

The Slavic Thunder God in Eastern Slavic and Polish Phraseological Units

Ziel des Beitrags ist es, die phraseologischen Einheiten zum slawischen Donnergott in polnischer, weißrussischer, ukrainischer und russischer Sprache zu analysieren. Diese phraseologischen Einheiten erscheinen als wichtiger Indikator für die Entwicklung des mythologischen Gottesbildes von einem der mächtigsten slawischen Götter zu einem negativen Wesen, das in Flüchen angesprochen wird.

The aim of the paper is to analyse the phraseological units on the Slavic god of thunder in Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian. These phraseological units appear as an important indicator of the development of the mythological image of God from one of the most powerful Slavic gods to a negative being, addressed in curses.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the name and the features of the Slavic Thunder God as shown in the phraseological units (further abbreviated as PUs) of Eastern Slavic (Belarusian, Ukrainian, Russian) and Polish languages. It is a well-known fact that the knowledge about the ancient Slavic gods and their names is mostly preserved in language (cf. Mokienko 2009: 206). After Christianisation these gods began to lose their positions as a source of religious meaning, fell into the realm of folklore, and were addressed by the Church as maleficent idols (cf. Mokienko 2009: 211). One part of the language, where it is fruitful to look for traces of the Slavic gods, is the field of phraseology as indicated by the work of Irina Chybor (cf. Chybor 2015a) and the recent article of Ivana Vivodić Bolt (cf. Vivodić Bolt: 2019).

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The relevance of phraseology and phraseological units in structuring the linguistic worldview is shown by the fact that phraseology can be seen as a portion of experience, which cannot be contained in a single word (cf. Chlebda 2020: 69). In this way, also the experience of the religious world can be found in specific phrases, often repeated as formulas, and used for religious and poetic purposes. Thus, providing the link with magical and religious texts that can only be formed within sequences of at least two words (cf. Chlebda 2020: 73).

Before going further in our investigation, it is necessary to define the use of words related to the electrical storm or thunderstorm in the selected Slavic languages and in English more precisely.

As it is known, a thunderstorm is a weather disturbance that occurs when warm moist air rises in a large swift updraft to cooler regions of the atmosphere and provokes precipitations (cf. Encyclopædia Britannica 2021). These precipitations are associated with loud clatters and flashing lights. At the same time, electrical charges strike the ground. The three main components of the phenomenon (the sound component, the light component, and the electrical charge) are intrinsically connected, although they represent different phases of it, and since in different languages they have specific denominations, they can also be considered as separated phenomena.

In English, the sound component is known by the term *thunder*, which is »the sudden, loud noise that comes after a flash of lightning« (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). The light component is known under the name of *lightning*, that is: »a flash of bright light in the sky that is produced by electricity moving between clouds or from clouds to the ground« (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). The last component, the electrical charge, which may strike the ground, is known as *thunderbolt*, which is »a single discharge of lightning with the accompanying thunder« or »an imaginary elongated mass cast as a missile to earth in the lightning flash« (Merriam-Webster 2021).

In this way, it is possible to show semantic ties as the following: thunder – noise, lightning – flash, thunderbolt – discharge, which emphasize the difference of meaning of the three terms. Nevertheless, the words *thunder* and *lightning* are often used as synonyms of *thunderbolt*, indicating the electrical discharge itself. Far from being a particular situation of the English language, the semantic interference between the three components of the thunderstorm is on the contrary shared at some level by some Slavic languages, especially in their dialects.

For the Polish language (further abbreviated as Pol.), we will translate the terms *piorun* as ›thunderbolt‹ (cf. Stanisławski / Jaślan 1987: 303), *błyskawica* as ›lightning‹ (cf. Stanisławski / Jaślan 1987: 167) and *grzmot* as ›thunder‹ (cf. Stanisławski / Jaślan

1987: 303). The semantic picture is here complicated by the use of the term *grom*, which is also employed as a synonym of *piorun* and *grzmot*. According to the analysis conducted by Andrzej Sieradzki, the term *grom* was used instead of *piorun* more intensively in the 16th century, but both terms were present, and in the scientific discourse *Piorun* ›Slavic Thunder God‹ was also known (cf. Sieradzki 2017: 204–205).

In the Belarusian language (further abbreviated as Bel.), the term *гром* is translated into English as ›thunder‹ (cf. Susha 2013: 664). For the English word ›lightning‹ the same dictionary returns both *маланка* and *бліскавіца* (cf. Susha 2013: 354). Here the term for ›thunderbolt‹ is also indicated as *маланка*, although in the Etymological Dictionary of Belarusian Language the word *пярун*, the Belarusian equivalent of Pol. *piorun*, is explained as ›a stroke of thunder and lightning‹ (cf. Martynaw / Cyhun / Mal'ko 2005: 305).

