

Correspondence between Jacob Grimm and Jernej Kopitar (1823–24)

Abstract

The romantic linguist, legal scholar, and folktale collector [Jacob Grimm](#) (1785–1863) was a central figure in the development of German nationalism and cultural heritage in the first half of the nineteenth century. Grimm maintained contacts with scholars and cultural figures among many nationalities, including the leading Slovene linguist and cultural awakener Jernej (also known as Bartholomeus) Kopitar (1780–1844) in Vienna. The following correspondence between Grimm and Kopitar shows that Grimm endeavored to support the cause of the Serb folk poet and linguist Vuk Karadžić and to introduce him and his work to a German literary public. Crucially, Grimm facilitated the contact between Karadžić and Goethe that led to Goethe's commentary on Karadžić's poems in an essay on Serbian songs, and Grimm himself went on to translate Karadžić's Serbian grammar into German at Karadžić's and Kopitar's urging. Grimm's and Kopitar's romantic enthusiasm for folk poetry across national lines shines through in their exchanges and stands in relation to Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, of which the Serbian folksongs represented a part.

Source

[Letter from J. Grimm to J. Kopitar]

Cassel, October 10, 1823

Esteemed Friend!

Vuk made me very happy and visited me here for a few days, but he already intends to depart this morning via Göttingen. Yesterday when he happened to speak of Serbian hospitality, it occurred to me that I could neither put him up nor entertain him as I would like in my crowded little house. That's how it is for us learned, pedantic Germans; we appreciate the simple natural virtues and poetries of uneducated peoples, but we can no longer properly emulate them. I was able neither to show him around nor travel with him, so plagued am I by all manner of business. What interesting things could I show him? In our library the *Curiosa slavica* are limited to a few of Truber's *Glagolitica* and a single copy of the *Bibl. Ostrog.* (Dobr. P. L-LI) of 1581 (a gift from Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden with his coat of arms in gold on the velvet binding).

The new Leipz[ig] edition of the songs has rekindled my old love; how beautiful these poems are! If I wish to look up words and take my time (I am patient by nature) I can understand most of it, and it should get better with time. If only I didn't have so many other things to do. I am struggling with the second (far more difficult) volume of my German grammar and need to continue my historical studies on the side. My work as censor is not too taxing; we are milder than you gentlemen there and everything slides through. But now Vuk has put a new bug in my ear; he thinks it would be a good thing for me to publish a German translation of his Serbian grammar. What say you? Wouldn't this put me up to my ears or at least *do ramena* [up to the shoulders] in a bottomless pit from which I could not extricate myself? My honest appraisal of the matter is as follows: the version that Herr^[1] Vuk showed me, which was prepared in Hungary, seems precise and correct; the German expressions still require some polishing. This is easily done. I must refrain from additions, revisions, comparisons (to which my superficial knowledge might lead, but also mislead). What else can I do in a preface but repeat what you and others have already said about the history and value of the Serbian language and add literary notes that Vuk intends to provide to

me. These are my chief concerns:

1) Publisher. I will write to Reimer in Berlin, who is now the owner of Weidmann's publishing company in Leipzig; a decent, otherwise obliging man.

2) The book cannot possibly be printed here or in the environs, and must thus be produced in Leipzig; consequently, the corrections must also be done there. My own work and efforts will thus be negligible. The matter is dear to me, so dear that I would like to study it for one year before proceeding. I write this letter in haste as I wish to give it to a traveler departing today and Herr Vuk will add a few lines for you. I hope for the continuation of your friendship. Please let me know when next you write whether the Cod. Glossarum Monseensiu you have acquired is the one edited by Pez or a better, richer one?

Yours, Grimm

[Letter from J. Kopitar to J. Grimm]

Vienna, October 25, 1823

Esteemed friend!

Your kind letter of the 2nd of this month shamed me since I owe you not just an answer but also money for Thorkelin. I could easily have settled the latter through Vuk had I not learned too late of his plans. It is up to you whether you would prefer to receive it through Leipzig, i.e., I can have a bookseller in Leipzig pay it through a doctor here. Vuk was delighted by your welcome and your recommendation to Goethe. I fear that you are correct in what you say in the review of the dictionary, that the interest in folk songs has been exhausted and misused, even by Goethe! Indeed, if it were the Greeks: but Rátzen! – However, hope is the last thing to fly away. – So, you also want to wait a year with the little grammar! Bis dat, qui cito dat (he gives twice who gives quickly), and now, since the lexicon and the classics are finished, a little grammar is the most urgent necessity? If Reimer doesn't want to, Volke here will publish it. Just prepare the Ms. for the printer, name your fee and we shall begin; once again, bis dat, qui cito dat. And natives and foreigners alike would prefer to have it from you, an impartial foreigner.

