

COMPARATIVE SEMANTICS AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE LEXEME *GOD* IN SERBIAN AND RUSSIAN

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Abstract. Within the framework of contemporary linguoculturological and lexicological research, this paper presents a comparative analysis of the semantic structure of the lexeme *God* in the Serbian and Russian languages. The primary objective of the study is focused on identifying, systematizing, and describing linguistic similarities and differences, as well as uncovering specific cultural concepts expressed through the primary and figurative meanings of this word. The results of the contrastive analysis indicate that the secondary meanings and metaphorical extensions of this lexeme in both languages transcend its original, religious core. This semantic layer develops in two distinct directions: on one hand, toward universal human spiritual and moral values, and on the other, within the domain of abstract and material subjectivization (where the meaning shifts to people or concrete objects). The observed semantic diversity points to the need for further empirical and psycholinguistic study of this phenomenon. It can be viewed as an important indicator of a gradual process of linguistic desacralization, namely secularization, which ultimately leads to the weakening of functional links between words of sacred origin and the religious system itself.

Keywords: lexeme *God*; sacred vocabulary; lexicology; Serbian language; dictionaries; Russian language.

1. Introduction. Theoretical framework of the research

Based on the theoretical position that religion is a fundamental component of the spiritual architecture of an ethnic group's culture – defined as “a reflection of the religious and mythological consciousness of man in language” (Vulovich, 2015, p. 16) and that “the linguistic picture of the world varies from language to language” (Hrnjak, 2007, p. 197), the subject of this research is a synchronic-comparative study of the semantic potential of the lexeme *God* in the Serbian and Russian language systems. The contrastive investigation into the semantic substrate of this specific lexeme within the Serbian and Russian linguistic frameworks is fundamentally predicated upon the shared culturological, historical, spiritual, and confessional paradigms that historically shape both speech communities under observation:

Confessional homogeneity: The Christian worldview of both peoples was formed under the decisive diachronic influence of the Orthodox Church.

Religious syncretism: The persistence and preservation of pagan elements are firmly embedded within the Orthodox substratum of both peoples. Berdyaev (1955) highlights the incorporation of a natural pagan element into Russian Christian Orthodoxy, while in the Serbian Orthodox context, this phenomenon is documented through the preservation of numerous folk customs and rituals (see Petrovich, 1999; Chaikanovich, 1973). Yerotich (2002: 92) also points to the deep, centuries-old connection between Slavic/Serbian paganism and Saint Sava Orthodoxy (*Svetosavlje*), emphasizing that only through subtle analysis can one differentiate magical actions within Orthodox practice and determine whether they are functionally or dysfunctionally integrated into the authentic religious canon.

The sociopolitical context of the twentieth century: The spiritual ties between the Serbian and Russian peoples during the twentieth century endured complex socio-political turbulence, largely generated by the activities of two authoritarian atheist regimes. Despite these unfavorable ideological circumstances, their relations were characterized by intense contact, interpenetration, and mutual influence (Jovanovich, 2010, p. 189).¹

These factors serve as causal agents that induced the formation of similar structures in the linguistic worldview of the Serbian and Russian peoples, whose spiritual content is reflected through the use of sacred vocabulary, with the lexeme *God* at its nucleus.

From a diachronic perspective, the lexeme *God* belongs to a common Slavic lexical stratum originating from the Proto-Slavic language fund.² According to Petar Skok the primary semantic layer of this word denoted *share, fortune, or earthly wealth*, which is illustrated by the traditional greeting “*Pomozi Bog*” (“God help [you]”) and the traditional reply “*Bog ti pomogao*” (“May God grant you a good share/happiness”) (Skok, 1971, p. 179). It was only during the Proto-Slavic era that the lexeme developed its secondary meaning of a deity who willingly distributes happiness and material benefits. In the first Serbian lexicographical work, the *Serbian Dictionary* (*Srpski rječnik*) published by Vuk Karadzic in 1818, the following significant realizations are recorded for this lexeme: “1) *zao Bog* [...] *teško zlu Bogu* [...] – 2) *jaoj meni do Boga miloga!* 3) *za pravoga Boga*” (Stefanovich Karadzic 1818: 37). Such examples reflect remnants of pagan dualism of Iranian origin regarding *good and evil* deities in Proto-Slavic mythology (Skok, 1971, p. 179).

