

THE HUNGARIAN WORD *GYENGE* ‘WEAK, FEEBLE, POWERLESS’ AND ITS SLOVAK (SLAVIC) COGNATES

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Abstract: Šimon Ondruš’s wide scope of linguistic interests included the etymology of Hungarian words. In a ten-part series of articles published in the 2004 and 2005 issues of the journal *Slovenské pohľady na literatúru, umenie a život*, he published entries of varying lengths on the etymologies of more than a 100 Hungarian words, including proposed etymologies of some words of unknown origin. One such Hungarian word is *gyenge* ‘weak, feeble, powerless’, which, according to Ondruš, is of Slovak origin. In a rather short article, he points out some facts that he believes prove this relationship, but Ondruš did not write a detailed etymology. The present paper reviews Ondruš’s arguments as well as those that can be found in the Hungarian literature about the origin of this word.

Keywords: etymology, loanwords, Slavic languages, Slovak language, Slavic–Hungarian language contacts

1. INTRODUCTION

Šimon Ondruš and his work had several ties to Hungary and the Hungarian language. Between 1959 and 1961, he was the lecturer in Slovak at the Lajos Kossuth University in Debrecen (now University of Debrecen) (Skladaná 2005, p. 75). The students’ handbook *Szláv népek és nyelvek* ‘Slavic peoples and languages’ (Sulán et al.) he co-authored with Endre Angyal, Endre Iglói, Emil Niederhauser, and Béla Sulán was published in 1962 and then re-issued several times. Ondruš developed a particular interest in Hungarian words of Slavic and Slovak origin as his ten-part series of articles entitled *Slovenské (slovanské) slová v maďarčine* shows. In these articles of varied length, he discusses the etymologies of 113 Hungarian words (Ondruš 2004; 2005).¹ Hungarian literature shares Ondruš’s view about the Slavic

¹ Ondruš tackles four pairs of words twice: *bosman – bocvan – bocman ~ bocmány – bos[z]vány* ‘a variety of apple’, ‘a kind of special pastry that a newly married woman takes to the spinning house of her maidenhood’ (2004/7–8, p. 276; 2005/3, pp. 129–130); *cícha ~ ciha* ‘pillowcase’ (2004/9, p. 130; 2005/4, p. 145); *gecela ~ kecele* ‘priest’s robe, (women’s) dress, a type of cloth, a kind of loose apron, headscarf’ (2004/7–8, pp. 279–280; 2005/6, pp. 135–136); *triem ~ terem* ‘(a spacious) room’ (2005/1, pp. 135–136; 2005/5, pp. 139–140).

etymology regarding several words (such as *kabát* ‘coat, jacket’, see Ondruš 2004/9, pp. 132–133; TESz 2, p. 291). There are a number of words with contentious etymologies (for example Slovak *korčuľa* ~ Hungarian *korcsolya* ‘ice skates’, see Ondruš 2005/6, pp. 137–138; TESz 2, pp. 571–572). Ondruš also discusses a few Hungarian words of unknown origin, such as the word *gyenge* ‘weak, feeble, powerless’ (see Ondruš 2004/7–8, p. 278; TESz 1, p. 1126).

2. ONDRUŠ’S THEORY

Ondruš quotes the TESz, according to which *gyenge* is of unknown origin, and the earliest written records of this word in Hungarian date back to the 15th–16th centuries. Ondruš argues that ‘weak’, ‘thin, narrow’, and ‘slender, skinny’ all partly belong to the same semantic field and similarly to other languages – his example is the German word *dünn* – all three concepts can be expressed by one word. Thus in Ondruš’s opinion “[t]oto zistenie indikuje jednoznačný názor, že maďarské *d’enge* [= *gyenge* ‘weak, feeble, powerless’, G. J.] pochádza zo slovenského *tenké*” (Ondruš 2004/7–8, p. 278). Ondruš argues that the word-initial Hungarian voiced *gy-* /ʝ/ is hardly surprising, especially in the vicinity of the sonorous *-n-*. There are two more arguments for the Slovak origin offered by Ondruš. First, Slovak, too, has a word-initial palatal stop, and second, the vocalism of the first *ɔ* as *e* (cf. below).

