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ON SERBO-CROATIAN VERB *GEGATI SE* 'TO STAGGER'

The thematic and systematic treatment of lexicon has long been established as a generally accepted postulate of modern etymology. The adequacy of such an approach is confirmed by the results of systematic studies of the Slavonic terminologies of craftsmanship, kinship, cattle breeding, weaving, folk medicine, meteorology, colours, mushrooms, days of the week, etc.

A category which, perhaps more than any other, calls for such an approach is that of onomatopoeic and expressive verbs. Phonetic, word formation and semantic rules which reflect the inner logic of such systems can only be established after a systematic study¹. Not a single lexeme of this kind can be given adequate interpretation if taken alone, isolated from the context.

The ideal, but probably unattainable, would be to have a collection of complete relevant material for each Slavonic language and then study such corpora comparatively. But feasibility directs us towards concentrating on the material of a single language and then referring occasionally, within the limits set by available dictionaries, to equivalents from other languages, primarily (but not exclusively) cognates.

The goal of our work is to illustrate this approach on a sample of Serbo-Croatian material. Since we are dealing with onomatopoeic verbs which do not tend to be problematic, either as regards phonetics or word formation, we are inclined to see the best way to their etymological interpretation in following the regularities of their semantic development and relying on semantic parallels².

For describing a sluggish, shaky, twisting kind of walk, apart from the general term *hrámati*, Serbo-Croatian language often uses the verb *gégati (se)* 'to walk in a staggering, swaying manner; walk with difficulty, slowly, drag oneself' (all the examples come from PCAHY, unless indicated otherwise), 'to walk slowly, drag oneself; stagger; work slowly' (Uskoci — Станић 1990: 118). The basic form is accompanied by a number of expressive variants: *gegùtati*, *gegùcati*, *gegùckati*, *gèngati*. A number of nomina agentis derive from this verb: *gégavac*, *gégāvka*, *gégāvko*, *gègāvce*, *gégalica* (in Bosnia it designates 'a swing'), *gégalo*, *gègāš*, *gégla* (Leskovac — Митровић 1984:53), *gègonja* (Uskoci — Станић *ibid.*), *gegùcalo* — all with the meaning 'a person who staggers, sways while walking'; *gèga* = *gègo* = *gègna* with the same meaning and with the meaning 'a person who works slowly' (Uskoci — Станић *ibid.*), as well as adjectives describing someone who walks like that: *gègav*, *gegùnjav*, *gegùcav*, *gèngav*, and the adverb *gègavo* 'in a staggering, tottering manner'.

The noun *gégavac* has developed a very specific meaning 'blind man' i. e. 'beggar' (hence *gégavački* 'blind-men's speech, argot' (PMCMX 1967: 475), and further *gégavac* 'šatrovac³, a petty thief, a mischievous boy'.

Skok (1971:558) considers the verb *gégati se* as an „onomatopoeia for imitating the action“. Gluhak (1993:227) describes it in two words only: „Descriptive verb“⁴.

Although he was heading in the right direction, Skok did not provide a precise and complete interpretation of this verb because he did not have at his disposal all of its SCr. forms and meanings; he did not give its Slavonic parallels, and he did not offer a reconstruction of a prototype which is clearly obvious if one has an overall insight into broader Slavonic material.

Since our etymological interpretation will be based on semantic criteria, it will be according to them that we shall present relevant additional (regarding Skok) SCr. material: *gëgnuti* 'to knock, hit', *gënuti*⁵ 'to hit, knock down onto the ground; to move, to start', *gënjati se*⁶ 'to move sluggishly, slowly', *gënjati se* 'to fight', *nagégati* 'to load a lot of something in a clumsy way, load so that it staggers, sways', *nagégati se* 'to get badly drunk'⁷, *gëgonja* 'a well-off householder; a strong, well-built man; such an ox or ram' (Uskoci — Станіи ibid.).