Modern lexicographic material (*Речник српскохрватског књижевног и народног језика*, 1959; *Речник српског језика*, 2011) confirms that this lexeme in modern Serbian is regularly exploited within phrasal and stable syntagmas to exteriorize (express) various emotional states: during blessings, oaths, ritual fraternization, expressions of prospective hope for success in work, the initiation of epic narratives, the articulation of anxiety (fear) before undesirable events, as well as curses (Belich, 1959, pp. 672 – 673; Nikolich, 2011, pp. 91 – 92). Similarly, in modern Russian, the lexeme functions as a formula for connoting happiness, a successful outcome, or the beginning of an activity,

which is confirmed by dictionary (*Большой толковый словарь русского языка*, 2000) entries such as “*S bogom!*” (“Godspeed!”) and “*Slava Bogu!*” (“Praise be to God!”) (Kuznetsov, 2000, p. 87).

In modern dogmatic-theological discourse, the lexeme *God* is defined as “a supreme, supernatural, immortal, and omnipotent being who governs the world and human life” (Kolarich, 2010, p. 44). It represents the supreme object of religious faith, conceptualized as an absolute Person endowed with all perfections (Gubsky, Korableva, Lutchenko, 2009, pp. 48 – 49). Nevertheless, in addition to these denotative definitions present in specialized philosophical and theological lexicons of both languages, the explanatory dictionaries of Serbian and Russian (*Филозофско-теолошки лексикон*, 2010; *Философский энциклопедический словарь*, 2009) also register a rich network of secondary, figurative meanings, which opens up space for the study of specific cultural concepts materialized through their use.

Research methodology

The research is based on the application of the comparative method in the analysis of the semantic structure of the lexeme *God* in Serbian and Russian. The aim is to establish the degree of semantic equivalence (similarities and differences) for the evaluation of the cultural concepts it translates. The research corpus is formed from representative lexicographic sources:

Serbian sources: *Rečnik srpskohrvatskog književnog i narodnog jezika* [Dictionary of the Serbo-Croatian Literary and Vernacular Language] of the Serbian Academy of Sciences (Belić, ed., 1959); *Rečnik srpskohrvatskog književnog jezika* [Dictionary of the Serbo-Croatian Literary Language] of Matica Srpska and Matica Hrvatska (Stevanović, ed. et al., 1967); *Rečnik srpskoga jezika* [Dictionary of the Serbian Language] of Matica Srpska (Nikolić, ed., 2011).

Russian sources: *Tolkovy slovar russkogo yazyka* [Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language] (Ushakov, ed., 1935); *Slovar sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo yazyka* [Dictionary of the Contemporary Russian Literary Language] (Chernyshev, ed., 1950); *Tolkovy slovar zhivogo velikorusskogo yazyka* [Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language] (Dahl, 1981); *Slovar russkogo yazyka* [Dictionary of the Russian Language] (Evgenieva ed., 1999); *Bolshoy tolkovy slovar russkogo yazyka* [The Great Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language] (Kuznetsov, compiled and ed. 2000); *Tolkovy slovar russkogo yazyka s vklyucheniem svedeny o proiskhozhdenii slov (82000 slov i frazeologicheskikh vyrazheny)* [Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language with the Inclusion of Information on the Origin of Words (82,000 Words and Phraseological Expressions)] (Shvedova ed., 2011).

Results, analysis and discussion

An evaluation of the compiled lexicographical data reveals a substantial level of semantic alignment between the decoded senses of the lexeme *God* in both Serbian

and Russian; however, a primary point of divergence emerges regarding the conceptual boundaries of its denotative core.

