

## Hungarian *szödër*, Ossetic *zedyr* ‘blackberry’ and some other berry names

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### 1. Introductory remarks<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to analyze the etymological connection between Hungarian *szödër* ‘blackberry’ and Ossetic *zedyr* id. Although a loan-etymology from Alanic to Hungarian has been suggested in earlier research, this has received little attention in subsequent Hungarian etymological literature, and in this article it is further argued why the loan-etymology should be taken seriously. In addition, the etymologies of some other Uralic berry names that have sometimes been mentioned in connection with them, mainly Udmurt *suter*, Komi *seter* and Mari (West) *šaptâr*, (East) *šoptâr* ‘black currant (Ribes)’, as well as Finnic \**sgstar* and Mordvin E *šukštorov*, *čukštorov*, M *šukštoru*, *čukštoru* id. will be discussed. It is argued that these words belong to the layer of substrate vocabulary that is prevalent in the languages that have been traditionally labeled as Finno-Permian.

### 2. Hungarian *szödër* and Ossetic *zedyr* ‘blackberry’

Recently, Cheung (2017: 29) has discussed the etymology of Ossetic I[ron] *zedyr*, *zezyr*, *zedyræg* D[igor] *zædure* ‘blackberry’ in his article examining contacts between Ossetic and Karachay-Balkar (commenting on the early observations by V. I. Abaev about the contacts between the two languages). Cheung assumes, quite convincingly, that the

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Ossetic word and Karachay-Balkar *zūdūr* ‘blackberry’ are parallel loans from some third source. The words in both languages are synchronically opaque, and cognates are not found in other Iranian or Turkic languages.

Cheung suggests that the words in question are borrowed from an unidentified “Caucasian” source, and the hypothetical donor form might be analyzed as a compound of \*zə (this reconstruction is apparently Proto-North-West-Caucasian, although this is not specified in the text, as he refers to Chirikba’s 1996 monograph on North-West-Caucasian reconstruction, or “West Caucasian” in Chirikba’s terminology), reconstructed on the basis of Adyghe *zə* ‘blackberry’ and Abkhaz *az* ‘red; blackberry shrub’, and \*dur ‘? fruit’, a hypothetical form based on Lezgian *dur* ‘dried fruit’. Cheung does not specify what language the reconstruction \*dur represents here, but it cannot be the same North-West-Caucasian proto-language, as Lezgian belongs to the unrelated Nakho-Daghestanian family of languages. According to Cheung, the Nakho-Daghestanian word was also separately borrowed into Ossetic as *dyrǰ* ‘fruit’. However, *zedyr* and *dyrǰ* cannot have any derivational relationship within Ossetic. Also etymologically connected in some way is the word *čadur* ‘blackberry’ that is found in the Dargwinian (Dargwa) language (of the Nakho-Daghestanian family), but this is not mentioned by Cheung although it has been mentioned in this connection by Abaev (1965: 524).

A more detailed commentary on Cheung’s Caucasian etymology must be left to specialists of Caucasian, but it has to be noted that the compound-etymology is dubious because of its hypothetical nature. Interestingly, Cheung does not comment on the Hungarian word *szeder* (= *szödér*; accusative *szödret*; also a form *szödérj* is found in the dialects) ‘blackberry’ at all, although it is phonetically and semantically suspiciously similar to the Ossetic word. Cheung does comment on some other lexical similarities in Caucasian Turkic and Hungarian in his article, such as the connections of Hungarian *borsó* ‘pea’ and Karachay-Balkar *mursa* ‘nettle, *Urtica urens*’ (op. cit. 33).<sup>3</sup>

The connection between the Ossetic *zedyr* and Hungarian *szödér* was suggested already by Abaev (1965: 524), who noted the similarity of the two words, assuming that the Ossetic word was borrowed from some Uralic form. Earlier, in his etymological dictionary of Ossetic, Abaev (1958–1989) had claimed that Ossetic *zedyr* represents a borrowing from the Proto-Uralic or Finno-Permian form that produced Mari *šoptâr* ‘blackcurrant’ and its alleged Permic cognates. This Uralic origin of Ossetic *zedyr* is also mentioned as an uncertain possibility by Tenišev (1989: 807) and Cheung (op. cit.). This very problematic idea will be discussed below.

