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PROSTHETIC *G- BEFORE *NĚ- IN PROTO-SLAVIC

In this paper¹ we argue that prosthetic *g- in Proto-Slavic **gnězdo* ‘nest’ developed regularly before *n followed by *ě, rather than analogically. We further suggest two new etymologies that confirm the regularity of this development: Proto-Slavic **gněvъ* ‘anger’ can be derived from PIE **noyH-wo-* (from the same root as OIr. *níth* ‘anger’ and OHG *nīd(h)* ‘jealousy, hate’), while Proto-Slavic **gnětiti* ‘burn, light (a fire)’ can be from PIE **noyt-* ‘shine’ (from the same root as Lat. *niteō* ‘shine’). We also show that, although the proposed rule of “g-prosthesis” in Slavic relies on only three examples, there are no counter-examples which would refute it.

This paper will examine a number of Proto-Slavic etymons which, as we shall argue, contain the prosthetic consonant *g- before word-initial *n-. An uncontroversial case of prosthetic *g- before *n- is found in Proto-Slavic **gnězdo* ‘nest’ (OCS *gnězdo*, Ru. *gnezdó*, Po. *gniazdo*, Cz. *hnízdo*, Croat. *gnijezdo*, etc., Derksen 2008:169, ESSJa VI:171–173, Skok I:576, Gluhak 1993:234, ERHJ I:278), which is certainly related to Skt. *nīdá-* ‘nest’, Lat. *nīdus*, OE *nest*, Lith. *līdzas*, OIr. *net*, Arm. *nist*, etc. (from PIE **ni-sdo-* or **h₂ni-sdo-*²). Since the reflexes in all the other languages

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² The word for ‘nest’ was a compound in PIE. It certainly contained the zero-grade reflex of the root **sed-* ‘sit’ (Lat. *sedeō*, OCS *šesti*, etc.) as the second element; if the first element is the reflex of PIE root **h₂en-/*h₂n-* ‘above, upper part’ (Gr. *ánō*, OCS *na*), then the correct reconstruction of the word for ‘nest’ is **h₂ni-sdo-* and the original meaning would have been ‘a seat above’. This might be the same element as

begin with *n-*, the word-initial *g- in Slavic must be secondary. However, the origin of the prosthetic *g- in this word has not been explained so far (Matasović 2008:92, Matasović 2014:71, Derksen 169, Bräuer I:173–174, ESSJa VI:17). The explanations that one finds in the literature are highly unconvincing: attempts to invoke analogies with other words beginning in *gn- mentioned by Vasmer, who refers to older literature, lack semantic motivation (e.g. the analogy with *gnojь ‘pus’, cf. OCS *gnojь*, Croat. *gnôj*, Russ. *gnój*, Po. *gnój*, etc., Vasmer I:279–280), while Vaillant’s (1950:92) hypothesis that *gn- was abstracted from verbs with the prefix *vbn- (such as *vognězditi ‘to nest in’, Russ. *vgnězdit’*) is completely *ad hoc* (not to mention the fact that it is uncertain whether word-internal *-nn- would yield -gn- in the first place). Finally, Snoj (2003:177) speculates that *gnězdo developed from earlier *něgzdo and compares Latv. *ligzda* ‘nest’ which also has a non-etymological -g- (also in Lith. dial. *ligzdas*; the Baltic forms have unexplained *l-* instead of *n-). However, the reflexes of the putative proto-form *něgzdo are unattested in Slavic, and, moreover, epenthetic velars before *s (and *z) are otherwise common in Baltic, but not in Slavic languages, cf., e.g., Lith. *žvaigždė* ‘star’ vs. PSl. *zvězda (OCS *zvězda*, Russ. *zvezdá*, Croat. *zvijězda*, Po. *gwiazda*, etc., Snoj 2003:861), or Lith. *tūkstantis* ‘thousand’ vs. PSl. *tysotja (OCS *tysqšta*, Croat. *tisuća*, Sln. *tisoč*, Snoj 2003:766).³

What seems to be lacking in the literature on *gnězdo so far is the hypothesis that the development of *n- to *gn- could be *regular* in Slavic in some phonetic environments, i.e. that we are dealing with prosthetic *g- which developed in the word *gnězdo as the result of a hitherto unknown sound law.⁴

In this paper we will show that, besides *gnězdo, two more Proto-Slavic words have the same element *g- in the same environment, i.e. before *n- followed by *-ě-, and we will explain how it regularly developed. Here are these two words:

the putative PIE prefix *(h₂)ni- ‘down’ (cf. Skt. *ni-tarām* ‘down’, OHG *nidar* ‘down’) if the original meaning of this PIE etymon was ‘in a vertical direction’.

