

Aleksandar Loma

The word *uška* ‘snake’ in the vernacular of Zagarač
and S.-Cr. *b(j)elouška* ‘Natrix natrix’

In the vernacular dictionary of the region Zagarač in Montenegro by Drago and Željko Čupić the word *uška* is found, designating any snake, including the poisonous ones. It is, together with the phonetic variant *vuška* from Dalmatia and the morphological one *užica* from Montenegro, a rare female noun reflecting, in Serbo-Croatian, Common Slavic **qžb* < PIE **ang^u(h)i-* ‘snake’. The most of its reflexes in Slavic languages are masculine and designate non-venomous species *Anguis fragilis* and *Natrix natrix*. The same word recurs as the second element of the S.-Cr. compounds *sl(j)epouška* ‘*Anguis fragilis*’, *b(j)elouška* ‘*Natrix natrix*’. In the former it is recognized by Petar Skok, who traces it together with the form *slepovuž* back to **slěpъjъ qžb* ‘the blind snake’, whereas *b(j)elouška* he judges it secondary to the suffixal derivative *b(j)el-uška*. However, there can be little doubt that it is another instance of a compound with **qžbka*, going back to the phrase **bělъjъ qžb* ‘white snake’. Yet the snake in question, *Natrix natrix*, English Grass or Water Snake, is typically dark green or brown in colour, with a characteristic yellow collar, to which is due its alternative name *Ringed Snake*, as well as the reinterpretation, in Serbo-Croatian, of **bělo-uš-ьka* as ‘the white-eared’ (cf. S.-Cr. *uši* ‘ears’); nevertheless, its visual appearance is far from being white. Consequently, “whiteness” is here not to be understood literally, in a physical sense, but rather as an expression of the reptile’s harmless nature. Such an interpretation can be corroborated by the widespread popular belief in a white house protecting snake, as well as by Slovak dialectal designation of nontoxic mushrooms as ‘white’ (*biele hubi*). It is understandable that this opposition “white = harmless, beneficial” vs. “black = harmful, poisonous” remained at the margin both in botanical and in zoological nomenclatures, because it was in collision with the fact, much more important for the immediate identification, that among the white- or light-coloured species there are also the poisonous ones and vice versa, every dark-coloured snake or mushroom is not necessarily dangerous. In view of the Lithuanian *angis*, Latvian *uôdze* both female, S.-Cr. *(v)uška*, *užica* is rather old than secondary arisen under the influence of *zmija* f. Its female gender together with that of Russ. *uža* beside Common Slavic *qžb*, *qžakъ* m. might go back to the double gender of PIE **ang^u(h)is* as presumably reflected in Lat. *anguis* m. and f.