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Go East!

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Warm, Blue and Bulgarian: The Development and Diffusion of Three Expressions to Denote a “Male Homosexual” in Central and Eastern European Languages

Andrea Trovesi

*Jer koliko si mi puta na klupi u parku znao reći:
“Ja sam za slobodnu mušku ljubav”
Prilagođeno Kazalište, Neki dječaci (Some boys), 1979¹*

Abstract: Words denoting male homosexuals in the languages of Europe often have fascinating and unexpected origins. They are reflections of different cultural patterns in the perception and understanding of homosexuality over time. The attempt to reconstruct the development of these words and expressions gives a revealing insight into the cultural history of the Old Continent. It shows the path, both geographical and semantic, along which they have spread through the centuries and reveals traces of compact cultural areas. In the paper, particular attention is devoted to three of the most interesting and widespread expressions denoting male homosexuals in Central and Eastern Europe: “warm brother”, “light-blue” and “Bulgarian”.

Keywords: languages of Central and Eastern Europe, words denoting male homosexuals, “warm brother”, “light-blue”, “Bulgarian”

Peccatum Mutum

It sounds like a paradox, but for a sin that should not even be mentioned, it is enough to leaf through any old or etymological dictionary to be literally inundated with dozens of words and expressions formerly used to refer to same-sex practices, denoting a not particularly limited or marginal diffusion of the phenomenon. Similar considerations

1 How many times on the bench in the park you told me: / “I am for free love among men”

do not apply solely to Western European languages, such as English, French and German, but even to generally less widespread ones from East Central, South-Eastern and Eastern European areas (eg. Czech, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Rumanian, Slovenian, Serbian and Croatian, Bulgarian). In this paper I will be focusing on the lexical items referring to male homosexuals from the latter group of languages, which are particularly interesting from the point of view of their origins and paths of diffusion. The most intriguing aspect that these expressions have in common is that all of them hint at the existence of consistent cultural areas in a remote or recent past, which triggered their diffusion either in the form of calque – for example, the expression *warm* occurs in the Central European cultural area and “light blue” is shared by many languages from the former Soviet Union – or borrowing, e.g. the word *Bulgarian* displays two paths of development in Western Europe (France, Britain) and in Central Europe (Central and South-Eastern).

Hot and Spicy

One of the most commonly recurring terms to express the concept of “homosexual” in the languages of Central Europe is the adjective “hot, warm”. Used both as an adjective and noun in Czech and Slovak, *teplý* belongs to the group of frequent expressions, while in Polish and Hungarian, respectively *ciepły* and *meleg*, are known but less widespread. In reality, the term “hot” in the sense of “homosexual act” is extracted from the locus of the “hot brother” which occurs identically in all the languages of the area: Czech *teplý brat*, Slovak *teplý brat*, Polish *ciepły braciszek*, Slovenian *topli bratec*, Serbian and Croatian *topli brat*. The language in which this expression originated and from where it then radiated into the surrounding ones is German, where *warmer Bruder* is attested as early as the eighteenth century.

It is no coincidence that this phrase has spread precisely among those peoples who historically have been in contact with the German language, particularly within the Hapsburg Empire. The widespread diffusion of such an expression in Central Eastern Europe is not surprising as, for almost a thousand years, the region was an area of intense German-Slavic and German-Hungarian contacts, where diglossia and bilingualism were very common.

Regarding the origin of the expression *warmer Bruder*, following popular etymology, the concept of “hot, warm” to indicate “homosexual” would be associated with the various meanings that the word possesses in the lexicon of each language.

A somewhat simplistic explanation refers to body temperature (Magnus Hirschfeld argued that, for example, the skin of homosexuals was perceived as warmer than that of heterosexual men). A second interpretation relies on the sense of “agreeable temperature, warm and friendly” character, which is typologically interesting, as it would

postulate an original of the “homosexual” warm approach close to that of the English “gay” and which seems moreover supported by the paraphrase for *warmer Bruder*, see Röhrich *lustiger Bruder* “joyful / happy / funny brother”.

Moreover, as in modern European languages, *warm* carries a further meaning related to physical, emotional and even sexual relations, as in “hot”.

Regarding the meaning of “heat” referring to body temperature, currently in none of the aforementioned languages does the corresponding adjective indicate “temperature above normal” and therefore it is not understood even in a translational sense as “passionate, sexually hot”. For this connotation, the adjective “boiling hot”, in German *heiß* and in Czech *horký*, is fairly widespread. However, the word *warm* in the Grimms’ German Dictionary means *warm* “wärmer als gewöhnlich, erhitzt [...] leidenschaftlich” (“warmer than usual, hot [...] passionate”) and in Paul’s *Deutsches Wörterbuch* “im 19. Jahrhundert mundartlich warm als wollüstig” (“in 19th century vernacular warm as voluptuous”) or “treuer, eifriger, begeisterter Freund” (“faithful, devoted, enthusiastic friend”).

