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Zapiski/Notes

On a Recent Article on Developments in Gender in Slovene Dialects. A Personal Note

My thirty-odd years of linguistic research in the village of Sele in Austrian Carinthia produced few publications in what can be called ‘traditional’ linguistics (as opposed to sociolinguistics). What I consider my two best non-sociolinguistic articles about the village dialect were published, six years after my first period of fieldwork, in Priestly 1984a, 1984b; the simple fact that they were accepted for *Slavistična revija* made me proud, and confirmed my suspicion and my hope that I had made a successful and useful analysis. In them I described what may be first *actual* instance, and is at least (to my knowledge) the first *recorded* instance, of the complete loss of the neuter gender in any dialect of any Slavic language (on minor qualifications about the term ‘complete loss’, see below). When, therefore, I recently learned of the publication of an article with the title “Lingvogeografska obdelava spola v ednini: samostalniki srednjega spola na -o v slovenskih narečjih” (Smole 2006), and in the very same *Slavistična revija*, I was surely one of the most interested of all its readers. I was very disappointed to find that Smole — who, I must assume, knew of those two articles — did not mention them.

One may speculate on her reason(s) for this omission. One justifiable reason would be that the volume has a limited purpose, namely to showcase specifically Slovene linguistic research, and that any discussion of work by others would be out of place. This is indeed the main aim of the volume: its editor speaks of “nujnost širše mednarodne predstavitve aktualnega slovenističnega jezikoslovja” (Vidovič Muha 2006: 1); and note the title of her preliminary remarks, “Slovensko jezikoslovje danes.” However, of the 23 authors in the volume, all but one refrain from treating their subjects in an academic vacuum, without any reference to non-Slovenes.¹ Smole herself lists one non-Slovene (Bernštejn) in her ‘references’ and refers to two more (Tesnière, Greenberg) in her footnotes. This does not appear to be her reason, therefore. Further: few discussions of changes in number systems would not profit from reference to what is surely one of the basic handbooks on this subject, the authoritative Corbett (1991); and this is also ignored. Note that Corbett emphasizes the loss of the neuter in *selščina* (1991: 315, and again in Corbett 2006: 240).

Another justifiable reason would be that my two articles in the 1984 *Slavistična revija* do not deserve a mention. I now briefly suggest some arguments against this.

¹ Indeed, the average number of non-Slovenes listed by the authors in their references is close to 8 each.

1. Smole correctly points out that no account of developments in gender can be properly made without consideration of the interplay between the system of genders and the system of numbers: “Razprostranjenost spremembe spola oziroma prehod v ženski (feminizacija) ali moški spol (maskulinizacija) je odvisen tudi od števila” (2006: 127). She admits that she does not intend to do this, however, since her aim is to present the developments in the singular only, “z namenom predstaviti projekt Slovenskega lingvističnega atlasa” (loc. cit.). There is no cause to object: however, this is one place where Smole should have cited Priestly (1984b) in a footnote, for this is precisely what I did in that article: reconstruct the chronology of the loss of the neuter (with implications for the other two genders) in selščina in all three numbers — a typically complex structuralist reconstruction, since it involves six phonological and three grammatical changes.²
2. Gender is not evident only in nominal endings; English for example has gender that is grammatically overt only in pronouns. Smole correctly points this problem out, too (2006: 128, especially footnote 12) and notes that if the materials on the Slovenski lingvistični atlas [SLA] had not been deficient, data from adjectival and verbal agreement would have been adduced. Again, there are no grounds for complaint — except that, again, reference to Priestly (1984a, in this instance) would have been useful. In that article I emphasize that selščina must very clearly be analyzed as having lost the neuter gender because every single noun agrees with adjectives and the 1-form of verbs either in the masculine or in the feminine but in no other form; and, in for example the singular, no single noun can be referred to pronominally except by masculine *ón* or by feminine *óna* — a fact which I proved using experimental phonetics to support auditory analysis.
3. Smole’s article exemplifies what may be termed a survey: she traces the fate of six originally neuter nouns in -o across the spectrum of all the Slovene dialects that form the basis for the SLA. This is valuable work, and her map is a useful one; nevertheless, analysis in breadth has to be supplemented by analyses in depth; “za dobro morfoložko ... obdelavo slovenskih narečij bi bilo nujno večje število monografskih opisov posameznih govorov” (2006: 128–129). And my own synchronic analysis was precisely one such (though far from monographic): I analyzed about 100 originally-neuter nouns.³ My analysis, if correct, demonstrates that the loss of the neuter gender is complex: I classified developments in eleven different groups, depending on