There are forms in SCr. with an *-i-* in the place of the *-e-* vowel in the root. Since they show an almost complete formal and semantic parallelism to our *gégati se*, we are of the opinion that these two groups should be analyzed together⁸ (since it is a case of vocal alternation so typical of onomatopoeic and expressive verbs⁹). The *-i-* forms are: *gígati (se)* 'to swing, rock; shake; hop on one foot; limp; walk on stilts', *gigùcati*, *gíngati* 'id.', *gìgnuti* 'to hit hard, thrash; sway, jerk', *gìgalje* 'crooked poles used for walking, stilts', *gìgalica* 'a swing', *gìgān*, *gígavac*, *gìgelj* 'a long-legged man who shakes while walking', *gìgoš* 'a strong, arrogant man', *gìgula* 'a tree stump, a bump, a knotty block of wood', *gìngara* 'a kind of tamburitza; a cornstalk instrument resembling a violin made by children as a toy', *gìg*, *gígavac*, *gìgān*, *gìgonja*, *gìgoš*, etc. 'a large, long-legged rooster', *gìga* 'a big and large hen; (nickname) a tall woman'¹⁰, *gìgoljast* 'stunted, tiny'.

We think that the interpretation of *gégati se* should be based on the form *gëgnuti* 'to hit, kick' (and its variant *gëknuti* 'id.')¹¹. On this basis we can suppose that the imperfective *gégati* originally used to have the same meaning (cf. *gëkati* 'to beat, hit'). This is supported by corresponding verbs in other Slavonic languages: Pol. *gagnąć* 'to wave, knock, hit' (K a r ł o w i c z 1900:812), Russ. *гëкнуть* 'to hit, precipitate' (CPHG 1970:166), Ukr. *гëкнути* 'to knock, kick; hiccup' (YPC 1953:323)¹², Bulg. *гëкам*, *гëкна* 'to fall onto my rear' (БЕР 1971:236)¹³, Wruss. *гëкнуть* 'to die, kill'¹⁴ (ЭСБМ 1985:76)¹⁵, Ukr. *гëкнути* '(vulg.) to die' (YPC 1953:323).

The point of departure for the verb *gígati* is also the principal form *gìgnuti* 'to hit'¹⁶.

Verbs with the meaning 'to hit' regularly undergo a semantic ramification in different directions¹⁷. One of the meanings which stem immediately from the basic one 'to hit' (*gëgnuti*, *gëknuti*, *gìgnuti*) is 'to shake, swing, wave, rock' (*gégati*, *gígati*)¹⁸. It is the basis of further development toward

the meanings 'to limp, drag oneself' (*gégati, gígati*)¹⁹ > 'to roam, wander' > 'to loiter, to be idle'²⁰ and further 'to work slowly, tediously (sometimes bad)' (*gégati*) or 'to be weak, feeble, stunted' (*gìgoljast, gíngav*)²¹.

Many other verbs show the same development of meaning.²²

The other direction of development of the basic 'to hit' goes towards 'to fill, cram' (*nagégati, nagígeriti*) > 'to be filled, stuffed, full (strong and the like)' (*gègonja, gígoš, gíga*) > 'an excrescence, swelling, knot, heap' (*gígula*)²³.

This development of meaning is also attested in many verbs²⁴.

The third direction of semantic development of the basic meaning 'to hit' is related to the sound effect of hitting, and it goes toward 'to produce a sound, in general or on an instrument, play an instrument'²⁵. In that respect the verb *gégati*² 'to play a gusle, play a stringed instrument' could be explained not as being homonymous to our *gégati*, but as another one of its semantic realizations²⁶.

This overall insight into SCr. material regarding the family of the verb *gégati (gígati)* enables us to establish the original form, an interjection *gèk*²⁷ (as well as its supposed variant **geg*), which confirms their onomatopoeic nature. So, we are not dealing here with onomatopoeia for imitating the action, but with an original interjection which has developed its semantic potential to the maximum.

The explanation offered for SCr. *gégati (gígati)* can be supported not only by the above-mentioned, individual semantic parallels, but also by an almost identical semantic network which covers some other onomatopoeic verbs. We shall consider the verbs with the *kek-/kik-* base:

'to hit' (*kèknuti, kènuti*²⁸, *zakíkati* 'to stab, plunge')²⁹ > 'to limp, drag oneself' (*kínkati*)³⁰ > 'to be weak, stunted' (*kèkiš, kikiš* 'a physically weak person', *zàkikān* 'stunted')³¹;

'to hit' > 'to fill, cram' (*nakékati*) > 'to be stuffed, fat, strong' (*kèganja* 'a stocky, clumsy person', *kèkna* 'a fat, sluggish girl', *kíkmat* 'plump, fat', *kínkela* 'a large, clumsy woman'³²) > 'an excrescence, swelling, knot, heap' (*kèganja* 'beaten up, knotty wood', *kèka* 'a heap of three nuts, two on the ground, the third on top of them', *kíga* 'a bump, knot, gnarl', *kíkula* 'an excrescence, gnarl, swelling, tumor; a bump, knot on wood').