2. Forms ending in *-j* such as *szödérj* are explained by TESz and Zaicz (2006) through analogy of *eper* ~ *eperj* ‘strawberry’.

3. As acknowledged by Cheung, the Hungarian word is a well-known Turkic loan from Old Turkic \**burčak* (see WOT s.v. *borsó*), but Cheung assumes that the Karachay-Balkar word was borrowed from Hungarian and then into Ossetic from Karachay-Balkar. This kind of explanation strikes one as suspicious due to chronological and areal factors, but a more detailed commentary on this etymology is outside the scope of this paper.

Much later it was argued by Helimski (2002: 109) that *szédër* is an Alanic loan into Hungarian. Helimski lists the word among the late Alanic loans into Hungarian, although he also mentions in brackets the possibility that the Hungarian word is a Wanderwort and not necessarily a direct Alanic loan.

Despite this impressive research history, it is not surprising that Hungarian *szédër* is not mentioned by Cheung at all, as the word is considered to be of unknown origin by most etymological dictionaries of Hungarian (Bárczi 1941; TESz; EWUng; Zaicz 2006). Bárczi (1941 s.v. *szeder*) refers to an old and indeed unconvincing Iranian etymology of Munkácsi (1901: 563–564), who assumed that the Hungarian word is a loan from a form akin to New Persian *sadar* ‘jujube fruit’, which has to be etymologically unrelated to the Ossetic word on phonological and semantic grounds. This, along with semantic reasons, makes it very unlikely that the Hungarian word for ‘blackberry’ could have been borrowed from it. (Munkácsi’s etymology is based on an older idea presented by Mátyás (1858: 51), who in his pseudo-scientific work considered the Hungarian and Persian words to be cognate.)

In addition to this, Bárczi mentions the possibility that *szédër* is an opaque compound (? *\*\*szédë-rj*) which contains a cognate of North Khanty *рӱӱ* ‘berry’. This obsolete idea was also presented originally by Munkácsi (1894: 2–3; see also Szinnyei 1903: 137), who connected the Khanty word and a hypothetical “Mansi *рӱӱ*” here, offering a similar explanation for *eper*, *eperj* ‘strawberry’. In reality, there is no trace of such a Mansi word in the dictionaries (Munkácsi & Kálmán 1986; Kannisto et al. 2013). Furthermore, the idea that the *-r-* or *-rj-* of the Hungarian words *szédër(j)* and *eper(j)* is cognate with the Khanty word for ‘berry’ is doubted by MSzFE (I: s.v. *eper*) and is not even mentioned by the UEW (II: s.v. *\*äpp3-r3-k3*).

In all Hungarian etymological dictionaries one can find a number of words which are claimed to be of unknown origin. Such words exist in all languages, of course, but in the case of *szédër* it is very difficult to understand why the vague notion of “unknown” origin is preferred over the completely plausible Alanic etymology. It is known that there are many relatively late Alanic loanwords in Hungarian (the appendix of the recently published WOT lists over 30 secure cases), which were probably acquired near the Caucasus some centuries before the speakers of Hungarian settled into the Carpathian Basin (Abaev 1965: 517); these loanwords bear a significant resemblance to modern Ossetic forms. The loan-etymology *szédër* ← *zedyr* fits well into this group of etymologies.

Although the etymology has received little support from Hungarian etymologists, WOT discusses the etymology in a brief but informative way, referring to the studies of Abaev and Helimski. However, instead of supporting the Alanic origin of the Hungarian word, WOT considers the word to be a Caucasian Wanderwort. This would fit well with the scenario discussed by Cheung, in which the obscure Caucasian word has entered separately at least Ossetic and Karachay-Balkar. Nevertheless, it can be argued that a borrowing from Alanic into Hungarian origin is more probable than the vague idea of a Wanderwort.

