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Names of Snakes in Latvian Texts
of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Introduction

Latvian texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are rather specific in their thematic range: they are mostly religious texts, predominantly translations. The designations of animals in these texts are also specific, used in parables and in figurative meaning. Along with the translation of the Bible and its parts, original and translated church hymns as well as other religious texts, this period can be noted for the first dictionaries with Latvian part which contained quite a number of names for various animals. Other secular texts as statutes, local regulations, oaths or dedication poems contained very few animal names.

The compilation of Latvian dictionaries began in the seventeenth century, and some of them were published at that time, e.g. Lettus with supplements by Georg Mancelius (Manzel) in 1638, Dictionarium Polono-Latino-Lottauicum by Georg Elger in 1683. However, several of such works remained in manuscript form, therefore difficult to access, until the twentieth and even the twenty-first century (e.g. both...
texts of *Lettisches und Teutsches Wörterbuch* from the middle of the seventeenth century by Christopher Fürecker, anonymous Latvian-German dictionary *Manuale Lettico-Germanicum* from the end of the seventeenth century, and Latvian-German dictionary by Johannes Langius of 1685).

The supplement *Phraseologia lettica* of Mancelius’ *Lettus* contains approximately 160 designations of animals, and only some of these are names of exotic animals not found in Latvia. They were Latvianized in different ways: by loan translation, e.g. [German] *Mährkatze* / [Latvian] *Juhrs=kagkis* ‘monkey, literally: sea cat’ (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 275, l. 12), by phonetic and morphological adaptation of the foreign word, e.g. [German] *Pfaw* / [Latvian] *Pahwis* ‘peacock’ (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 279, l. 1), by new coinages utilizing already existing Latvian names for local animals, e.g. [German] *ein Camel* / [Latvian] *Mefcha=Sirrx* ‘camel, literally: forest horse’ (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 274, l. 9), [German] *Papagey* / [Latvian] *Wahdſemmes Wahlohdſe* ‘parrot, literally: German golden oriole’ (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 279, l. 4), or by providing descriptive translation, e.g. [German] *eine Löwe* / [Latvian] *Lowis* / *breeßmiex Swährs* ‘lion, literally: terrible beast’ (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 275, l. 21). Sometimes the compiler had difficulties to find an adequate German equivalent for the Latvian animal name. In such cases he gives a descriptive German designation, e.g. [German] *Roggen=Vogel mit langen Füſſen* / [Latvian] *Ꞩehjas=putnis Tittilbis* ‘sandpiper; rye bird with long legs’ (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 278, l. 21) or [German] *ein Vogel fo des Abends im wege gegen die Pferde ſcheuſt* / [Latvian] *Lehlis* ‘night jar; a bird that darts at horses on the road in the evening’ (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 278, l. 23).

The so-called first manuscript of Fürecker’s Latvian-German dictionary mentions a slightly smaller number of animals, however, many of them have synonyms, phonetic and morphological variants, and diminutive forms, e.g. stork has several names – *dzēse*, *melnsprāklis*, *stārķe*, *žugre*, *žugure*: [Latvian] *Dsehse, ſchuggre. Sem* [German] *Storch*. [Latvian] *Meln=sprahklis, id. Curl.* (Fuer1650_70_1ms, 1650–1670, p. 53, l. 24), [Latvian] *Schugure, Starke. Germ. ein Storch* (Fuer1650_70_2ms, 1650–1670, p. 368, l. 15); whereas eel is named as follows, *zutis*, *zutītis*, *zutēns*, *zutēniņš*: [Latvian] *Suttis*, [German] *Ein Aal*. [Latvian] *gen. pl. sufchu. Sutitis* [German] *Ein Aalchen*. [Latvian] *Sutens*, [German] *Ein halb gewachsener Aal*. [Latvian] *Sutteninfch*. [German] *Ein kleiner aal. etc.* (Fuer1650_70_1ms, 1650–1670, p. 271, l. 30–33). The only exotic animal mentioned in Fürecker’s manuscripts is ape: [Latvian] *Pehrtickś*. [German] *ein Affe* (Fuer1650_70_2ms, 1650–1670, p. 161, l. 1). However, it seems very likely that the word was added later because it is followed by references to late seventeenth-century print sources which were not available during Fürecker’s lifetime.

