Chapter 10

Evaluating linguistic variation in light of sparse data in the case of Sorbian

Eduard Werner

The severely endangered Sorbian languages (ISO hsb, dsb), endemic to the Eastern part of Germany, are dramatically under-researched. This lack of research extends from basic knowledge about numbers of speakers, competence, and language transmission, but includes also core aspects of linguistics, like phonology, morphology and syntax.

Having experienced centuries of marginalisation, Sorbian texts are (sparsely) attested only from the 16th century. This makes evaluation of variation especially difficult, since the variation might be caused by a certain register of the language, for example, a special dialect (our default assumption), but it might also be caused by other factors such as traditions of verbal art, notably in folksongs which unfortunately have not been preserved in their original form either and are therefore hard to evaluate, but which contain very old layers of language.

In this chapter, one of the oldest Sorbian monuments will be compared to folksongs, applying knowledge about neighbouring Germanic and Celtic literatures. From the linguistic side, the results of the comparison lend greater insights into historical sound changes in Sorbian; from the cultural side, we learn about aesthetic concerns of verbal art in this language, which, in turn shed light on a range of linguistic phenomena beyond sound patterns.

1 Goal of this paper

The goal of the investigation is to get a more reliable reconstruction for older layers of Sorbian (Upper Sorbian, ISO hsb and Lower Sorbian, ISO dsb) on the one hand and more concrete ideas about Sorbian verbal art on the other hand. As

a starting point, elements of verbal art from other European cultures (restricting ourselves to examples from Old High German and Welsh in this paper in order to demonstrate such elements) will be applied to Sorbian folk song texts and monuments. It will be shown that these elements make a lot of sense especially if applied to a reconstructed text with a phonologically older layer.

2 Introduction

The Sorbs, a Slavic people indigenous to the Eastern part of Saxony and Brandenburg (see Figure 1), are one of the four acknowledged autochthonous minorities of Germany, the others being the Frisians, the Sinti/Roma and the Danes.

They are first mentioned in the year 631 of Fredegar's chronicle from the early Middle Ages and they are the last remnants of the Slavic-speaking population which once reached the Baltic sea in the North and Frankfurt/ Main and Hamburg in the West (Stone 2015: 13). During the 8th century a stable border between German (the area without red dots) and Slavic (the area dominated by red dots) population emerged as can be seen from the following map (Figure 2), which shows the distribution of place names ending in -itz[1]. However, German slowly expanded, and after the assimilation of the Polabians (in the region of Lüchow-Danneberg at end of the 18th century) the Sorbians were the only autochthonic Slavs left.[2]

For Sorbian, the first monuments maintained appear at the beginning at the 16th century, roughly 900 years after their first mentioning in the chronicle of Fredegar.[3] Moreover, the first monuments are usually translations of Christian clerical texts for missionary purposes so they do not reflect the normal context of language usage of that time.[4] For most of the originally Slavic territory which has been germanised long ago, no information of the language and culture other than place names has survived.

The Slavic gentry was germanised early on and Christianity extinguished or significantly diminished old domains of Sorbian language and culture like pagan

---

[1]These place names trace back to Slavic patronymic names ending in *-ici with only rare exceptions like *Urmitz* in Rheinland-Pfalz which come from Latin.

[2]For a comprehensive study see Stone 2015.

[3]An exception is the Kayna stamp presumably from the beginning of the 10th century which is an Old Polabian monument (and the only one) found on Old Sorbian territory (Werner 2004). It shows that the Slavic languages were used in official contexts as well. Unfortunately, no other monument from this time seems to have been preserved.

[4]The oldest Sorbian sentence from 1510, however is a declaration of love (Werner 2014).

Figure 1: Area of settlement of the Sorbs in Germany
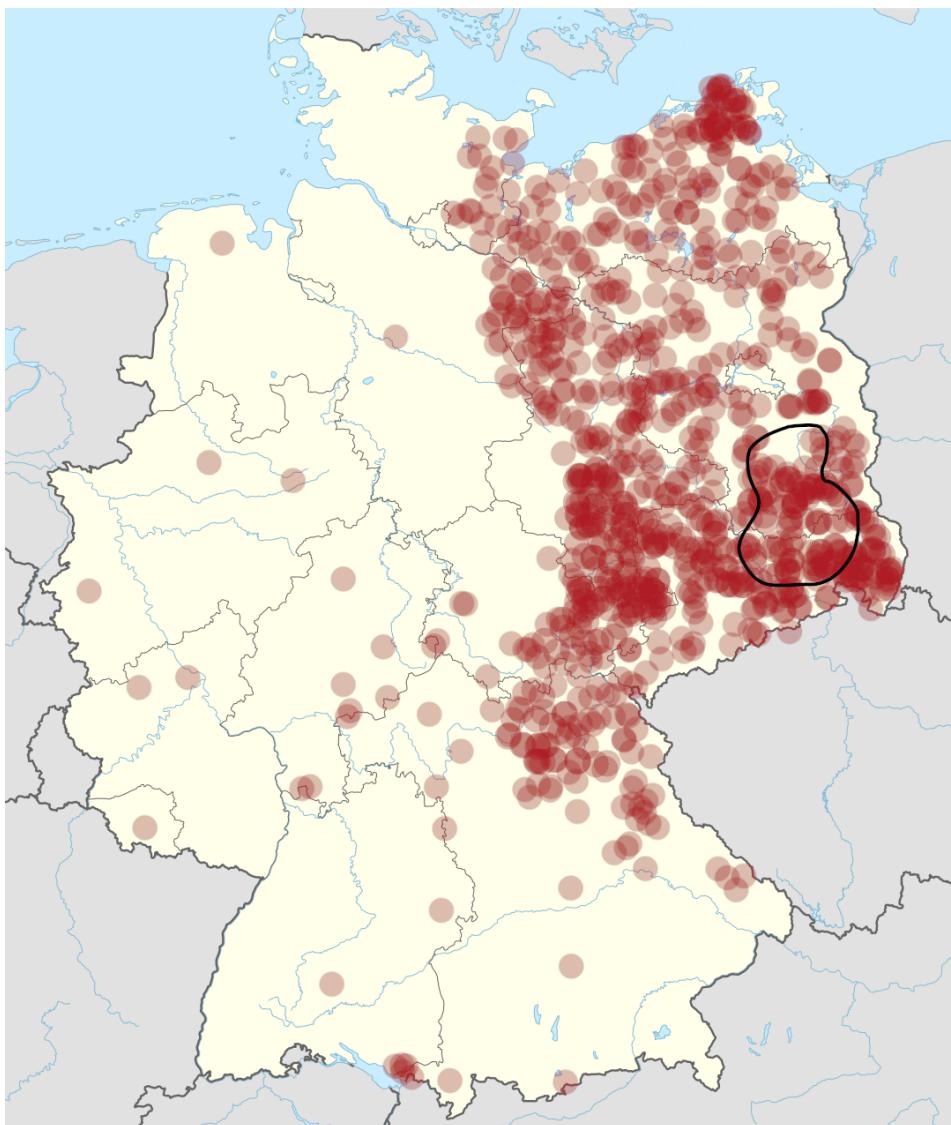
Figure 2: Names ending in -itz. The region outlined in black is roughly the contemporary region of the Sorbian languages. Source: http://deutschlandkarten.nationalatlas.de/wp-content/namensatlas/