As noted above, Hungarian has many Alanic loans, but no cultural words of “Caucasian” origin are known in the Hungarian vocabulary. This makes the Alanic origin of the Hungarian word likely, and there are no phonological obstacles in this etymology. No parallels to the substitution of Alanic \*ʒ by Hungarian sz [s] can be found in the material listed by WOT, Sköld (1925) or Helimski (2002). The only example of Alanic \*ʒ is Hungarian *tölgy* ‘oak’ (< \**tülgy*) ← Alanic \**tulʒə* (> Ossetic I *tülʒ*, D *tolʒæ* id.; WOT: 1148, 1336), but here the different substitution can probably be explained by the word-internal position.

In any case, phonetically there is nothing that would prevent us from assuming the substitution *sz* ← \*ʒ, and it is well-known that the modern Hungarian affricate *dz-* (which would probably correspond phonetically to the Alanic affricate) appeared in the language much later in the early modern period (Samu 1988: 429; Gerstner 2018: 116). Cheung (2002: 10) mentions that in modern Ossetic ʒ is sometimes realized as a sibilant *z*, but it would be unwise to project this situation back to prehistoric times. We can in any case state that this substitution offers no obstacle for the etymology. In Old Hungarian, the word is often written with *z*, but this may reflect the non-established orthography rather than the phonetic reality.<sup>4</sup> A similar substitution has occurred in the loan into Karachay-Balkar which likewise has *z-*. The vowel substitution \**ĕ* ← \**æ* is phonetically expected. Also Hungarian \**e* (instead of closed \**ĕ*) would have been possible – in the dialects, both \**ĕ* and \**e* are found, and it is uncertain which is primary here, but this is not an obstacle to the etymology.

An opposite direction of borrowing is less likely. It would be more difficult to explain how the Hungarian sibilant \**ʒ* would have developed into an affricate in Ossetic (although similar problems are involved in Cheung’s etymology that derives the word from Caucasian \**zə*; a more detailed investigation of this problem has to be left for elsewhere), at least there are no parallel examples of such loans. Also the vocalism of the second syllable of the Ossetic form is very difficult to explain from the Hungarian word, which further reinforces the unlikelihood of this option.<sup>5</sup>

Based on all of the above, we would like to argue that the neglected Alanic etymology of the Hungarian word should be rehabilitated, and hopefully it will find its way into the Hungarian etymological dictionaries of the future. Here it is important to note that the word is attested in Hungarian already in the 12th century, so it cannot have been borrowed from the language of the Alans (*Jász*) who settled in Hungary in the 13th century. This means that if the Ossetic word is really of “Caucasian” origin, the borrowing into Alanic has to be very early, but the problems with Cheung’s etymology have to be discussed elsewhere in more detail.

4. The Hungarian word is attested already in the 12th-century sources, where it is written with *z* (also a variation *sz* : *s* can be found in medieval sources and also in Hungarian dialects, and according to TESz this variation points to an “old word” – it is difficult to understand this argument of TESz, and it remains uncertain how the forms with *s* [ʒ] can be explained). The form *Zuduryg* that is attested in 1193 probably reflects the Hungarian dialectal change \**ĕ* > *ü*; later dialectal attestations include such forms as *södör*, *szödörgye*.

5. I am grateful to Zsolt Simon for pointing this out to me.

It was mentioned above that Abaev (1965) had suggested that the Ossetic word might be of Uralic origin. This idea is based on outdated reconstructions of words that have been projected back to Proto-Finno-Volgaic and Proto-Finno-Permic.