Leaving aside a detailed review of other seventeenth-century dictionaries, it can be stated that the compilers of earliest Latvian dictionaries mainly focused on local
animal names and their translations, providing exotic animal names only sporadi-
cally.¹

For the purposes of current study, religious texts comprise the translation of
biblical texts and their interpretations in sermons and church hymns. The Bible,
being a millenia-old text written in a different part of the world – the Middle East
(the Old Testament was written in Hebrew from the fifteenth to the fourth centuries
BCE, the New Testament – in Old Greek in the second half of the first century CE),
provides a limited but at the same time comparatively wide array of animal names.
Biblical texts feature a number of exotic animals that Latvians of the sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries had not seen and could not imagine (visualize), for instance,
lion or camel. On the other hand, these texts do not mention some animals that are
more characteristic to northern regions, e.g. snow bunting or elk. There are several
studies dedicated to the animals mentioned in the Bible that attest almost 200 items,
including both real (e.g. lion, tiger, cat, eagle, scorpion) and invented animals (e.g.
dragon) (see also Freedman, 1992; Souvay, 1907).² As mentioned above, Mancelius’
Lettus includes about 160 animal names, Fürecker’s manuscripts – only 120.

Although some translated excerpts from the Bible were published before the
full translation, there is no doubt that rendering the names of exotic animals into
Latvian was not an easy task for Ernst Glück, translator of the Bible (1685–1689).
The translation demonstrates several ways which were used by Glück and previ-
ous translators of the excerpts (see Kazakénaitė, 2019, p. 286) in solving translation
problems – in this case, naming in Latvian previously unknown and undesignated
animals:

(1) the names of exotic animals are substituted with names of local, familiar
animals, e.g. porcupine, an inhabitant of southern regions, was renamed hedgehog,
obviously on the grounds of a certain common feature – both animals have spines
(quills): Un es darriſchu to par Ihpaſchumu teem Eſeem, literally “And I will make it
property of hedgehogs” (VD1689_94, 1689 [1694], Isa, 14:23), in modern translation:
Atdošu dzeloņcūkām, literally “I will give it to porcupines” (Bībele, 2012, p. 1174);

(2) forming a descriptive name by adding some characteristic attribute to an
already known animal name, e.g. antelope was called mazais ēršķis (ēršķis in the sev-
enteenth century was a name for deer), possibly presuming that antelope was similar
to local deer because, like deer, it belonged to artiodactyla, had horns, although it
was smaller in size: Eřfchķis / Stirna un Meſcha=Wehrfis / un Meſcha=Ahfsis / un

¹ Usually from German into Latvian or from Latvian into German. The only exception is Elger’s

² In fact, these sources contain not a list of animals, but a list of possible animals because there are
instances when in Hebrew or Old Greek (and, of course, in other languages of translations) some ani-
mals are mentioned in descriptive way, e.g. liels jūras zvērs (a large sea beast) only suggests a possibility
that it might be crocodile.
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maſais Erščķis / un Breedis / un Meſcha=Kafa (VD1689_94, 1689 [1694], Deut, 14:5); here maſais Erščķis is literally ‘small deer’. In modern translation the same excerpt features the word antilope ‘antelope’ (Bībele, 2012, p. 321);

(3) exotic animal names are incorporated into the text almost without adaptation, literally taken over from Hebrew and only adding Latvian endings, for instance, in the following enumeration of different lizards: Kà tur irraid* Anaka / Koals / Letaā / Komets / un Tinfčamets. As a kind of justification the translator provides an asterisked footnote with explanation that Arabs know these lizards which are strange to Latvians: *Tahs irr peezas Tautas no Ķirfatehm, kas pee teem Arabeŗeem paņištamas, bet pee mums nepaņištamas irr, literally “These are five species of lizards which Arabs know but we are not familiar with” (VD1689_94, 1689 [1694], Lev, 11:30); in modern translation the same passage reads: un gekons un krokodils, un varans, un smilšu varans, un hameleons “the gecko, the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink and the chameleon”3 (Bībele, 2012, p. 188). Martin Luther’s Bible translation into German of 1545 reveals a different method: names of exotic animals are translated using familiar German designations: Der Jgel / der Molch / die Aydex / der Blindschleich / vnd der Maulworff, literally “hedgehog, newt, lizard, blindworm, and mole” (Luth1545, 1545);

(4) more often the translator gave preference to already adapted and possibly familiar names (used in texts prior to the full translation of the Bible) which were borrowed through German as an intermediary. Some of such words had been included in the first Latvian dictionary Lettus or its supplement Phraseologia lettica (Mac1638_L, 1638; Manc1638_PhL, 1638), e.g. in the Old Testament sentence atneeffe Seltu un Šudrabu / Elewantu=Kaulus / un Pehrtiķes / un Pawahs, literally “brought gold and silver, elephant bones, and monkeys, and peacocks” (VD1689_94, 1689 [1694], 1 Kgs, 10:22); for comparison – [German] ein Aff / [Latvian] Pehrte / Pehrtikis (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 276, l. 16), [German] Pfaw / [Latvian] Pahwis (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 279, l. 1).