³ Note, also, that PSl. *gnězdo points to the full o-grade in the first syllable (*noy-sdo-), while all the other IE languages point to the zero-grade *ni-sdo- (or *h₂ni-sdo-). This is difficult to explain, but we may speculate that, when *ni- was no longer felt as a prefix, the new full grade (*noysdo- > *nayzdo-) was introduced in Slavic on analogy with other neuter o-stems that have the full o-grade in the root (Matasović 2014:71).

⁴ ESSJa VI:172 mentions (and dismisses) an earlier proposal by the Bulgarian linguist M. Čalákov that there was a special prosthetic development of *g- in *gnězdo, but not as a result of a more general rule.

1. Proto-Slavic **gněvъ* ‘anger’ (Croat. *gnjěv*, Russ. *gnév*, Po. *gniew*, Cz. *hněv*, Skok I:578, Vasmer 1955, I:279, ESSJa VI:168–170) can be related to OHG *nīd(h)* ‘jealousy, hate’, OS *nīth* ‘id.’, Go. *neip* ‘id.’, OE *nīð* ‘id.’ < PGerm. **neiþa* (Kluge 1991:585), which is probably from the same PIE root **neyH*⁵ as OIr. *níth* ‘battle fury, anger’ and W *nwyd* ‘passion, emotion’ < PCelt. **nītu-* (EDPC 291). The Slavic words reflect a derivative with the suffix *-*wo-*, i.e. **gněvъ* is regularly derivable from **noyH-wo-*.⁶ The laryngeal in the root, which must be posited because of long *-*ī-* in Celtic, is independently confirmed by the acute in Slavic. Semantically, this etymology of PSl. **gněvъ* is clearly preferable to all the alternatives proposed so far, which usually assume that it is somehow derived from the root of **gněsti* ‘to press, oppress’ (Russ. *gnestí*, Cz. *hníst*, Croat. *gnjěsti*, etc., Snoj 2003:176). Assuming that **gněvъ* somehow comes from **gn-ew-* (possibly also in also ON *knýja* ‘to press’) does not explain, among other things, the acute in Slavic, which is neatly explained by the new etymology proposed here, and the connection with Russ. dial. *gnobít’* ‘torture’ and Po. *gnębić* ‘press’, assumed by ESSJa (VI:180), does not explain the consonant -*b-* in those words.
2. Proto-Slavic **gnětiti* ‘burn, light (a fire)’ (CSl. *gnětiti*, Russ. *gnetít’*, Ukr. *hnityty*, Vasmer I:280, ESSJa VI:167–168) can be connected to Lat. *niteō* ‘to be radiant, shine’ and derived from the root **neyt-/noyt-/nit-*.⁷ The semantic connection between ‘to burn’ and ‘to shine’ is quite close (cf. Eng. ‘to light (a fire)’), and the causative meaning (‘to cause a fire to burn’) is quite in line with the o-grade in the root of PSl. **gnětiti* and the suffix *-*i-*. The forms in Slavic languages beginning with *n-* (e.g. Sln. *nětiti*, Croat. dial. (Čakavian) *nīfit* (Grob-

⁵ If the laryngeal in this word was **h₁*, the same root might be attested in Gr. *óneidos* ‘reproach, blame’, Skt. *nindati* ‘reproach’, Arm. *anicanem* ‘blame’ Latv. *nīdu*, *nīst* ‘hate’ (IEW 760–761) via the controversial ‘Kortlandt effect’ (Matasović 2023), by which **h₁* alternated with **d* in PIE. In that case, the correct reconstruction of the root would be **h₃neyd-/h₃neyh₁-*.

⁶ Croat. *gnjáviti* ‘bother’ and its cognates (e.g. Sln. *gnjáviti*, ERHJ I:279) is a late intensive-iterative formation that was productive in Slavic (similar to Croat. *bàviti se* ‘to engage in something’ from the root of *bīti* ‘be’ (< PSl. **byti*)).

