

School of Slavonic and East European Studies
University of London

PETER SHERWOOD

*Fire and Water, Heat and Cold: Some Linguistic
Reflections on the Ob-Ugrian Languages*

*Ogień i woda, gorąco i zimno. Kilka refleksji z badań nad językami
obsko-ugryjskimi*

Our honorand's lifelong interest in the richly satisfying particularity of dialect is, I hope, echoed in the thoughts below, which try to show some links between the linguistic microcosm and the cultural macrocosm in the traditional world of the two Ob-Ugrian languages and peoples.

Vogul (native name: Mansi) and Ostyak (Khanty) are today spoken in northwestern Siberia as their first language by perhaps 3,000 and 13,000 people respectively. Jointly referred to as Ob-Ugrian (or Ob-Ugric) because they are spoken mainly along the River Ob and its tributaries, the languages nevertheless have speakers as far north as the Arctic Circle, as far west as the Ural Mountains, as far south as latitude 58° north, and as far east as longitude 80° east. Though closely related, the two languages are not mutually intelligible, and while their grammatical systems are largely identical, there is considerable dialectal variation within each of the languages, thus Northern Ostyak, for example, is in many ways closer to Northern Vogul than to any variety of Southern or Eastern Ostyak. With Hungarian (Magyar), Ostyak and Vogul form the Ugrian (or Ugric) branch of Finno-Ugric; Finno-Ugric, in turn, comprises, with Samoyedic, the Uralic language family. The fine detail of the relationship between Ostyak and Vogul, as well as of their links with Hungarian, have still to be convincingly demonstrated; reconstruction of the vocalism, crucially, presents serious difficulties. In com-

mon with other small native peoples of Siberia, the Ob-Ugrians are now less and less able to maintain their traditional arctic way of life, based on reindeer-breeding, fishing, and hunting for fur-bearing animals, and partly for this reason their languages may not survive as first languages of the next generation. Their oral literature — including the world's most complex bear-cult material — has been collected, if spasmodically, since the 1840s, but partly because of the complex notational systems of the collectors it is still not widely known (for introductions to Vogul and Ostyak see Kálmán 1975 and honti 1984; for an English-language introduction to Vogul mythology, see now Munkácsi-von Sadvoszy-Hoppál 1995, but with care; there are 87 Ugric poems or parts of poems in the original and in English translation in Honko-Timonen-Branch 1993).

In what follows I shall cite various features of the Ob-Ugrian languages and of Ob-Ugrian culture to suggest that what may appear to be logical oppositions or mutually exclusive terms in the title of this essay are less obviously so in the Ob-Ugrian context.

In some of the cosmogonic myths of the Ob-Ugrians, for example, there are stories resembling the Flood of the Bible. One difference is that the deluge is of fire or water, or both; as in the Bible, few escape, by boat or (in Ob-Ugrian myth) raft or by reaching high ground in time. Here is a Vogul version from the River Sosva region:

"Once in the beginning there was the holy flood of fire. The sky had filled once more with the evil cursing and blasphemies of men and God's mind was wroth. Behind his house lay a lake of golden water, of the water of life. He bathed in the water to restore his youth. He thought: «Meanwhile, let there be a holy flood of fire, let it wash folk away». His youngest son, World-Surveyor-Man, suddenly arrived at his father's door and leapt from his steed. By the door stood two tubs of holy flood water. As he looked at them, they began to rise and boil over. He quickly pulled a kerchief from his pocket and threw it on the tubs, and then commanded them with his sword to simmer down. Then he sought and sought and sought his father, but he was nowhere to be found. Finally, he espied his golden hair rising from the golden waters of the lake, the lake with the water of life. Running to the shore, he grasped his father's arm. «Father,» he said, «why did you do this? Why must you startle your lake full of gulls, your lake full of ptarmigan? Have you no pity on mankind?» Then his daughter came. «Father,» she said, «let us both swear that we shall raise a rainbow as a sign that in the lifetime of man, during the ages of man, you will not wreak any holy flood of fire!» This is how I think we must proceed; sooner or later we shall create seven days of darkness. There will be hailstorms for seven days and seven nights; not one tree on the hill shall remain, not one tree in the forest should remain! Let mankind be ruined! The innocent lad and the innocent maid, however: let them remain." (13–14)