In secular texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries like statutes of different levels, oaths, and dedication poems (but with the exception of dictionaries), animals are seldom mentioned and almost always in indirect manner, e.g. in the martial law statute of 1696, zirgs ‘horse’ is used in the phrase koka zirgs ‘wooden horse’, which, most probably, means a specific seventeenth-century punishment device: K as aiskawejahs us Krohńu Darbu eet / tam buhs us kohka Sirgu fehdeht, literally “He who is late for his state job, must sit on the wooden horse” (SKL1696_RA, 1696, par. 51). In a dedication poem the bird name balodis ‘pigeon’ is used in a complex name of a month: peektâ Deenâ Sehrkkīnu Mehnen / ko ir Ballojču Mehnefs

快餐， literally “the fifth day of the month of frozen snow-crust, which is also called pigeon’s month” (ZP1685, 1685, p. 1, l. 29).

Religious texts make up the largest part of texts from these centuries in terms of volume, both among manuscripts and printed texts, and consequently names of snakes are mostly found in Bible texts and texts related to the Bible. In light of this, the best insight into the usage of such names can be gained by studying those names that are used in the Bible.

In Latvia, there are three species of snakes: viper, grass snake, and smooth snake. Smooth snake, however, is a very rare animal in Latvia and, probably, was not widespread several centuries ago because its name was not registered in old written sources. On the other hand, lexicographic works have registered the word tārps in the meaning of ‘snake’.

In modern societies taboo words are usually related to sexual life, some physiological processes, etc. (Hock, 1996, pp. 231–234); several centuries ago taboo words as a rule designated something people were afraid of, for example, dangerous animals. Making taboo of dangerous animals resulted in a relatively faster change of their names. It is a characteristic feature that as a result of taboo, names of dangerous animals changed comparatively more often – names of snakes and crocodiles were made taboo already in ancient Egyptian (Rava-Cordier, 2010, p. 133).

The objective of the paper is: (1) to analyse the use of čūska, odze, zalktis, and tārps in Latvian texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, using materials of the Corpus of Early Written Latvian Texts in an attempt to determine how precisely the translators of religious texts rendered names of snakes, and to ascertain whether any semantic changes have taken place, or whether religious texts show specific use; (2) to find out if taboo and related euphemisation is reflected in early Latvian texts.

Čūska, čūška

The word čūska ‘snake’ does not belong to Common Baltic lexis (older designation for snake is odze, see discussion in the next sub-chapter); it is formed, according to some etymologists, on imitation of hissing sound, comparable to the word čūkstēt ‘to hiss, to sputter’ (Fraenkel LEW, 1962–1965, p. 305; ME, 1923–1932, vol. 1, p. 425), and most probably “in the past it was a cover name to substitute the older odze” (Karulis, 1992, vol. 1, pp. 192, 193). However, in seventeenth-century texts the word čūska (cf. LVVV, 2016) and its phonetic and morphological variants čūška, cūska, and cūška were used mostly in the sense ‘snake’ just like nowadays, so there is no ground to talk about semantic changes during the last four hundred years. One cannot deny that the word probably is relatively new; despite the fact that the first book in Latvian was published in 1585, the word čūska first appeared in print only in 1631.
In the translated parts of the Bible which were published earlier ‘snake’ was referred to as *odze* (in Modern Latvian: ‘viper’).

The word *čūska* in modern meaning was registered both in early lexicographic sources, e.g. in the first Latvian dictionary, Mancelius’ *Lettus* of 1638: [German] *Schlang* / [Latvian] *ťchuhška* (Manc1638_L, 1638, p. 157B, l. 1) and in Christopher Fürecker’s Latvia-German dictionary manuscript of the mid-seventeenth century: [Latvian] *Zuhschka*, [German] *eine Schlange* (Fuer1650_70_1ms, 1650–1670, p. 314, l. 10), and in religious texts, e.g. Glück’s translation of the New Testament of 1685: *Jeb kad tas kahdu Siwi luhdʃ / kas tam weenu Tzuhʃku dohtu?* “Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?” (JT1685, 1685, Matt, 7:10).

In religious texts the use of *čūska* was not infrequently symbolic. Of course, this is not peculiar to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Latvian religious texts; rather, it can be attributed to biblical symbolism in general – snake as a tempter of Eve in the first book of Moses (Genesis) is perceived as a symbol of Satan, whereas copper snake in the fourth book of Moses (Numbers) and in the Gospel of John in the New Testament is rather a positive image, a symbol of faith.

Especially in the books of New Testament and in interpretations of the Bible (e.g. in Mancelius’ three books of sermons) the word *čūska* refers to the concept of ‘devil, satan’, e.g. *Tahʃ ſeewas ſāhklai buhʃ tai Tſchuḫškai tam Wällam to Ghalwu faŢpahrdiet*, literally “The seed of the woman shall kick the head of snake, the devil” (Manc1654_LP1, 1654, p. 346, l. 28).