Table 1. The Semantic Structure of the Lexeme *God* in Serbian and Russian

Serbian	Russian
"1. ... in monotheistic religions and according to certain idealistic philosophical conceptions: the supreme being that created the world and governs it, the highest spiritual principle; cf. deity" [...] "3. Christ, Jesus" [...] "4. in polytheistic religions: a supernatural being, a deity" (Belić, ed., 1959, pp. 672 – 673). "1. relig. a. in monotheism: the creator of the material and spiritual world. [...] Coni. b. in polytheism: the master of a part of nature and the world: ~ of the sun, ~ of the sea, etc." (Stevanović ed. et al., 1967, p. 230). "1. relig. a. (God) in monotheistic religions, the highest supernatural being that created the material and spiritual world and governs it. b. in polytheistic religions: one of the supreme supernatural beings that govern the world and natural phenomena, a deity [...]" (Nikolić, ed., 2011, p. 91).	„a. According to religious beliefs, the supreme being who allegedly stands above the world and controls it" (Ushakov, ed. 1935, p. 159). "1. In the oldest (polytheistic) religions, one of the greatest celestial beings standing above the universe; in monotheism and idealistic philosophy – a specific higher power, a supreme being standing above the world (according to some teachings – solely the creator of the universe, according to others – also the one who governs the world and grants assistance upon request, prayer, etc.)" (Chernyshev ed., 1950, p. 525). "According to the religious concept: the supreme being that created the world and controls it, or (in polytheism) one of such beings" (Evgenieva, ed., 1999, p. 100). "1. According to the religious conception: the creator of heaven and earth, of all existence; an omniscient higher intellect that governs the world; the universal cosmic origin (possessing many names: the Creator, the Demiurge, the Most High, the Sustainer, the Almighty, etc.; in Christianity, one in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit) [...] 2. In polytheism: one of the supernatural beings ruling over a certain part of the world, a patron to someone or something (usually relating to a specific sphere of activity)" (Kuznetsov, ed., 2000, p. 86). "1. In religion: the supreme, omnipotent being that controls the world, or (in polytheism) one of such beings [...] 2. In Christianity: the triune deity, the creator and universal cosmic origin – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit" (Shvedova, ed., 2011, p. 53).

As evidenced by Table 1 in certain Russian lexicographical sources, the primary semantic volume of the lexeme *God* simultaneously encompasses both the monotheistic and polytheistic religious concepts, whereas in Serbian dictionary practice, the semantic realizations of this lexeme within monotheistic and polytheistic systems are strictly lexicographically differentiated. On the other hand, it is observed that in both the Serbian and Russian linguistic pictures of the world, the mentioned token regularly evokes the meaning of the cosmological Creator and a sovereign being who constitutes the highest spiritual and ethical axiological systems. Such a cognitive schema is entirely expected from a theological standpoint, given that within the framework of the scholastic tradition, the Deity is doctrinally defined as the absolute value – *summum bonum*, as well as *finis boni* (the ultimate purpose/goal of all good) (Kolarich, 2010, p. 44). Thereby assigning Him a teleological and providential function within the cosmos (Pavlovsky, 1994, p. 34). This conceptual proximity is accompanied by a well-developed series of synonyms in both languages:

Serbian synonyms: *Gospod, Svevišnji, Svevideći, Tvorac, Svemogući, Gospodar, Stvoritelj, Višnji, božanstvo, apsolut* (Čosić, 2008, p. 62).

Russian synonyms: *Tvorets, Sozdatel', Vsevyšnii, Vsemogushchii, Vseveshchii, Gospod', Vечноye Sushchestvo, Tvorets vselennoy* [у оригиналу: БОГ м. Творец, Создатель, Вседержитель, Всевышний, Всемогущий, Предвечный, Сущий, Сый, Господь; Предвечное Существо, Создатель вселенной] (Dal, 1981, p. 104).

