

## A Possible Slavic Etymology of Hungarian *komor* ‘gloomy’ and *komoly* ‘serious’

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**Abstract:** The Hungarian words *komor* ‘gloomy’ and *komoly* ‘serious’ are of unknown origin. The present paper aims to elucidate this question from various angles: it gives an overview of what the Hungarian etymological dictionaries say on this topic, shows that *komoly* is a relatively late development out of *komor*, spread by the language reformers (especially by Ferenc Kazinczy) at the end of the 18th century, and presents the attempts to prove the Turkic origin of *komor*. Finally, it offers a Slavic etymology based on the Slavic stem \**chmur-*, demonstrates that semantically the two words match perfectly, and dissolves the phonological doubts that may arise at first sight.

**Keywords:** Slavic languages, Hungarian, etymology, loanwords, Turkic languages

**1. Introduction.** The Hungarian etymological dictionaries do not offer any satisfactory explanation concerning the origin of the adjective *komor* ‘gloomy, sullen’. Géza Bárczi includes *komor* in the article discussing another adjective, *komoly* ‘serious’: in his opinion, the two words should be treated together, even if their source remains unknown. He postulates the intermixture of two words of different origin: 1. *komor* ‘dark-coloured’, either from a Finno-Ugric or a Turkic etymon, and 2. *komoly*, originating from Slavic *komolъ* ‘without horns’ (BÁRCZI 1941: 168). According to István Kniezsa, though, “all this is dubious” (KNIEZSA 1955: 671), while the possibility of a Finno-Ugric etymology of *komor* and *komoly* is firmly rejected in another work (cf. *homály* in LAKÓ 2: 296). The three-volume Hungarian etymological dictionary considers *komor* as a word of unknown origin, affirming that “its Finno-Ugric derivation, its explanation as an alternate stem of *homály* ‘obscurity, dusk, dimness’ as well as its Turkic, East Slavic, and German etymologies are unacceptable” (TESz. 2: 540–541). The somewhat newer EWUng. adds two further hypotheses to this fairly categorical assertion: first, that the final *-r* may be a nominal suffix attached to an unknown stem, and second, that it is also possible that the adjective *komor* developed from verbal forms or infinitives such as *komorodik* [1372], *komorít* [1585], *komorú* [1604], or *komorul* [1780] through back-formation (EWUng. 1: 779). ESz. presents these same two possibilities without modification (ESz. 2006: 423). Yet these assumptions are not only uncertain to a high degree but they do not offer any help in clarifying the origin of the two words since they leave the stem unexplained.

**2. *Komoly*.** What all etymological dictionaries agree on, though, is that *komoly* is a secondary form of *komor* that developed a slightly different meaning and was spread by the language reformers (particularly by Ferenc Kazinczy) at the end of the 18th century. This is confirmed by Kálmán Szily's *Dictionary of the Hungarian Language Reform*, which says: "Kazinczy 1788. 'That is what I also use for the German word *ernst*. The meaning of *ernst* is close to that of *komor* but as *komor* is more sombre than *ernst*, the harshness of the *r* has been changed into *ly* (pronounced [j])' (M. Muzeum 1788. I. 158 l.). This suggests that *komoly* had already been used by someone before Kazinczy, although the Phil. Műsz. attributes it to him as many as three times. Kazinczy wrote the following with his own hands in Szemere's Följegyz. (1: 180): 'Révai did not like *komoly*. I do, because it perfectly designates a new idea. But I know from prof. Márton that this word is regarded as a neologism even among the peasants who live in and around Szala county'. [...] Actually, an *r* in word final position can indeed easily turn into *ly* in popular speech; cf. *quartier* : *kvártély*; *barbier* : *borbély*, etc." (SZILY 1: 181–182). This means that Kálmán Szily himself could not determine whether a vernacular form of *komor* ending in *ly* had existed before or was made up and spread in standard Hungarian by Ferenc Kazinczy. Either way, for us this means that finding the origins of *komor* would elucidate the etymology of *komoly* as well.

**3. The different meanings of *komor*.** In the rest of this paper, I am going to outline a Turkic hypothesis concerning the etymology of *komor* before moving on to a possible Slavic etymon which is, in my opinion, at least as convincing as the Turkic one. But first, we have to clarify the connection between the different significations of the word in question, which, according to TESz. and EWUng., are the following: 1. 'sullen, ill-humoured, morose (person)'; 2. 'gloomy, dark, dismal (weather)'; 3. 'improperly castrated (bull, horse, or ram)'. Though this third meaning slightly complicates the situation, both dictionaries agree that it originates from the first one, due to the excitability of badly neutered animals, a point that is strengthened by the fact that our first records of this third meaning are relatively recent as they date back only to the end of the 18th century (cf. EWUng. – 1780, 1793; TESz. – 1795). Therefore, we can reasonably assume that the first meaning ('sullen, ill-humoured, glum') is the original one, which has been transferred to gloomy weather conditions and to unluckily castrated animals.