A leading scholar in the Ob-Ugrian field has remarked à propos of such passages: "In several accounts, fire and water mingle as destructive elements

to such an extent that the genuineness of the account must be called into question.’ (Vértes, p. 100). Indeed, Vogul *śakw* (which is rendered ‘flood of fire’ in the ‘holy flood of fire’ above) is glossed in the standard dictionary as ‘Weltmeer, Ozean; Sintflut, Feuerflut’ (WW 585b). We need not cast doubt on the authenticity of the accounts, however, as there is both lexical and grammatical evidence that in Ob-Ugrian culture fire and water, heat and cold, are parallel terms, rather than mutually exclusive, “either/or” oppositions.

We may begin with a phrase, this time from Ostyak: *potəm rōw*, literally ‘frozen warmth’ and meaning something like ‘a cold feeling in the body’. A recent analysis of Ob-Ugrian syntax treats this phrase as part of a ‘figurative expression’ (Kulonen 1989:178):

potəm rōw-n joγət-s -aj -əm
cold heat-AGENT come PAST-PASSIVE-s1

”I was (over)come by frozen heat” = ‘I felt cold’ KT 792a

However, there is less figurativity than might appear at first sight. If we consider one of the most common verbs in Ob-Ugrian, reconstructed for Proto-Ob-Ugrian as *ʔ(γ)-* ‘eat’ (Honti 1982: 134), we see that in both languages one possible meaning (when the verb has a so-called passive suffix) is ‘experience burning sensations (which may be severe and even lead to death)’. The link between ‘eat’ and ‘burn’ may be quite widespread (compare the various senses of English consume), but a characteristically Ob-Ugrian feature is that the burning sensation may be caused by (or be a symptom of) illness, or by extremes of heat or cold. (All translations, including bracketed additions, are taken from the sources cited).

nāj- ne tē -wə -ø
fire-AGENT eat-PASS-s3

es ist ihm warm (er wird vom Feuer gebrannt) Vogul WW 636b

āsərmä-n tē -wə -ø
cold-AGENT eat-PASS-s3

er friert (er wird von der Kälte gefressen) Vogul WW 636b

xät-nə wāñm-əm tew-āj -ø
sun-AGENT face-s1 eat-PASS-s3

die Sone hat das Gesicht verbrannt Ostyak DEWOS 714

There is at least one more Ostyak verb that behaves in exactly the same way, with both hot and cold agents: *toŋxəj-*, *śuŋxi-j-* (Kulonen 1989: 132 (49) indicates only one example, with ‘sun’ as agent, presumably the first item below):

- 4 on the shores of the nourishing Ob,
 3 the nourishing Ob, where the wuš-fish and the elk run about'

Here, for example, sūx and wuš are said to be a pair of words in parallel. Parallel words are chosen either arbitrarily or from nature. Thus, typical pairs given by nature are 'man/woman', 'boy/girl', 'hand/foot', 'large/small', while pairs like 'seven/six', or 'four/five' are specific to the culture, often with ceremonial overtones; the last, for example, is restricted to texts connected with the bear ceremony (Austerlitz 1958:50–51).

Since 'fire/water' or 'heat/cold' are not found in Ob-Ugrian poetry as parallel words in this sense, we should perhaps avoid the term 'parallel' in discussing them. None the less, in the harsh world of the sub-arctic, both nature and culture contribute to the Ob-Ugrians' perception of fire and water, heat and cold, as parallel forces, whose effects on man and his environment are perhaps similar enough to outweigh their obvious symptomatic differences.