3. THE PROPOSED ETYMOLOGIES OF *GYENGE*

As it happens, the completed contemporary etymological dictionaries of the Hungarian language – with the sole exception of Bárczy (1941) – all list the word *gyenge* as of unknown origin: TESz (1, p. 1126), EWUng (pp. 494–495), and ÚESz. However, there are two proposed etymologies of this word.

Several works dealing with the origins of the Hungarian language and its loanwords written around the turn of the 19th–20th centuries claim that *gyenge* is of Turkic origin. This view is shared by Ármin Vámbéry (1870, p. 147; 1914, p. 162), József Budenz (1871, p. 82), Zoltán Gombocz (1907, pp. 164–165), Géza Bárczi (1941, p. 103), and more recently by András Róna-Tas – Árpád Berta (2011, pp. 378–380), despite the fact that this kinship is indeed problematic both phonetically and semantically – a fact that is acknowledged by the authors themselves. On this account, all the above-mentioned Hungarian etymological dictionaries reject the Turkic etymology.

As the Finno-Ugric languages became gradually better known towards the end of the 19th century, there were more and more studies discussing the Hungarian words of Finno-Ugric origin. These include a paper by József Budenz (1878, p. 212), who changed some of his earlier views, as well as papers written by Bernát Munkácsi (1881, p. 469; 1895, p. 264) – both linguists arguing for the Finno-Ugric origin and

providing Finno-Ugric cognates of the word *gyenge*. On the other hand, the word *gyenge* is not included in the dictionary of the Finno-Ugric elements of the Hungarian lexicon (MSzFE), and in the relevant entries of the Uralic Etymological Database (Uralonet 616: *nämz* ‘soft, weich’ and 652: *n8mz* ‘soft, weich’) there are no Hungarian data whatsoever, not even one with a question mark. Hence, the Finno-Ugric origin of this word is unanimously rejected by current research.

4. HISTORICAL DATA FOR THE HUNGARIAN WORD *GYENGE*

There are much earlier data in the TESz than the data from the 15th–16th centuries mentioned by Ondruš. The earliest written record is a personal name, *Genge*, in a document which is a transcription of a 1282 document made in 1327²: *Item An|cillas Suas Genge, et Nychÿr, sororem ejusdem, duas | filias ejusdem Genge, Facha, et Jolyan nominatas, et filium | ejusdem Genge Miclous nominatum*. Dezső Pais (1922, p. 28) interprets the name *Genge* as if it were the same as the adjective *gyenge* thus attributes the meaning ‘weak, miserable’ to the name as well. This view is adopted by Jolán Berrár (1952, p. 10), and more recently by Valéria Tóth (2016, p. 131), too, but neither offer any arguments for this identification. However, there are no attributive expressions in the document so there is no reason to assume that either *Genge* or her children were miserable or powerless except, of course, for the fact that they were servants. Based on the text, the only thing that can be stated with certainty is that *Genge* was a woman’s name. Over time, the name *Genge* ~ *Gyenge* appears in Hungarian sources, first perhaps as a sobriquet, and later as a surname. Historical data shows that people of all social status had the name *Genge* ~ *Gyenge*, so there is really not much evidence to support the view that this name means ‘miserable, weak, powerless’.³

The second earliest record according to the TESz is from the 15th century Codex Jókai⁴: *mÿkoron ygen meg faradottuolna mert vala eÿ vylagban gewnge ember es*

² The charter is kept in the National Archives of Hungary in Budapest, DL-DF reference number: 1019, <https://archives.hungaricana.hu/hu/charters/10246>, published in *ÁÚO* 12: 367–368, however, there are some small differences between the spelling of the surviving document and the edition. An earlier charter issued by the Hungarian king László IV in 1278 is incorporated into the newer one, however, its text is irrelevant to the present discussion.

³ The question whether the forms with an initial *g-* or *gy-* are the earlier ones, as well as the question which sounds were represented by these graphemes are problems of the history of the Hungarian language and its orthography; from the point of view of etymology these are only partially significant, for details see Juhász (2024, pp. 191–192).