These definitions would suggest a possible reference to sexual excitement or even to the coitus itself, as suggested by the Czech expression *teplej vobklad* “coitus”, literally “hot pack”, recorded in Prague’s urban slang in the 1930s, or the Slovak *teplá rit’* “homosexual”, literally “warm bum”. The Grimms also reported the meaning of *warm* as “treuer, eifriger, begeisterter Freund” “loyal, caring, passionate friend”, on which it might be worth reflecting at greater length in the future.

In a far more pessimistic perspective, the expression might derive from the (late) medieval and the early modern age practice of condemning sodomites to death at the stake, along with anyone else deviating from the new rules of behaviour being established by the Church.

Finally, it must also be remembered that Paul in his *Wörterbuch* provides a further definition of the expression *warmer Bruder*, namely *Stubenhocker*, literally “he who sits on the stove”, in the sense of “comfy slipper”, or “stay-at-home”. This reference to a man who was by nature too domestic and unmanly could have given rise to the word “homosexual”. The etymology therefore remains uncertain.

The frequency and distribution of these expressions varies a lot between the different languages. As already mentioned, *teplý* is one of the usual terms to indicate “homosexual” in Czech and Slovak. However, the basic neutral semantics of the term is lost in the various and numerous derivatives, among which the best known are Czech *teplouš* and Slovak *teploš*, or semantically close synonyms, Czech *přibřátý* and Slovak *přibriaty* “heated”. The Serbian and Croatian *vručko* falls into the same semantic field, diminutive from the stem *vruće*, “(steaming) hot, boiling”.

In German the term *warm* was gradually replaced by *schwul*, a specialized and monosemantic term meaning “male homosexual”, which almost completely lost its

derogatory connotation and is now the most widespread term. The word *schwul* is a 17th-century loan from Low German (see the Dutch *zwoel* “oppressive, sultry heat”), which in new High German has given rise to two words: *schwül* “sultry, suffocating” and *schwul* “homosexual, gay”. The problems of defining the origin of meaning are the same as for *warm*. However, an important clue to the etymology of the term could be provided by the meaning of the verb *schwelen* “slowly burn”, from the same root of *schwul*, always derived from Low German.

Finally, *schwul* (*schwelen*) also seems to have given rise to certain terms linked with the concept of “homosexual”: Polish *cwel* and its derived forms are typical prison jargon.²

Blue Pigeons

Before the colours of the rainbow became the symbol of the LGBT(Q) community, other colours were, and still are, used to indicate “homosexual” in various languages of Eastern Europe. One for all, the Russian *goluboj* “light blue”.

In the languages of the far eastern part of the Old continent, this adjective which indicates the colour “blue, celestial” is widely calqued. Etymologists point to the fact that Russian *goluboj* has become popular since the 1970s and 1980s, but at the same time they underline that it must have been around for some time before that. Despite its recent diffusion, as it is supported by the presence of loanwords or calques in many languages of the former Soviet Union (such as Ukrainian *holubij* or Lithuanian *žydras*, etc.), the origin of the meaning “male homosexual” for *goluboj* remains uncertain and even mysterious.

The most frequently cited hypothesis, reported in etymological dictionaries and other similar official sources, considers it a calque from English *blue ribbon* “passive homosexual”, as it is recorded in the slang of American prisoners between the 19th and 20th centuries (see Mokienko and Nikitina). The problem lies in the fact that such a meaning is not actually very frequent, and, apart from that, the English word *blue* is more consistently used in the meaning of “indecent, obscene”. Against the idea of an American-English borrowing are Nikitina and Roberts, who, through a thorough investigation of the term, have come to the conclusion that it is very hard to support such a hypothesis and suggest following the etymological argumentation of Šaxidžanjan, where he maintains that the semantic contents of the term developed in Soviet labour camps during the 1940s and 1950s and later passed over into the colloquial language.

2 A further interpretation considers it derived from *Schwelle*, which in the past had the meaning “axis, beam” and later took on the meaning “threshold”. In its metaphorical usage it indicates a piece of wood that it is trodden upon and, by extension, a prisoner at the lowest level in the prison’s hierarchy.

Another hypothesis links the colour blue to the concept of *blue blood*: same-sex sexual relations were supposed to be significantly widespread among European aristocratic circles. Yet another suggests that its origin can be traced back to the phrase *amour bleu*. This was a common expression for same-sex relationships in the past. It has originated from the name of the Greek divinity *Aphrodite Urania* “celestial”, e.g. “heavenly” or “spiritual”, the daughter of the Greek god Uranus. According to Greek mythology, Aphrodite Urania was conceived and born without a mother, and therefore lacked a truly feminine nature. As Plato puts it in his Symposium: “Those who are inspired by this love turn to the male” (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html>).

