

Translating Esotericism: Serbian*

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First of all, the historical situation of the Serbian language should be explained. The literary language of the medieval Serbs was Church Slavonic, which made Serbian culture part of the linguistic and cultural community sometimes referred to as *Pax Slavia Orthodoxa*. Russian and Bulgarian literatures also belonged to it (Church Slavonic had been the language of Romanian medieval culture too, up until the fifteenth century). Thus, in the Slavic Orthodox lands, Church Slavonic had the same role as Latin had for Catholic Christianity. Over time, the phonetic systems of the vernacular Serbian entered this language, so it is referred to as the Serbian recension or redaction of Church Slavonic, or as the Serbian Church Slavonic language (it is the same in the cases of Russian and Bulgarian). It was through these recensions that Church Slavonic made these cultures part of a more encompassing Orthodox space whose center was Byzantium. Theological, philosophical, and secular texts (some of which were of classical or oriental origin) came through Byzantium. The translation into one of the Church Slavonic recensions would sometimes transfer to other Slavic literatures (e.g., Serbian Church Slavonic texts influenced Russian literature).

Serbian Church Slavonic was flexible enough to enable translating, for instance, the texts of patristic and ascetic literature, of Hesychasm, or Epiphanius'

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treatise about heresies (in Damascus' version). The translation of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's corpus during the fourteenth century demonstrated that the translator was able to find corresponding Slavic terms for each Greek one, often using calques. This translation enriched Serbian Church Slavonic with Neoplatonic terminology. The translators of this corpus, as well as some other philosophical texts, found corresponding lexemes for a vocabulary that would also become significant for the development of Western esotericism as a field of study: theurgy (*bogoděstviје*), *gnosis* (*razumь, vědь, věděnije*), *pneumatikos* (*dubovъnъ*), *theoria* (*zbrěnije*), ecstasy (*istupljenije*), *theosis* (*oboženije*), palingenesis (*pakybytijе*), *sophia* (*prēmudrostь*), mystagogy (*tainonastavljenije, tainosluženje, tainoučenije*), *nous* (*umь*), monad (*jedinica*), emanation (Gr. *aporroe, istakanije*), fantasy (*mьčtь*), and a number of compounds with *iero* (such as hierology). Sometimes the same word was used for both God and deity (*theion*), sometimes two different words.¹

As part of the Byzantine cultural milieu, translations also referred to Byzantine sources in the case of texts that would be classified as esoteric today. These are the apocrypha referred to as “renounced” or “false books,” “secret books,” as well as various kinds of mantic texts (thunder, bodily shaking, calendars, stars, dreams, bird flight divinations) whose titles are also translated, mostly with calques (*gromovnik, zvezdočatac, kolednik, lunovnik, roždanik, vračebnik munjovnik, sanovnik, ptičnik*). Historical developments moved the center of Serbian culture to the territory of the Habsburg Monarchy in the eighteenth century. Culture turned away from the Byzantine model towards the Western European one (yet again, the same process occurred in other Orthodox cultures during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). A new secular intelligentsia emerged. The literary language of the time was a mixture of the Russian redaction of Church Slavonic and the vernacular Serbian language, resulting in diglossia between the literary Slavonic-Serbian (an artificial language nobody spoke) and the vernacular. Scientific, philosophical, and related terminology was formed

1. Kapustina, *Stara srpska filozofska terminologija*.

in various ways. In the course of the nineteenth century, this state of diglossia was overcome and the vernacular language was finally accepted as the literary language by means of reform. Since the vernacular was devoid of terminology for many abstract philosophical and theological or technical notions, modern times were marked by the abandonment of Slavic terminology in favor of adaptations from German, French, and English. The general tendency was to simply borrow foreign terms rather than translate them or make calques. Thus, other than in the Middle Ages, the contemporary philosophical terminology is mostly borrowed (from scholastic Latin). That is the reason why, despite the acceptance of language reform, questions were posed from time to time about whether the reform was justifiable in all its aspects. Critics think that it severed ties with the older heritage, and the possibilities for establishing an appropriate abstract terminology in the Serbian language were reduced.²