Lexicographical analysis indicates that the lexeme *God* develops additional meanings in both language systems (see Table 2).

Table 2. Secondary Semantics of the Lexeme *God* in Serbian and Russian

Serbian	Russian
"fig. 1. one who possesses great power, authority; that which is omnipotent. [...] 2. a person who represents something perfect, unattainable. [...] 3. a person who enjoys someone's greatest love and respect. [...] 4. that which is most important to someone, everything, one's all" (Belić, ed., 1959, p. 672). "2. a. the greatest sanctity, an idol; an authority, a powerful person; an arbitrator. [...] b. the greatest force, authority. [...] 3. the dearest, adored person or the dearest thing" (Stevanović, ed. et al., 1967, p. 230). "2. fig. a. one who possesses great power, authority, who is omnipotent. b. a person who represents a great authority or something perfect, unattainable; a person who enjoys someone's greatest love and respect, an idol" (Nikolić ed., 2011, p. 91).	"3. A materialized representation of a supernatural being in art. <i>A clay god. To collect a collection of Indian gods.</i> 4. Of a powerful person who possesses authority over other people. [...] 5. Of an object of adoration, admiration (usually a gifted person, a genius). <i>The god of poetry, music. What a culinary god!</i>" (Kuznetsov, ed., 2000, p. 86). "2. Figuratively: of a genius, an exceptional talent. [...] Of sublime works of art. [...] Metaphorically: of poetic inspiration" (Chernyshev, ed. 1950, p. 527). "3. fig. An object of adoration, veneration (archaic, bookish). <i>Music is his god. This girl is a god to him.</i> 4. fig. A genius. An extraordinary talent [...] 5. fig. That which dominates, determines what the center of content is. <i>Artillery is the god of war.</i>" (Shvedova, ed., 2011, p. 51). "Image, icon: (Dal, 1981, p. 104).

Based on the empirical evidence delineated in Table 2, the figurative extensions of the lexeme *God* within the Serbian linguistic paradigm exhibit a distinct anthropocentric orientation. In this context, semantic shifts are mapped onto human agents characterized by specific attributes, namely individuals who:

- Wield asymmetrical social power and systemic influence;
- Embody an uncontested epistemic or institutional authority;
- Assume the societal role of an objective arbitrator or judge;
- Personify an exemplar of individual perfection;
- Receive ultimate expressions of communal affection and profound respect;
- Serve as focal points for secular idolatry and veneration.

Conversely, within the Russian linguistic system, these transferred semantic codes are systematically designated to individuals who:

- Exercise absolute dominance and hegemony over subordinate agents;
- Become the recipients of hyperbolized admiration and adoration;
- Display extraordinary cognitive capacities or creative genius.

From a structural linguistics viewpoint, this directional derivation is mediated by

the cognitive apparatus of conceptual metaphor. The cognitive schematization of a highly abstract target domain (*God*) is operationalized through structural mappings derived from the source domain (*Man*), functioning as a dominant anthropomorphic projection (Stevanovich, 2021, p. 81).³

Viewed from a culturological perspective, the aforementioned secondary meanings can be traceably motivated by Biblical narratives, wherein God is conceptualized as the Creator of life and the universe, the supreme authority, and an omnipotent judge possessing absolute power, while simultaneously existing as a perfect being who commands the utmost love, admiration, and veneration. Conversely, within the contemporary culture of the Serbian and Russian peoples as mirrored in their respective languages, the figurative extensions of the lexeme *God* applied to human agents can acquire a negative semantic nuance in colloquial communication. In such contexts, this token may be utilized to articulate a transient infatuation with an individual, or to convey the speaker's expressive stance triggered by that individual's position of authority, material wealth, or social status. Crucially, these external attributes do not necessarily correlate with the intrinsic spiritual and ethical virtues that are fundamentally emphasized within the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition.

