

The aim of our project is to study the origin, history and evolution of the **comparative degree of the adjective** (cf. Pol. *ładny* : *ładniejsz*) in the **Slavic languages**. We intend to reconstruct the development of this formation from its earliest, prehistoric past up to the present time.

The category under investigation may seem a trivial phenomenon: it is known not only from Polish and the remaining Slavic languages, but also from all of the foreign languages more familiar to us (Eng. *nice* : *nicer*, *interesting* : *more interesting*; Sp. *bueno* : *mejor*, *interesante* : *más interesante* etc.). Still, it would be a mistake to consider the comparative degree as something entirely ordinary. It has been known for a long time in general linguistics that the comparative is **only found in one area (admittedly large, but nevertheless geographically isolated)**, namely the Indo-European language family (which encompasses the Slavic languages, but also e.g. English, Latin and its descendants such as Spanish or French, as well as a number of further subfamilies of Europe and Asia) and several neighboring families (Uralic, which includes e.g. Finnish and Hungarian; Turkic, which includes e.g. Turkish and Kazakh; and part of the Semitic family, especially Arabic). Outside of this area, the occurrence of forms with special suffixes – such as Eng. *nicer* or Pol. *ładniejsz* – is essentially unknown.¹

In our research, we intend to clarify why this highly specific formation is confined to a single area, as well as to investigate how it behaves in the course of a language's development in time. We believe that the **Slavic languages** constitute an exquisite point of departure for discussion regarding these matters: firstly, it is a language group in which expressing the comparative through grammatical suffixes (cf. Pol. *ładniejsz*) is a **robust phenomenon to this day**; secondly, in the debate on the origin and development of comparative suffixes in the Indo-European languages, **Slavic data have not been utilized in full and still comprise many unsolved mysteries**; thirdly, the Slavic material features a number of phenomena (partly also known from the ancient Indo-European languages) that seem to **contradict claims and generalizations** concerning the shape and development of comparative forms, **widely accepted in general linguistics**.

Accordingly, in our project, we put forth a number of hypotheses (all entirely novel in international scholarship) that we intend to confront with the facts. We hypothesize that the category of the comparative may have arisen in a **single, prehistoric language of central Eurasia**, from which – by means of language contact and borrowing among various languages – it spread across the area where it is found in historical times. Moreover, we surmise that the original 'donor language' may have been **Proto-Indo-European**, i.e. the reconstructed common ancestor of all Indo-European languages, unattested in writing and thought by linguists to have been spoken around the 4th millennium BCE. As regards the 'building blocks' from which Proto-Indo-European may have created the category of the comparative – we believe that a crucial clue for identifying this material may lie in the material of the very Slavic languages (alongside the earliest attested Indo-European languages such as Sanskrit, Ancient Greek, Latin, etc.). We conjecture that expressions such as Polish *wzwyż* 'upwards', containing an element recalling that seen in comparative forms (cf. *wyższ* 'higher'), may be a **vestige of the original form** from which Proto-Indo-European developed the category under discussion. Last but not least, another of our research questions is whether data from Slavic languages may **refute certain 'universals'** (i.e. generalizations) **widely assumed in contemporary linguistics**. We mean e.g. the view according to which comparative forms are 'by nature' longer and more complex than the basic adjective forms from which they are formed (cf. *high* : *high-er*). This is contradicted by diverse Slavic data, however: cf. Serbian/Croatian *vis-ok-i* 'tall' : *viš-i* 'taller', where the comparative form is actually clearly shorter.

In order to determine the probability of the above-described hypotheses, we shall conduct a detailed investigation covering a wide scope of the relevant Slavic material. We are planning, among other things, to conduct **queries in the unpublished card-file archives of the Slavic Linguistic Atlas** (distributed among various Slavic countries) as well as to analyze the comparative degree forms attested in the **earliest Slavic written texts**. Besides, we will undertake a synthetic and novel survey of the data from other Indo-European languages as well as of the existing historical linguistic analyses. We will confront our results with the available general linguistic and typological literature in order to determine whether the Slavic material **makes it necessary to revise certain conclusions reached there**.

Our project will result in a **book**, published in a prestigious publishing house, which will contain the core results of our research: a possibly complete and consistent reconstruction of the development of the comparative degree starting from the (pre-)Proto-Indo-European origins to the modern Slavic languages, as well as our typology-oriented conclusions. Furthermore, we will prepare **a number of articles** for leading scholarly journals in which we will deal with certain specialist issues pertaining to the Slavic material itself. We are convinced that our inquiries will help paint a new picture of the comparative degree as an **interesting and exceptional element** of our grammar, as well as to direct attention to the fact that those languages with which we tend to be the most familiar are not always the most 'typical' ones against a worldwide background.

¹ This is not to say, of course, that other languages are incapable of expressing a relation like *high* : *higher* or to compare things or people; however, this can be done without adding any grammatical elements to the adjective itself. Constructions like this may, for example, have a structure that would correspond to English ***this house is nice than that one*.