Esotericism terminology was subject to the same processes. The acceptance of Western esotericism (as defined by Hanegraaff)³ in Serbian culture of the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries included a new terminology. Key terms that are relevant to esotericism in modern Serbian are not substantially different from those in other European languages. The English term *esotericism* has a few correlates without any true difference: *ezoterija*, *ezoterizam*, and in some older editions also *ezoterika* and *esoterija*. The suffixes *-ija* and *-izam* are very productive, and are used for terms (*filozofija*, *teologija*, *tehnologija*; cf. German *-ie*, English *-y*) or movements. The transfer of the word *okultizam* is equally clear. Sometimes the form itself reveals the cultural source: the form of the word *spiritizam* shows that it was taken from German and French sources in the nineteenth century, as opposed to the English *spiritualism* (although one does encounter the word *spiritualizam*, but this is a philosophical term). The whole vocabulary of these movements is mostly borrowed (*medijum*, *medijumstvo*, *telepatija*, *astralno*

2. Selimović, *Za i protiv Vuka*

3. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 254–55.

telo, somnambulizam), while there are some cases in which a domestic word will be used (*vidovitost*—clairvoyancy). One of the early spiritualist texts titled *Avetinjski pojavi* (Teozof [Čedomilj Mijatović] 1887), could be loosely translated as *spectral apparitions* or *phenomena*; however, the word *dub* is used more often (both for *ghost* and *spirit*), and the same author gave the title *From the world of spirits* (*Iz sveta dubova*) to his second book.

Some terms are, quite naturally, linked to the international character of a movement, such as *teozofija* and *antropozofija*. There is something interesting about the transfer of these terms: specifically, some authors write it as *teosofija* and *antroposofija*. This form has its parallel in philosophical terminology, since one current of philosophers, classicists, and theologians claims that it should be written and pronounced *filosofija* instead of the normative *filozofija* — which was adapted from German pronunciation as early as the nineteenth century — in order to maintain the link with the Greek original and the primary meaning of the word. The related writings of Theosophical and Anthroposophical authors also establish Sophian connotation, thus quite unexpectedly bringing these movements closer to philosophical terminology. Undoubtedly, the acceptance of new phenomena such as esotericism that was taking place in the nineteenth century also meant the acceptance of their associated terminology. Like the aforementioned late-antique terms, words that are borrowed directly from the Greek or indirectly through Western intermediaries (*teurgija, mistagogija, etc.*) are nowadays used instead of Slavic ones (however, it is typical to translate *nous* as *um*).

New terms borrowed from European languages are used today even in those cases where medieval terms existed for some of the relevant notions. The Church Slavonic term *viděnie* (seeing) was used for the medieval apocryphal genre referred to in Latin as *visio*. However, this domestic term lost its meaning in more modern times and was replaced by *vizija*. *Vizija* (like the English “visionary”) carries a connotation more powerful than the common word *viđenje*; therefore, W.B. Yeats’ *A Vision* is translated as *Vizija*. Moreover, as

proven by standard dictionaries, the lexeme has gained the meaning both of hallucination during illness, and of imagination, just like the word *vizionar* came to mean “dreamer” too. Such an extension and movement of the semantics tells us more about deep cultural changes than about linguistic ones. The medieval term for astrology (*zvęzdoslovije*, a calque from Greek, different from *zvęzdočtenije*, signifying astronomy – although the adjective “astrological” existed as well) was lost during the course of the nineteenth century and was substituted by *astrologija*. Likewise, the Latin loanword *imaginacija* is used together with the Serbian noun *mašta* – and even more so in scientific papers.

The term *gnosis* was translated in two ways in medieval texts; but even though they both still exist today, they are now used in their everyday sense, devoid of soteriological depth. The medieval term *razum*, which was used to translate *gnosis* (referring to supernatural knowledge in parts of the Dionysian corpus) has a completely different meaning today: reason. To use the word *razum* for *gnosis* would therefore change the meaning altogether. *Gnosis* is today usually referred to as *gnoza* (but should be differentiated from *gnosticizam*), implying a special type of knowledge (particularly in the texts of practitioners). This is an example of how retaining the foreign term provides denotation, not only due to the lack of a common term but also because of the peculiarity of the word itself. The “foreignness” itself gives it a special power. The usage of the untranslated term *nju ejdž* (New Age) in Serbian (which is clearly differentiated from the common phrase by the usage of capital letters in English) retains the historical positioning that would be lost in translation.

This short overview of the most important terms might not be too challenging in terms of translation studies: *ezoterija* and *spiritizam* are truly transparent. However, it is very telling from a perspective of cultural history. It turns out that in the Serbian cultural space (and the author of the present article would be willing to expand this point to the whole of *Pax Slavia Orthodoxa*), esotericism – so often regarded as a residuum or a survival of “obsolete” periods of history,

or as an aberration – is actually part of a cultural transfer that is typical of modernity. Esoteric terms are transferred in the same way as philosophical or technical ones, and they participate in the creation of modern vocabulary.

