28. Agreement*

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Abstract

In many respects the agreement systems of Slavonic languages are close to canonical. Controllers of agreement are often present, they have overt expression of features, and they take consistent agreements. The target has obligatory bound expression of agreement, and there is matching of features values (for person, number and gender). However, Slavonic also shows several very interesting instances of agreement choices, induced by a range of different controller types. These agreement choices provide good evidence for the constraints of the Agreement Hierarchy and the Predicate Hierarchy, as well as for various types of condition on agreement, notably animacy and precedence.

1. Introduction

Slavonic provides remarkable insights into agreement for two opposing reasons. On the one hand, agreement in Slavonic is ubiquitous and 'canonical': that is, the Slavonic systems fit squarely at the core of any reasonable definition of agreement. On the other hand they have in addition some interesting non-canonical traits. In some instances there is a high degree of variability, and we can identify several competing factors which together determine the choice of agreement form. Not surprisingly, therefore, the literature on the topic is extensive. It includes books, often examining a single language, sometimes broader in scope: Popov (1964), Vanek (1970), Skoblikova (1971), Crockett (1976), Corbett (1979a, 1983), Iomdin (1990), Schmidt and Lehfeldt (1995) and Wechsler and Zlatić (2003). There are also many theses and articles, including recent work by Leko (2000) and Igartua (2004). Slavonic data have an important place in a general typology of agreement systems (Corbett 2006). I have made available a fuller bibliography on the topic, at: <htp://www.surrey.ac.uk/LIS/SMG/agr.html>.

2. Canonical Agreement

A good starting point for defining agreement is Steele's notion of 'systematic covariance between a semantic or formal property of one element and a formal property of another' (1978, 610). We shall call the element which determines the agreement (say the subject noun phrase) the controller. The element whose form is determined by agreement is the target. The syntactic environment in which agreement occurs is the domain of agreement. And when we indicate in what respect there is agreement, we are referring to agreement features (or categories). Thus number is an agreement feature; it has the values singular, dual, plural, and so on. Features are directly reflected in agreement. There can be other factors (like word order) which have an effect on agreement but are not directly reflected like features. Such factors are called agreement conditions.

Corbett (2006) provides twenty converging criteria for characterizing canonical agreement. 'Canonical' represents the best and clearest examples, those most closely matching the 'canon'; they are the ones still included if we take our definitions to their logical end point (and so they will not be frequent). These twenty criteria fall under three main principles: I: canonical agreement is redundant rather than informative; II: canonical agreement is syntactically simple; and III: the closer the expression of agreement is to canonical (i. e. affixal) inflectional morphology, the more canonical it is as agreement. It is evident that substantial parts of the Slavonic systems may be characterized as canonical according to these principles. For further discussion of definitions see Mel'čuk (1993) and Schmidt/Lehfeldt (1995).

3. Broad Characterization of Agreement in Slavonic

Typically we find agreement within the noun phrase in number and gender. Finite verbs generally agree obligatorily with their subject in person and number. Past tenses are frequently formed with the so-called *l*-participle, which creates a more interesting situation: here the auxiliary verb shows agreement in person and number, while the participle shows agreement in number and gender. Some Slavonic languages, such as Russian, use a null form for the verb 'be' in its present tense, so that the former participle is the sole form in the past tense; it may be said therefore that Russian verbs agree in person and number in the present, but in number and gender in the past. Various types of pronoun, including the relative pronoun, also show agreement with their antecedents, in number and gender. (Most Slavists readily include the determination of the form of anaphoric pronouns within agreement.)

The three features which are indisputably agreement features are somewhat different in nature. Gender is an inherent feature of the noun. It is found on the target; say the adjective, as a consequence of its presence in the noun (overt or covert). Thus agreement marking of gender on an adjective has nothing to do with the lexical meaning of the adjective. Within gender we can observe the rise of the animate sub-gender (Huntley 1980, Krys'ko 1994, Timberlake 1997). Person is an inherent feature of the pronoun, but not of the verb. Number is more difficult. It is an inherent feature of some nouns: those which are only singular (like Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian *hrabrost* 'courage') or only plural (like Russian *šči* 'cabbage soup') impose this feature value on their modifiers. However, a considerable proportion of the nouns in Slavonic languages can be associated with both (or all) numbers. In straightforward examples involving such nouns, the number feature appears to relate primarily to the noun; the property denoted by the adjective is not affected by the change in number. Traditional accounts of Slavonic languages also include agreement in case. In a phrase like Russian: *v novom avtomobile* 'in a new car', the adjective and noun stand in the same case. Depending on one's view of syntax, this covariance may be seen as differing from that found with gender, number or person. It is less clear that case is an agreement feature, though we should recognize that it interacts strongly with agreement features. There are, however, a few constructions where there is good evidence for agreement in case. Consider Polish expressions like the following (Dziwirek 1990, 147):