### 3. Words for ‘blackcurrant’ in western Uralic

Abaev argued that the Ossetic word and the forms in Dargwa and Karachay-Balkar could be borrowed from the Uralic form that is ancestral to Mari (West) *šaptâr*, (East) *šoptâr* ‘black currant (Ribes)’ and Komi *seter*, Udmurt *suter*. Also WOT mentions these words in the discussion of the etymology of *szödër*, noting that the UEW derives these from Proto-Finno-Permic *\*sapt3r3 ~ \*sopt3r3*. The Finno-Permic form is reconstructed by Sammallahti (1988: 553) as *\*saptVrV*. Also KESK (272) considers the Permic and Mari words to be cognate but gives no Proto-Finno-Permic reconstruction; the Proto-Permic reconstruction is given as *\*soter* with a question mark, probably because of the Komi–Udmurt vowel correspondence that is irregular in inherited vocabulary. Bereczki (2013 s.v.) accepts the UEW’s etymology without comment; the Proto-Mari form is reconstructed as *\*šoptir* by Bereczki, but based on Aikio’s (2014) new reconstruction of Proto-Mari vocalism this form would be *\*šaptâr* instead. The UEW rightly rejects the possibility that Hungarian *szödër* and these words could be related, but WOT assumes that the Permic words could somehow be connected to the Alanic word, although no clear reference to borrowing is made.

This assumed etymological connection is based only on the superficial similarity of the Uralic words and the Ossetic one. Already Joki (1972: 181–183) considered the Alanic etymology of the Permic words unlikely. As the Permic languages, similarly to Hungarian, have absorbed a number of loanwords from Alanic (Helimski 2000: 505–506), it would be tempting to assume that the Komi and Udmurt words are borrowed from the same source. However, for the Mari word it would be impossible to assume borrowing from Alanic because of the cluster *\*pt*, which could hardly be explained from the Iranian form. Permic *-t-* can also be explained from *\*-pt-*, if the Permic words indeed are cognate to the Mari word.

The meaning of the Permic and Mari words is ‘currant (ribes)’. Together with the phonological arguments, this points to the conclusion that the resemblance to the Ossetic word that denotes ‘blackberry’ is purely accidental. The vowel correspondences between the Mari and Permic words are slightly irregular, which means that the words cannot be derived from the proto-form that is given by the UEW. The UEW argues that the Komi vocalism has arisen due to delabialization caused by the word-internal *\*p*. It remains uncertain whether this explanation solves the irregular vocalism or not, but there is also another problem with the idea that the Mari and Permic words could reflect an inherited Finno-Permic stem: the Mari word has *\*š* in all dialects, including Malmyzh (Beke 1997–2001 s.v. *šoptâr*), which means that it cannot reflect earlier *\*s* but only *\*š* or *\*ś*. Komi *seter*, Udmurt *suter*, on the other hand, cannot be derived from a

form with either \*ʃ or \*ʒ but it can only reflect \*s. This clearly means that the Mari and Permic words cannot be cognates.

It has been shown by Aikio (2015: 44–47; see also Zhivlov 2015) that a large part of the “Finno-Permian” and “Finno-Volgaic” vocabulary results from parallel borrowings from some unknown source.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the ‘currant’ words belong to this same group of words, which includes names for various kinds of plants, and at least one other berry name as well is listed by Aikio, namely the word for ‘raspberry’ in Erzya Mordvin *inžej*, Mari (East) *eŋəž*, West *əŋgəž*, Komi *emiž* and Udmurt *emež*. The UEW (26) derives these words from Proto-Finno-Ugric \**əŋʒ-čs*,<sup>7</sup> but due to the irregular vowel correspondences Aikio (op. cit. 46) reconstructs both \**enäsšän* and \**əŋänsä* (the former proto-form could yield the Mordvin word, and at least Mari points to the latter; the Komi and Udmurt words do not reflect either of these forms regularly). Bereczki (2013 s.v. *eŋəž*) accepts the etymology of the UEW without any further comment.