On the other hand, the tendency to translate and calque terms from Greek is noticeable in the sphere of contemporary theological language, together with the borrowing of compounds that are quite natural in Greek but rather unusual in Serbian. In theology Slavic terminology is preserved (setting aside the question of to what extent it is the continuation of an older, domestic terminology or, rather, an instance of borrowing from Russian literature, which would indicate cultural transfer yet again). In a strange way, esoteric terminology seems to be closer to philosophical or technological than to theological vocabulary – this is suggested here as a very tentative conclusion that would definitely require a more encompassing analysis of the relevant corpus.

Some of the terms have common domestic equivalents: *nauka* means science, *prosvetiteljstvo* is used for “Enlightenment” in the sense of the eighteenth-century phenomenon. It speaks volumes that the term for education (*prosveta*) is based on the same root, and not on *educatio*. *Prosvetljenje* has a related root, however; here the connotation is closer to *illumination*, used in the sense of gaining an insight, which can be supernatural too. The term *otkrovenje* (revelation) is inherited from the medieval lexicon. In its original meaning it is still used in the standard Bible translation of St. John’s Revelation (Apocalypse), or in theological literature. *Otkrovenje* has retained some of its supernatural power, even when it is used in other contexts (for instance, an avant-garde book of poetry by Rastko Petrović [1922]⁴ used this title although the content was anti-Christian).

Yet another linguistic layer comes from the spoken language. Here we are dealing with a string of emic folklore terms for magical practices and representations. These terms belong to the fields of ethnology, anthropology, and folkloristics, referring to practices, in some cases, converted into specialized scholarly terminology.

4. Petrović, *Otkrovenje*.

Simultaneously, these disciplines have been using international and etic terms while adapting emic ones as well. A whole array of folklore terms signify magical practices, magical healing, and/or forms of divination: they are sometimes included in scholarly vocabulary as synonyms or with more specific meanings (e.g., *bajanje*, charming), while sometimes etic terms are used (*magija*). The term *onaj svet* (meaning *other world* or *that world*) has been widely accepted, so here we are dealing with a term that originally comes from folklore but is now used as part of the scholarly vocabulary. Conversely, there are folklore terms for the altered state of consciousness (*zanosenje, padanje*), but *trans* (trance) is more current in scholarly papers. While there is an emic term *premiranje* (the standard lexical definition is “to lose consciousness” or “to become paralyzed because of strong emotion,” but folklore material testifies to its use in NDE contexts), scholars prefer the NDE (Near Death Experience) terminology or a translation of it (*iskustvo bliske smrti*). There are also opposite cases, for instance when the term *vrač* is used for Calchas (the Greek seer from the *Illiad*) or as the translation of shaman. The usage of emic terms is analogous to the state of the discipline in other European languages too (e.g., *Zauberei*, sorcery, *sorcellerie*).

After this historical overview, the question of contemporary translation solutions must be considered. Sometimes it is necessary to resort to neologisms, such as the translation of Weber’s famous *disenchantment*, most commonly translated as *raščaravanje* (which is a German calque, with the Serbian root for magic); but the translation of *re-enchantment* cannot be solved by a simple prefix, as it requires a whole phrase. It is significant that in some publications, *Entzauberung* is translated as “rationalization,” thus providing an interpretation of Weber’s term. Practitioners have faced the same difficulties in their emic vocabulary as scholars who have attempted to transfer these terms to different ends. A more detailed investigation of highly specialized emic vocabularies, such as the Masonic would yield insights about historical connections and influences. Research has shown that Wiccans use the term *paganski* quite

naturally, while reconstructionist Slavic practitioners reject the terms *paganiizam* and *neopaganiizam*, using *rodnoverje* instead (again a borrowed term, this time from Russian). Here we are dealing with the problematics of a specific *Fachsprache*.

In this short article we have covered just some of the most important terms. A more detailed analysis would require processing a larger corpus (books, journals) following standard lexicological procedures, with the necessary diachronic background accompanied by research in the history of language. Such a study, in turn, would be just the basis for further analyses that would be not only linguistic but would draw connections with intellectual history, and could reveal transfers and internal changes in Serbian culture.

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