(1) Sześć kobiet by-ł-o smutn-ych six woman [PL.GEN] be-PAST-NEUT.SG sad-PL.GEN 'six women were sad'

The verb is third singular neuter 'by default'; the adjective appears to agree in number and gender with the quantified noun within the subject noun phrase. (According to Dziwirek (1990, 158n16), the neuter singular may be found instead, in 'informal spoken Polish'.) This construction is in any case difficult to analyse, but it suggests that we have to allow for agreement in case.

4. The Special Interest of Slavonic

While many instances of agreement in Slavonic fit into well-known systems, there are also numerous examples where more than one agreement form may be found. Recall that Steele mentioned a 'semantic or formal property'. We have a rich variety of circumstances in which agreement can be determined by the meaning - semantic agreement, or by the form - syntactic agreement. The choice may be influenced by a range of factors, as we shall see.

4.1. The effect of controllers

When there is a choice of agreement, this is normally made possible by the controller. There are certain controller types (within Slavonic and beyond) which regularly permit agreement choices, and we discuss these in § 4.1.1. And then there are conditions which range over different controller types, and which favour one or other agreement choice; we treat these in § 4.1.2.

4.1.1. Controllers which induce agreement choices

Agreement rules are frequently formulated as though a controller's features were constant, that is, that all agreements will be identical. In fact, we regularly find agreement choices: a given controller allows two (occasionally three) agreement possibilities. The choices arise from a mismatch of semantic and formal properties of the controller. Controllers which allow agreement choices are of two types. There are lexical items, hybrids, which induce agreement choices. And second, there are constructional mismatches, where the form and semantics of the construction can be at odds. We discuss these in turn.

Several lexical hybrids allow agreement choices. These may relate to number, or gender, or both, and they arise from a mismatch between the meaning of the noun and its morphological form.[1] An example of a number mismatch is Russian para 'man and woman, couple', which has the morphology of a singular, but denotes more than one. It takes singular agreements, except of the personal pronoun. Another example of a number mismatch is provided by Old Church Slavonic *družina* 'company' and similar nouns, which most often take singular attributive modifiers, and plurals in other positions (see Huntley 1989, 24-25). For gender mismatches we may take the Czech děvče 'girl' (colloquial), which takes neuter agreements, except for the personal pronoun, which may be neuter or feminine (Vanek 1970, 87-88). There are also various honorific titles, which take feminine and masculine agreements in Polish, neuter and masculine in Russian. A considerably researched type of controller is Russian nouns like vrač 'doctor', when denoting a female. Since such nouns have the morphology typically associated with masculines, but denote females, a complex pattern of masculine and feminine agreements occurs (Corbett 1991, 183-184, 231-232 and sources there). And then there are nouns which show gender mismatches in the plural: Serbian/ Croatian/Bosnian gazda 'landlord, master, boss' and similar nouns, which are now established as masculine in the singular, but which allow masculine and feminine agreements in the plural; and Polish nouns like *lajdak* 'wretch', which take a combination of non-masculine personal and masculine personal agreements (Corbett 1991, 233-236 and references there). A truly remarkable instance is Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian deca 'children' which takes feminine singular, neuter plural and masculine plural agreements. All these items show patterns of agreement which are in accord with the Agreement Hierarchy (§ 4.2).