Such metaphorical use with the meaning ‘devil, satan’ is encountered in the word combination *veca čūska* ‘old snake’, typical for Mancelius’ religious works (in sermons and in the book of Latvian church hymns), e.g. *bett Jeſus Chriſtus gir wehl ſtipprahx / taʃ gir tam Wälla / tai wätzai Tſchuḫškai to ſpāḫku pa=jehmis*, literally “but Jesus Christ is even stronger, He has taken away the strength from the devil, the old snake” (Manc1654_LP1, 1654, p. 323, l. 31). Such use is motivated, most probably, by a verse in the Book of Revelation: *Un tas leelais Puhķis irr ismeſts / ta wezza Tſchuḫʃčka / dehwehts tas Wels / un tas Satans* “The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan” (JT1685, 1685, Rev, 12:9).

In the Bible, the general name *čūska* is most likely used to designate not only vipers, but also snakes characteristic of the location of biblical events, exotic snakes from Latvian point of view. However, as snakes in the original biblical text are referred to by a general name, the Latvian translator did not have to think of specific terms.

In rare cases the word *čūska* is used to name other animals. As it was mentioned in the introduction, the translators of the Bible used familiar animal names to designate exotic creatures unknown to Latvians at that time. Thus, in some cases the word *čūska* or its variants were used in particular places where the Bible mentions scorpions, e.g. in Mancelius’ translation of the Wisdom of Sirach (1631): *Tee Swāhri / Tſchuḫškas / Sallʃči / Sohbins / gir arridfan Attreepʃčanas dehʃ radditi*, literally
“Beasts, snakes, grass snakes and sword are also created with the aim of revenge” (Manc1631_Syr, 1631, p. 591, l. 23). In Luther’s translation of 1545 the same passage reads: Die wilden Thiere / Scorpion / Schlangen / vnd Schwert (Luth1545, 1545, Sir, 39:36). In the Latvian translation of 1631 Scorpion is translated as Tſchuhſkas ‘snakes’, and Schlangen ‘snakes’ is rendered as Sallſſchi ‘grass snakes’.

In one more instance (Book of Isaiah) the translators apparently had difficulties to find an appropriate equivalent for the Hebrew word with the meaning of ‘beast, monster’. The modern translation kaus jūras nezvēru! “he will slay the monster of the sea” (Bībele, 2012, p. 1193) in Glück’s version reads: un wińſch nokaus to leelu Tſchuhſku / kas Juhŗâ irr, literally “and he shall slay big snake that is in the sea” (VD1689_94, 1689 [1694], Isa, 27:1), employing the word čūska.

In such cases it is impossible to interpret čūska as ‘scorpion’ or ‘dragon’; rather, it can be explained as the translator’s attempt to render an unknown concept to his readership (seventeenth-century Latvian peasants) in the most comprehensive way.

**Odze**

If it is a traditional view that the lexeme čūska analysed before is formed on Latvian sound imitation (ME, 1923–1932, vol. 1, p. 425) and can be regarded as a relatively new coinage, then the word odze ‘viper’ belongs to the common Indo-European lexis, an old designation of snake. Although in Mülenbach’s Dictionary of Latvian Language the meaning of the word uôdze is only general Schlange ‘snake’ (ME, 1923–1932, vol. 4, p. 413), in modern Standard Latvian the dominant meaning is ‘viper’. Wojciech Smoczyński links Lithuanian angis and Latvian uôdze with I-E root *ang-*(h)-i- (Smoczyński, 1982, p. 220).

Algirdas Sabaliauskas links the Lithuanian word angis ‘snake, viper’, related to Latvian odze, with Old Prussian angis ‘snake’, Old Russian ужъ ‘grass snake’, Russian уж ‘grass snake’, Polish wąż ‘snake’, Latin anguis ‘snake’ and several other words. He states that already in the earliest Lithuanian written texts the word angis had a parallel term gyvâtė, which is more common in Modern Lithuanian. The old name for snake angis has survived only in south-western dialects of Lithuania (Sabaliauskas, 1990, p. 26); in Modern Lithuanian it is more typical to use angis in the meaning of viper than snake in general.

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Latvian texts the word odze was used in the same context as the word čūska, practically both words were used as synonyms; however, odze in the meaning of ‘snake’ is registered approximately 50 years earlier than čūska (cf.LVVV, 2016).