The English term ›thunder‹ is translated into Ukrainian (further abbreviated as Ukr.) as *грім* (cf. Balla 1996: 521) while ›lightning‹ matches the word *бліскавка* (cf. Balla 1996: 673). Nevertheless, in both cases the word *гром* is indicated as a secondary translation. ›Thunderbolt‹ is translated literally (further abbreviated as lit.) as ›stroke of lightning‹, *удар блискавки* (cf. Balla 1996: 521). The word *перун* appears as a synonym of *гром* (cf. Hrinchenko 1907–1909: 1730).

In the Russian language (further abbreviated as Rus.), the word *гром* (cf. Myuller 2013: 827) indicates ›thunder‹ while the term for ›lightning‹ is *молния* (cf. Myuller 2013: 501). The equivalent of Pol. *blyskawica* also exists in the dialect of Smolensk region and in Western Russian dialects as *бліскавка*, and according to Vladimir Dal' it means ›a lightning without thunder‹ (cf. Dal'). The English word ›thunderbolt‹ is translated as *удар молнии*, ›stroke of lightning‹ (cf. Myuller 2013: 827).

As the dictionaries show, the Slavic equivalents of ›thunder‹, ›lightning‹ and ›thunderbolt‹ are often overlapping, and are in some cases used as synonyms, indicating that the differences in meaning among them is not always clear. For the present work it is interesting to remark the connection of the thunderbolt, the discharge of electric energy during a thunderstorm, with Pol. *piorun* and Bel. *пярун*.

A Proto-Slavic god named after the lightning?

The existence of a common Slavic Thunder God is attested by the fact that the evidence provided by Procopius of Cesarea concerning the tribes of Antes and Sclaveni (which are the most relevant ancient people who merged in the ethnogenesis of the

Slavic ethnolinguistic group) mentions the presence and worshipping of a god of lightning. The relation of Procopius regards the 6th century CE, approximately the same time when the early Slavic tribes were moving toward their historic location (cf. Mallory / Adams 2006: 50). A recent interpretation of Procopius' text would indicate that the early Slavic people believed »in a god that was named after the lightning« (Loma 2004: 69). The reconstructed Proto-Slavic term for »lightning«, according to the Etymological Dictionary of Slavic Inherited Lexicon, is **mьldni*, which is cognate with Rus. *молния* and Bel. *маланка*, although Procopius did not mention any native terms for the god or the lightning (cf. Derkesen 2008).

According to Văčeslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov, the Proto-Slavic god related to lightning is the protagonist of a myth of Indo-European origin, with parallels in different traditions (cf. Mallory / Adams 2006: 436), in which he as an atmospheric god of the storm from a high location fights against a snake-like creature which would hide himself inside people, trees, and animals. The Thunder God would attack this entity with thunderbolts, and thanks to his victory, he would release the waters contained in the clouds, causing rain (cf. Ivanov / Toporov 1970: 1182). In this way, a clear depiction of this myth is contained in Belarusian fairy tales that, according to Ivanov and Toporov, conserve exceptional archaic features (cf. Ivanov / Toporov 1970: 1182).

The name of the common Slavic Thunder God was reconstructed with the method of historical linguistics, and based on the first written evidence of the theonym, Old Rus. *Perunu*, contained in *Povest' Vremennykh Let*, as reported by Michał Łuczyński (cf. Łuczyński 2011: 224), thus providing a Proto-Slavic form of **Perunъ*. In this way, the traditional etymology of the Thunder God's name **Perunъ* was reconnected with Old Church Slavic *perъ, pьrati*, »to strike, to hit«, as a *nomen agentis* of »the one who strikes« (cf. Pokorny 1959: 818).

According to Łuczyński, the etymology of Proto-Slavic **Perunъ* comes from Early Proto-Slavic **Perownŭ*, an adjectival name formed from the Proto-Indo-European noun **pér* meaning »rock, mountain« (cf. Łuczyński 2020: 274), and thus returning the theonym as »the (supernatural) one who holds the mountains«. This hypothesis is reinforced by different terms present in the Slavic languages, as Polabian **peräun*, dialectal Czech *parom*, dialectal Old Rus. *перун*, Ukr. *пирун*, Bel. *пярун*, Pol. *piorun* (cf. Łuczyński 2020: 90) meaning fossils (belemnites) or Palaeolithic artefacts that were deemed to be fallen from the sky like arrows during thunderstorms, and thus to have had magical powers. These fossils or Palaeolithic artefacts are known in English as *thunderstone*, and the folkloric beliefs about them are attested throughout all of Europe. Not surprisingly, an archaic English word for »thunderstone« is *thunderbolt* (cf. Merriam-Webster 2021).