religion and connected fields such as sorcery and medicine. Apart from the monuments mentioned, only songs have survived. However, they have also changed due to the lack of professional bards; songs got passed on by peasant workers coming from other villages for seasonal work. The oldest Sorbian songs we know have been collected during the 19th century. Details regarding they were performed, the context in which they were performed, and even the melodies are sketchy (Nedo 1966: 199) for technological and methodological reasons[5]. Moreover, Smoleŕ & Haupt (1843) were no folk musicians. They often relied on songs that had been collected by others such as Jordan or Zejler. Altogether we have 1,500 Sorbian song lyrics documented (Nedo 1966: 176).

Nowadays, the Sorbian languages are highly endangered; for Lower Sorbian the number of native speakers is down to a few hundred (Walde 2004, Lewaszkiewicz 2014). For Upper Sorbian, there is still a territory where Sorbian is being passed on as a family language, but their number is declining fast as well and might be no more than 5,000 (ibid.). On the one hand, the Sorbian languages display strong German influence in every subsystem of the language, on the other hand we find archaic phenomena like a complete dual[6] or supine[7].

3 Verbal art from Proto-Indo-European to Slavic

> We are inclined to view the oral tradition of a culture as an early stage of progress, succeeded by the more stable and permanent stage of recorded language. (Berleant 1973: 340)

PIE seems to have had two distinct types of metrics, a syllable-based one with a quantitative rhythm and a fixed number of syllables as well as a so-called strophic style with relatively short lines and no syllable count. According to Fortson (2010: 35), this style is especially characteristic of archaic liturgical and legal texts.

---

[5]It was obviously not possible to record performances and intervals and rhythm were written through the filter of musical notation for classical European sheet music.

[6]The dual does not only occur with nouns and adjectives, but PRONouns, verbs etc. as well, and it does not need a trigger (like *two* or *both*) to be used, e.g. 'those (two) children are playing' would be USo *wonej dźěsći sej hrajkatej* PRON.NOM.DU N.NOM.DU PRON.DAT V_2/3du as opposed to 'those children are playing' *wone dźěći sej hrajkaja.* PRON.NOM.PL N.NOM.PL PRON.DAT V.3PL (cf. Faßke & Michalk 1980: 429ff, fn. 29).

[7]In Lower Sorbian, the supine is a form of the infinitive required when expressing a movement involved in order to act, e.g. *I go to sleep* vs. *I want to sleep.* The first sentence would be expressed with a supine (LSo *du spat [V.1SG V_SUP]*), the second with an infinitive (*cu spaś [V.1SG V.INF]*). Cf. Janaš (1976: 354)

The *syllabic* type is commonly known from antique epics like the Vedic Rig-veda (presumably from the second millenium BCE[8]), the Sanskrit Mahābhārata (ca. 400 BCE[9]), the Old Greek Illiad and Odyssey (presumably 8th century BCE[10]) as well as all the Latin classics. The system is based on vowel length and consonant clusters. Vowels can feature *natural* or *positional* length whereby *positional length* basically means a short vowel and a consonant cluster.

In this type, end rhymes, alliterations and so on can occur. However end-rhymes do not play a central role (Coulson 2017: 17f, 211f).

The strophic type in Hittite, Avestan, Umbrian, Classical Armenian and Old Irish shows that both forms have co-existed with the same geographical scope, since Umbrian coexisted with Latin, and so did Avestian and Sanscrit. This type is characterised by grammatical and phonetic parallelism (Fortson 2010: 35).

As has been argued that the strophic style might be the older one (Fortson 2010: 35), but this discussion is outside the scope of this article. Let it suffice to agree that both types were present at a late PIE period. As it seems, it was perfectly possible to combine both types and end up with a syllable-counting system containing alliterations, as can be seen from the example of a South Picene epitaph given by Fortson (2010: 301), the inscription Sp TE 2, found in Bellante near Teramo:

(1) postin viam   videtas tetis   tokam   alies
     along road-ACC.SG see-2.PL Titus-GEN.SG toga-ACC.SG Alius-GEN.SG
     esmen   vepses vepeten
     this-LOC buried grave-LOC.SG
     "Along the road you see the toga of Titus Alius buried in this grave"

While much of the interpretation is still open to guesswork, the artistic part is much clearer: We have three alliterating phrases consisting of seven syllables each which can again be divided into two two-syllable units and a final trisyllable. In each of the phrases we have alliterations: *viam – videtas*, *tetis – tokam*, *vepses – vepeten*.

Repetition of sounds (including alliteration, assonance, and, less frequently, end-rhyme) is characteristic of IE poetry even outside the strophic style. A line like the following, from the Roman comic playwright Plautus (*Miles Gloriosus* 603), is quite typical of the technique:

---

[8]Cf. Fortson (2010: 208).

[9]No exact date can be given, but the compilation must have been undertaken after Pā ṇini's work (Fortson 2010: 208).

[10]Fortson (2010: 249).

(2) sī minus cum cūrā aut cautēlā locus loquendī lēctus est
     "If your place of conference is chosen with insufficient care or caution
     ...(trans. P. Nixon)

We have the alliterating *k* sounds (spelled *c*) of *cum cura aut cautela* followed by *l*'s in *locus loquendi lectus*, all of which also have *k* sounds in their interior [...]. In Plautus, the repetition of these sounds is partly for comic effect [...] (Fortson 2010: 37)

Of course, the sound effects can vary and all sound patterns as well as the rhythmical patterns can also serve to provide a mnemonic aid and, therefore, ensure that the text is passed on unchanged. That would be especially important in liturgical and legal texts of all sorts as well as folk medicine, sorcery, etc.