Two general points are worth noting. First, these examples may comprise individual lexical items (even single items in the use of a particular individual, as in the case of the special agreements found with *značitel'noe lico* 'important person' by Gogol'), or relatively large numbers of nouns, as in the case of nouns like Russian *vrač* '(female) doctor'. In the latter situation, though the system of agreements may be the same, we must not assume that the actual frequency of the different options will be the same from item to item. Quite the opposite: there is evidence that *vrač* '(female) doctor' and *buxgalter* '(female) accountant' behave rather differently. And second, while the reason for these agreement choices is to be found in a mismatch between semantics and morphology, such a mismatch is not a sufficient condition for an agreement choice. Thus Russian *djadja* 'uncle' (like similar nouns) denotes a male but belongs to the morphological class whose members are usually feminine. The semantics overrides the morphology, such that the noun is straightforwardly masculine; for agreement purposes it behaves just like *otec* 'father'.

An important type of hybrid is the honorific pronoun, used in address. Pronouns like Russian vy 'you' used in this way produce interesting agreement effects. Since the pronoun is plural, it takes some plural agreements; as shown by the verb in this Russian example:

(2) vy xot-ite ... 2pl.nom want-2pl 'You (polite) want ...' However, the pronoun is used to address a single individual, and some singular agreements are found (as usually in the Russian long form adjective):

(3) vy segodnja očen' zadumčiv-aja.
 2PL.NOM today very thoughtful-(LONG.FORM) FEM.SG.NOM
 'You are very thoughtful today.' (one woman addressed politely)

We also find constructional mismatches, agreement controllers which produce a choice of agreement because of a mismatch of form and meaning within the construction. For example, in numeral phrases the numeral may not be plural in form, though the semantics of the phrase would imply a plural. Slavonic languages show considerable variation and the actual quantifier involved has a dramatic effect on the agreement found (Suprun 1969, 175-187; Corbett 1983, 220-224).

There is an interesting pattern: the agreement form which is semantically justified (usually plural) becomes more likely the lower the numeral. The reason is that the groups which we quantify with larger numbers are the groups which are less individuated and conversely are more likely to be viewed as a unit. For this reason they are more likely to be encoded grammatically as a noun. And as a result, when there is a grammatical choice, the higher are more likely to be treated somewhat more like nouns. Russian *četyre knigi* 'four books' is 'more plural' than *pjat' knig* 'five books', and in a sense *tri knigi* 'three books' is 'more plural' than *četyre knigi* 'four books'; we are better able to individuate three items than four.

Slavonic has an unusual associative construction, indicated only by agreement morphology: this is found in the Talitsk dialect of Russian (Bogdanov 1968). In this dialect, a plural verb can be used with a singular noun phrase, to indicate reference to a person or persons besides the one indicated directly:

 (4) Góša pr'ijéxa-l'-i ! Gosha arrived-PAST-PL
 'Gosha and his family have arrived!'

This was used when the named person arrived with his wife and children; the fact that more than one person is involved is shown in this dialect exclusively by the agreement. This plural agreement does not extend into the noun phrase, and so conflicting agreements can be found in the same sentence.

Plural agreement may also be the only indicator of honorific usage, as in this Russian example of a maid talking of her mistress:

(5) Mamen'ka plač-ut ... Mother cry-3pL
'(Your) mother is crying ...' (Turgenev Nakanune, 1860)

Here the plural verb with singular subject indicates respect for the person referred to. This demonstrates that in cases like this the controllers cannot be restricted to particular lexical items, but that a range of noun phrases may be involved. (For evidence that this construction follows the constraints of the Agreement Hierarchy, see Corbett 1983, 24-25, and for sources on the construction in Belarusian, Czech, Polish, Slovak, Slovak,

vene and Ukrainian see 1983, 41n8; it is also found in Kajkavian, Wayles Browne, personal communication.)

An agreement controller consisting of conjoined noun phrases is very likely to give rise to an agreement option. It may allow agreement with both or all the conjuncts, and it may allow agreement with just one conjunct. The latter type is frequent both in texts and in naturally occurring discourse. When agreement is with one conjunct it is almost always with the nearest. Here is a clear example from Cassubian (Stone 1993, 784):

(6) Odraz-a i strach czierowô-ł, jego postępk-ama revulsion(FEM)-sG and fear(MASC)[SG] direct-PAST[MASC.SG] his action-PL.INST 'Revulsion and fear directed hi actions'

Here the genders of the nouns make it clear that agreement is with the nearer conjunct. The alternative is for agreement to be with all the conjuncts, as in this Slovene example (Lenček 1972):

 (7) Tonček i Marina sta prizadevn-a Tonček (MASC) and Marina (FEM) be.3DU assiduous- MASC.DU 'Tonček and Marina are assiduous'

Agreement is with both conjuncts, and the gender and number resolution rules specify the form of the target as dual and, where appropriate, masculine. For resolution rules see Corbett (2003). For many of the Slavonic languages the number resolution rule simply specifies plural, and in some there is no place for gender resolution since gender is not distinguished in the plural.