**4. The Turkic etymology of *komor*.** A number of scholars have asserted that the Hungarian adjective *komor* originates from a Turkic etymon. Lajos K. Katona gives a detailed explanation about how Chuvash *xămăr*, used mainly to designate the colour of cattle and cognate with Turkic *qonur* 'smoky, reddish-brown, light or dark brown, greyish, dark', was adopted into Hungarian and how the semantic change 'dark grey → morose' occurred (K. KATONA 1931: 51–54). This etymology is accepted by Margit K. Palló, who points out that Lajos K. Katona's article is not included in the references of TESz. where it is claimed that the word is of unknown origin (K. PALLÓ 1981: 208). The voluminous compilation of András Róna-Tas and Árpád Berta on the Turkic layer of Hungarian vocabulary also accepts this assumption, though their arguments are not completely satisfactory and do not dispel all

doubt (RÓNA-TAS–BERTA 1: 560–562). What all have to face is the problem that the meaning of the Turkic word (‘yellow, brown, grey’), which is primarily used as an animal colour, remains considerably distant from the first meaning of Hungarian *komor* (‘sullen, grumpy, ill-humoured’), all the more so since the metaphorical signification of this presumed etymon is the exact opposite of that of Hungarian *komor* in almost every Turkic and Mongolic language, meaning ‘something or somebody kind, nice, agreeable, etc.’ (RÓNA-TAS–BERTA 1: 560–561). This was also indicated by Géza Bárczi, who is for some reason or another not cited in the previous work: “due to phonetic and especially semantic difficulties, the Turkic words cannot be matched to the Hungarian one without problems” (BÁRCZI 1941: 168). Only in Chuvash can the word be used for gloomy, cloudy weather but its usage for personal mood or character is not attested there either. Perhaps that is why EWUng. considers the Turkic etymology of *komor* hardly probable (“kaum wahrscheinlich”). Therefore, the Turkic origin of Hungarian *komor* can only be accepted if we turn a blind eye to its considerable semantic disadvantages.

**5. A possible Slavic origin of *komor*.** István Kniezsa did not include *komor* in his two-volume *Slavic Loanwords in Hungarian* (KNIEZSA 1955) but he did include *komoly*. In this entry, placed among the words of disputable origin, he comments also on the issue of *komor*, although it soon turns out that here he is treating another meaning of *komoly*: “According to [Franz Miklosich], the Hungarian word also means ‘mutilis, verstümmelt’ (mutilated) and comes from the Slavic adjective *komolъ* ‘ohne Hörner’ (without horns). [...] But this is completely uncertain. Our sources do not know this meaning of the word. [...] It is most probably a variant of *komor*. [...] And as far as *komor* is concerned, it is perhaps of Turkic origin” (KNIEZSA 1955: 671).

Kniezsa thus dismisses Miklosich’s assumption (MIKLOSICH 1872: 34, MIKLOSICH 1886: 126) because he cannot find any evidence that *komoly* can mean ‘mutilated’ (as the author of this paper could not either). Like many others, he deems it likely that the word originates from *komor*, which in turn may be of Turkic origin (here he cites Lajos K. Katona). Then, curiously, he emphatically refutes the argumentation of Bernát Munkácsi, who derives Hungarian *komor* from a Slavic source: “Munkácsi’s explanation that *komor* comes from Slavic *chmura* ‘Wolke; felhő (cloud)’ can by no means be accepted” (KNIEZSA 1955: 671).

Kniezsa must have read only superficially what Munkácsi wrote because the cited volume 8 of *Ethnographia* says something completely different: “Based on the contrastive dictionary of Miklosich, we can identify the Russian layer of our Slavic vocabulary in the following words, only attested in Russian: [...] *komor*: Russian *chmur*: *chmuryj*, *chmurnyj* ‘düster, mürrisch’ (gloomy, grumpy), *chmuritъ-sja* ‘finster aussehen’ (to look sullen)”, while two lines below he states explicitly: “Polish *chmura* ‘Regenwolke’ (rain cloud), *pochmurny* ‘finster’ (sinister), and Czech *chmoura*, *chmurny* cannot be taken into consideration when looking for the etymon of this old word that is found already in the Tihanyi Codex (c. 1530) in the form of *kumur*” (MUNKÁCSI 1896: 19, similarly MUNKÁCSI 1899: 409). This means that Munkácsi did not intend to derive the Hungarian adjective *komor* from