As far as I have compared the Salzburg copy of Monsee's glosses, they are both gemelli, perhaps by the same hand.

I suggested the Ulfilas in Milan. There is a potential publisher, but as yet no editor. Count Castiglione mustn't read anymore because of his eyes. I am still awaiting letters but can already see that nothing will come of it unless you go there. Couldn't you spend half a year in Milan? In short, consider yourself the editor and plan accordingly. – We are most anxious to see the second part of your grammar. Dr. Appendini of Ragusa, a Piedmontese who understands Dalmatian, is learning Gothic from you, which he is absolutely persuaded is Slavic, and is amazed by your patience and thoroughness. He is now learning German as well, but Gothic is easier for him to grasp, he says.

Vale et fave tuissimo

Kopitar

[...]

[Letter from J. Grimm to J. Kopitar]

Cassel, December 31, 1823

To the Honorable Herr von Kopitar, Royal and Imperial Librarian and Censor etc. at Vienna

[...]

Conceding all of the important arguments for the origins of church Slavonic in the South Slav lands, it is always striking how the North Slavs retain color more faithfully and lastingly in these ъ and ѣ affections. – I shall not so quickly manage the elements of the Slavic languages. Now I must throw myself back into German with all of my physical and mental energies, for I can no longer postpone the printing of my second volume, mostly still unwritten, much of it not yet conceived. I thus do not believe that I will be able to produce anything sensible in the preface to Vuk. ([Johann Severin] Vater says that he wants to include another treatise on the emergence of Serbian folk poetry and has made a request that puts me in a difficult position, for in truth it does not belong in the little grammar book and renders it more expensive. Let the publisher decide).

Vuk's mishap saddens me; how can you, with your warm dedication to him, be responsible for this? And how did it come about? The elevation of the despised language to a written language alone cannot have so incensed the opponents. Is it the [overly] free words and passages? And if Milosch withdraws his protection, isn't one Hungarian magnate patron enough? Vater and even Vuk believe that Reimer will buy a few hundred copies of the songs, but even that is not certain. It would be better if Volke did so, or the man who has the dictionary could also distribute it more easily. It is unlikely to find many buyers outside Austria, Hungary, Bohemia and Russia; perhaps two or three Germans will take the Serbian grammar and twelve German libraries the songs, but that is all!

Goethe is now too advanced in years and too varied in his interests to be expected to do anything serious (and I hear he has been ill of late); he sniffs at individual flowers of folk poetry and enjoys them. He no longer has any wish to cultivate and care for an entire field. He was especially moved by the modern Greek song about Charon; among the Serbs he will like the ones in the first volume best, the girls' songs and love songs. He presumably has less time for the great epic ones. I consider his peculiar view of folk poetry to be partially mistaken. The Serbian songs will surely cause people to see the light. Two or three of these fresh songs are worth more to me than the entire volume of Motenebbi,^[2] which Hammer translated into German. Goethe's Divan contains the most splendid work drawing attention back from the Oriental to the German. And Rückert and Platen, two brilliant poets, only harm themselves by carrying on with the ghazals.

What do I know of the modern Greek? Haxthausen, now government councilor in Cologne, a well-meaning man who is, however, wholly ill-equipped to edit, has long wished to publish an edition of what a Greek dictated to him during the Congress of Vienna. All these years, Goethe's approval has failed to spur the lazy fellow on. I have more confidence in Fauriel, whom I met in Paris in 1814, 1815; a fine Provençal, who in those days was also studying the troubadours. I do not know his address but would like to write to him sometime.

Your advice concerning Mellerio came too late! I had written to Castiglione on the previous post day and now await his answer.

My brief review of the Serbian songs is hardly worthy of notice. How indulgent you are of one who makes tyronic errors such as writing *Trschitcha* for *Trschitsch*! I canceled the *h* in *tch*, with regard to p. 555 of my grammar, because the Swedes have the same sound. I thank you for the many instructions in your last letter. Why do you want me to pay for Beowulf now, since you wish to purchase Slavica for me, for which I must send money later, and more at that?

A blessed New Year! Keep me in your affections; I promise to burden you with fewer letters during the whole year than in these past two months.

[J.] Grimm

NOTES

[1] Herr: Mr.

[2] Motenebbi (Mutanabbi), Arabic poet (915–965). Goethe reveals his knowledge of this poet in the *West-Eastern Divan*. J. von Hammer-Purgstall's translation was published in Vienna in 1823.

Source: *B. Kopitars Briefwechsel mit Jakob Grimm*, edited by Max Vasmer. Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1987, pp. 4–15.

Translation: Pamela Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Correspondence between Jacob Grimm and Jernej Kopitar (1823–24), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-5010>> [September 20, 2024].