

## Origin and diversity of the words for ancient Eurasian grain legumes in Slavic languages

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## Abstract

This short research note aims at demonstrating the importance of the role that grain legumes, such as pea (*Pisum sativum* L.), lentil (*Lens culinaris* Medik.) or field bean (*Vicia faba* L.), have been playing in the everyday lives of both modern Slavic nations and their ancestors. This role

has been witnessed by rather rich lexicological evidence and supported by attested etymological connections. This note also links Slavic roots to the other members of Indo-European language families and presents their common Proto-Indo-European origins.

**Keywords:** etymology; field bean; lentil; lexicology; pea; Slavic languages.

## 1. Introduction

The term *grain legumes* comprises all legume (fam. *Fabaceae* syn. *Leguminosae*) species that are grown for and are used in the form of either immature or mature grains for both human consumption and in animal feeding, as well as for various non-food purposes such as green manure (Ćupina et al., 2004). Crops such as pea (*Pisum sativum* L.), lentil (*Lens culinaris* Medik.), field bean (*Vicia faba* L.), vetchlings (*Lathyrus* spp.) and vetches (*Vicia* spp.) are considered the most significant on a world scale (Smýkal et al., 2010). All these species originated in Near Eastern, Mediterranean and Central Asian centres of diversity (Zeven & Zhukovsky, 1975) and are also among the first domesticated plant species in the world (Zohary & Hopf, 2000). The earliest archaeological findings of these crops are about 10,000 years old and are located mainly in Syria (Tanno & Willcox, 2006). From there, they spread in all directions, especially towards Europe, where they and cereals carried out the “agricultural revolution” of post-glacial Europe. In a rather short period, during the sixth millennium BC, grain legumes reached almost every corner of the continent, such as northern France (Bakels, 1999) and Armenia (Hovsepian & Willcox, 2007). The Balkan Peninsula and Central Europe are especially rich in archaeobotanical evidence on the grain legume cultivation in Neolithic, as witnessed by sites such as Stare Gmajne in Slovenia (Tolar et al., 2010), Kutné Hory in Czech Republic (Smýkal & Mikić, 2009) and southern Serbia (Medović et al., 2011).

The Slavic languages have the greatest number of speakers of all the branches of the Indo-European language family in Europe. Like its relatives, such as Baltic, Celtic, Hellenic, Italic or Germanic branches, the ultimate origin of the Slavic nations and their languages are Proto-Indo-Europeans, the people who spoke supposed Proto-Indo-European language and became distinct in the vast Pontic-Caspian steppe, from which they started to migrate in many direc-

tions during the fifth millennium BC (Anthony, 2007). The Balto-Slavic branch got separated from other Indo-European languages probably from 3,000 to 1,000 BC (Andersen, 2003), while between 1,500 and 1,000 BC these two groups were finally differentiated from each other. The Slavs in their original homeland in East Europe were scarcely known to Greeks or Romans, but their remarkable expansion in early fourth century AD made them more discernible to the Western civilisation. It is assumed that there was a language spoken by all Slavic tribes before their migration, directly derived from the Proto-Indo-European, and it is commonly referred to as Proto-Slavic. It is true that modern Slavic languages are rather differentiated, but their common underlying stratum is highly recognisable and the differences are still relatively small (Lockwood, 1977).

Like in other branches of the Indo-European language family, there is an extensive vocabulary of the words common to all Slavic languages, retaining nearly the same forms despite a millennium-and-a-half long geographic separation. Among these, especially notable are those related to animals and plants, particularly fruits, cereals and legumes (Mikić-Vragolić et al., 2007). Since the significant geographic proximity of both Proto-Indo-European and Proto-Slavic homelands with the routes of the domestication of the most ancient grain legumes, it may be assumed that the ancestors of the modern Slavic peoples knew rather well pea, lentil or field bean and that they both cultivated and used them before their great migrations. By this reason, the main goal of this preliminary research was to examine the origin and the diversity of the words denoting pea, lentil and field bean and in the majority of the modern Slavic languages.

## 2. Words for pea in Slavic languages

The words denoting pea in modern Slavic languages demonstrate a remarkable morphological uniformity (table 1). Only a slight modification occurs in some languages. In some of