⁴ The so-called Codex Jókai (formerly known as Codex Ehrenfeld or Codex Ehrenreich, or The Legend of Francis) is the earliest surviving Hungarian book consisting of 81 folios, but the book is definitely missing at least 27 folios. The Hungarian text seems to be a compilation translated from several Latin sources about Saint Francis of Assisi and his fellow monks, and Bartholomeus de Pisis’s *Liber conformitatum*. Based on the times of compositions of the original Latin works as well as the

*beteg termezety zerenť*⁵. Here the word is an adjective, and the meaning is indeed ‘weak’.

As the earliest historical record is a personal name – and thus its meaning is not entirely clear – Ondruš is more or less correct in identifying the 15th–16th centuries as the earliest data for the Hungarian word. On the other hand, perhaps the most accurate description of the Hungarian historical records of the word *gyenge* would be as follows: data as personal names – with uncertain meaning – can be traced back to 14th century original documents, and the data as an adjective to the 15th century.

5. THE MEANINGS OF *GYENGE*

As Ondruš correctly observes, *gyenge* indeed expresses different senses in contemporary Hungarian: 1) physically and/or mentally weak: *gyenge ember* ‘helpless/powerless person’; 2) not fully developed: *gyenge hajtás* ‘weak plant growth’; 3) not quite suitable for something: *gyenge mágnes* ‘weak magnet’; 4) something lacking active ingredients: *gyenge tea* ‘weak tea’; 5) something that is insufficient in any way: *gyenge előadás* ‘lacklustre performance’. This is well documented historically: in Verantius’s dictionary (1595) the Hungarian words *gyenge*, *gyeünge* are the equivalents of the following Latin words: *delicatus* ‘delicate’, *imbecillis* ‘weak, fragile’, *tener* ‘tender, young’, *vietus* ‘withered, lacking strength’ (pp. 27, 46, 105, 113). The equivalents of *subtilis* ‘fine, thin’ are *gyeünge*, *vekony* (p. 102), and that of *tenellus* ‘tender, young’ is *gyengetske* (p. 105). In Comenius’s *Janua* (1643, p. 100) among the items of clothing there is *nyári gyenge szoknya* ‘light summer garment’ as the equivalent of the Latin *theristrum*. In Gyarmathi’s word list (1799, p. 354) the Czech *tenke sukno* translates as ‘dünnes Tuch, gyenge szoknya’, that is ‘thin cloth’.

The fact that the two words have similar ranges of meanings in Hungarian and Slovak does not by itself prove the Hungarian word’s Slavic, Slovak origin. Nevertheless, it is an important and relevant observation.

6. HOW DID *TENKÝ* BECOME *GYENGE*?

Ondruš does not explain in detail how, in his opinion, the Slovak *tenký* became Hungarian *gyenge*, but the phonological changes can be satisfactorily explained.

As Ondruš rightly points out, the word-initial Hungarian /j/ is not surprising, and it is also possible that the *-n-* may have affected the word-initial /c/ through

orthography and language of the Hungarian text, the original translation was probably created after 1370. Based on the watermarks on the papers used for the Codex Jókai, it was copied from the now-lost original probably by a single hand in the 1440s, see P. Balázs (1981, pp. 9–13) for details.

⁵ *Quumque nimis fatigaretur ex hoc maxime, quia fuit homo delicatus in saeculo et debilis secundum naturam...*, see P. Balázs (1981, p. 183).

long-distance assimilation. However, there may be a better explanation for the word-initial sound change. Although the sounds /c/ and /j/ both existed since the Old Hungarian period (Kiss – Pusztai 2018, pp. 112–117), according to written records, there were no Hungarian words beginning with *tye-* /cɛ-/ (Gl, p. 724; NySz 3, pp. 831–834), but there are more than a dozen words with word-initial *gye-* /jɛ-/ (Gl, pp. 276–278; NySz 1, pp. 1156–1167).⁶ Thus, it seems likely that we are dealing with Slavic /c/ > Hungarian /j/ sound substitution, since the difference between the two sounds is only one phonetic feature: [± voiced].

The internal Slavic *k* > Hungarian *g* change is voicing as well, which is a common phenomenon in the Hungarian language (Trócsányi 1916, p. 286), and in this position, too, the *-n-* could have affected the stops.