Criticizing the aforementioned hypothesis and pointing out various kinds of inconsistencies, first of all temporal ones, as the expression *goluboj* was recorded only recently around the 1960s, Paškov rejects them all and advances the assumption that it is a slang word invented by regulars of the historic cruising place for homosexuals near the Bolšoj theatre in Moscow during the Soviet era (Paškov). The adjective would be a secondary formation from the noun. The author maintains that the expression comes from *golub* ‘pigeon’ and supports his opinion with a series of different arguments: linguistically, *golub* sounds like a euphemism built on a common pattern of word formation *gomo-seksualist*; pragmatically, starting from the pleasurable *golub* ‘pigeon’ to its diminutive forms used as “playful ways of addressing someone” *golubok* or *golubčik*, meaning “my dear (fellow), my friend”; and finally, culturally: a semantic reinterpretation of a popular song from the early 1960s: *Letite golubi, letite!* “Fly away, pigeons, fly away!”, intended as a veiled warning for any homosexuals in the cruising area that the police are on patrol.

Whatever the origin, the term *goluboj* is less vulgar than other expressions and could have been perceived as a neutral, inoffensive word, much like the English *gay* or the German *schwul*. However, the over-riding anti-gay atmosphere in Putin’s Russia has inverted such a development.

Bulgarian Heretics

Buzerant is one of the most common and widespread derogatory expressions in Czech and Slovak to say “homosexual”. Various genetically related forms with different degrees of diffusion are also found in almost any Central European language: the truncated form *buzi* form *buzeráns* in modern Hungarian; Romanian *buzărean* is a Transylvanian regionalism; in Slovenian *buzarant* and Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian *buzerant*; Polish *buzer* is archaic, as well as the regional Austrian-German word *Buserant*. This lexical root meaning was very popular in Europe, spreading to different Central European languages, amongst which many Slavic as well. Nevertheless, its origin has to be sought in the south-eastern part of the continent, in the Balkans, and moving westwards it had a crucial evolutionary stage in central-northern Italy.

The etymology of the word certainly dates back to the late Latin *Bulgarus* / **bu(l)gerus*, which was borrowed and transformed in the dialects of Ancient Italy into *bug(g)erone* and *buz(z)eron*. The original expression has given birth to two forms which differ in the treatment of the sound /g/ and subsequently to two divergent paths of diffusion: the one moving from north-eastern Italy towards Central Europe has /g/ > /z/, see Czech *buzerant*, the second through Western Europe remains /g/ see Old French *bougre* and then English *bugger*³ (*Buggery act*, 1533). But it was precisely the north-eastern Italian dialectal variant of the expression (with /g/ > /z/) that was borrowed in Austrian German and spread everywhere amongst the languages of Central Europe.

As to the etymology of the word and its semantic development, originally *Bulgarus* indicated the geographic origin of a group of people from Bulgaria or, by extension, from the Balkans. Being members of the Bogomilism, a well-known heretic sect amongst the Balkan population, those *Bulgarians* fled the Ottoman invasions in Bosnia (12th-14th centuries) and moved to northern Italy and southern France, founding various groups of religious sects (some suggests their learning would provide the philosophical basis for various Reformations in Central Europe, including the Lutheran reformation). Following the spread of and, by descent, of that Patarene in northern Italy and Albigensian in southern France, the term goes by metonymy to indicate *heretic* in general and, then, in the consequence of a further semantic shift motivated ideologically by the will to discredit heretics by accusing them of acts against nature, becomes synonymous with sodomy. However, it is sometimes argued that despising sexual intercourse with women, the members of the Bogomil sect might have given grounds for suspicions of homosexual practices.

Unlike the noun, the derived verb *buggerare* survives in contemporary Italian dialects. However, it has lost the meaning “to have sodomitic relations with someone” and shifted semantically to indicate “to swindle, to cheat”. A semantic evolution of this kind, in which the meaning moves away from the sexual sphere, is also found in Czech and Slovak, where the Czech and Slovak *buzerovat* verbs respectively developed secondary meanings of “to annoy, to get on someone’s nerves”. Similarly in Slovenian.

Along the western path, starting from Italy and developing through the Old French *bougre* “heretical, sodomite” and Modern French “idiot”, the word is appropriated in English, in which the verb *to bugger* has still the meaning “practicing sodomy”, whereas the adjective *bugger* means “difficult, annoying”.

Disrupting the linearity of the geographical development, Russian has imported the term *bougre* from French: *bugor, bugry* < French *bougre* “slicker, shuffler” (see Epiškin).

3 In modern English the noun *bugger* is more commonly used as a derogatory term for cruel or contemptible men in general or affectionately for old men as in *silly old bugger*.

Conclusion

There are understandably many other words, some deeply offensive, others simply euphemistic, for referring to “male homosexual” in the languages of the “other” Europe. We have internationalisms such as *homosexual* or *gay*, loanwords from foreign languages such as Bulgarian *manaf* and *götveren* (from the Turkish “greengrocer” and “ass-giver”) and so on, but amongst those the three discussed above (“warm brother”, “light blue” and “Bulgarian”) are the most interesting in terms of cultural history and their etymology.

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