The sound changes which led to the rise of Proto-Slavic[11] (PSl) had a very significant impact on both of these systems. First, the PIE opposition of long and short vowels was abandoned. As a result there was no phonological vowel length (although the PSl yers[12] must have been much shorter than the other vowels, cf. Schaarschmidt 1997: 48ff). Secondly, the principle of open syllables greatly reduced the possibility of having consonant clusters.[13] This would have impacted both the syllabic system and the strophic system as well because many consonants would disappear reducing the possibilities of consonant alliterations. So while it is still possible to count syllables, the aesthetic system of versification must have undergone significant changes in PSl times.

4 Verbal art and Sorbian

In Old Sorbian, closed syllables were possible again after the fall of the weak yers.[14] This reduced the number of syllables which would have been the only preserved feature of verbal art from PIE times then. Other changes also occurred affecting consonants or eliminating certain consonant groups. (Due to the lack of written documents it is not possible to date these changes absolutely.)

The following facts are noteworthy:

---

[11]According to Fortson (2010: 419) this occurred before the 5th century.

[12]Yers were ultrashort vowels reflecting mostly PIE *u and *i; they got lost in many positions later in the individual Slavic languages.

[13]For an extensive introduction of the sound changes of PSl see the introductory chapters of Leskien (1969) and Trunte (1990).

[14]Since the yers were vowels, the loss of them in certain positions (e.g. at the end of the word) led to loss of syllables and to closed syllables preceding the syllable containing the yer, e.g. PSl *onъ > USo wón, cf. Schaarschmidt (1997: 57f)

- While there is a well-known bardic tradition in both South and East Slavic cultures (as well as Celtic and Germanic), no such traditions are mentioned for Sorbian. This likely owes to the fact that the Sorbian gentry (as well as other Slavic tribes of the Slavia Germanica) was germanised early on. Accordingly, Sorbian bards would not find a society with good conditions to support or sustain Sorbian bardic traditions.[15] This would mean that Sorbian lacked professional bards who could ensure that songs are being passed on properly[16] and that the hidden meanings and metaphors will be taught to the people.

- Traditional South Slavonic and Eastern Slavonic poems are dekasyllabic. Rawp (1957) showed that not even the oldest surviving Sorbian songs are dekasyllabic. So we do not find a cultural connection between Sorbian and East/South Slavonic bardic tradition here.

- Virtually all Sorbian cultural traditions were living and being passed on orally in the so-called *přaza/pśěza*[17] (until well after WWII) by normal village people who were mostly unable to read or write their Sorbian native tongue.

- Songs were passed on by ordinary people coming over from other villages to work. Usually people were keen to be taught new songs and Sorbians travelling to other Sorbian villages could be sure of being asked for all the songs they knew.

Sorbian Studies have so far focused on written texts (e.g. Jenč 1956) depicting Jurij Mjeń (1727–1785) as the founder of profane Sorbian literature[18] with his translation of a part of Klopstock's Messias and his *Ryćerski kěrliš* in clean hexametres (Stone 2012), Handrij Zejler as the father of Sorbian poetry and songs and so on.

---

[15]In the 13th century, there was a known Slavic ministrel Wizlav III from the Isle of Rügen (Cf. Rawp 1978: 12f). While the melodies are said to contain Slavic elements (ibid.), the words of all 17 songs which have been preserved are in German, cf. https://archive.thulb.uni-jena.de/collections/receive/HisBest_cbu_00008218 (accessed 18-09-2019).

[16]Nedo (1966: 197) remarks that in many cases the lyrics of the songs have been corrupted.

[17]While the translation would simply be *spinning room,* it was more an institution of village life where not only work would be done (like typically spinning and shearing of feathers), but stories were told, songs were sung, people of all generations met and traditions were passed on.

[18]Cf. Jenč (1956: 130), and Čermák & Maiello (2011: 76).

Pawoł Nedo (1908–1984) declares Sorbian folksongs[19] as primitive, non-elaborated, imperfect, lacking rhyme, neglecting the fact that in German (which he tacitly keeps in mind) end-rhymes only became predominant in the High MA in the courts of Europe:

> Das wichtigste Kennzeichen der gebundenen Volkssprache ist der Rhythmus, mit dem das Volk [...] recht großzügig verfuhr, entweder, weil es ihm keine entscheidende Bedeutung beimaß oder weil es eine klare rhythmische Durcharbeitung nicht bewältigte. (Nedo 1966: 197)[20]

Nedo does notice alliterations, but does not investigate them, and calls them a substitute for the missing or imperfect rhyme[21]:

> Die sorbischen Lieder kennen auch keinen bewußt und systematisch angewandten Endreim. Wenn der Endreim erscheint, so hat man oft den Eindruck der Zufälligkeit, und er ähnelt oft mehr einer Assonanz. (Nedo 1966: 197)[22]

Nedo does not give examples for rhymes he considers to be imperfect, so it can only be guessed what he had in mind. He never considers the possibility that traditional Sorbian songs and music might have had its own artistic criteria so that a rhyme he perceives as imperfect or accidental might have been completely fine for the artistically educated Sorb of that time because perception of artistic means is influenced by education to a large degree.[23] For music, something similar has been attested: Christian missionaries described Sorbian singing as cacophonic (Rawp 1978: 11).[24] Thus, it would have been logical and even compelling to consider such a possibility for poetry as well.

---

[19]The songs at issue are the traditional songs found mostly in Smoleŕ & Haupt (1843), not the romantic songs composed by Kocor and Zejler during the 19th century.

[20]"The principal feature of folk poetry is rhythm, which has been treated rather sloppily by the ordinary people, either because it did not seem relevant to them or because they were unable to cope with it properly." [EW]

[21]"[...] ein Stilmittel [...], das offenbar den fehlenden oder unsauberen Reim ersetzen soll" (Nedo 1966: 199) The term *imperfectness* is also being used by Kayser (1954: 98) if an assonance is used at the end of a verse.