Although Ondruš does not address the question of word-ending, it seems very likely that not only *tenké* – as posited by Ondruš – but all forms of the paradigm ending in *tenkV*, i.e. *tenká*, *tenkú*, *tenký*, and *tenkí* also became **tenke* /cɛŋkɛ/ (> *gyenge* /jɛŋgɛ/) in Hungarian due to vowel harmony. Instead of the Slovak word-ending long vowels, Hungarian has a short one – this is a phonetic feature of Hungarian (Papp 1969, pp. 541–543).

7. THE ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING OF *TENKÝ*

The Slovak word *tenký* goes back to the Proto-Slavic **tǫnъkъ* (Králik 2015, p. 609; Derksen 2008, p. 505), as is also noted by Ondruš. The words derived from the Proto-Slavic etymon are attested in almost all Slavic languages, and mean ‘thin, narrow, slender, delicate(ly detailed)’ (ESJS, p. 1007, s.v. *tǫnъkъ*). At the same time, this also proves that *gyenge* is undoubtedly a Slavic word in Hungarian, the direction of the borrowing could not have happened the other way around.

Understandably, Ondruš does not devote much space to semantic change: from the meaning ‘thin, narrow, slender’ existing in Slavic languages, including Slovak, the meaning ‘weak’ does not require much imagination: a thin branch, cloth or board is not strong enough, so it is weak. In addition, the name *Genge* ~ *Gyenge* may have preserved the meaning ‘thin, slender’, which is closer to the original Slavic sense.

8. THE CONDITIONS OF THE BORROWING

Due to phonological and geolinguistic reasons words from other Slavic languages neighbouring Hungarian cannot be considered – Ukrainian *тонкий*

⁶ Hungarian still lacks words with word-initial *tye-* /cɛ-/ , the only exception is the neologism *tyepi* ‘tracksuit’ (< Slovak *tepláky*, with a truncated stem and a diminutive suffix), used exclusively in Slovakian Hungarian. Furthermore, the overall number of Hungarian words beginning with *ty-* /c-/ is negligible: only the word *tyúk* ‘hen’ and its derivatives, and interjections such as *tyuhaj* are listed in dictionaries (see ÉKsz², p. 1387; Lanstyák 2011, p. 97; Termini).

(ESUM 5, pp. 596–597), Croatian *tanak* (Matasović et al. 2, p. 450), or Slovene *teněk* (Bezljaj 4, p. 167–168) – so Slovak indeed seems to be the only possible source of the Hungarian word *gyenge*.

Although the first written records for Hungarian *gyenge* date back to the 14th–15th centuries, and those for Slovak *tenký* to the 16th century (HSSJ), the most probable date of borrowing seems to be around the 12th–13th centuries. The borrowing must have happened after the 11th–12th centuries, when the jers in weak positions were lost and those in strong positions developed into full vowels, and before the end of the 13th century because the earliest written Hungarian data is from that time.

Based on what has been said so far, there are no phonological, semantic, geolinguistic, or chronological problems that would preclude the possibility that Hungarian *gyenge* and Slovak *tenký* are cognates, so Ondruš's theory is most probably correct.

9. EARLIER LITERATURE ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *TENKÝ* AND *GYENGE*

It should be noted, however, that the kinship of these two words had already been noticed before Ondruš's article. In connection with the reform of the Hungarian language starting at the end of the 18th century, as attention was directed towards the relationships between languages and the kinship of the Hungarian language, more and more works were written in which loanwords of the Hungarian language from diverse sources were collected and analysed. In several such works, *gyenge* is included as a cognate of Slavic words meaning 'thin, slender'.