It is obvious that this onomatopoeia has undergone a semantic development identical to the one of our *gégati (gígati)*, thus forming a system of meanings in which each form has its own place. The links which remain empty can be filled with respective lexemes when and if they appear. The awareness that such a system exists is of first-rate importance in etymological studies. Knowing where each lexeme fits in the system makes interpretation much easier and more incontestable. When that notion is absent, i. e. when lexemes are treated individually, they can, being unclear, remain without interpretation (like SCr. *gènuti, kènuti*, Sle. *kínkati*, Wruss. *gègajka, kékilixa*), not fully explained (like SCr. *gégati*, Psl. **gykati, *kykati*, cf. below), or simply misinterpreted (like SCr. *gíg*, Sle. *gíngav*, Bulg. *гингера се*, Russ. *kékamb*).

Another question that arises here is the problem of reconstruction of onomatopoeia. Of all the verbs discussed in this work it is only the forms

**gykati* and **kykati* that have been reconstructed as Protoslavonic in ЭССЯ (1980:221 and 1986:260). For both cases the continuations given are almost exclusively those meaning 'to produce a sound, of humans or animals'³³.

What happens with the forms with *-e-* vocalism? In contemporary Slavonic languages they are present alongside the *-i-* ones. In many modern Slavonic languages there is an interjection *gek, kek* (Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, Russian). Did those interjections (onomatopoeias) originate independently in all those languages only after the disintegration of Protoslavonic unity? We think that they must have existed in the Protoslavonic language in some forms like **geg*/**gek*, **geg*/**gek*, **kek*, **kek*. Being onomatopoeia, they were not subject to regular phonetic changes³⁴ so that gutturals followed by front vowels were not necessarily palatalized. The question of the true nature of those guttural sounds remains open.³⁵

Older etymological dictionaries did not pay much attention to onomatopoeic verbs. They treated them sporadically, due to scarcity of such lexicon in the older descriptive dictionaries which etymologists had at their disposal. But the abundance of present-day lexicographic production (especially dialectal), combined with the lexematic conception (Russ. term *полексемная концепция*) of most modern etymological dictionaries³⁶, threatens many words to remain unexplained or misinterpreted unless they are previously studied within „larger“ systems.

Serbo-Croatian material which was the subject of our analysis demonstrates the aptitude of dealing with this type of lexicon in a wider context, systematically, with an utmost regard of the semantic factor. Respective Slavonic comparative data argue in favour of the described semantic changes and confirm the correctness of the proposed interpretation of S.Cr. verb *gégati* (*se*) and its word family.

NOTES

¹ S z y m a ĩ s k i (1977), for example, has made a good study of word formation of onomatopoeic and expressive verbs in Bulgarian.

² As А б а е в (1986:22) rightly notices: „Any semantic development from a basic (meaning) to an extended one, no matter how unlikely at the first glance, can furnish the basis of an etymological solution if it is present repeatedly and independently in several languages“.

³ This word should be considered within the sequence *šátriti* 'to stagger' (Piroť — Ж н в к о в и ћ 1987:174) : *šátrovac* 'vagabond, pickpocket' (PMCMX 1976: 933): *šátrova ĉki* 'the speech of potters, bricklayers and some other craftsmen, argot' (ibid.), which is, as regards word formation, analogous to our *gégati*: *gégavac*:*gégava ĉki*.

⁴ We suppose he had in mind description of the action — ergo, the same as Skok.

⁵ The form *gēnuti* (<*gēgnuti*) is the result of simplifying the group *gn*>*n* (B a p 6 o r 1984:143). Although he was aware of this form (attested in Vuk) and even dedicated a whole lemma to it (with no solution, though), Skok did not relate it to the verb *gégati se*.