The comitative construction together with alternative agreement possibilities is found in some but not all the Slavonic languages. We may illustrate it from Belarusian (Bukatevič et al. 1958, 292):

- (8) *Dzed z unukam lavi-ŭ rybu* grandfather with grandson catch-PAST[SG.MASC] fish 'Grandfather and grandson were fishing'
- (9) Brat z sjastroju pajš-l-i ŭ tèatr brother with sister go-PAST-PL to theatre 'Brother and sister went to the theatre'

The head noun in the nominative case may control the agreement ((8) - syntactic agreement) or there may be agreement with the expression as a whole ((9) - semantic agreement. Semantic agreement is less likely with comitative expressions than with conjoined noun phrases.

4.1.2. Conditions on controllers

These are factors relating to controllers but which range over different controller types. Two are well established, and their interaction is also moderately well researched. The first condition is animacy. There is substantial evidence, primarily from text counts but also from work with consultants, that controllers referring to animates are more likely to take semantically justified agreement than are those referring to in animates. The evidence comes from different Slavonic languages, and involves various quantified expressions and conjoined noun phrases (for a survey and sources see Corbett 1983, 110–132,139, 143–146). To give one example, Patton examined a large corpus of 19th and 20th century Russian literary texts, and a sample from Pravda, for examples of predicate agreement with quantified subjects. From her data (1969, 35, 63, 148, 160) the following may be calculated:

(10) The effect of animacy on agreement with quantified expressions in Russian

	singular	plural	percent plural
animate	790	1293	62
inanimate	1047	740	41

The second condition is precedence. There is strong evidence that controllers which precede their targets are more likely to take semantically justified agreement than are those which follow. Again there is evidence from different Slavonic languages, and it involves quantified expressions, conjoined noun phrases and comitative phrases (Corbett 1983, 107–150 passim). To give just one part of the evidence: Sand examined a large corpus of Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian texts (literature of the 1960s, non-fiction 1951–1968 and the newspaper *Politika* 1969–1970). The largest controller type investigated was the numerals from *pet* '5' upwards. (11) has been drawn up from her data (1971, 73–75):

(11) The effect of precedence on agreement with quantified expressions (involving *pet* '5' and above) in Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian

	Ν	% plural
subject-predicate	310	20
predicate-subject	851	2

While it is easiest to show the effect of precedence in subject-predicate domains, with different types of controller subjects, it is also relevant to controllers of attributive modifiers.

We have seen that controllers which refer to animates are more likely to take agreement forms with a greater degree of semantic justification than are those referring to in animates. Similarly, controllers which precede their targets are more likely to take agreement forms with a greater degree of semantic justification than are those which follow. Since these two controller factors are independent, we can cross-classify for them to see the inter action of these conditions. (12) records agreement with conjoined noun phrases. The data are taken from modern literary texts, from Russian (1930– 1979) and from Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian (a corpus of short works by Ivo Andrić) [2].

word order	subject type	animate		inanimate	
		N	% PL	PL	% PL
subject-predicate	Russian	115	100	67	85
	Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian	21	100	35	91
predicate-subject	Russian	89	84	114	28
	Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian	23	70	62	26

(12) Predicate agreement with conjoined noun phrases

Both animacy and precedence exert a major influence on the agreement selected. The plural, the form with greater semantic justification, is more likely if the subject is animate and if it precedes the predicate. With both factors are present, Russian and Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian (in the samples here) require the plural form. When either one of the factors is present, the plural form is found in a significantly higher proportion of the cases than when neither is present. In Russian the two factors are of about equal weight, and in Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian precedence appears to be the more important factor. Thus both animacy and precedence have a substantial effect on agreement choices, ranging over different controller types.