² This reconstruction also resulted in my hypothesis that the name of the village was originally a dual form, corresponding to the fact that there were two largest centres of settlement (pri Cerkvu and pri Terklu) belonged to two different medieval bishoprics (see Priestly 1996). This would make the village linguistically unique in a second way; but the villagers have not accepted my proposal to refer to it in the dual, “Sele sta lepa vas med gorami,” and continue the traditional “Sele so lepa vas med gorami.”

³ “About,” because the number is open-ended due to derivative suffixes: I included only two nouns with endings corresponding to SLS -*ovje*, for example.

the morphology and the syntactic agreement (see points ## 2 and 4) of the contemporary nouns.

4. Smole notes that both masculinization and feminization occur in Slovene dialects. She correctly includes “jugovzhodni rožanski”, i.e., the area where selščina is spoken, as a dialect with masculinization of neuter nouns. Her map shows the general areas in which each of these phenomena occur; and it appears that only in one small area (at the juncture between rovtarski and primorski dialects, see 2006: 132) are the two phenomena co-occurrent. Is this true only with reference to Smole’s six *-o* nouns? In selščina, of the 100 originally neuter nouns which I analyzed, twelve have become feminine. Further, not all of these 12 feminine selščina nouns have⁴ the *-a* ending which Smole, following Ramovš, cites as showing that analogy is involved in this development (2006: 130). Indeed, the exceptional feminization of about one-eighth of the selščina nouns presented me with a conundrum for which only relatively recently did I devise a (possible, but uncertain) explanation (see Priestly 2006).

Finally, note that just as “masculinization” and “feminization” can be partial or complete (a consideration beyond the scope of Smole’s article), so also “loss” may not always be absolute. In selščina, there are what are sometimes called “frozen” (now best considered “idiomatic”) remnants of the neuter gender: (a) the phrases *u pädiali jútär*, *u tóri jútär*, *u sriädi jútär* “on Monday morning, on Tuesday morning, on Wednesday morning”) and so on; (b) the word *uné* (Standard Literary Slovene [SLS] *oné*); (c) the word *usé* (SLS *vse*); (d) the ambigene noun *léät*; and (e) (and is this not an idiomatic remnant of the neuter in other varieties of Slovene too?) the predicative (povednikov) forms (on the special role of which see Corbett 1991: 216, 2006: 97). See Priestly (1984a: 44–46) for reasons why these five remnants do not amount to enough evidence to declare that the neuter is still “alive” in selščina. These details do emphasize the need for many more in-depth treatments of individual dialects.

It would be pretentious to suggest that Priestly (2006), published in Taiwan just one year ago, should have been mentioned by Smole. I think, however, that my suggestion is justified that she should have mentioned my two articles from 1984. Above all, and if nothing else, the mere fact should be stressed that selščina must, until evidence to the contrary is found, be considered the first (and only?) Slavic dialect to have lost its neuter gender completely and thus join Indo-European languages such as Breton, Latvian and Kashmiri in having a simple masculine/feminine gender distinction in all grammatical categories (see now Priestly 1984c). Smole’s omission of this unique fact about the dialect spoken in Sele is, above all, to be much deplored.

⁴ Or, could theoretically have this ending, since some of them do not occur in the singular.

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