[22]"Sorbian songs do not even know a systematical and intentional end-rhyme. Where an end-rhyme occurs, it seems to be accidental and it looks more like an assonance." [EW]

[23]The Welsh verses we will discuss later in this paper are such an example: Welsh end-rhymes usually consist of a stressed and an unstressed verse while e.g. in German poetry both normally display the same stress pattern (Kayser 1954: 40f). Of course, there are other types of end-rhyme, notably *proest* which requires that the vowel of the rhyming syllables be of different quality (Llwyd 2007: 149ff).

[24]Slaviūnas (1958: 22) attests that in traditional Lithuanian songs parallel seconds are being perceived as aethetically pleasing.

After the crushing verdict of one of the most outstanding and well-known protagonists of Sorbian culture and Sorbian public life (Nedo had been e.g. head of the Domowina, the chief organisation of the Sorbs, for many years), Sorbian folksongs have not been researched further.[25]

On general grounds, Nedo's view which implies that Sorbian folk songs lack artistic elaboration or structures should be rejected. But his view on his own culture shows that such structures are either very much different from what he expected or hoped to find or veiled by language change (or both). Such different aesthetic systems can be found in Germanic *Stabreimdichtung* or Welsh *cynghanedd* (as seen in the following chapter). In both cases, verses are structured by means of alliterations.

5 Verbal art in Old German poetry

While Old Germanic poetry is usually dominated by alliteration rhymes (Jankuhn & Hoops 2005: 435ff), this is not true for Old German poetry. In German literature these structures have mostly disappeared:

> Die Menge überlieferter Stabreimdichtung ist in den einzelnen germanischen Sprachen recht verschieden. Im Ahd. sind es nicht mehr als 200 Zeilen. Hier scheint die Tradition im 9. Jh abgerissen zu sein [...]" (Von See 1967: 1f)[26]

Here is a well-known example from Hildebrand's song (von Eckhart 1729: 864):

(3) hiltibraht enti haðubrant, untar heriun tuem
     "Hildebrand and Hadubrand, between hosts two"

This is the so-called *long verse* according to Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) which is supposed to be divided into two parts, the (underlined) *staff* occurs twice in the

---

[25] A few years before, Jan Rawp (Raupp) had written on Sorbian songs: "Die formale Seite der [...] Liedtexte erweist sich in manchem als eigenartig und reizvoll. Sprachliche Gestaltungsmerkmale wie Epitheta, Alliterationen, Interjektionen u. a. vertiefen Ausdruck und Sinngebung." [Formally, the lyrics of the songs are in many ways strange and appealing. Linguistic means such as epitheta, alliterations, interjections etc. emphasise expression and meaning.] (Raupp 1966: 10). Rawp was not only a scientist, but also a musician and composer, so he had a different approach than Nedo, but unfortunately he was unable to continue his work due to health reasons.

[26] The amount of traditional alliterational poetry varies according to the language at issue. In Old High German there are not more than 200 verses. Here, the tradition was discontinued during the 9th century.

first and once in the second part (where it is supposed to be in the only stressed word). It should be pointed out that this means that there had been at least about 200 years of contact and cultural exchange between Sorbs and Germans at that time.

6 Verbal art in Celtic poetry (Welsh)

There are no Celtic monuments documenting verbal art from the region which is now Germany and from the Celtic cultures that must have been in contact with the Slavic and German cultures. Therefore, some Welsh verses will be taken as an example for Celtic since Welsh versification is very well documented (Morris-Jones 1930, Llwyd 2007). The following verses from the 15th century by Dafydd ap Edmwnd will illustrate the intricate sound patterns as well as how easy it is to miss them if one is not familiar with them:[27]

(4) Oeri y bûm ar y barth er cyn cof, a'r ci'n cyfarth.
"Freezing I was on the ground longer than memory, and the dog was barking."

People mainly familiar with modern Sorbian, Lithuanian or German poetry might only spot the end-rhyme and some individual alliterations (*bûm – barth, ci – cyfarth*), but only very few will be aware of the full complexity of the verse if they have never been introduced to the system of *cynghanedd:*[28]

(5) Oeri y bûm ar y barth

features a repeating sound pattern *r-b* repeating in the first and the second part of the verse

(6) er cyn cof, a'r ci'n cyfarth.

shows an even more intricate pattern *r-c-n-c-f.*

---

[27]The following analysis is by no means complete. It mainly serves as an example of an intricate system of alliteration which is still alive and well documented.

[28]For a full description of *cynghanedd* as well as the *cynghaneddion* given here, see Morris-Jones (1930) and Llwyd (2007).

As mentioned above, there is no surviving poetry from the continental Celtic tribes that were originally in contact with the German and Slavic tribes, but it can be safely assumed that they will also have possessed a system of sound alliterations for verbal art, because, as aforementioned, these alliteration systems can be traced back to PIE times. For the same reason, it can be assumed that the Slavic tribes that were in contact with Germanic and Celtic tribes must have had an at least remotely similar system due to both heritage and ongoing cultural contact.

7 Verbal art in Sorbian folk songs

Nedo dedicates only three pages to the language of the Sorbian folk songs (Nedo 1966: 196–199) and describes figures of speech only superficially. He notices the existence of repetitions, epitheta and assonances without investigating them further. Figure 3 provides a sample verse from an Upper Sorbian folk song from Smoleŕ & Haupt (1843: 86), but comprehensive research is necessary.

The theme of the song is the widespread (in folk songs throughout Europe) *knight takes girl* which might have some grounds in Slavic exogamy, but interesting is the lexeme *šelma* since the word originally means 'carrion, rotting carcass' and later 'villain' and 'executioner' (Kluge 2001: 798).

(7) a. Přišoł je šelma mi šelmowski,
V_ł.SG.M COP.3SG N.NOM.SG.M PRON.DAT.1SG A.NOM.SG.M
Come has villain me villainous

b. Přišoł je šelma a wzał je ju
V_ł-SG-M COP.3SG N.NOM.SG.M CON V_ł-SG-M COP.3SG PRON.ACC.SG.F
Come has [a] villain and taken has her
preč,
ADV
away

c. Hišće mje njeje na kwas prosył.
ADV PRON.ACC.1SG COP.3SG.NEG PREP N.SG.ACC.M V_ł.SG.M
even me hasn't to wedding asked.

"Came a villainous villain,
Came a villain and took her away
Did not even invite me to the wedding."

Following Nedo's statements there is a typical repetition (*přišoł je šelma*) and a tautological adjective follwing the noun (*šelma … šelmowski*) "for greater poet-

LI.

Zjěbany luby.
(Z Koćiny.)