⁷ This Latin verb was hitherto without etymology (De Vaan 2008:410); it may be related to Lat. *renīdeō* ‘to shine, reflect’, but in that case the alternation of -*t-* and -*d-* in Latin is unclear. One may start with a PIE root **ney(H)-/ni(H)-* and derive PSl. **nětiti* and Lat. *niteō* with the suffix *-*t-*, while *re-nīdeō* would be derivable from the same root with the suffix *-*d^h*- (De Vaan 2008:519). Finally, Mlr. *níam* ‘brilliance, glow’ might come from a derivative PIE **ney(H)-mo-* (LEIA N-16). Of course, all of this remains a rather speculative possibility.

nik), Cz. *nítiti*, Po. *niecić*) were abstracted from verbs with prefixes, cf., e.g., Croat. arch. (Ikavian) *unititi* ‘light (a fire)’ (ARj. XIX:642–643). This is much more probable than deriving both **gnětiti* and **nětiti* from a root **kney-/knoy-* (cf. OHG *ganeheista*, *gneista* ‘spark’ (< PGerm. **gahnaista-*), OPr. *knaistis* ‘fire’, Snoj 2003:443), with subsequent sporadic loss of *g- in Slavic on the analogy with verbs with prefixes, in which *-g- was in the coda of a closed syllable, since Proto-Slavic allowed sequences of the form *-CVgnV-, cf. PSl. **stegno* ‘thigh’ (OCS *stegno*, Cz. *stegno*, Croat. *stègno*, Russ. (obs.) *stegnó*, Derksen 2008:466). This means that *-g- would not have been lost, for example, in **vbgnětiti* ‘light a fire’ because of the law of open syllables (note that this is also contradicted by Croat. *unititi* mentioned above). Moreover, our theory of the regular “g-prosthesis” before PSl. **ně-* predicts just the kind of alternation we observe between Croat. *unititi* and CSL. *gnětiti*, while allowing that some forms (Cz. *nítiti*, Po. *niecić*, etc.) generalized the initial *n-* from verbs with prefixes. Although the etymology of PSl. **gnětiti* proposed here cannot be considered as certain, especially since its possible cognates are limited to Latin,⁸ we believe it is more convincing than the alternative etymologies posited so far. Note that, even if one does not accept our “g-prosthesis” rule in Proto-Slavic, one can still accept our etymology connecting PSl. **gnětiti* and Lat. *niteō*, since both verbs can also be derived from a PIE root **kneyt-/knoyt-/knit-* by universally accepted sound laws.

Another word which might, in principle, also show the “g-prosthesis”, is PSl. **gnědv* ‘brown’ (Croat. (old and dialectal) *gnjed* ‘tawny’, Russ. *gnedój* ‘brown (of horses)’, Po. *gniady*, Cz. *hnědý* ‘brown’, Skok I:578, Vasmer I:279). This could be derived from **gnoydo-* and related to Lat. *nīdor* ‘strong smell, fumes’ (De Vaan 2008:408). The original meaning of PSl. **gnědv* would have been ‘smoky, having the color of smoke’; for a semantic parallel, cf. Lat. *furvus* ‘dark-coloured, dusky’ < **d^hus-wo-* (de Vaan 2008:252, cf. OE *dox* ‘dark-coloured, dusky’, OIr. *donn* ‘dun, light brown’ < **d^hus-no-*). However, Kroonen (2013:236) convincingly derives both Lat. *nīdor*, Gr. (Hom.) *kníssē* ‘smell and odor of fat’ and PGerm. **hnissa-* ‘smell’ (Icel. *hniss* ‘smell (from

⁸ A possible third comparandum would be OIr. *nía* (Gen. sg. *niad*) ‘hero, champion’ (LÉIA N-15) which can be derived from a root-noun **neyt-s* (Gen. sg. **neyt-os*) ‘light, radiance, shining’, cf. also Modern Irish *niata* ‘fiery, valorous, pugnacious’ < **neytto-*. This would imply, however, that there was a metaphorical semantic development in Irish from ‘radiance, flash’ to ‘furor’ and ‘hero’. Although such a development is not without parallels (cf. OIr. *lúan* (*láith*) ‘warrior frenzy’, where *lúan* is from PIE **lowksno-* ‘light, radiance, Moon’, cf. Lat. *lūna*, Av. *raoxšna-*), it cannot be proved.

cooking)', Nw. dial. *niss* 'smell') from a PIE s-stem **kneydos/*knids-o-*. The Slavic form **gnědv* could regularly come from **knoyd-o-* (with the same development of **kn-* to **gn-* as in PSl. **gnida* 'nit' (Russ. *gnída*, Po. *gnida*, Croat. *gnjida*, Derksen 2008:169) vs. Gr. *konís*, OE *hritu* 'nit'). Therefore, PSl. **gnědv* 'brown' cannot be adduced as an argument for the development of *g- before *ně- in Slavic, since this word could also be from **knoyd-* (with the aforementioned semantic development from 'smoked' to 'smoky' and 'brown').