In the earliest Latvian dictionaries the word odze was translated into German as Schlange ‘snake’ or Natter ‘viper, grass snake’: [German] Natter / [Latvian]
Ohdse (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 294, l. 5), [Latvian] Ohdse [German] ein Schlange. (Fuer1650_70_1ms, 1650–1670, p. 167, l. 8). In another lexicographic source (Elger’s Polish-Latin-Latvian Dictionary) the word combination odzis čūska, literally ‘viper snake’, may lead to an assumption that odze and čūska are not used here as full synonyms, but rather as a hyponym and hypernym (superordinate), similarly to egles koks ‘spruce tree’ and other such seventeenth-century formations: [Polish] wąż poľpoltj ziemny. [Latin] Serpēs. [Latvian] Odzis czuſká (Elger, 1683, p. 576).

As it was mentioned earlier, in religious texts the word odze is registered in the first publications, e.g. in the Gospels and Epistles of 1587: Vnde tas leels Sathanas / ta weetcza Odze, literally “and big Satan, the old viper” (EvEp1587, 1587, p. 220, l. 18). As can be seen, here the word is used in the context of čūska, already quoted in the passage from the Book of Revelation, where the modern translation has čūska: sensanā čūska, ko sauc par velnu un sātanu “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan” (Bībele, 2012, pp. 2619, 2620).

Contrasting sixteenth- and seventeenth-century translations of New Testament texts with the latest translation of 2012 and Luther’s German translation of 1545, it is clear that in approximately half of the cases in the old texts the word odze was used in places where in modern text and, probably, in the original, the animal referred to was snake in general and not viper in particular, e.g. Lai mehs arri ne kahrdinajam Kriſtu / kà zitti no teem wiņņu kahrdinaja / in tappa no tahm Ohdſehm amaita- ti, literally “We should not test Christ, as others among them did and who were killed by vipers” (VLH1685, 1685, p. 66, l. 23). The same passage in modern Bible translation reads: un gāja pazušanā no čūskām “and were killed by snakes” (Bībele, 2012, p. 2470), and in Luther’s translation: Vnd wurden von den Schlangen vmbracht (Luth1545, 1545, 1 Cor, 10:9).

In the same way as čūska, the word odze was sometimes used in the old texts as scorpion, e.g. Kam nikna Seewa irr / tas irr kà neweenahds Wehrfchu Pahris / kam weenahdi wilkt buhs / kas to dabbu / tas dabbu Ohdſi, literally “One who has furious wife is as an unequal pair of oxen who has to pull equally; who gets it, gets the viper” (VLH1685_Syr, 1685, p. 38B, l. 16). In Luther’s translation of 1545 the same passage reads: Wer sie krieget / der krieget ein Scorpion (Luth1545, 1545, Sir, 26:10).

Taking into account that in lexicographic sources the word odze was interpreted both as ‘snake’ and ‘viper’, it can be suggested that in the sixteenth century odze dominated as the only general name for snake. In the seventeenth century, similarly to Lithuanian, snake was called by the old name odze and the newer one – čūska, the former designation gradually acquired a narrower meaning of ‘viper’. In the translation of the Old Testament that was published in 1689, four years after the New Testament, in almost all cases the word odze was used in the same instances of the Holy Scriptures as Hebrew equivalent ‘viper’ in the original and odze in modern Latvian Bible translation (2012). The only departure from these was in the Book of Isaiah:
juhs eʃt mafaki nekà nenekka / un juhfu Darbs irr jauvaks nekà Ohdje, literally “you are smaller than nothing, and your work is worse than a viper” (VD1689_94, 1689 [1694], Isa, 41:24). In the modern translation it reads: jūsu darbi ir tukšība “and your works are utterly worthless” (Bībele, 2012, p. 1225). Obviously, the translator deviated from the original and chose the image of snake, viper as a symbol of something very bad. However, such usage is an exception and, probably, the translation of the Old Testament furthered the proliferation of a narrower meaning of odze as ‘viper’.

It seems that in the eighteenth century the above mentioned narrowing of meaning became widespread because Gotthard Friedrich Stender translates ohdje into German as Otter ‘viper’: [German] Otter, [Latvian] ohdje (Stender, 1789, p. 447).

However, as Evija Liparte argues in her paper on the good and bad snake, Latvian folklore materials that were mostly collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveal the use of odze also in general sense of ‘snake’, including grass snake: “it is quite possible that in folklore the word odze could have been used in the meaning of grass snake”. And this corresponds to the idea that “it seems that exactly odze was the original general name for snake. But as the name of snake is a taboo word […], the word odze was gradually replaced by onomatopoeic čūska that imitates the hiss of snake” (Liparte, 1993, p. 32).

