3 Proto-Slavonic

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1 Introduction
Proto-Slavonic was the parent language of the thirteen living and two extinct Slavonic speech communities. Most of these speech communities are accorded the status of autonomous languages. However, the distinction between dialect and language being blurred, there can be no unanimity on this issue in all instances, notably that of Slovincian as separate from Cassubian and, indeed, of Cassubian as separate from Polish (see further chapter 13, section 1).

Traditionally, Slavonic is classified into three basic branches, East, West and South, and subdivided further according to the similarities within these branches. This classification is given in table (extinct languages are placed in square brackets).

In addition, it is convenient to group the East and West branches and the North Slavonic and the East and South branches into East/South and West/South respectively. A survey of Late Proto-Slavonic dialects is provided in section 2.

Unlike Latin, the parent language of the Romance languages, Slavonic was not recorded, and its forms must be reconstructed. This reconstruction is accomplished by comparing the forms of all the languages and of the languages which, together with Slavonic, form the large Indo-European family of languages of south-western Europe. In addition to Slavonic, this family includes Indic languages (classical Sanskrit and many languages of modern India), Iranic languages (Persian and the northern Iranian languages of the Eurasian branch), Tocharian, Anatolian (Hittite and the lesser languages of the Hittite family), Armenian, Greek, Albanian, Italic (including classical and pre-classical forms), which gave rise to the Romance languages, Celtic, Germanic (the medieval languages with which the Slavs came into contact in the first millennium AD), Slavic, Old and Middle High German and Old Norse) and Baltic (Lithuanian, Old Prussian). As is the case with Slavonic, the genealogy of the Indo-European languages is attributed to their hypothesized common ancestor, the Proto-Indo-European language, which was reconstructed. It is a common practice in historical linguistics to rely upon reconstructions with asterisks. In this survey, however, languages will not be relied upon to differentiate between attested and reconstructed forms, and asterisks will not be used except to avoid ambiguity.

It is useful to subdivide the period, perhaps four millennia long, into four periods, each of which corresponds to a different phase of linguistic change. Thus, the period encompassing the disintegration of the Indo-European linguistic unit, which is dated from the ninth century AD, is called Proto-Indo-European. While there is no agreement on the critical subdivision and, hence, on the number of Proto-Slavonic subperiods, the least arbitrary formula appears to be one based on the extent of linguistic change. Thus, the period encompassing the earliest phase ofonic differentiation is called Early Proto-Slavonic, and the period encompassing the final phase of linguistic change is called Late Proto-Slavonic, and the period encompassing the final phase of linguistic change is called Late Proto-Slavonic. These periods are characterized by the fact that the languages which were once dialectally uniform become dialectally distinct. Some scholars use the term 'Common Slavonic', either to all of 'Proto-Slavonic' or to the last phase of Slavonic unity (approximating 'Late Proto-Slavonic' of this survey).

The similarities between Baltic and Slavonic have long been acknowledged. One could mention the common treatment of the