⁶ This is an iterative form of the verb *gēnuti*. For a parallel of the change of verb aspect: imperfective>perfective>imperfective, presented in the sequence *gégati*>*gēnuti*>*gēnjati*, compare *drápati*>*drápnuti*>*drānjati*, *máhati*>*má(h)nuti*>*mānjati* (cf. B j e l e t i ć — V l a j i ć - P o p o v i ć 1991:130).

⁷ Cf. *děratí* 'to beat; to drink too much'.

⁸ Skok has also pointed in that direction, but without argumentation or material beyond the basic *gégati*.

⁹ Cf. S z y m a ŋ s k i (1977: 14) and Б ј е л е т и ћ, forthcoming.

¹⁰ S k o k (1971:561) relates all these forms with the meaning 'large rooster, hen, woman' to the learned word *gigant*. It seems hardly possible that this word, thus modified, would specialize in designating nothing but large hens. It is even harder to accept Skok's relating *gigalje* and *gigant*.

¹¹ More about *k/g* alternation in onomatopoeic verbs cf. S z y m a ŋ s k i (1977: 12).

¹² The pair of meanings 'to kick, hit' and 'to hiccup' is also noted by P o p o w s k a - T a b o r s k a (1989:24).

¹³ The word is explained as being onomatopoeic, from the interjection *zek!*. Cf. the parallelism of meanings 'to hit': 'to fall' in SCr. verbs: *žknuti*, *bāpnuti*, *brēbiti/brēbnuti*, *dērnuti*, etc.

¹⁴ Cf. SCr. *dēkati* 'to beat'/*dēknuti* 'to die', *mandrknuti* 'to hit' and 'to die', etc.

¹⁵ The authors have some idea of its onomatopoeic nature, but the argumentation is missing.

¹⁶ Cf. Ukr. *gūgnutu* 'to throw, cast, knock onto the ground; breathe out'. ЕСУМ (1982: 504) treats this as a variant of the original *kūknutu*.

¹⁷ Cf. for example: Л. В. Куркина, Славянские этимологии II, Этимология 1972, Москва, 1974, 60—75; А. П. Шальтъяните, О семантической структуре словообразовательно-этимологических гнезд глаголов с этимологическим значением „драть“ в русском языке, Этимология 1986—1987, Москва, 1989, 212—220; Вјелетић—Влајић—Поровић (1991), Влајић—Поповић (1993 and forthcoming), Поровска—Таборска (1989), etc.

¹⁸ Cf. Pol. *gągnąć* 'to wave, tire one's hands by waving' (K a r ł o w i c z, *ibid.*).

¹⁹ Cf. Bulg. *гунџера се* 'to drag oneself' (БЕР 1971:243). The explanation that it is a denominal of the noun *гунџер* 'Scotch thistle, Onopordon acanthium', we find unlikely. Slovene *gingati* 'to hesitate; walk with difficulty' B e z l a j (1977: 143) relates with the adjective *gingav*, in his opinion, a loan from the Hungarian *gyenge* 'weak, feeble, infirm'. The same etymology is offered for the identical SCr. adjective (S k o k 1971:562). Skok's sources are Kajkavian 18th century writers only, although it is found in Vuk too. Hungarian etymology should be discarded on phonetic grounds. With regard to the SCr. variants *gégati/gēngati* and *gīgati/gīngati* (as well as Sle. *kīnkati* 'to hesitate', cf. note 30) we think we are dealing here with an indigenous word.

²⁰ Cf. Sle. *gęgač* 'a sluggish man' (P l e t e r š n i k 1894: 208).

²¹ Cf. *gežalo* 'a stunted one' (PMJ 1986: 95).

²² Cf. SCr. *basati* 'to hit; swing; roam', *kljpati (se)* 'to fight; walk with difficulty' / *kljpnuti* 'to become exhausted, worn out', *mandrknuti* 'to hit' / *mandrkati* 'to wave; roam', *bātati* 'to hit' / *batūrati* 'work carelessly', etc. (for more details see Вјелетић—Влајић—Поровић 1991).

²³ Cf. Wruss. *гѣгаўка* 'crop (of a bird)' (ЭСБМ 1985: 76) described as „unclear“. If our explanation is accepted, it would enlarge the inventory of semantic typology of tumors, swellings, etc. offered by Куркина (1973: 89).