Zaltis/zalktis

Lithuanian linguist Algirdas Sabaliauskas acknowledges that both Latvian zalktis ‘grass snake’ and Lithuanian žaltys ‘grass snake’ belong to Common Baltic lexis, or more precisely, they can be traced only in Latvian and Lithuanian; in other languages the concept of grass snake is designated by words of different root. He considers that these Baltic words are of obscure etymology, although there are etymologists who link the Latvian word zalktis with the adjective zaļš ‘green’ (ME, 1923–1932, vol. 4, p. 685; this is questioned by Smoczyński, 2007, p. 773), or the verb zalgot ‘to glint’ (Karulis, 1992, vol. 2, p. 548).

Mülenbach’s Latvian Language Dictionary gives the first meaning of zalktis as: (1) die Ringelnatter, Hausnatter, eine Schlange überhaupt ‘grass snake, snake in general’ (ME, 1923–1932, vol. 4, p. 685).

In Latvian texts of the seventeenth century (dictionaries and translations of religious texts) the word zaltis/zalktis is used only in the general sense of ‘snake’.

In Mancelius’ dictionary and Fürecker’s dictionary manuscripts the word zalktis is translated into German as Schlange ‘snake’, the German name for grass snake (Natter) is found nowhere. In Mancelius’ dictionary Schlang is translated by a string of synonyms: [German] Schlang / [Latvian] Tʃchuhʃka / Saltis / Tahrps (Manc1638_
PhL, 1638, p. 294, l. 1). Similarly in manuscripts of Fürecker’s dictionary: [Latvian] Saltis, [German] ein Schlange (Fuer1650_70_2ms, 1650–1670, p. 341, l. 2) and in manuscript of Langius dictionary: [Latvian] Salktis (Tchuhiška) [German] eine Schlange (Langijs, 1936, p. 233). In a slightly different context, the word *zaltis* is included in Elger’s Polish-Latin-Latvian dictionary: here it is given as one of the translations for Polish Bázilišek and Latin Basiliſcus: [Latvian] Odzis / zaltis szuška / dewet [Latin] Basiliſcus (Elger, 1683, p. 9A).

The Latvian word *zalšāda* is translated in dictionaries as Schlagenhaut ‘snake’s skin’: [German] Ich hab eine Schlagenhaut gefunden / [Latvian] eß atraddu Sallſch=Ahdu, literally “I found the skin of a grass snake” (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 294, l. 11).

In religious texts one can notice the same practice: as in the case of *odze*, the word *zaltis* is used as a synonym of čūska. It seems appropriate to cite a passage from Chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation mentioned before; however, this time instead of čūska or odze the focus is on zaltis: *In tas leelajs Puhķis / tas wezzajs Saltis / kam Wahrds irr tas Welns in ſahtans*, literally “And that big dragon, the old grass snake, whose name is devil and satan” (VLH1685, 1685, p. 113, l. 31).

In Glück’s translation of the Old Testament (Book of Isaiah) the word *zalktis* is mentioned only once: *Jir tas lehkdams Saltis tur Ligſdas darrihs* (VD1689_94, 1689 [1694], Isa, 34:15); modern version: *Tur lēcējčūska ligzdos un dēs* “The flying snake will nest there and lay eggs” (Bībele, 2012, p. 1210).

The habitat area of common grass snake does not reach into the Middle East, probably only borders on it in some places, therefore it is not surprising that studies on animals mentioned in the Bible (Freedman, 1992) do not record the grass snake. Consequently, it may be asserted that the word *zalktis* in Latvian religious texts of the seventeenth century is used in the meaning of ‘snake’.

Looking through later dictionaries I tried to clarify when the word *zaltis/zalktis* is translated not as Schlange, but as Natter/Ringelnatter, i.e. as a word in German in the sense of ‘grass snake’.

Although in Jakob Lange’s dictionary *zaltis/zalktis* is not translated as Schlange, this dictionary does not provide a clear picture: [Latvian] Saltis, Salktis tas, [German] eine Kupferschlange (Lange, 1773, p. 266); the word Kupferschlange in Modern German designates Blindschleiche ‘blindworm’.


Ulmann’s dictionary of 1872 gives the following: [Latvian] falkfis, -ſcha, falkts, faltis, faltens, [German] eine Schlange, ein Molch (Ulmann, 1872, p. 232); this proves
that even at the end of the eighteenth century Latvian zalktis was translated as 'snake, newt'.

The first use of Latvian zalktis in modern meaning ‘grass snake’ was recorded in Russian-Latvian-German Dictionary of 1872: [Russian] Ужъ, m. [Latvian] saltis, salktis, m. Natter, f. (Valdemārs, 1872, p. 616).

The above mentioned lexicographic data seems to prove that the word zaltis/zalktis was mostly used in the general sense ‘snake’; it could be a term not only for a grass snake, but for other snakes, including the poisonous ones, too, even for some reptiles. The specific meaning ‘grass snake’ developed in a gradual and slow process.4

In separate Latvian sub-dialects, mainly in Courland (for example, in Nīca, Remte, Pope, Ugāle, Usma), the word zalktis is still used in the general sense of ‘snake’ (LVIVK, n.d.).