the Slavic noun *chmura* but from the Russian variants of the same stem, the adjective *хмурый* ‘sullen, gloomy, morose’ and the verb *хмуриться* ‘to be or become sullen’. This is by far not as unrealistic as Kniezsa’s judgement implies. Besides, the quote also reveals that Munkácsi got the idea from Miklosich, even if Kniezsa overlooked Munkácsi’s inaccurate reference to Miklosich’s “contrastive dictionary”. The corresponding entry is indeed somewhat hidden: the variants beginning with *chm-* are enumerated under *smurŭ*, where at the very end of the article we can find the remark, separated with a dash: “vergl. magy. *komor* (cf. Hungarian *komor*)” (MIKLOSICH 1886: 311). As TESz., following Kniezsa and not deeming it necessary to look at the earlier literature, rejected the Slavic hypothesis, this etymology, originating primarily from Miklosich, has been consigned to oblivion. Neither does Oskar Asbóth mention Miklosich when he devotes several pages to criticizing and refuting – mainly for phonetic reasons – Munkácsi’s etymology (ASBÓTH 1900: 454–457).

Munkácsi was obviously wrong when he asserted that *komor* must come from Russian. But a more exhaustive view on the Slavic languages reveals that *\*chmur-* is a remarkably widespread stem with nominal, adjectival, and verbal derivations. The entries *\*xmura / xmurъ(jb)*, *\*xmuriti (se)*, and *\*xmurъnъjb* in Trubačev’s *Slavic Etymological Dictionary* give plenty of examples, the significations of which can be divided into two subgroups: 1. ‘cloudy, gloomy weather’; 2. ‘gloominess, sullenness, moroseness’ (TRUBAČEV 1981: 43–45, in this dictionary *x = ch*). The outcomes of *\*xmura* have only survived in the West Slavic languages, all signifying ‘cloud’: Czech *chmura*, Slovakian *chmúra*, Upper Sorbian *khmura*, Lower Sorbian *chmura*, Polish *chmura*. However, the verbal forms of the same stem can mean both ‘to cover with clouds, to be covered with clouds, to become overcast’ as in Czech *chmuriti*, Slovakian *chmúrit’*, Polish *chmurzyć*, Upper Sorbian *khmurić*, Russian *хмурить(ся)* and ‘to frown, to look stern’ as in Serbo-Croatian (archaic) *homuriti se*, Slovenian *hamóriti*, Lower Sorbian *chmuriś*, Russian *хмурить(ся)*, Ukrainian *хмурити(ся)*, Belarusian *хмурыць*. The adjectival forms can convey either or both meanings: Czech *chmurný*, *pochmurný* ‘gloomy, ill-humoured, sad, dark, sullen’; Polish *chmurny*, *pochmurny* ‘cloudy, overcast’; Slovakian *chmúrny*, *pochmúrny*; Belarusian *хму́ры, пахму́ры*; Ukrainian *хму́рий, похму́рий* ‘cloudy, overcast; sullen, gloomy, ill-humoured, sad’; Russian *хмурый* ‘sullen, gloomy, ill-humoured, morose’, along with the further related Russian *насмурный* ‘overcast, cloudy’. The Slavic stem is of Indo-European origin and cognate with Proto-Slavic *\*smurъ* as well as with Greek *ἄμαυρός* ‘dark’ (POKORNY 1: 701 [*mau-ro*], VASMER 2: 677–678 [*смұрый*], TRUBAČEV 1981: 43–45, ČERNYCH 2: 345, OREL 4: 172).

Regarding the adjectives, one notices that we have more forms that contain the suffix *-n-* than those that do not (only Russian and Ukrainian provide examples of adjectives without *-n-*). Yet this does not mean we should rule out Slavic as the source of Hungarian *komor* since 1) the forms without suffix evidently preceded the ones with an *-n-*; 2) the language of the Slavs living in the Carpathian Basin could have contained an adjective without *-n-*; 3) it is also not inconceivable that Hungarian *komor* was created from a borrowed verb through back-formation (as

EWUng. and ESz. propose). In any case, the stem of the Slavic etymon is *chmur-*, and that is very close to Hungarian *komor*.

As far as semantics is concerned, the Slavic etymology proves to be much more satisfactory as the Turkic one. Considering the double meaning of the Slavic stem, the first two significations of Hungarian *komor* are self-evident (1. 'sullen, ill-humoured, morose [person]'; 2. 'dark, gloomy, cloudy, overcast [weather]') and only the third one (3. 'poorly castrated [bull, horse, ram]') remains without explanation. But this relatively late third meaning (its first attestation in TESz. 2: 540 hails only from 1795) is in all likelihood an inner development in Hungarian after the first one, as all etymological dictionaries that comment on this point suggest. On the other hand, however, the Turkic hypothesis explains the second and third meanings (which occur much more restrictedly) only partially: although the connotation of the Chuvash word depicting weather conditions ('gloomy, dark, overcast') corresponds to the second meaning of Hungarian *komor*, their third meanings accord only in that they both refer to cattle. The semantic fields of the Turkic words lack both 'sullen, ill-humoured, morose' and 'badly castrated', while Hungarian *komor* cannot mean anything like 'yellow, brown, greyish', only 'dark' in a rare figurative sense.