Der betrogene Liebhaber.
(Aus Kotten.)
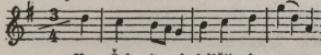
Tempo di menuetto.

Ha   Šoł   je tón hólčik tón runy pu-ćik , ha na-dejšoł , na-dejšoł runy du-bik , ha na-dej-šoł , nadejšoł runy du
Der Bursch ist ge-gangen den graden Weg , ge-kommen zum gra - den Ei - chenbaum , ge-kommen zum gra-den Ei - cher

Šoł je tón hólčik tón runy pućik, Nadejšoł, nadejšoł runy dubik. :,:	1	Der Bursch ist gegangen den graden Weg, Gekommen zum graden Eichenbaum. :,:
Wurjezał je sej tam hałžčičku, Wudžjelał je sebi piščałku. :,:	3	Geschnitten hat er sich ein Ästelein, Gemacht hat daraus er ein Pfeifelein. :,:
Tak sej wón weselje zapiska, Ze swojej' zrudneje wutroby, Ze swojmaj płačitomaj wočomaj :	5	So spielt' er ein fröhliches Lied sich auf, Aus seinem Herzen, das trauerte schwer, Aus seinen Augen, die weinten so sehr:
Ja mam tam lubku haj susodžinku, Ja mam tam lubku mi rjanu holčku. :,:	8	Ich hab' dort ein Liebchen, ein Nachbarskind, Ich hab' dort ein Liebchen, ein Mädchen so sch
Druzy tam khodža k nej z weselosću, Ja pak, mój bóžo, ze zrudnosću. :,:	10	Die Andern gehn zu ihr mit Freudigkeit, Ich aber, mein Gott, nur mit Traurigkeit. :,:
Pšišoł je šelma mi šelmowski, Pšišoł je šelma a wzał je ju preč, Hišće me neje na kwas prosył.	12	Ein Schelm ist gekommen, ein schelmischer Sch Ein Schelm ist gekommen und nahm sie mir w Und lud mich nicht einmal zur Hochzeit ein.
Džensa je kwas ha za tydźeń zas, Neńdu ja na tón, da na tamón du, Da na tamón tola zawjesći du.	15	Und heute ist Hochzeit und künftige Woch', Und geh' ich nicht heute, geh' später ich doch, Gewiss und wahrhaftig geh' später ich doch.

Figure 3: Text fragment from Upper Sorbian Folk Song

ical expressiveness" (Nedo 1966: 198). However, if an older version of the text[29] is assumed, a different picture emerges. Therefore we assume a state after the falling of the weak yers and denasalisation of nasal vowels, but before assibilation of *ŕ, vowel changes (caused by palatalisations and labialisations) and the establishing of word-initial stress in prefixes:[30]

(8)   Prišel je šelma mi šelmowski,
      Prišel je šelma a wzäl je ju proč,
      Hišće mje njeje na kwas prosyl.

---

[29]This has so far only been tried for a Sorbian song by Rawp (1957) in order to establish the original number of syllables of the song verses, but not in order to identify other linguistic means of verbal art.

[30]The following (reconstructed) verses are otherwise identical to the ones already annotated. Discussing the individual sound changes in Sorbian is beyond the scope of this article, and we must point the reader to Schaarschmidt (1997).

When looking at the first two verses in example 9, note the complex alliteration rhyme with a staff *šel/zäl*. The *w* belongs phonetically to the preceding syllable:

(9) Prišel je šelma mi šelmowski,
      Prišel je šelma a wzäl je ju proč,

The first two verses start with the same pattern *pr*, which is repeated in the last stressed syllables of the last two verses creating a frame:

(10) Prišel je šelma mi šelmowski,
      Prišel je šelma a wzäl je ju proč,
      Hišće mje njeje na kwas prosyl.

The vowel scheme of the first four syllables is identical in all three verses which suggests that the song was originally sung in a canon-like way[31] :

(11) Prišel je šelma mi šelmowski,
      Prišel je šelma a wzäl je ju proč,
      Hišće mje njeje na kwas prosyl.

Sound structures such as the ones outlined here can be found in many songs. The function of connecting verses can also be taken over by a cynghanedd-like assonance (they also have the same stress and are accented) which can be found e.g. in the first verse of *Rubježnicy* (Smoleŕ & Haupt 1843: 29):

(12) Jědlenki   su   rubali   a   rěbliki   su   dźěłali
      N.acc-pl cop.3pl V_ł.pl conj N.acc.pl cop.3pl V_ł.pl
      pine-trees they-have chopped and ladders   they-have wrought

Here a structure *r-b-l – r-b-l* occurs between the verses (*rubali – rěbliki*). Around these, there is twice *ki-su,* adding another element of symmetry as well as an onomatopoëtic feature (the chopping of the axes). Furthermore, the *d-l* of *jědlenki* finds an equivalent in *dź-ł* of *dźěłali* with palatalisations inversed. Finally, there are also inner rhymes *ki-li-ki-li* (all these syllables are accentuated in the song).

As can be seen, there seems to have been a very rich, dense, and intricate alliterational system which needs further investigation in order to try and reconstruct individual elements of this system.

---

[31]Slaviūnas states that many of the Lithuanian threefold *sutartinės* were sung in as strict canons (Slaviūnas 1958: 14) and that assonances are a necessary part of them (op. cit.:18).