In several Slavic languages, the terms for thunderstone show homonymy with the Slavic theonym of the Thunder God, as in Polish and Belarusian, bringing the conclusion that in the early stages of the Slavic languages, there has been a process of semantic separation between the attribute of the Thunder God, more specifically his weapon that he casts from the sky as a stone arrow, and the theonym itself. Thus, the presence of this word (the term *piorun* having as a secondary meaning ›belemnite‹ in Polish) can testify to the existence of the cult of *Perun* as the Thunder God also in the territory of contemporary Poland (cf. Sieradzki 2017: 205).

Even if the etymological link between the Thunder God and the thunderstone could have been relevant for the Proto-Slavic speakers, it does not mean that this connection was still perceived in the Early Slavic times, when theoretically the atmospheric domain of the god of the thunderstorm could have already brought about a semantic shift from the theonym to the eponymous atmospheric phenomena, such as thunder, thunderbolt, and lightning.

While the name of the Eastern Slavic Thunder God, *Perun*, appears as a direct continuation of **Perunъ*, the name of the Western Slavic Thunder God is not clearly attested from pre-Christian times. On the one hand, according to Andrzej Sieradzki, the term *Piorun* in Polish, the etymology of which is related to **Perunъ* by Wiesław Boryś (cf. Boryś 2005: 437), was used as a translation of the Eastern Slavic god's name *Perun* in the 16th century. On the other hand, in a specific time of the ›Western Slavic languages‹ development the Thunder God's name and his attributes (the thunderbolt and the thunderstone) could have been represented by the same term, mirroring the linguistic situation of the Eastern Slavic languages (cf. Sieradzki 2017: 207), as shown by Bel. *пярун* ›a stroke of lightning‹ and Bel. *Пярун* ›name of the Thunder God; Perun‹. From the area of the current historical region of Eastphalia (Germany) is attested the now-extinct Western Slavic Polabian language. In Polabian the word for ›Thursday‹ is *pěrendan*, lit. ›Perun's day‹ (since the end of the 17th century, for details cf. Waniakowa 1998: 97–98). The term, assumed to be a calque from German *Donnerstag* (›Thursday‹), would indicate the connection with the Slavic Thunder God and the fourth weekday. In fact, in many Indo-European languages in different historical periods, the name of the fourth day of the week was associated with the Thunder God as Latin *diēs Jovis* ›day of Jupiter‹ and English itself (*Thursday* lit. ›day of the thunder god‹).

A different opinion was expressed by Aleksander Brückner, according to whom *piorun* ›thunderbolt‹ is not related to Slavic pagan mythology, and the popular belief that shows how the thunder chases a demonic creature has to be seen only as a Christian one (cf. Brückner 1927: 414).

Phraseological units regarding the Thunder God

In presenting the PUs related to the Thunder God, we will firstly divide the material by the languages, providing also a literal translation into English. We will consider PUs that contain directly the terms Pol. *piorun*, Rus. *перун*, Ukr. *перун*, Bel. *нярун* and the related dialectal forms as well as phraseologisms containing the synonyms as Pol. *grom* and Ukr. *зром*. Subsequently, we will comment on semantics of the PUs that support the conception of a supernatural entity (a god), conceived as an actor behind the atmospheric phenomena, the action of whom is represented in the linguistic fact.