ABBREVIATIONS (DICTIONARIES CITED)

- KT — *K. F. Karjalainens ostjakisches Wörterbuch*, bearbeitet und herausgegeben von Y. H. Toivenen, *Lexica Societatis Fenno-Ugricae* 10, Helsinki 1948.
- DEWOS — Wolfgang Steinitz *et al.*, *Dialektologisches und etymologisches Wörterbuch der ostjakischen Sprache*, Berlin 1966–1993.
- WW — *Wogulisches Wörterbuch*, gesammelt von Bernát Munkácsi, geordnet, bearbeitet und herausgegeben von Béla Kálmán, Budapest 1986.

REFERENCES

- Austerlitz R., 1958, *Ob-Ugriic Metrics. The metrical structure of Ostyak and Vogul folk-poetry*, "FF Communications", No. 174, Helsinki.
- Honko L., Timonen S., Branch M., 1993, *The Great Bear. A Thematic Anthology of Oral Poetry in the Finno-Ugrian Languages*, Poems translated by K. Bosley, Helsinki.
- Honti L., 1982, *Geschichte des obugrischen Vokalismus der ersten Silbe*, Budapest.
- Kálmán B., 1975, *Chrestomathia Vogulica*, Third edition, Budapest.
- Kannisto A., Liimola M., 1951, *Wogulische Volksdichtung*, gesammelt und übersetzt von A. Kannisto, bearbeitet und herausgegeben von M. Liimola, I. Band, *Texte mythischen Inhalts*, "Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne", vol. 101, Helsinki.

- Kulonen U.-M., 1989, *The Passive in Ob-Ugrian*, "Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne", vol. 203, Helsinki.
- Munkácsi B., von Sadvoszky O. J., Hoppál M., 1995, *Vogul Folklore*, collected by B. Munkácsi, selected and edited by O. J. von Sadvoszky, M. Hoppál, Budapest-Los Angeles (NP Poorly edited and in poor English).
- Sherwood P., 1994-1995, *Ob-Ugrian "consume"*, "Nyelvtudom'anyi Közlemények".
- Vértés 1990, Edit Vértés *Szibériai nyelvrokonaink hitvilága*, Budapest.

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł jest próbą spojrzenia na makroświat poprzez wniknięcie w szczegóły mikroświata, z czym spotykamy się w badaniach dialektologicznych, które stanowią przedmiot wieloletnich zainteresowań Profesora Michała Łesiowa. Pojęcia *ognia* i *wody, gorąca* i *zimna* zostały zbadane w kontekście języków Ostiaków i Wogulów, dwóch małych narodowości zamieszkujących północno-zachodnią część Syberii. Te dwa języki obskourgryjskie tworzą wraz z językiem węgierskim ugryjski zespół ugrofińskiej grupy językowej, która z kolei wraz z językami samojezdzkimi tworzy uralską rodzinę językową.

Materiał ilustracyjny zaczerpnięty z mitologii, słownictwa, frazeologii i składni sugeruje, że mimo to, iż *ogień* i *woda, gorąco* i *zimno* są pojęciami wzajemnie się wykluczającymi, w językach i kulturach narodowości ugryjskich mieszkających nad rzeką Ob, gdzie surowy klimat podbiegunowy ma wpływ na człowieka i jego otoczenie, są one odbierane jako zjawiska przyrody, których podobieństwa górują nad oczywistymi różnicami.

Oto dwa zdania w języku wogulskim, w którym użyto ten sam czasownik *jeść* w *passivum*, który może oznaczać 'on został spalony' lub 'on został zamrożony', w zależności od użytego agensa semantycznego:

nāj- ne tē -wə -∅
 ogień-AGENS jeść-PASSIVUM-3 os. sing.
 es ist ihm warm (er wird vom Feuer gebrannt)
 (jemu jest ciepło — on został przez ogień spalony)

aśǝrmä-n tē -wə -∅
 zimno-AGENS jeść-PASSIVUM - 3 os. sing.
 er friert (er wird von der Kälte gefressen)
 (on zmarł — on został przez zimno zjedzony)