8 Verbal art in Sorbian monuments

In this part, the results of the analysis of the folk song will be applied to one of the oldest Lower Sorbian monuments, i.e. Richter's baptizing agenda from 1543. It sports several unique features, but because of the sparseness of documents from this period, some of them are hard to evaluate (see Figure 4):
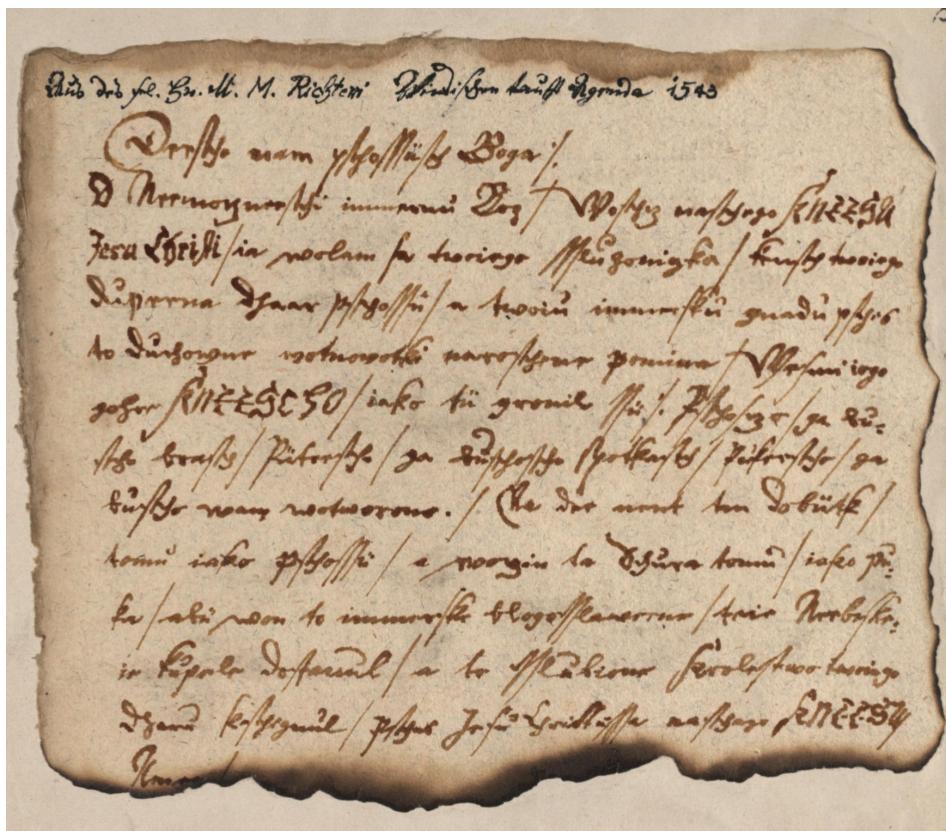
Figure 4: Lower Sorbian baptising agenda from 1543 (Source: https://sachsen.digital/werkansicht/dlf/172704/3/0/#)

- The monument shows a change *aj > ej throughout (**dajśo 2pl IMP ´to give´ > dejśo, *pytajśo 2pl IMP ´to look for´ > pytejśo, *pukajśo 2pl IMP ´to make burst´ > pukejśo[32]), which is phonetically very plausible, but not known from other monuments.

---

[32]Since orthographical issues are not being discussed here, all examples are given in a modernised orthography.

- There is *kśignuś* (or maybe *kšygnuś*) instead of the expected *krygnuś 'to get' (loanword from German *kriegen*). Schuster-Šewc (1983: 690) interprets this *kśignuś* as a hypercorrect form, but to all that is known it might as well be a dialectal variation. Probably the sound change at issue had not occurred long ago (people were still aware of it in the late 18th century, cf. Schlegel 2019: 31).

Even more striking is the term *blogoslowjenje* 'blessing' which is obviously a Church Slavonic (ChSl) term (*blagoslavljenъje*) where we would strongly expect something like *žognowanje* (from German *segnen*) because that is the only attested term for 'blessing' in any other Sorbian monuments and because there are many other German loanwords in this monument as well. The phonetic adaptation of the word, however, makes it very plausible that it is part of a very old (and at that time long severed) ChSl connection and not merely an ad-hoc-loanword introduced by an educated writer.

The most interesting part, however, is the rendering of Mt 7,7:

> Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

From the phonological system of the monument and other Sorbian (or Polish or Czech) sources, we would expect the following translation:

(13) Pšosćo, ga buźo wam dano; pytejśo, ga
V.2ᴘʟ.ɪᴍᴘ ᴄᴏɴᴊ ᴄᴏᴘ.3ꜱɢ.ꜰᴜᴛ ᴘʀᴏɴ.ᴅ.2ᴘʟ ᴘᴀʀᴛ.ɴᴏᴍ.ꜱɢ.ɴ; V.2ᴘʟ.ɪᴍᴘ ᴄᴏɴᴊ
buźóšo namakaś; klapejśo, ga buźo wam
ᴄᴏᴘ.2ᴘʟ.ꜰᴜᴛ V.ɪɴꜰ V.2ᴘʟ.ɪᴍᴘ ᴄᴏɴᴊ ᴄᴏᴘ.3ꜱɢ.ꜰᴜᴛ ᴘʀᴏɴ.ᴅᴀᴛ.2ᴘʟ
wotworjono.
ᴘᴀʀᴛ.ɴ.ꜱɢ.ɴ

However, the words in the monument read[33]:

(14) Pšosćo, ga buźo braś;
V.2ᴘʟ.ɪᴍᴘ ᴄᴏɴᴊ ᴄᴏᴘ.3ꜱɢ.ꜰᴜᴛ V.ɪɴꜰ
pytejśo, ga buźóšo spotkaś; pukejśo, ga buźo
V.2ᴘʟ.ɪᴍᴘ ᴄᴏɴᴊ ᴄᴏᴘ.2ᴘʟ.ꜰᴜᴛ V.ɪɴꜰ V.2ᴘʟ.ɪᴍᴘ ᴄᴏɴᴊ ᴄᴏᴘ.3ꜱɢ.ꜰᴜᴛ
wam wotworjono.
ᴘʀᴏɴ.ᴅᴀᴛ.2ᴘʟ ᴘᴀʀᴛ.ɴ.ꜱɢ.ɴ

---

[33]Lines 6-8 of the manuscript, rendered in contemporary orthography for convenience´s sake.

According to any other source of Lower Sorbian, this sentence should be translated as:

> Ask, and he will take; seek, and ye shall stumble; make it burst, and it shall be opened for you.

Schuster does not discuss this passage at all (Schuster-Šewc 1967: 293), but simply states in the Sorbian etymological dictionary (Schuster-Šewc 1983) that *spotkaś* also means 'to find', and that *pukaś* also means 'to knock at a door' (as in Polish *pukać*) although this document is the only source for these meanings. But even then, the passage remains unclear (*ask, and he will take*). In his edition of Sorbian language monuments (1967) Schuster therefore tacitly conjectures *pšosćo, ga buźo braś* to *pšosćo, ga buźošo braś,* which means *ask, and you will take* (Schuster-Šewc 1967: 293). But in spite of the conjecture, the translation is still not an acceptable translation of Mt 7,7.[34] Keeping in mind that the document does not contain any obvious errors, I would be unwilling to accept the conjecture, especially since it fails to provide a full explanation of the deviations from other documents.