The two examples we adduced above (**gněvb* and **gnětiti*) show that the development of prosthetic *g- before *ně- might well be regular in Slavic. Moreover, there are no counter-examples to the rule of "g-prosthesis" as we formulated it, since word-initial *ně- in Proto-Slavic is attested only in the following words which, as we will show, do not contradict our rule:

1. PSl. **němv* 'mute' has a controversial etymology, but the derivation from **mēmo-* by dissimilation is the most likely one (cf. Latv. *mēms* 'mute', ERHJ I:714).⁹ The form **mēm-* is probably onomatopoeic in origin, and our rule does not predict that prosthetic *g- would have developed before **m-* as well.
2. **nědra* 'bosom' (Croat. *njèdro*, Cz. *ňadro* 'bosom', Derksen 2008:150, ESSJa VI:43) is actually derived by false analysis from **vbn ědra* (ERHJ I:726), and **ědra* is the nominative plural of **ědro* 'core, bosom' (OCS *jadra* 'embrace, bosom', Po. *jadro* 'net', Croat. *jèdro* 'sail'). Thus, prosthetic *g- is not expected in this word, because it had initial *ě- rather than *ně- in Proto-Slavic.
3. PSl. **něga* 'care' (Croat. *njèga*, Russ. *néga* 'well-being', Cz. (arch.) *něha* 'beauty', ESSJa XXV: 97, Skok II:529–30), also has a controversial etymology,¹⁰ but Latv. *naîgs* 'beautiful, handsome' points to word-initial **nay-* in Balto-Slavic (ERHJ I:727). However, in this word it is easy to explain the lack of prosthesis as the result of a dissimilatory loss **g-...-g- > 0-...-g-*, i.e., we can assume that the expected form **gněga* was dissimilated to **něga* in Proto-Slavic, or that the presence of the second velar in the root blocked the development of the prosthetic *g- before *ně-. In either case, this word does not contradict our rule.¹¹

⁹ The derivation of **němv* from a PIE compound **ne-h₁g'-mo-* 'not speaking' (from the root of Lat. *aiō* 'say) suggested by ERHJ (I:714) is a mere (and unlikely) possibility.

¹⁰ Formally possible, but semantically not quite compelling, is a derivation from the root **neyg^{w-}* 'wash' (Gr. *nízō*, OIr. *nigid*, ERHJ I:27).

¹¹ Similarly, the lack of "g-prosthesis" in Proto-Slavic indefinite pronouns (e. g. OCS *někvto* 'someone', *něčvto* 'something', *někakv* 'somehow', etc.) can be explained

With respect to the relative chronology of the “g-prosthesis” in Slavic, we can be certain that it is anterior to the assimilation of *mēmō- to *nēmō- > PSl. *němъ ‘mute’. Had this not been the case, we would have expected PSl. *němъ > *gnēmъ.¹² Still, the prosthesis of *g- before ně- must be a rather late process in Proto-Slavic, since the change of *ay to *ě is also quite late (Matasović 2008:127, 144–145; Holzer 2011:44, 58). The prosthesis certainly does not go back to the Balto-Slavic period, since we do not have any examples of prosthetic *g- before *n- in the Baltic languages.

The fact that there are only three words in which we find the regular prosthesis of *g- before *ně- in Slavic (*gnězdo, *gněvъ and *gnětiti) should not be taken as an argument against this proposed sound law, since the number of Proto-Slavic words with the initial sequence *gně- was certainly very limited. What is important is that there do not seem to be any counter-examples to the sound law we have proposed.