4.2. The effect of domains

We now investigate the considerable impact of the syntactic domain on agreement choices. We shall look at two hierarchies. We begin with the larger syntactic domains, where agreement options are constrained by the Agreement Hierarchy (Corbett 1979b; 1983, 8-41, 81-86; 1991, 225-241):

attributive > predicate> relative pronoun > personal pronoun

Fig. 28.1: The Agreement Hierarchy

Possible agreement patterns are constrained as follows:

For any controller that permits alternative agreement forms, as we move rightwards along the Agreement Hierarchy, the likelihood of agreements with greater semantic justification will increase monotonically (that is, with no intervening decrease).

As an illustration of the type of data covered by the Agreement Hierarchy, consider agreement with numeral phrases in Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian involving the numerals *dva* '2', *tri* '3', *četiri* '4' and *oba* 'both'. These require a special form of masculine nouns, a survival of the dual number which is synchronically a genitive singular. Attributive modifiers to such nouns must take the ending *-a*; it has been argued that it should be analysed synchronically as a neuter plural. However it is analysed, this *-a* form represents syntactic agreement.

(13) *dva dobr-a čovek-a* two good-NEUT.PL men-sG.GEN 'two good men' In the predicate the neuter plural form (syntactic agreement) and the masculine plural form (semantic agreement) are both possible:

(14) *ov-a dva čovek-a su dobr-a/dobr-i* this-NEUT.PL two men-sG.GEN be.PL good-NEUT.PL/good-MASC.PL 'these two men are good'

The relative pronoun is also found in both forms:

(15) *dva čovek-a koj-a/koj-i* ... two men-sg.gen who-NEUT.PL/who-MASC.PL ... 'two men who ...'

The personal pronoun must stand in the masculine plural form *oni* (**ona* is unacceptable). We therefore find syntactic agreement in attributive position, both types of agreement of the predicate and relative pronoun, and only semantic agreement of the personal pronoun. There are figures for the relative frequency of the two forms in the positions where there is an option. These are derived from Sand (1971, 55–56, 63) and presented in (16):

(16) Distribution of masculine plural (versus neuter plural) forms in Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian

	attributive	predicate	relative pronoun	personal pronoun
plural (semantic) agreement	0%	18% (N = 376)	62% (N = 32)	100%

(16) shows a monotonic increase in the likelihood of agreement forms with greater semantic justification.

We now focus on the predicate, one of the positions on the Agreement Hierarchy. Comrie (1975) demonstrated how honorific plural pronouns may take singular or plural agreement, but that this variation is constrained by what we may call the Predicate Hierarchy:

verb > participle > adjective > noun

Fig. 28.2: The Predicate Hierarchy

Reformulating Comrie's proposal we may claim that:

For any controller that permits alternative agreement forms, as we move rightwards along the Predicate Hierarchy, the likelihood of agreements with greater semantic justification will increase monotonically (that is, with no intervening decrease).

In subsequent research I investigated evidence for all the Slavonic languages, for agreement with honorific pronouns, and the results are given in summary form in Corbett (1983, 42-59). Again there is great variation, but the overall pattern is very clear and it is fully in accord with the Predicate Hierarchy.

4.3. Target factors

Conditions on targets range over different target types. It has been known for some time that predicate type has a role in influencing agreement choices. Robblee reports that predicates form a hierarchy of individuation, which she motivates from phenomena apart from agreement. There are three main classes, each split into two subclasses; the reader is referred to Robblee (1993a) for justification of these, but the examples in (17) give an indication of membership. Robblee took a corpus of Russian prose (1976 to 1988) and extracted instances of predicate agreement with quantified noun phrases including either a numeral or one of *neskol'ko* 'several', *malo* 'few' or *nemalo* 'several, more than a few'.