One interpretation is that this passage is an old parody[35] which is found in the manuscripts of Thietmar von Merseburg, where the Greek *κύριε ἐλέησον* had been turned into a sentence meaning 'there is an alder-tree at the bush' (Stone 2015: 27). The first part (*ask and he shall take*) could then refer to taxes and duties. But it is also possible that the changes were introduced solely in order to produce an aesthetically more pleasing text. Sorbian culture at that time was an oral culture, not a written one, and Christian contents were in any case unintelligible to the Sorbian peasants. Therefore, while a priest could not excel by conveying content, he could still earn the respect of his parish demonstrating oratory skills. Accordingly, the sentence in example 15 will be considered from an artistic standpoint, starting with the expected (reconstructed) wording (differences between this reconstruction and the monument are underlined):[36]

---

[34]It should be mentioned that there is a translation in the oldest Upper Sorbian catechism of Warichius from 1595 (Schuster-Šewc 2001: 126) which is in line with Schuster´s conjecture (not with the manuscript discussed here) which could be from a different part of the Bible (John 16:24) and which we will not discuss here as it is significantly more recent and from a different region.

[35]I would like to thank Patrick McCafferty from the UL for pointing out that such parodies exist in Irish. In a Slavic context, one could compare the oldest Western Slavonic (presumably Old Sorbian) sentence ukriwolsa.

[36]Newer phonology can be applied here. Only *r is reintroduced instead of š in *pšosćo* so the reader without knowledge in historical Sorbian phonology can follow more easily. Speakers were still aware of the change *r > š at the end of the 18th century (Schlegel 2019: 31), and the aforementioned example of *kšygnuś* vs. *krygnuś* shows that this sound change was still active for the time of the monument examined here.

(15)   Prosćo, ga buźo <u>Wam dano</u>.
         Pytejśo, ga buźośo <u>namakaś</u>.
         <u>Klapejśo</u>, ga buźo Wam wotworjono.

Observe how all the verses consist of two parts. There is an alliteration p-p in the first two lines, while the second part of all three verses start with *ga buźo*. There is also a sort of climax in the second parts of the verses in so far as there are six syllables in the first verse (*ga buźo Wam dano*), seven in the second (*ga buźośo namakaś*) and eight in the last verse (*ga buźo Wam wotworjono*). This might have been perceived as an aesthetically pleasing starting point, but from an artistic point of view, it could definitely be improved.

Looking at the first verse, *Wam dano* displays no alliteration or assonances and is not linked to anything. However, substituting *Wam dano* with *braś* does two things:

1. It creates a sound chain *pr – b – br.*

2. It changes the meaning from *it will be given to you* to *(he) will take*, which could be a message along the lines of: *Now it sounds correctly and we can understand it properly: so that is what the Christians really mean – they are not giving, but taking.* This might reflect the experience of the Sorbians with the Christian church as they were forced to attend church service (Knauthe 1767: 150).

Assuming a change of the text here from *Wam dano* to *braś* would also explain the fact that we have *buźo* 3.sg and not *buźośo* 2.pl and would render Schuster's tacit conjecture unnecessary.

In the second verse, we have the same artistic problem – *namakaś* is not connected. The substitution of *namakaś* with *spotkaś* again has two effects:

- It creates an alliteration *p-t – p-t* with *pytejśo – spotkaś.*

- It creates a parody *seek and you shall – no, not find, but stumble.* Knauthe (1767: 120ff) mentions the Sorbians did not like to go into the cold and dark Christian churches.

And finally, when substituting *klapejśo* with *pukejśo* (which is not so far away semantically), there is a much better alliteration, connecting all three verses with *prosćo – pytejśo – pukejśo* (not unlike *veni – vidi – vici*). Furthermore, the second and the third verse are connected with *pytejśo – spotkaś – pukejśo* through the

voiceless stops *p-t − p-tk − p-k*. The substitution again adds to the parody as well, stating that you will *not* find open doors by knocking on them, but that you have to force them open.

So there is a case to be made that the citation of Mt 7,7 found here is an old parody rather than a translation. The fact that this passage is found in a baptising agenda and therefore in a context where a parody should not appear would require that this parody is much older than the monument and that the parody was not perceived as such by the person who incorporated it into the agenda.[37]

The alternative explanation is much less convincing: It requires the dialect of Zossen to have evolved lexically rather differently to everything else we know about Lower Sorbian of that time; it would not explain the artistic sound structures (or explain them as coindicences), but even then, it would require a conjecture and leaves the part *pšosćo, ga bužo[śo] braś* partly unexplained.

9 Summary

In spite of the assertions made by Nedo (1966), the analyzed samples of Sorbian traditional folk songs feature interesting artistic means which are, however, significantly different from what we would expect from a German perspective. They seem to be based on various types of rhymes including alliteration, not unlike Germanic *Stabreimdichtung* or Welsh *cynghanedd.* Especially alliterating verse may be the oldest surviving attestation of Sorbian verbal art.

As shown, original rhymes were lost to corruption during the oral transmission of texts or obscured by later Sorbian sound changes. We therefore have to assume that it will only be possible to recover parts of the alliteration schemes. However, with *Stabreimdichtung* disappearing in Old High German as early as the 9th century, the Sorbian songs would be the oldest (and only) source of poetry of that kind that survived to this day from the former Slavic and now germanised region. As such patterns can also be found in translations of liturgical texts, they for sure go beyond aesthetic purposes. Indeed, apart from their former functions, they help reconstruct texts. Investigating them in detail would require a multidisciplinary philological project since all areas at issue are sparsely documented and have to be further explored. Historical linguistics needs the input

---

[37]Perhaps the parody was at that time so old that it had faded away, or the priest who originally adopted them (who might not have had fluent Sorbian) had been "taught" these words by the community. Cf. again the oldest Western Slavonic sentence cited in the chronicle of Thietmar von Merseburg, where the people claim that their corrupted version is what they had been taught by Boso, the first bishop of Merseburg. (Stone 2015: 27)

from literature, cultural studies, and musical studies as well. For example, on the one hand, historical sound changes help to unearth elements of verbal art; on the other hand, it is possible to date the historical sound changes more exactly because of their effects on alliterations.