Polish

The majority of PUs presented here were collected by Ivana Vidović Bolt (cf. Vidović Bolt 2019: 345–347), such as: *jak piorun z jasnego nieba*, also *jak grom z jasnego nieba* (with the synonym *grom* instead of *piorun*), both meaning lit. ›like a thunderbolt from the clear blue sky‹, an equivalent of the English idiom *a bolt out of the blue* with the meaning of ›suddenly, unexpectedly‹; *jakby piorun strzelił / trafił / trzasnął*, lit. ›as if the thunderbolt had struck / hit / snapped‹, also in the variants *jakby w nich piorun uderzył*, lit. ›as if the thunderbolt struck them‹, and *jakby grom jasny między nich uderzył*, lit. ›and a bright lightning struck between them‹ (cf. Krzyżanowski 1970: 933), both meaning ›a sudden reaction to unexpected news, an unexpected surprise‹; *niech to piorun trzaśnie*, lit. ›may the thunderbolt hit it‹, *do pioruna*, lit. ›to thunderbolt‹, *do stu piorunów*, lit. ›to a hundred thunderbolts‹ (cf. Żmigrodzki 2023), *idź do pioruna*, lit. ›go to thunderbolt‹, all meaning ›damn it‹ (cf. Chybor 2015b). According to Aleksander Gieysztor, this type of an expression was considered a strong swear word in Old Polish times, as it was indicating not only the atmospheric phenomenon but also a demonized image of its author, in other words, of the Thunder God (cf. Gieysztor 2006: 91–92).

Concerning the difference in meaning between the two semantic equivalents *grom* and *piorun*, Anna Krawczyk-Tyrpa reports evidence from ethnographic records, such as *piorun a gróm to jedno, piorun to je szpetne*, lit. ›*piorun* and gróm (dialectal version of Polish *grom*) are the same, *piorun* is ugly‹ (cf. Krawczyk-Tyrpa 2001: 97), indicating that *piorun* was perceived as a strictly negative term. Nevertheless, also *grom* was perceived as a curse, according to another respondent as in *grom? A pewno, że znamy, to taki przeklon niepekny*, lit. ›*grom*? Certainly, we know that, is such an un-beautiful curse‹ (cf. Krawczyk-Tyrpa 2001: 97). In Kashubian, the term *paròn*, even-

tually connected with the Thunder God *Perun* and with Pol. *piorun*, was identified as an evil spirit, and expressed in curses (»damn it«) such as *žěbě ce jasnistě paroně vzqlě*, lit. »may a bright *paron* take you« (cf. Sychta 1970: 33–34).

Belarusian

A conspicuous quantity of Belarusian PUs related to the Thunder God and similarly to the atmospheric eponymous natural phenomena of the thunderbolt and lightning were collected in the ethnographic work of Tamara Sudnik (1979) in the village of Pielasa, historically also populated by Lithuanian-speaking people. Especially relevant is the semantic chain of the meaning reported by Sudnik: according to her, the terms *p'arún* and *p'arkúnas* are related to Rus. *гром*, »thunder«, and to Rus. *удар молнии*, »lightning strike«, that is the thunderbolt, but also to name of the mythological personification of these phenomena (the Thunder God). To be more faithful to oral language, Sudnik uses phonetic transcription as in e.g. *p'arún zabíu*, lit. »the thunderbolt kills«, *p'arún u kám'an b'jé*, lit. »the thunderbolt hits on the rocks«, *p'arúnóm xátu spalila*, lit. »with the thunderbolt the hut (was) burned down« (in these three examples, the respondents would have seen a combination of supernatural and physical realities (cf. Sudnik 1979: 229)); *kap cibě zimavý p'arún zabíu by*, lit. »may a cold thunderbolt kill you«, *izí tý pad zímnavo p'arúna*, lit. »may you go under a cold thunderbolt«, meaning »damn you«, with semantically identical variants in dialectal Lithuanian, e.g. *kat tavi žymenis p'arkúnas žumúšt*, lit. »may a winter thunderbolt strike you«, *yéjk tú po šáltu p'arkúno*, lit. »go you under a cold thunderbolt« (cf. Sudnik 1979: 232); *пасля дожджыку ў чацвер* lit. »after the rain on Thursday«, meaning »never, unknown when« (cf. Lyepeyshaw 2004: 287).

Ukrainian

The following PUs were collected by Irina Chybor (cf. Chybor 2015a: 78–79): *хай тебе перун тпісне*, lit. »may the thunderbolt hit you«, with the variants *перун би тя розтраскав*, lit. »may the thunderbolt strike you«, and *перун би ти забив*, lit. »may the thunderbolt kill you«; *як грім на голову*, lit. »a thunder on the head«, meaning »out of the blue« (cf. Chybor 2015b); *після дощукы в четвер*. lit. »after the rain on Thursday«, meaning »never, unknown when«. There are numerous variations to the last example e.g. *після дощика в четвер*, lit. »after the rain on Thursday«, *на сухую п'ятницю*, lit. »onto a dry Friday«, *і тепер ні в четвер*, lit. »not today, not on Thursday«, *після четверга в п'ятницю*, lit. »after Thursday on Friday«, *не тепер, то (так, а) в четвер*, lit. »not now, then on Thursday«.