Interestingly enough, a similar picture can be observed in Lithuanian. In the Dictionary of Lithuanian Language the word žaltys has three meanings: (1) modern meaning ‘grass snake’; (2) any snake-like animal; (3) an animal that in a biblical sense tempted Eve; embodiment of evil (LKŽ, 1941–2002, vol. 20, pp. 143–145).

**Tārps**

In modern Standard Latvian the word tārps has a meaning of ‘worm’; however, in the Supplement to ME one of its meanings is ‘snake’: tārps I ‘die Schlange’ supported by examples from Krišjānis Barons’ collection of folk-songs and from different Latvian sub-dialects (EH, 1934–1946, vol. 2, p. 671). Pēteris Šmits in his collection of Latvian folk beliefs provides a context for the use of tārps: Kad mežā ejot, tad nevajagot piesaukt vārdu čūska, jo tad čūskas rādoties, bet vajagot gan sacīt tārps “When in forest, one should not say the word čūska ‘snake’ because then the snakes come up, one should use the word tārps instead” (A. Krūmiņa, Smiltene) (Šmits, 1940, vol. 1, p. 323).

This illustrates the use of euphemisms in connection with taboos peculiar to dangerous animals. In the meaning of ‘snake’ the word tārps displays a metaphorical transfer that is based on common features of two concepts – both snakes and worms are longish creatures without legs and they move by crawling.

In Lithuanian one can see a euphemism of the same semantics: the second meaning of the word kirmėlė ‘worm’ is ‘snake’ (LKŽ, 1941–2002, vol. 5, p. 841).

Such metaphors usually turn into “dead metaphors” rather quickly, the word changes its meaning and further use is no longer perceived as metaphorical. However, this has not happened with the word tārps, mostly because it is not part of

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4 For comparison: German Natter also has two meanings: ‘grass snake’ and ‘viper’.
Standard Latvian and is mainly used in sub-dialects of Latgale (Rāzna, Kaunata, Astūne, Liksna, Preiļi), where it is still perceived as a euphemism (LDIAK, n.d.). It is interesting that almost 400 years ago the German word Schlang was translated as Tſchuhßka / Saltis / Tahrps (Manc1638_PhL, 1638, p. 294, l. 1). Other early texts do not support such usage, the word tārps was basically used as ‘worm’ or ‘reptile’; the sense ‘snake’ has not been registered in religious texts and other dictionaries. However, this does not seem surprising, as Mancelius mostly recorded popular speech, and the substitution of čūska, zalktis or odze by the euphemism tārps can be regarded as a peculiar feature of popular speech in certain situations, both in the seventeenth century and in modern times.

**Conclusions**

In sixteenth-century Latvian texts snake in general meaning was referred to only as odze (nowadays odze: ‘viper’). In seventeenth-century texts the words čūska (nowadays: ‘snake’), odze (nowadays: ‘viper’), zalktis (nowadays: ‘grass snake’) were used in similar contexts as synonyms; in the same instances of Bible texts both as ‘snake in general’ and as ‘devil, satan, embodiment of evil’.

It can be supposed that the oldest names for snake were odze and zalktis; besides, odze was both a general name for snakes and a specific term of viper, whereas zalktis was a general name for snakes (including the venomous ones) and a designation of grass snakes. Gradually the word odze was “pushed out” of its general meaning by a euphemistic imitation of hiss – čūska, and so odze narrowed its meaning to viper only. Early Latvian texts also document the time of concrete semantic changes: in the sixteenth century the word čūska was less current than odze ‘snake’, in the seventeenth century they were more or less equally used, and in the eighteenth century one can observe stabilisation of modern meanings of čūska ‘snake’ and odze ‘viper’.

The word zalktis also underwent a narrowing of meaning: with reference to grass snakes and not snakes in general. Of course, texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries document only one period in a much longer process of semantic change. In the nineteenth century the word zalktis was used in a general sense of ‘snake’, and such practice can be observed even nowadays in the sub-dialects of Kurzeme. Comparison with the Lithuanian language allows to conclude that the above mentioned facts show neither specificity of old texts, nor incompetence of translators; they are rather historical language facts: both Latvian odze and Lithuanian angis, 

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5 In Latvian sub-dialects similar euphemisms are abundant, e.g. garastis, literally ‘that who has a long tail’; garausis, literally ‘that who has long ears’; garais tārps, literally ‘long worm’; cērtamais tārps, literally ‘cuttable worm’; lunkanais zvērs, literally ‘supple beast’; raibais, literally ‘motley’; sīvzobis, literally ‘that who has sharp tooth’; stripainis, literally ‘stripy’ (LDIAK, n.d.).
and Latvian zaltis/zalktis and Lithuanian žaltys originally had more general meaning ‘snake’, later gradually narrowing their semantics to specific kinds of snakes.

