, including a set of screenshots illustrating the organization of the data and the functioning of the search mechanisms. Actual texts will be released to the public gradually after each has been fully annotated, and after each has also been provided with the more traditional scholarly commentary (prose descriptions of the specific local dialects represented by these texts). It is expected that the first set of texts – which provides a cursory sampling of the dialectal diversity within Bulgaria – will be released in late 2015. Data preparation and entry will continue as long as needed, and additional sets of texts will be released when the material has been fully entered, annotated, and verified.

The advantages of this research tool are obvious. The most basic one is also the most intangible: it allows everyone who was not present at the moment of recording in the village to experience that moment as fully as possible. It also helps to demystify dialectology, both for the general public and for linguists who work exclusively with standard languages; and it gives an additional level of access for those dialectologists who, though accustomed to working with data over a broad span of variation, may have had relatively little contact with dialectal speech in its natural context. On a more pragmatic and scientific level, the availability of actual audio recordings allows users to listen directly to the recordings, as many times as they wish, either to verify our transcriptions for themselves, or to utilize the material for their own analyses (or both).

Another advantage of the site is that the digital interface was developed using the open-source content management system “Drupal”, which means that the format is easily reproducible. We plan to produce documentation of the entire process involved in the construction of this project. Thus, although our website is limited to material recorded within the Republic of Bulgaria, we hope that other Balkan linguists may one day emulate the model and produce similar collections of dialectal material from closely (or not so closely) related Balkan languages.

Finally, I stress the use of the plural pronoun “we” in the above. Although the idea of presenting the material in this format is my own,

the enterprise – as in all dialectological work – is a collective effort. For the construction of the database and further development of site design, I am indebted to Quinn Dombrowski and Cammeron Girvin in Berkeley, and for the data themselves, I am indebted to my Bulgarian colleagues, above all Vladimir Zhobov and Georgi Kolev, who organized the field trips, who did the in-depth research necessary to choose the correct sites, and who, having listened to the entire corpus of field recordings, made both the selections of texts and the initial transcriptions. The overall supervision and the subsequent stages of data preparation are my responsibility, but for data entry I have been aided by a talented group of undergraduate students at UC Berkeley.

In sum: we use modern technology to return to the beginnings: access to speech in the original village context.

Российская академия наук
Институт славяноведения

БАЛКАНСКИЙ ТЕЗАУРУС:
НАЧАЛО

БАЛКАНСКИЕ ЧТЕНИЯ 13
ТЕЗИСЫ И МАТЕРИАЛЫ
Москва, 7–9 апреля 2015 года

Москва 2015

*Сборник подготовлен и издан
при финансовой поддержке РГНФ,
грант № 15-04-14076г*

Редколлегия:

М. М. Макарецв, И. А. Седакова, Т. В. Цивьян

Балканский тезаурус: Начало. – М.: «ПРИНТ ПРО», 2015. –
268 с. (Балканские чтения 13. Тезисы и материалы.)

ISBN 978-5-7576-0336-0

СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

БАЛКАНСКИЕ ДРЕВНОСТИ

<i>Вяч.Вс. Иванов</i> (Москва – Лос-Анджелес) Начало начал: первый по порядку знак в ранних балканских формах письменного счета.....	9
<i>Валерий Мерлин</i> (Иерусалим) «Ты сокрушил голову Левиафана» (Пс. 74:14): основной миф устами псалмопевца.....	15
<i>Михаил Евзлин</i> (Мадрид) «Теогония» Гесиода как текст о началах	19
<i>В.Г. Мостовая</i> (Москва) Лексико-семантическое поле «начало» в поэзии Пиндара (синонимические отношения).....	26
<i>Л.И. Акимова</i> (Москва) Два «начала» в жизненном цикле: Берлинская амфора мастера Дария.....	31
<i>Я.Л. Забудская</i> (Москва) Начало повествования в драматическом жанре: прологи древнегреческой трагедии	37
<i>А.А. Новохатько</i> (Фрейбург) Начало в тексте: о прологе древнеаттической комедии	43
<i>Т.Ф. Теперик</i> (Москва) Поэтика начала в структуре книги: «Энеида» Вергилия.....	49

БАЛКАНСКОЕ СРЕДНЕВЕКОВЬЕ

<i>Емилија Црвенковска</i> (Скопје) Грчкото <i>ἀρχή</i> и неговите црковнословенски преводни еквиваленти	57
<i>Keiko Mitani</i> (Tokyo) „Начело премудрости...” i južnoslavenski prijepisi priče <i>Slovo Akira premudroga</i>	62
<i>Grace Fielder</i> (Tucson) The <i>Thesaurus</i> of Damaskenos Studites: A Beginning of a Balkan Thesaurus?.....	67