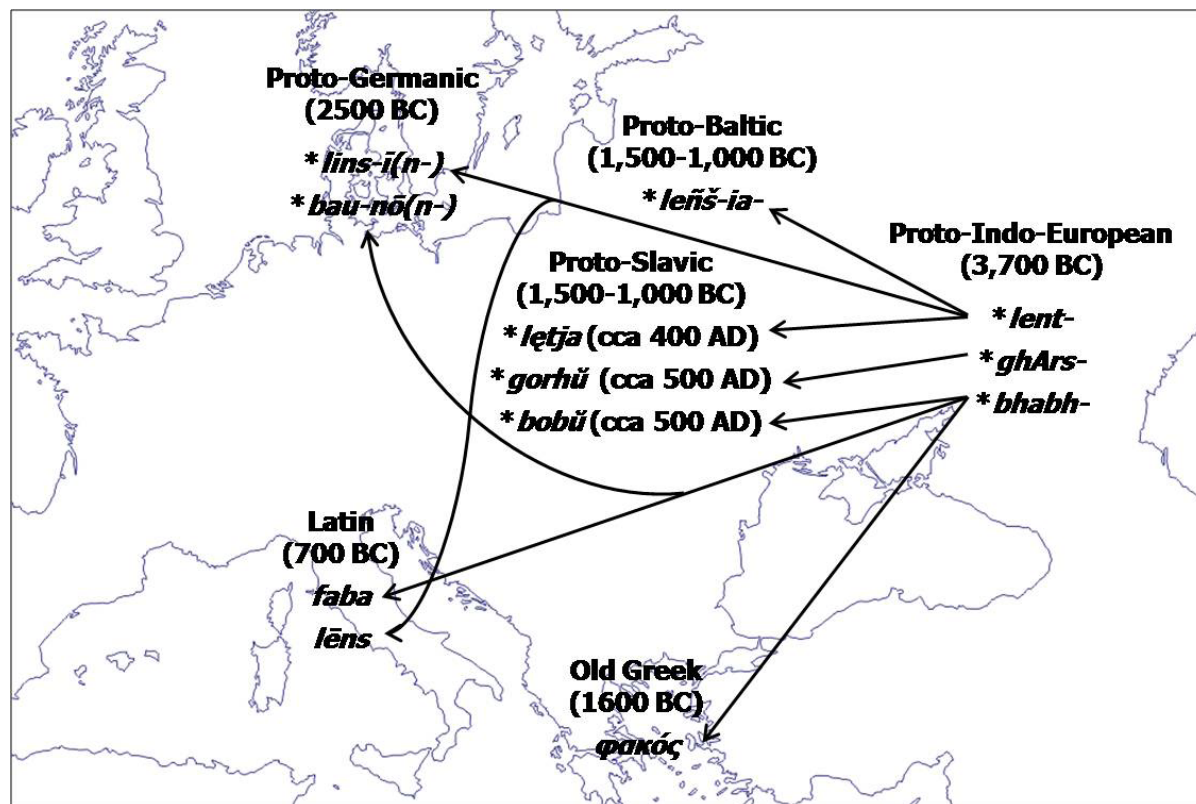
the languages of the southern branch, such as Croatian, Macedonian, and Serbian, the words have a diminutive form by adding the suffix *-ak*. A hypothetical change could have happened during the introduction of common bean (*Phaseolus vulgaris* L.), since in Croatian and western dialects of Serbian it is called *grah*: due to the larger size of its seeds, it could adopt this name, while pea, in fact, began to be referred to as *small grah*, that is, *grašak*. In the languages of the eastern branch, such as Rusyn, it is *-ok*. It is interesting that in Russian *goroshok* denotes vetches (*Vicia* spp.). Both suffixes *-ak* and *-ok* reflect the Proto-Slavic *\*-ŷkŭ*.

The origin of the words denoting pea in all

the Slavic languages is the Proto-Slavic root *\*gorhŭ*, also denoting pea (Vasmer, 1953). This root, in its turn, might be derived from the Proto-Indo-European *\*ghArs-*, *ghers-2*, denoting a leguminous plant in general (Pokorny, 1959; Nikolaev, 2007), but this reconstruction mostly remains hypothetical and, in contrast, could be explained as a borrowing from one of the neighbouring peoples (Mallory & Adams, 2006). Precious evidence that essentially contributed to the assessment of the Proto-Slavic root is the word denoting pea in Polabian, an extinct Slavic language, *gorch*. From Slavic, its word denoting pea was borrowed by some neighbouring languages, such as Albanian, in the form of *gróshë*

### FIGURE 1

A geographical presentation of the development of the words denoting pea, lentil and field bean in Slavic from their Proto-Indo-European roots and in some other branches of the Indo-European language family<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The dates on the map indicate either the time when the direct descendants of the Proto-Indo-European language are supposed to be developed or the time when their first records were attested.

and meaning *common bean*, and Aromanian, as *grăshac* and with the preserved original Slavic meaning (Mikić, 2009).

The hypothetical Proto-Indo-European root *\*ghArs-* was not preserved in the proto-languages of the other Indo-European languages (figure 1). In fact, its traces may be found only in the Baltic languages, such as Lithuanian, with *gařšas* and *garšvà* for the species *Archangelica officinalis*, and in Germanic languages, such as High German, with *Giersch* for the species *Aegopodium podagraria* (Vasmer, 1953).