From the phonetic point of view, the prosthesis of a velar stop before (phonetically rather than phonologically) palatalized [nʲ] is not unusual; a similar process independently occurred in Croatian in the verb *gnjúriti* ‘dive, duck’ if it is from the same root as PSl. *nvrěti ‘dive’ (OCS *nvrěti*) and *noriti ‘dive, sink’ (Čakavian *njorìt* (Orlec), cf. EHRJ I:281). It is somewhat surprising, however, that there is no prosthesis of *g- before *n- followed by other front vowels, e. g. in PSl. *n’iva ‘arable field’ (OCS *n’iva*, Russ. *níva*, Po. *níwa*, Croat. *njìva*, etc., cf. ERHJ I:728). Perhaps this can be explained by the lower articulation of Proto-Slavic *ě with respect to *i, *e and *v, but we cannot be sure: we can only state that “g-prosthesis” was regular before the word-initial sequence *ně- in Proto-Slavic, but not in other environments.

From the methodological point of view, it is important to acknowledge that word-initial *g- in each of the words discussed in this article *might* have a different explanation: in *gnězdo ‘nest’ it could be due to some hitherto undiscovered analogy, and for *gněvъ ‘anger’ and *gnětiti ‘light (a fire)’ different (but not yet proposed) etymologies might be correct. How-

by a similar dissimilatory loss of the first velar in a sequence of two velars, or by an analogical loss of the initial *g- due to the influence of the negation *ne (this analogy is the reason why the standard Croatian forms *nětko*, *něšto*, etc. do not have the expected reflex of Proto-Slavic *-ě-, cf. ERHJ I:689).

¹² It is also possible, but less likely, that *g- developed only before *n- followed by *ě that developed from *ay (< PIE *ay, *oy, *h₂ey and *h₃ey), but not before *n- followed by *ě that developed from PIE *ē and *eh₁. If that were the case, the “g-prosthesis” might have been posterior to the dissimilation of *mēmō- to *nēmō- and PSl. *němъ, and the lack of prosthesis in the indefinite pronouns (*někъto ‘someone’, *něčъto ‘something’, etc.) would not need an explanation.

ever, our hypothesis has the strength of simultaneously accounting for the historical development of all three of these difficult words.

To sum up: if our conclusions are accepted, the prosthetic *g-, which seemed to be an annoying exception in *gnězdo ‘nest’, is actually an instance of a Proto-Slavic sound law: *g- was regularly added to words beginning with *ně- in Proto-Slavic. Finally, it is important to note that, even if one does not accept our conclusion that there was a “g-prosthesis” rule before word-initial *ně- in Proto-Slavic, the two new etymologies we proposed for PSl. *gněvъ ‘anger’ and *gnětiti ‘light (a fire)’ might still be correct.

List of abbreviations: Arm. = Armenian, Av. = Avestan, Croat. = Croatian, CSL. = Church Slavonic, Cz. = Czech, Eng. = English, Go. = Gothic, Gr. = Greek, Hom. = Homeric, Icel. = Icelandic, Lat. = Latin, Latv. = Latvian, Lith. = Lithuanian, Nw. = Norwegian, OCS = Old Church Slavonic, OE = Old English, OHG = Old High German, OIr. = Old Irish, OPr. = Old Prussian, OS = Old Saxon, PCelt. = Proto-Celtic, PGerm. = Proto-Germanic, PIE = Proto-Indo-European, Po. = Polish, PSl. = Proto-Slavic, Russ. = Russian, Skt. = Sanskrit, Sln. = Slovene, W = Welsh.

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Protetsko *g- ispred *ně- u praslavenskome

Sažetak

U ovom članku pokazujemo da se protetsko *g- u praslavenskoj riječi *gnězdo ‘gnijezdo’ razvilo pravilno (a ne analoški, kao što se ponekad misli) ispred glasovnog niza *ně-. Također predlažemo dvije nove etimologije koje potvrđuju to pravilo: praslavenski *gněvъ ‘gnjev, ljutnja’ je izvodivo iz ie. *noyH-wo- (iz istoga korijena kao i staroirski níth ‘gnjev’ i starovisokonjemački nīd(h) ‘ljubomora, mržnja’), dok je praslavenski *gnětiti ‘paliti, zapaliti’ izvodivo iz indoeuropskoga *noyt- ‘sjati’ (iz istoga korijena kao u latinskome niteō ‘sjati’). Također pokazujemo da pravilo o “protetskome g-” u praslavenskome nema protuprimjera koji bi ga opovrgli.

Ključne riječi: etimologija, praslavenski, indoeuropski, *gnězdo

Keywords: etymology, Proto-Slavic, Proto-Indo-European, *gnězdo