БАЛКАНЫ И БАЛКАНИСТИКА

Я з ы к

<i>Jack Feuillet</i> (Paris)	
Nature et objet de la linguistique balkanique.....	69
<i>Helmut W. Schaller</i> (Marburg)	
Remnants and representatives of old substrate and new adstrate languages	73
<i>Ronelle Alexander</i> (Berkeley)	
Where Dialectology Begins: Village Speech in Context	77
<i>Н.Н. Казанский</i> (Санкт-Петербург)	
Обозначение начала действия в древнегреческом языке.....	82
<i>Zlatka Guentchéva</i> (Paris)	
Le début du processus: ingressivité et inchoativité	85
<i>Ф.А. Елоева</i> (Санкт-Петербург)	
Новогреческий аналитический перфект – <i>my end</i> <i>is my beginning</i> (неокончательная грамматикализация или неполная деграмматикализация?)	92
<i>А.Ю. Русаков</i> (Санкт-Петербург)	
Албанские сверхсложные времена: состав форм, диалектное распределение, употребление.....	97
<i>М.С. Морозова</i> (Санкт-Петербург)	
<i>Filloj së bëri</i> : аблатив отглагольного имени в конструкциях с фазовыми глаголами	105
<i>Max Wahlström</i> (Helsinki)	
The elusive beginnings of the Balkan Slavic case loss: Two myths	112
<i>Eric H. Prendergast</i> (Berkeley)	
Objects in the Balkan beginning: Syntactic dislocation and the subordination of case to discourse and phrase structure ...	115
<i>Т.В. Цивьян</i> (Москва)	
Предложения к «Балканскому тезаурусу»: дейктическая составляющая	117
<i>Анастасия Петрова</i> (Велико Търново)	
Към въпроса за диахронната предопределеност на фразеологичната семантика	120

Мотоки Номати (Саппоро)

- О начале новой «дезинтеграции» и «интеграции»
сербохорватского языка: этнолект горанцев
и их идентичность в социолингвистическом освещении 125

К у л ь т у р а*Петя Асенова* (София), *Уте Дукова* (Франкфурт на Майн)

- Отъждествяване на представата за *начало* и *край*
в балканските езици и култури. 128

И.А. Седакова (Москва)

- «Начинание» / «неначинание»
и балканославянский концепт лени 135

Н.В. Злыднева (Москва)

- Новизна как память об истоках:
об одной парадигме балканского искусства XX века 143

А.Н. Соболев (Санкт-Петербург)

- Ситуации этнического симбиоза на Балканах
и их отражение в языке и культуре. 145

М.В. Домосилецкая (Санкт-Петербург)

- Начальные формы существования пчелы
(по материалам МДАБЯ) 147

Мифология и фольклор**М и ф ы , с ю ж е т ы , м о т и в ы***О.В. Белова* (Москва)

- Этиологические мотивы в восточно- и южнославянских
легендах о миротворении – общее и особенное 152

Magdalena Rekić (Lođ)

- Mit zajedničkog porekla kao specifična vrsta mita početak 159

В.Я. Петрухин (Москва)

- О балканских мотивах в русском летописании и миниатюре . . 162

Р и т у а л*Mirjam Mencej* (Ljubljana)

- Ustvarjanje prostora. Obredi domestifikacije: kroženje 166

<i>А.А. Плотникова</i> (Москва)	
Строительство дома у мусульман на Балканах: символика начала (по полевым материалам из Боснии, Сербии)	172
<i>Георги Мишев</i> (Пловдив)	
Началото на пътя на вещицата в българската традиционна култура	179
<i>Кира Задоя</i> (Дюссельдорф)	
Святочные обходы с прутьями на территории Украинских Карпат	189
<i>С.А. Сиднева</i> (Москва). <i>Архипија</i> : «начало» в номинациях, символике и обрядах первых дней месяца в новогреческой культуре	194
<i>А.А. Новик</i> (Санкт-Петербург)	
Начало знахарской практики как продолжение традиции: албанцы Украины	199
<i>А.С. Дугушина</i> (Санкт-Петербург)	
Родины в традиции албанцев Украины: этнокультурная специфика и инокультурные элементы	209
<i>Н.Г. Голант</i> (Санкт-Петербург)	
Концепт <i>начала</i> в мифологических представлениях румын о днях недели	214
 Текст	
<i>С.М. Толстая</i> (Москва)	
<i>С начала до конца</i> : структура и магия перечней в фольклорных текстах	220
<i>А.В. Жугра</i> (Санкт-Петербург)	
Запевы и зачины в албанском эпосе	226
<i>К.А. Климова</i> (Москва)	
Формулы зачина в новогреческих быличках	232
<i>Елена Сартори</i> (Афины)	
Военачальники у истоков национальных государств, герои народных песен на Балканах: Колокотронис и Карагеоргий	237

<i>Masumi Kameda</i> (Tokyo)	
Yugoslav Reproductions of Heroes: Making National Icons through Photography.....	242
 Л и т е р а т у р а	
<i>Дагмар Буркхарт</i> (Мангейм – Гамбург)	
Конструирование начала в балканославянских романах.....	249
<i>Габриелла Шуберт</i> (Берлин).	
«Тяжесть начала» – строительная жертва в интерпретации Иво Андрича.....	256
<i>Анастасия Романова</i> (Кишинев)	
Зачин обращение к читателю как активизатор художественного кода («За что мы любим женщин» Мирчи Кэртэреску)	262