**TABLE 1**

Words denoting pea in modern Slavic languages

Language	Word
Belarusian	<i>garoh</i>
Bulgarian	<i>grah</i>
Croatian	<i>grašak</i>
Czech	<i>hrách</i>
Kashubian	<i>groch</i>
Lower Sorbian	<i>groch</i>
Macedonian	<i>grašok</i>
Polish	<i>groch</i>
Russian	<i>gorokh</i>
Rusyn	<i>hraščok</i>
Serbian	<i>grašak</i>
Slovak	<i>hrach</i>
Slovenian	<i>grah</i>
Ukrainian	<i>gorokh</i>
Upper Sorbian	<i>hroch</i>

### 3. Words for lentil in Slavic languages

It is notable that the words denoting lentil in the modern Slavic languages form two morphologically related groups. The first group, comprising languages like Bulgarian or Slovenian, owes the origin of its words for lentil directly to the Proto-Slavic *\*leŕja* (Vasmer, 1955) and ultimately to the Proto-Indo-European *\*lent-*, *\*lent-s-* (Pokorny, 1959; Nikolayev, 2007), both denoting lentil as well. In such form, the Slavic word for lentil was

adopted by Hungarian as *lencse* (Skok, 1972) and, most likely, returned to Slavic languages in the form of the Rusyn *lenča*, since the preservation of the nasality is impossible in an inherited East Slavic item.

This Proto-Indo-European root also gave the words denoting lentil in other derivatives of it, such as the Proto-Baltic *\*leñš-ia-*, Proto-Germanic *\*lins-ī(n-)* or Latin *lēns* (figure 1), all of which produced words denoting the same in their modern descendants, such as Modern Lithuanian *lešis*, Modern German *Linse* or Modern Italian *lenticchia*. To the same group belongs the Russian local *lyacha* (Vasmer, 1955).

There are opinions that the words denoting lentil in another group of Slavic languages, such as the Czech *čočka* and the Serbian *sočivo*, were derived from the Proto-Slavic *\*sočevica* (Vasmer, 1958). It is considered that this root could be somehow related to the Primitive Slavic *\*sokŭ* (Derksen, 2008), because of the Sorbian *sok* (table 2), and the Primitive Indo-European *\*s(w)ok<sup>w-</sup>*, both meaning *juice* (Nikolayev, 2007), but without any clarification yet.

**TABLE 2**

Words denoting lentil in modern Slavic languages

Language	Word
Belarusian	<i>sačavica</i>
Bulgarian	<i>leshta</i>
Croatian	<i>leča</i>
Czech	<i>čočka</i>
Lower Sorbian	<i>sok</i>
Macedonian	<i>lekja</i>
Polish	<i>soczewica</i>
Russian	<i>chechevitsa</i>
Rusyn	<i>lenča</i>
Serbian	<i>sočivo; leča</i>
Slovak	<i>šošovica</i>
Slovenian	<i>leča</i>
Ukrainian	<i>sochevitsia</i>
Upper Sorbian	<i>sok</i>

#### 4. Words for field bean in Slavic languages

Similarly to pea, the words denoting field bean in modern Slavic languages show almost the highest possible degree of mutual morphological similarity. Their common ancestor is the Proto-Slavic *\*bobŭ* (Vasmer, 1953), that, in its turn, was derived from the Proto-Indo-European *\*bhabh-*, *bhabhā*, also denoting field bean and meaning literally *something swelling* (Pokorny, 1959; Nikolaev, 2007). From Slavic, the word for field bean was borrowed by the neighbouring Romani as *boba*, Romanian as *bob* and Hungarian as *bab* (Mikić, 2011).

This Proto-Indo-European root also produced the supposed Proto-Albanian root *\*bhakā*, the Old Prussian *baba* and *babo*, the Proto-Germanic *\*bau-nō(n-)* and the Latin *faba*, all with the same, preserved original meaning. The only branch of the Indo-European language family where the meaning shifted from field bean to lentil is Old Greek, with *φακός* (Mikić, 2010).

**TABLE 3**

Words denoting field bean in modern Slavic languages

Language	Word
Belarusian	<i>bob</i>
Bulgarian	<i>bob</i>
Croatian	<i>bob</i>
Czech	<i>bob</i>
Kashubian	<i>bób</i>
Lower Sorbian	<i>bob</i>
Macedonian	<i>bob</i>
Polish	<i>bób</i>
Russian	<i>bob</i>
Rusyn	<i>bob</i>
Serbian	<i>bob</i>
Slovak	<i>bob</i>
Slovenian	<i>bob</i>
Ukrainian	<i>bib</i>
Upper Sorbian	<i>bob</i>

It is noteworthy that field bean had a kind of ethnobotanical significance for the Ancient Slavs and Romans, witnessed by personal names such as *Boban*, *Boba* and *Bobana* in Modern Serbian and Croatian languages (Skok, 1971) and the Latin names *Fabius* and *Fabia* (Pokorny, 1959).

#### 5. Conclusions

By the attested high degree of morphological conservatism and a remarkable lexicological continuum throughout millennia, this brief lexicological and etymological thesaurus may be considered another testimony of the significant role the most ancient European grain legumes, such as pea, lentil and field bean, have been playing in the everyday life of the Slavic peoples. This preliminary research, with its results, may also be regarded as an invitation to crop historians and linguists to assist each other in solving the puzzling issues of our common Slavic and European past.

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