The earliest such work is a descriptive grammar of Hungarian, entitled *Magyar Grammatika* 'Hungarian Grammar', in its Hungarian–Slavic–Latin glossary there is the entry: *Gyenge, Tenky, Tener* (DebrGr 1795, p. 348). And this work was followed by several others. In the appendix of Gyarmathi's (1799, p. 354) *Affinitas*, the Czech–Latin–Hungarian comparative word-list mentions two Czech forms: *Tenki. Tenka. Tenuis. Gyenge*, and in his other work called *Vocabularium* Gyarmathi (1816, p. 24) gives even more Slavic cognates: *Gyenge, L[atine] tenuis, B[ohemice] tenky, tenka, C[arniolice (= i.e. Slovene)] tanke, D[almatice (= i.e. Croatian)] tanak, P[olonice] cienkj, (...)*. István Sándor (1808, p. 42) dedicated an entire issue of his journal *Sokféle 'Varia'* published in Vienna to the Hungarian language, in which the first piece discusses the loanwords in Hungarian; here a Slovak cognate is given: *Gyenge. Tenuis. Tót[ul (= i.e. Slovak)] Tyenki. v. Tener. R[ožnay]'s* (1815, p. 130) article also mentions the word *gyenge: schwädlich und zärtlich, nach dem Slaw[ischen] tenky und tonky, dünn oder schwach*. In the two early 19th century etymological dictionaries of the Hungarian language, too, this correspondence can be found: in Leschka's dictionary (1825, p. 89) as: *Gyenge, sine dubio ex slav[ico]*

těnký, in neutro *těnké*, ([l]e[ge] *tyenké*), *formatum est* (...), in that of Dankovszky (1833, p. 403): *Gyenge* (*tyenke*, sl[avice (= i.e. Slovak)]) *tennis* [sic! – a typographical error instead of *tenuis*], *dünn*, *nicht dick*, z. B. *der Faden*, 2) *gracilis*, *schlank*, *zart*.

So, in those times, the notion that the Hungarian word *gyenge* is of Slavic origin was considered a fact that did not require any particular justification. However, this really obvious identification was forgotten for two reasons: first, because the very thorough and detailed etymological dictionary written by Zoltán Gombocz and János Melich (1914–1944) – which does devote space to dubious, unconvincing or non-mainstream etymologies – was left unfinished towards the end of letter *G*, and second, because István Kniezsa's etymological dictionary (1955) does not discuss the word *gyenge*. It seems, the authors of the latest Hungarian etymological dictionary, the ÜESz, have not encountered Ondruš's article.

10. THE REBORROWING OF *GYENGE*

Considering that the meaning of the word *gyenge* has slightly changed compared to the meaning of the Slavic etymon, several Slavic languages, including Slovak, reborrowed the Hungarian word. Since the end of the 1630s, the Slovak word *dengľavý* meaning 'weak, sick(ly), skinny, emaciated' is attested as shown by the data collected and analysed by Gregor (2023, pp. 265–266) (see also Králik 2015, p. 117; Kopecká et al. 2011, p. 178), providing earlier attestation for this word than the HSSJ, where the earliest record is from 1652.

11. CONCLUSION

The centuries-long mutual influence of the Slovak and Hungarian languages on each other is beautifully exemplified by the words *tenký*, *gyenge*, and *dengľavý*, and although Ondruš did not write a detailed etymology, his theory is probably correct.

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Resumé

MAĎARSKÉ *GYENGE* ‘SLABÝ’ A S NÍM SÚVISIACE SLOVENSKÉ (SLOVANSKÉ) VÝRAZY

Do širokého spektra lingvistických záujmov Šimona Ondruša patrila aj etymologická problematika maďarskej lexiky. V rokoch 2004 – 2005 Ondruš uverejnil sériu 10 článkov v časopise *Slovenské pohľady na literatúru, umenie a život*, v ktorých sa venoval etymológii 113 maďarských slov, pričom predložil aj etymologické interpretácie pre niektoré slová neznámeho pôvodu. Jedným z nich je maďarské adjektívum *gyenge* ‘slabý’ (staršie i ‘jemný; nežný; tenký’), ktoré je podľa Ondruša slovenského pôvodu (porov. slovenské *tenký*). Vo svojom pomerne stručnom texte Ondruš poukázal na niektoré fakty, ktoré podľa neho svedčia v prospech takéhoto výkladu, príslušnú etymologickú interpretáciu však podrobne nerozpracoval. Autorka predloženej štúdie analyzuje Ondrušovú argumentáciu, ako aj názory na pôvod slova v maďarskej vedeckej literatúre, pričom dospieva k záveru, že Ondrušova etymologická hypotéza je pravdepodobne správna.

Kľúčové slová: etymológia, lexikálne prevzatia, slovanské jazyky, slovenský jazyk, slovansko-maďarské jazykové kontakty