What does need some clarification, though, is the phonetic background behind the transformation *chmur-* > *komor*. In order to resolve the discrepancy between the two forms, we have to discern three distinct phenomena, one of which is relatively unusual, whereas the other two are completely natural and integral parts of the history of the Hungarian language.

1)  $\chi > k$ : Though not a very frequent case, the voiceless velar fricative  $\chi$  can be substituted by the voiceless velar stop *k*. Examples can be found in as long a period as from the 14th to the 20th century: North Slavic *\*chvorь* > *kór* 'illness' (cf. *kórság* 'illness': 14th cent., KNIEZSA 1955: 278), Slovakian *chlapec* > *klapec* 'kid' (1881, KNIEZSA 1955: 270), Slovakian *kuchta* > *kukta* 'culinary apprentice' (1702, KNIEZSA 1955: 291), Slovakian *buchta* > *bukta* 'pastry filled with jam' (1825, KNIEZSA 1955: 1), Russian *хлеб* (and Gen. *хлеба*) > *kleba* 'bread' (1897, KNIEZSA 1955: 270), or Bavarian-Austrian *wachter* > *bakter* 'railway watchman' (1638, EWUng. 1: 72). As these examples illustrate, in most cases where this kind of substitution takes place, the sound  $\chi$  is followed by a consonant (as in *chmur-*) but one can also find words where no neighbouring consonant is needed to turn  $\chi$  into *k*: Russian *хорошо* > *karasó* 'good, alright' (NYOMÁRKAY 2004: 404), German *Fach* > *fakk* 'shelf, box, locker' (EWUng. 1: 348, written as *fach* but pronounced with a *k*; cf. KOLYVEK 2014: 211). Indeed, when expounding the etymology of the Hungarian regional word *makuka*, Léna Kolyvek seems to take it for granted that a Hungarian voiceless velar stop *k* can sometimes be traced back to the voiceless velar fricative  $\chi$  of a Slavic or a German etymon (KOLYVEK 2014: 211).

The fact that the same (or a very similar) voiceless velar fricative also used to exist in Hungarian allows us to narrow down the period in which Slavic *chmur-* was adopted into Hungarian since a phoneme substitution could only occur when  $\chi$  had already turned to *h* in all phonetic environments so that the Slavic  $\chi$  had no

exact equivalent in Hungarian any more. According to Géza Bárczi, this process was completed around the end of the 13th century, so the borrowing of a no more precisely identifiable form of *chmur*-/*chmuryj* must have taken place after 1300 (otherwise, we would have *h* instead of *k*, like in the words *chvrastъ* > *haraszt* [a polysemous word used for various plants and groups of plants] and *chrvat* > *horvát* ‘Croatian’) (BENKŐ 1967: 118). Thus, despite Asbóth’s objections (ASBÓTH 1900: 454–455), as long as we put the borrowing to sometime after 1300, the relation between Slavic *χ* and Hungarian *k* can be explained without difficulty by phoneme substitution.

2) The insertion of an intervening vowel to break up consonant clusters. This phenomenon is very common and can be corroborated by countless examples such as *brat* > *barát* ‘friend’, *drobъ* > *darab* ‘piece’, *grezdъ* > *gerezd* ‘segment (of citrus fruits or garlic)’, *služba* > *szolozsma* ‘church service’ (cf. KESZLER 1969: 16–23).

3) The opening of the *u*-s. This has also numerous parallels like *burs* > *bors* ‘pepper’, *dumb* > *domb* ‘hill’, *pur* > *por* ‘dust, powder’, *urusz* > *orosz* ‘Russian’ (cf. BENKŐ 1967: 150).

**6. Conclusion.** This paper has aimed to demonstrate that the Slavic etymology of the Hungarian word *komor* (and thus *komoly*) deserves to be examined and weighed up in detail, though nobody has considered the question seriously since Bernát Munkácsi. The assumption that *komor* goes back to the widespread Slavic stem *chmur*- does not raise any insolvable semantic or phonetic problems and is therefore at least as admissible as the argumentation in favour of Chuvash *xămăr*. Obviously, we cannot exclude the Turkic etymology either – a more appropriate formulation would be, after Max Gottschald, that the word can but does not have to be explained this way (“so kann der Name, nicht so muss er gedeutet werden” – GOTTSCHALD 1954: 9). Nevertheless, in our case it is the Slavic etymology that appears to be the more convincing one.

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