Russian

For the Russian language, the majority of PUs are present in the Western Russian dialects, while to the Russian *koinè* can be ascribed the following PUs: *как гром среди ясного неба*, lit. ›like thunder out of the blue‹, meaning ›like a bolt out of the blue‹ (cf. Molotkov 1987: 121), and *после дождичка в четверг*, lit. ›after the rain on Thursday‹, meaning ›never, not known when‹. The following PUs are taken from Dictionary of Russian Dialects, in some cases presenting the year when and place where the linguistic units were collected: *с перуна сгореть*, lit. ›to burn by a lightning strike‹ (cf. Filin / Sorokoletov / Myznikov 1991: 294), indicated as present in the Russian spoken in Latvia in 1963; *схвати тебя перуном*, lit. ›may you be grab by the thunderbolt‹, used as a curse in Tver’s area in 1853 (cf. Filin / Sorokoletov / Myznikov 1991: 294); *перун тебя забей*, lit. ›may the thunderbolt hit you off‹, with the variants *пусть перун тебя заберет*, lit. ›may the thunderbolt take you away‹, used as a curse (cf. Filin / Sorokoletov / Myznikov 1991: 294), and *сбей тебя перун*, lit. ›may the thunderbolt beat you‹, meaning ›damn you‹, used in Pskov.

Conclusions

The belief that the thunderstorm and its phenomena are related with a supernatural entity, a specific Thunder God, the Christian God, or any sort of demon, is cross-cultural and quite archaic. In this way, this idea is also expressed in the Slavic PUs, although it is not always easy to differentiate in the idiomatic expressions the ›supernatural activities‹ (thunderstorm performed by an agent / God etc.) from the ›natural ones‹ (thunderstorm as a weather disturbance without an agent).

A consistent group of PUs, which are not directly related to supernatural activities, can be seen in the Slavic variations of ›a bolt out of the blue‹, meaning ›a sudden and unexpected situation‹. Indicators of more specific supernatural conceptions related to the thunderstorm and thunderbolt come from reports of folkloric beliefs. On the one hand, these reports mention that the utterance of the term *piorun*, and its local equivalents in Polish dialects, was considered a sin and thus forbidden, justifying the taboo and the repeated use of *piorun* in strong curses (cf. Krawczyk-Тырпа 2001: 94–95). On the other hand, the semantic and phonetic identification of the term for thunderbolt or lightning strike (Pol. *piorun*, Bel. *пярун*, Rus. *перун*) with the name of the Slavic Thunder God would point in the direction of a declassification of the Slavic god towards a negative entity caused by Christianization, making the use of Thunder God’s name an insult and a curse.

According to Valerij Mokienko, another consequence of Christianization and the demonization of the Thunder God is to be seen in PUs meaning »never, in an unknown time« or »the non-concretization of an event« that are connected to the Slavic equivalent of the fourth weekday, such as Ukr. *чeмвeр* and Rus. *чeмвeрe* (cf. Mokienko 2009: 242). In fact, in many Indo-European languages in different historical periods, the name of the fourth day of the week was associated with the Thunder God, e.g. English Thursday. A relevant link between the fourth weekday and the Thunder God in the context of the Slavic languages is the Polabian term *pěrendan*, lit. »Perun's day«, meaning »Thursday« (cf. Waniakowa 1998: 97). This would allow the consideration that the fourth weekday is related to *Perun*, even if the day is not directly named after him. With the cultural penetration of the Christianity, the prayers dedicated to *Perun* on his day would have become ineffective in popular beliefs, indicating a removal of *Perun* from his respected role. Therefore, anything related to the fourth day of the week would have been associated with the non-concretisation of time and space.

Finally, the PUs related to the phenomena of the thunderbolts and the eponymous terms of the Thunder God's name appear present in all the Slavic languages under analysis in the following paper, or are more specifically in their dialects. They can be considered a case of dialectal peripheral archaism, related to the time in which the supernatural entity mentioned was still perceived as a powerful agent, capable of influencing the human life, and manifesting in the eponymous atmospheric phenomena. The peripheral area of these dialects would express the borders of the Slavic-speaking populations in the Western (North Polish dialects) and in the Eastern Baltic regions (Belarusian dialects). The PUs related to the swearwords and curses could be considered posterior to the Christianisation of the different Slavic areas under consideration. The case of the PU *do pioruna* and its variations in Polish appear to be attested at least since Old Polish times (10th–14th century), and a similar assertion can be inferred from the similar PUs present in Polish and Polish dialects.

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