²⁴ Cf. *būbati* 'to beat' / *nab'bam* 'to fill to the top, stuff' (P i r o t — Ж и в к о в и ћ 1987: 88), *nāgmariti* 'to beat up' / *nagmāram* 'to fill, cram' (P i r o t — Ж и в к о в и ћ 1987: 89), *bāpati* 'to beat' / *bāpka* 'a heap of stones', *dērati* 'to beat, whip' / *dērep* 'a strong, well-built man; block-head'.

²⁵ Cf. SCr. *bīti* 'to beat; to play (different instruments)': „bije u tamburu“, „bijem u gitar“, „vojvoda od svatova bijući uz šargiju“, „biju gusle po kavama“ (our spacing, M. B. —J.V.-P.) (PCAHY 1959: 579).

²⁶ This meaning of the verb *gégati* is attested in secret language only, cf. *gēgavac* 'a gusle player', *gege* 'a gusle with two strings'. It appears reasonable to interpret the noun *gēge* as a postverbal of *gēgat*; 'to play an instrument'. In this context the noun *gīngara* 'a kind of tamburitza' could be explained in an analogous way, as deriving from *gingati* (although it is not attested in the meaning 'to play an instrument'). The explanation of this noun is missing in S k o k (1971: 562) who only conveys Budmani's thinking of a Greek or a MidLat. source. Also, cf. Pol. *giga* 'an old stringed instrument' (K a r ł o w i c z 1900: 828). Although respective descriptive dictionaries relate SCr. *gēga*, as well as Pol. *giga* to Germ. *Geige*, phonetics disallows this explanation, at least in the case of SCr.

²⁷ SCr. interjection *gek* has only been attested in the meaning of an interjection which imitates frogs' croaking, but it is not necessarily the only one. Our hypothesis that this interjection originally used to describe hitting, i. e. the sound which accompanies it, can be confirmed by Russ. *zek* 'to hit, slap; to fall down having stumbled' (CPHG 1970: 166)

and Bulg. *зек* (*зяк*) which is the basis of the verb *зѣкам* 'to fall' (БЕР 1971: 236). Verbs are not seldom created from interjections which describe hitting (more on interjectional formation of verbs in *S z y m a ř s k i* (1977: 17), cf. SCR. *bāp*, an interjection imitating sound (usually hollow) audible at a sudden fall or at hitting with a dull object, *bāpnuti* 'to hit, kick; to produce a crash, bang having bumped into something', *būb* with the same meaning as *bāp*: *būbati* 'to beat, hit with something producing a hollow sound', *lūp*, an interjection which describes hitting or falling, also used to imitate the hollow sound audible at hitting or falling: *lūpati* 'to beat violently, producing strong, hollow sounds, making noise; to roar, blare'.

²⁸ S k o k (1972: 75) places this verb in a separate lemma leaving it, as he does *gēnuti* (cf. note 5), without solution. The form *kēnuti* derives from *kēknuti*, probably as a result of dissimilatory simplification of the *-kn-* group (due to the initial *k-*). Although В а р б о т (1984: 140) claims the *-kn-* group in Slavonic verbs not to be susceptible to simplification, the example from Uskoci, *kēknuti=kēnuti* 'to hit violently; to eat up; to fall down suddenly; to precipitate abundantly' (С т а н и њ 1990: 357) demonstrates that, under certain conditions, this change is possible.

²⁹ Cf. Sle. *kēkati* 'to hit lightly', *kēka* 'a small wooden hammer', *kekek* 'a short sword' (P l e t e r š n i k 1894: 394). Although the verb *kēkati* is missing in lemma *kēka* I (В е з л а ј 1982: 28) the author relates the forms with *-e-* and *-i-* vocalisms making that the basis of his conclusion about the antiquity of that word family which he traces back to Psl. **kōk-* or **kyk-*. With regard to the synonymous Russ. *кѣкать* (cf. below) the reconstruction **kōk-* should be discarded.