The results were clear; semantic (plural) agreement is least common with *byt*' and successively more common with more individuated predicates (Robblee 1993b). However, different predicates more or less likely to appear in particular word orders, and we have established that word order impacts on agreement. We need, therefore, a count in which word order is held constant, in order to isolate the effect of the predicate type. Robblee provides this in a later paper.

	subject-predicate word order		predicate-subject word order		TOTAL	
	N	% PL	N	% PL	N	% PL
CLASS I ('inversion') e. g. <i>byt</i> ' 'be', <i>proizojti</i> 'occur'	13	15	110	7	123	8
CLASS II ('intransitive') e. g. <i>stojat</i> ' 'stand', <i>kras-</i> <i>net</i> ' 'redden'	43	63	117	44	160	49
CLASS III ('agentive') e. g. <i>rabotat'</i> 'work', <i>udarif</i> 'hit'	55	96	35	71	90	87
TOTAL	111	74	262	32	373	45

(17) Semantic (plural) predicate agreement with quantified noun phrases according to word order and predicate type in Russian (from Robblee 1997, 235)

Thus of the class I predicates, of the 13 found with subject-verb word order, 15% had plural agreement. Plural agreement is more likely with subject-verb order (15%) than with verb-subject (7%), and the same is true for each class of predicate (63% versus 44%, and 96% versus 71%). But equally, if we keep the word order constant and consider the class of predicate (comparing down the columns) then we see that plural is least likely with 'inversion' predicates, more so with other intransitives and most likely with agentives. Here then we have clear evidence that this hierarchy has an effect independent of word order. Robblee uses predicate type as an indicator of the individuation of the subject, which links interestingly to typological claims about the role of individuation in agreement systems.

The question which remains is how this hierarchy relates to Comrie's Predicate Hierarchy. Robblee's Predicate Hierarchy of Individuation provides a cross-cutting classification, as becomes clear when we consider non-verbal predicates. A few of these, such as *vidno* 'visible' are inversion predicates (Robblee 1993a, 216), while the majority are lower on the hierarchy (1993a, 230). In Comrie's Predicate Hierarchy, which has a syntactic and morphological basis, verbs and non-verbs are fully separated. Thus Robblee's hierarchy can be seen as a target condition, ranging over the predicate types defined in Comrie's hierarchy. When other factors are held constant adjectives favour semantic agreement by comparison with verbs (Corbett 1983, 163–170).

4.4. Possessives in Upper Sorbian and Slovak

Perhaps the most remarkable instance of agreement in Slavonic is found in Upper Sorbian, where the possessive adjective can control an attributive modifier, as in this example (from Fasske 1981, 382–383):

(18) *moj-eho muž-ow-a sotr-a* my-MASC.SG.GEN husband-POSS-FEM.SG.NOM sister-FEM.SG.NOM 'my husband's sister'

In (18), the particularly interesting form is *mojeho;* this is masculine since $mu\check{z}$ 'husband', which is the source of *mužowa*, is masculine. It is singular for the same reason (the formation of the possessive adjective requires a singular referent). Thus we have the possessive adjective as a controller of agreement, taking another attributive modifier as its target, which is a totally unexpected agreement domain. The construction has been discussed in detail in Corbett (1987); for the distribution of the construction in the Sorbian dialects see Fasske (1996, 66–73). This Upper Sorbian construction is indeed remarkable; the only other modern Slavonic language which has it, and to a more limited extent, is Slovak. Control of the relative pronoun by the possessive adjective is much more common, while control of the anaphoric pronoun is general in Slavonic (except for Polish, where it is limited).

5. Conclusion

Research on agreement in Slavonic has given us accounts of the different agreement systems, and ample evidence of the pervasive nature of choices in agreement systems. We know a good deal about individual factors which affect agreement choices, but less about how they interact. We know something about the adult systems, but rather little about how they are acquired and what their function is. There is a good deal still to be found out.

* The support of the ESRC (grant RES-051-27-0122) is gratefully acknowledged. The following are the abbreviations:

DU	dual	NOM	nominative
FEM	feminine	PL	plural
GEN	genitive	POSS	possessive adjective suffix
INST	instrumental	SG	singular
MASC	masculine	1	first person
Ν	total number of examples	2	second person
NEUT	neuter	3	third person

[1] For additional data and examples of items discussed in this section see Corbett 1983; for titles pp. 23–24, for Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian *gazda* 'landlord, master, boss' pp. 14–17 and references there, for Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian *deca* 'children' pp. 76–88, for Russian *značitel'noe lico* 'important person' pp. 25–26, and for *vrač*' (female) doctor' pp. 30–39.

[2] Details in Corbett (1983, pp. 105–35 especially p. 130 on Russian, and pp. 139–140 and p. 101 on Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian).

6. Literature (selected)

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