In this context, from a linguoculturological perspective, a question arises regarding the mechanisms behind the transformation of rigorous religious theism the fundamental postulate of which is the conceptualization of the living Deity as an absolutely unitary being devoid of any analogy into secondary semantic structures. This phenomenon is particularly indicative when observed within the framework of the Serbian and Russian ethnocultural space, given that both nations, through Orthodox theology, are traditionally oriented toward a specific paradigm of the knowledge of God (*theognosis*). This paradigm is predicated upon the intrinsic impossibility of comprehending or grasping the divine essence through logical identity and rational categories (Gricanov, ed., 2003, pp. 111 – 112).

The secondary semantics of this lexeme also implies a transition into the domain of abstract conceptuality and material subjectivity. This is reflected in dictionary definitions such as: “*what is most important to someone, one's everything*” (Belich 1959: 672), “*that which dominates, determines, or constitutes the center of the subject's consciousness,*” “*the object of adoration and worship*” (Shvedova, 2011, p. 51), and “*the most precious thing*” (Stevanovich, 1967, p. 230).

Such meanings may be reflexes of pre-Christian pagan fetishism and animism (focusing on material objects of worship), but they simultaneously function as a reliable semantic marker of the loss of functional connections between sacred vocabulary and its original religious core. This thesis is further supported by the psycholinguistic research of Ksenia Koncharevich (2017, p. 600), based on the analysis of associative fields in the dictionary of Y. N. Karaulov. The results show that in the minds of modern Russian speakers, the lexeme *God* activates functional

links within the religious domain in only 8.41% of cases. In the remaining instances, due to the semantic extension of the attributes of power, it is identified with secular realities outside the sacred sphere.

An additional feature of the Russian language model is the development of the secondary meaning of *image* or *icon*. The example provided by Kogan, “*Saint Theodosius – he is a god, look, the icon is standing there (Vlg. Tot)*”, demonstrates that saints are also integrated “into the rank of gods through religious attributes” (Kogan, 2017, p. 84).⁴ Furthermore, the Dictionary of the Contemporary Russian Literary Language notes that “in certain proverbs and expressions, the lexeme *god* signifies: a saint, a holy person whom someone venerates” (Chernyshev, ed., 1950, p. 525).

In traditional Russian domestic culture, the icon space (the *red corner* / *krasny ugol*) held the status of the sacred center of the home and a symbol of divine blessing (Tsekhanskaya, 2004, p. 8). Ritual behavior upon entering the hut required primary verbal and non-verbal communication with the shrine (praying before the icon) before addressing the household.

The idiom used for banishment or radical expulsion from a house should be interpreted precisely within this context: “*A vot tebe Bog, a vot tebe porog*” (“*Here is God for you, and there is the threshold*” / “*Here is the icon, and there is the door*”) (Chernyshev, 1950, p. 525). The first part of this formula imperatively directs the person to offer a final prayer to the icon before being cast across the threshold. This example illustrates how lost ethnographic and cultural codes of a community can be successfully reconstructed through the semantic structure of sacred lexemes.

Conclusion

A comparative lexico-semantic investigation into the token *God* in both Serbian and Russian demonstrates that their foundational semantic strata encapsulate congruent culturological and theological paradigms anchored in the Eastern Orthodox Christian worldview. This framework positions the lexeme as an ontological foundation for paramount ethical and spiritual principles.

Nevertheless, both linguistic systems manifest significant semantic drift and derivation toward secondary, non-literal meanings. These conceptual shifts are bifurcated in their motivation: they are partially underpinned by archaic survivals of pre-Christian pagan mythologies, and partially accelerated by contemporary processes of secularization and desacralization. The latter, in particular, erode the functional-semantic cohesion between the sacred lexical inventory and formal dogmatic theology. Consequently, to achieve a comprehensive verification and holistic understanding of this linguistic evolution, it is imperative to undertake further empirical inquiries utilizing an expanded corpus of phraseological units wherein this lexeme operates as a core constituent.

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