Also cf. Russ. *кѣкать* 'to hit hard, beat', *кѣкнуть* 'to hit, break something' (CPHG 1977: 86) (Ф а с м е р 1986: 221 gives these forms only with the meaning 'to hiccup', and compares them with Turkish *kākā* 'stutterer', neglecting the relation between meanings 'to hit' and 'to hiccup', cf. note 12), Wruss. *кѣкнуць* 'to die' (ЭСБМ 1989: 18), Russ. *кѣкнуть* 'to disappear suddenly, vanish' (CPHG 1977: 204), Ukr. *кѣкнути* 'to die' (Ж е л е х о в с к и й 1886: 342). Of all the verbs we are dealing with, this form is the only one to be treated from a semantic standpoint. The proposed solution (<Psl. **kyk-* 'to bend') differs from ours, but it is quite reasonable, well supported by parallels (ЕСУМ 1985: 431, s.v. *кук*).

³⁰ Cf. Sle. *kīnkati* 'to doze, shake, hesitate'. В е з л а ј (1983: 32) considers this verb unclear, giving for it some very unlikely Slavonic and Baltic parallels. He did not have the idea of relating this verb to an almost synonymous *gingati* (s.v. *gingav*, see the note 19).

Also cf. Bulg. *kēkala* 'a crippled, lame woman' (БЕР 1979: 317) and Pol. *kikutac* 'to limp, hobble' (<*kikut* 'stump' and expression for the way in which a lame man moves) (K a r ř o w i c z 1902: 333). For a different interpretation of this word (<Psl. **kyka*) see S ř a w s k i (1965: 160—1).

³¹ Cf. Bulg. *kēkav* 'weak, feeble; sickly' (БЕР 1979:317). It has no firm etymology — there are suggestions of relating it to *кѣкав*<*кѣка* 'an illness of ruminants, Enterohaemia infectiosa ovium with paraplegia of rear legs', or Alb. *keq* 'bad'.

³² Cf. Wruss. *kēkilixa* 'a fat woman' (ЭСБМ 1989: 18). The word is described as unclear, with a possibility that it is a loan from Litv. *kėkė* 'a bunch; braid; heap'.

³³ The semantic relation of hitting and the sound it produces on one side, and various piercing sounds, produced by humans or animals, on the other side, needs no comment, cf. SCR. *brēbnuti* 'to hit, slap, kick': *brēbōnjiti* 'to murmur, buzz, grieve', *būbati* 'to beat' and 'to hum, buzz, talk nonsense', *viknuti* 'to hit, thrash' and 'to say in a raised voice, start howling', *dērati* 'to beat' and *dērati se* 'to make penetrating noises (of animals), to roar, scream, yell'. Cf. notes 25 and 27.

³⁴ This feature of onomatopoeas Kořínek (1934: 8, 68) describes as „vocal unchangeability of interjectional bases“ („hlásková neměnnost interjekcionálních základů“). We should bear in mind that „ordinary“ words too, do not obey phonetic always and absolutely (А б а е в 1986:16).

³⁵ The Ukrainian reflexes (where *g-* did not turn into *h-*, as it would be expected) indicate that they might have been secondary (in terms of aspiration).

³⁶ Cf. В а р б о т (1993:24).

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ABBREVIATIONS OF SOURCES

- SSKJ Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika. I—IV. Ljubljana, 1970—1985.
- БЕР Български этимологичен речник. I—III. София, 1971—1986.
- ЕСУМ Этимологічний словник української мови. I—II. Київ, 1982—1985.
- PMJ Речник на македонскиот јазик. Ред. Б. Конески. Скопје, 1986.
- PMCMX Речник српскохрватског књижевног језика. I—VI. Изд. Матица српска и Матица хрватска. Нови Сад—Загреб, 1967—1976.
- РСАНУ Речник српскохрватског књижевног и народног језика. I—XIV. Српска академија наука и уметности. Београд, 1959—1989.
- СРНГ Словарь русских народных говоров. I—XXV. Москва—Ленинград, 1965—1990.
- УРС Украинско-русский словарь. I. Гл. ред. И. Н. Кириченко. Киев, 1953.
- ЭСБМ Этымалагічны слоўнік беларускай мовы. I—VI. Мінск, 1978—1990.
- ЭССЯ Этимологический словарь славянских языков. I—XIX. Ред. О. Н. Трубачев. Москва, 1974—1992.