Early Latvian texts preserve another euphemistic name of snakes: tārps, literally ‘worm’; as a euphemism it is still current in several Latvian sub-dialects.

It is possible that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries animals as well as plants were not so strictly separated in peoples’ minds, the borders between their names were more fluid, therefore any of snakes’ names could be attributed to any snake species in Latvia.

Translated by Juris Baldunčiks

Abbreviations


EvEp1587 – Euangelia und Episteln... Königsperg: Gedruckt... bey Georgen Osterbergern, 1587.


Fuer1650_70_1ms – Fürecker, Christopher. Lettisches und Teutsches Wörterbuch... I. http://senie.korpuss.lv/source.jsp?codificator=Fuer1650_70_1ms

Fuer1650_70_2ms – Fürecker, Christopher. Lettisches und Teutsches Wörterbuch... II. http://senie.korpuss.lv/source.jsp?codificator=Fuer1650_70_2ms


Luth1545 – Biblia, das ist, die gantze Heilige Schrifft Deudsch (1545). http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Luther,+Martin/Luther-Bibel+1545


SKL1696_RA – Sawadi Karra=Teesas Likkumi… Riga: [G. M. Nöller], 1696.


VLH1685 – *Vermehretes Lettisches Hand=Buch…* Mitau: George Radetzky, 1685.

VLH1685_Syr – *Das Hauß, =Zucht=und Lehr=Buch Jesus Syrachs…* Mitau: George Radetzky, 1685.


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**Names of Snakes in Latvian Texts of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries**

**Abstract**

This article analyses the naming of snakes in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Latvian texts which are taken from the Corpus of Early Written Latvian Texts, containing the first Latvian dictionaries, religious texts, and some secular texts. The objective of the paper is to try to determine how precisely the translators of religious texts rendered names of snakes, and to ascertain whether any semantic changes have taken place, or whether religious texts show specific use. The study also aims to find out if taboo of dangerous animals, snakes in particular, and related euphemisation is reflected in early Latvian texts. The paper focuses on four Latvian words: čūska, odze, zalktis, and tārps; two of them, odze and zalktis, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries until present time, have undergone significant semantic changes, probably because of euphemisation triggered by taboo. Comparison with the Lithuanian language allows to conclude that such usage, different from Modern Latvian, is neither specificity of old texts, nor incompetence of translators, but rather historical language facts. It is also established that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries animals as well as plants were not so strictly separated in peoples’ minds, the borders between their names were more fluid, therefore any of snakes’ names could be attributed to any snake species in Latvia.

**Keywords:** 16th and 17th century Latvian texts; names of snakes; semantic changes; taboo; euphemisms
Nazwy węży w szesnasto- i siedemnastowiecznych tekstach łotewskich

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje nazwy węży w szesnasto- i siedemnastowiecznych tekstach łotewskich, pochodzących z korpusu wcześniego piśmiennictwa łotewskiego, zawierającego pierwsze łotewskie słowniki, teksty religijne i świeckie. Autorka podejmuje próbę ustalenia, jak dokładnie tłumaczy tekstów religijnych przekładali nazwy węży, oraz wyjaśnienia, czy zachodziły w tym zakresie zmiany semantyczne i czy teksty religijne zawierają specyficzne użycia. Artykuł ma również na celu ustalenie, czy tabu w odniesieniu do groźnych zwierząt, zwłaszcza węży, i związane z nim eufemizacja znajdują odzwierciedlenie we wczesnych tekstach łotewskich. Analiza skupia się na czterech łotewskich leksemach: čūska, odze, zalktis i tärps. W okresie od XVI i XVII wieku do czasów współczesnych, dwa z nich, odze i zalktis, uległy znacznym zmianom semantycznym, prawdopodobnie wywołanym eufemizacją wynikającą z tabu. Porównanie z językiem litewskim pozwala stwierdzić, że takie użycie, odmienne niż we współczesnej łotewszczyźnie, nie wynika ze specyfiki wczesnych tekstów łotewskich ani z braku kompetencji tłumaczy, lecz z historii języka. Jak wykazano, w XVI i XVII wieku poszczególne zwierzęta i rośliny nie były tak mocno wyodrębnione w ludzkiej świadomości, granice pomiędzy ich nazwami były bardziej płynne, a zatem wszystkie omawiane nazwy można przypisać wszystkim gatunkom węży występującym na Łotwie.

Słowa kluczowe: szesnasto- i siedemnastowieczne teksty łotewskie; nazwy węży; zmiany semantyczne; tabu; eufemizmy


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