Abbreviations

V	verb	SG	singular
COP	copula	DU	dual
N	noun	PL	plural
A	adjective	M	masculine
ADV	adverb	F	feminine
CON	conjunction	N	neuter
PRON	pronoun	NOM	nominative
PREP	preposition	GEN	genitive
PART	participle	DAT	dative
ł	ł-form used for most compound tenses and moods	ACC	accusative
		INF	infinitive
		SUP	supine
IMP	imperative		

References

Berleant, Arnold. 1973. The verbal presence: An aesthetics of literary performance. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31(3). 339–346. DOI: 10.2307/429164.

Čermák, Radek & Giuseppe Maiello. 2011. *Nástin dějin a literatury Lužických Srbů*. Brno: Středoevropské centrum slovanských studií.

Coulson, Michael. 2017. *Complete Sanskrit.* revised by Richard Gombrich and James Benson. London: Hodder Education.

Faßke, Helmut & Siegfried Michalk. 1980. *Grammatik der Obersorbischen Schriftsprache der Gegenwart: Morphologie.* Bautzen: Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR.

Fortson, Benjamin W. 2010. *Indo-European language and culture: An introduction* (Blackwell Textbooks in Linguistics). Chichester: Wiley.

Janaš, Pětr. 1976. *Niedersorbische Grammatik: Für den Gebrauch der Sorbischen Erweiterten Oberschule.* Bautzen: Domowina Verlag.

Jankuhn, Herbert & Johannes Hoops. 2005. *Reallexikon der germanischen altertumskunde.* 2nd edn. Vol. 29. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.

Jenč, Rudolf. 1956. *Stawizny serbskeho pismowstwa*. Vol. 1. Nakl. Domowiny.

Kayser, Wolfgang. 1954. *Kleine deutsche Versschule*. Lehnen Verlag München.

Kluge, Friedrich. 2001. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. Vol. 24. bearbeitet von Elmar Seebold. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

Knauthe, Christian. 1767. *Derer Oberlausitzer Sorberwenden umständliche Kirchengeschichte*. Görtlitz.

Leskien, August. 1969. *Handbuch der altbulgarischen Sprache, Grammatik – Texte – Glossar*. Heidelberg.

Lewaszkiewicz, Tadeusz. 2014. Dolnołużycki i górnołużycki - języki zagrożone czy wymierające. *Slavia Occidentalis* 71(1). 37–53.

Llwyd, Alan. 2007. *Anghenion y gynghanedd: Fersiwn newydd*. Llandybïe: Cyhoeddiadau Barddas.

Morris-Jones, John. 1930. *Cerdd dafod sef celfyddyd barddoniaeth Gymraeg*. 2nd edn. Gwasg Prifysgol.

Nedo, Pawoł. 1966. *Grundriß der sorbischen Volksdichtung: Schriftenreihe des Instituts für sorbische Volksforschung in Bautzen*. Bautzen: Domowina Verlag.

Raupp, Jan. 1966. *Sorbische Musik*. Bautzen: Domowina Verlag.

Rawp, Jan. 1957. *Naše golcy z wojny jědu – staroserbski episki spěw*. Vol. C 2. 35-65. Letopis.

Rawp, Jan. 1978. *Serbska hudźba*. 2nd edn. Budyšin: Ludowe nakładnistwo Domowina.

Schaarschmidt, Gunter. 1997. *The historical phonology of the Upper and Lower Sorbian languages*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.

Schlegel, Matthias. 2019. Leben und Werk Johann Friedrich Fritzes. In *Festschrift zum 200. Todestag Johann Friedrich Fritzes*, 15–48. Kolkwitz: Evangelische Kirchengemeinde Kolkwitz.

Schuster-Šewc, Heinz. 1967. *Sorbische Sprachdenkmäler, 16.-18. Jahrhundert* (Schriftenreihe des Instituts für Sorbische Volksforschung in Bautzen 31). Bautzen: Domowina Verlag.

Schuster-Šewc, Heinz. 1983. *Historisch-etymologisches Wörterbuch der ober-und niedersorbischen Sprache*. 1978–1989. Bautzen: Domowina Verlag.

Schuster-Šewc, Heinz. 2001. Die ältesten Drucke des Obersorbischen. In Wenceslaus Warichius und Gregorius Martini (ed.). Bautzen.

Slaviūnas, Zenonas. 1958. *Sutartinès: Daugiabalsès lietuviu liaudies dainos. I[-II.] Sudaré ir paruosé Z. Slaviunas*. Valstybiné grozinés literaturos leidykla. http://www.sutartines.info (20 August, 2019).

Smoleŕ, Jan Arnošt & Leopold Haupt. 1843. *Volkslieder der Sorben in der Ober-und Niederlausitz: Pěsnički hornich a delnich Łužiskich Serbow*. Fotomechanischer

Neudruck mit einem Vorwort von Jan Raupp, Domowina Verlag, Bautzen 1984. Grimma: VEB Domowina-Verlag.

Stone, Gerald. 2012. Upper Sorbian recżerski in Jurij Mjeń's poem 'Sserſſkeje recżje samożenje a kwalbu we recżerſkim kyrliſchu' (1767): An amendment. In Irina Podterga (ed.), *Schnittpunkt Slavistik, Ost und West im wissenschaftlichen Dialog. Festgabe für Helmut Keipert zum 70. Geburtstag*, chap. Teil 3: Vom Wort zum Text. Bonn: V&R unipress.

Stone, Gerald. 2015. *Slav outposts in Central European history: The Wends, Sorbs and Kashubs.* digital edition. London/Oxford/New York/New Delhi/Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Trunte, Hartmut. 1990. *Ein praktisches Lehrbuch des Kirchenslavischen in 30 Lektionen. Zugleich eine Einführung in die slavische Philologie.* München: Otto Sagner.

Von See, Klaus. 1967. *Germanische Verskunst* (Sammlung Metzler. Abteilung E: Poetik 67). Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlangsbuchhandlung. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-476-99093-8.

von Eckhart, Johann Georg. 1729. *Commentarii de rebus Franciae orientalis et episcopatus vvirceburgensis...* Vol. 2. sumptibus almae Universitatis Juliae.

Walde, Martin. 2004. Demographisch-statistische Betrachtungen im Oberlausitzer Gemeindeverband „am Klosterwasser". *Lětopis* 51(1). 3–27.

Werner, Eduard. 2004. Das Petschaft von Kayna. In Uwe Junghanns (ed.), *Linguistische beiträge zur slavistik*, 63–72. (= Specimina Philologiae Slavicae 149). München: Sagner.

Werner, Edward. 2014. Dodawk k serbskej sadźe z lěta 1510. *Lětopis* 61(2). 55–57.