WOT also suggests that Finno-Permian/Finno-Volgaic \**čskčs-tʒrʒ* (this form is reconstructed by the UEW as ancestral to Finnish *siestar*, Estonian *sõstar* ‘blackcurrant; Ribes nigrum’ and Mordvin E *šukštorov*, *čukštorov*, M *šukštoru*, *čukštoru* id.) might have the same suffix as the Mari and Permic words discussed above, assuming that \**-tVrV* could perhaps mean ‘berry’. As the word for ‘blackberry’ is another completely irregular Finno-Permian/Finno-Volgaic etymology (Proto-Finnic \**sestar* and Mordvin E *šukštorov*, *čukštorov*, M *šukštōru*, *čukštōru* can in no way be derived from a regular proto-form, and the equation of the Finnic and Mordvin words is marked with a question mark already in the UEW, and likewise in SSA s.v. *siestar* and EES s.v. *sõstar*), it is indeed possible that the two words are borrowed from the same source, but \**-tVrV* cannot be considered a suffix within Finno-Permian or Finno-Volgaic.

It is also in no way certain that the endings of the Finnic, Mordvin, Permic and Mari words contain the same suffixal element, because the vocalism of this “suffix” can hardly be reconstructed, and it remains purely speculative whether this element could have meant ‘berry’ somewhere (most likely in the substrate language that provided the word to the Uralic languages in question). Moreover, the UEW has reconstructed two uncertain forms for two proto-languages, the very existence of which is uncertain (see Salminen 2002), and then they are arbitrarily segmented into a stem and an obscure suffix.

6. Already von Herten (1973: 88–92) suggested something similar, namely that the so-called Finno-Permian and Finno-Volgaic vocabulary relating to agriculture does not consist of real cognates, but rather words that were borrowed into Finnic from the related branches. This leaves the ultimate origin of these words open, though, but the idea bears resemblance to the later discussions of the topic by Aikio and Zhivlov.

7. UEW also lists Southern Khanty *-än̄t̄* ~ *-än̄t̄* as a cognate, but this is not discussed by Aikio (2015). The Khanty word is attested only in compounds *juχtējānt̄* ‘Himbeere’, *juχtējānt̄juχ* ‘Himbeerstengel’, *mēχāvan̄t̄* ‘Erdbeere’. It is improbable that the Khanty word has anything to do with the Mordvin, Mari and Permic words for ‘raspberry’: Southern Khanty *ä* often reflects Proto-Khanty \**ä* (Zhivlov 2006: 28), which is not the usual reflex of Proto-Uralic (= Proto-Finno-Ugric) \**ä*. Aikio (2015: 40) notes that Proto-Khanty \**ä* is the regular reflex of \**ä* in \**ä*-stems, and it appears that also in the \**ä*-i-stems short \**ä* is the Proto-Khanty reflex (cf. PU \**kāti* ‘hand’ > PKh \**kāi*, PU \**jāni* ‘ice’ > PKh *jājk/jjnk*, Zhivlov 2006: 129–130).

This element is probably not related to the Caucasian word which according to Cheung gave both Ossetic *dyrğ* ‘fruit’ and the latter part of *zedyr*. At least Abaev’s suggestion that the Ossetic word is borrowed from some Uralic form should be rejected.

In addition to the berry names discussed above, UEW also reconstructs one more word for ‘blackcurrant’, PU (PFU) \**čskčz* (*čskčz-kkz*). Confusingly, the Mordvin words *šukštorov* etc. are listed also in this entry as uncertain reflexes. This etymology is even poorer than the other two etymologies discussed above. Even the Finnic words, namely Veps *čičik*, *čigičäjäne*, Ludic *čihoj* and Estonian *sitik*, *sitikas* cannot regularly reflect a single Proto-Finnic form, and obviously these Finnic words are no better cognates to the Mordvin words. Also Khanty (East) *čowčək* ‘schwarze Johannisbeere’, (South) *čapčə* and (North) *šəmšš* id. and Mansi (South, West) *šošəγ*, (North) *sosiy* have to be unrelated to the Finnic and Mordvin words due to irregular vocalism. It seems that UEW has here grouped a bunch of unrelated words under one entry, and although it might be fruitful to study some of the berry names from the perspective of substrate borrowings, the forms listed under \**čskčz* (*čskčz-kkz*) probably show only accidental similarity.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

It has been our aim here to stimulate further discussion on Alanic-Hungarian contacts, as well as on the substrates in Western Uralic, with these small etymological remarks. We hope that these ideas will be discussed further in the subsequent research.

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