Is Slavic četa an Indo-European Archaism?

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The origin of the Slavic word *četa ‘military unit’ (Old Russ. četa ‘troop’, OCS četa, Bulg. četa, Mac. četa, Srb./Cr. četa, Sln. četa; borrowings Alb. çetë ‘kinship, military unit’, ‘handoff in a relay’ [Geg], Rom. ceată, Hung. czata, ‘troop, band’ Turk. çete ‘Raubzug’, are presumably from Srb./Cr.) has eluded Slavic etymologists, leaving them with only tentative proposals, e.g., “Proisxoždenie četo (južnoslavjanskogo?) slova nejasno” (Černy 1994: 387); “...nima jasne etimologije” (Snoj 1997: 71). In part this mystery owes to the absence of plausible cognates in IE, and, in particular, Baltic. Comparative Slavic reconstruction is hampered further by the lack of agreement in accent—as well as meaning—between East Slavic and South Slavic, cf. end-stressed Rus. četa ‘pair, couple’ vs. Bulg. četa, Srb./Cr. četa, Sln. četa, all meaning ‘military unit, troop’, which indicate alternative Common Slavic reconstructions *četa vs. *četa. This paper attempts to sort out these apparent conflicts, starting from and developing an offhand remark by R. Jakobson,¹ and arrives at a uniform starting point for all of these forms. Though the proposal presented here cannot be proven beyond a doubt, if correct, it may further aid in the analysis of the recalcitrant IE compound numerals ‘four’ and ‘five’.

In the literature at least five historical connections of Common Slavic četa have been proposed: (1) Common Slavic *četa is usually derived from IE *kh₁₂eta- ‘twist, braid’, cf. Umbr. kateramu ‘congregamini’, Lat. caterva ‘crowd, throng, band’, Ir. cethern ‘idem’, despite the difficulty presented by the root vocalism (Skok 1971: 314; Vasmer 1987: 351; Černy 1994: 387, all with references to earlier literature), which would have given rise to Common Slavic **kot-. Trubačev et al. reject this interpretation, preferring instead to see the form as (2) an internal Slavic formation from *četo, *čisti/*čitati ‘to count’, thus the form *četa would have originally meant ‘a group of a certain number’ (1977: 92–3; recently Gluhak also adheres to this view 1993: 176). Another possibility is (3) comparison with OCS kotora ‘battle’, which is perhaps cognate with Skt. śātayati ‘he vanquishes’, śātru- ‘enemy, victor’, from IE *k’h₁₂eta-. This connection presents difficulties both with respect to the root vocalism as well as the unexpected

¹ To our knowledge, no one, including Jakobson himself, has followed up on this suggestion.
kentum reflex of the initial consonant (see Snoj 1997: 71). (4) Jakobson in his 
marginia of Vasmer’s etymological dictionary suggests iconically that “čet, 
čěka ‘even number’, čěnyj ‘even’, četa ‘pair, union’, četar ‘quarter’ seem to be 
archaic relics of the same word family as četýře” (Jakobson 1971: 646–47). A 
similar view is taken by Ehrart (1982: 139) and Andreev (1986: 142), though 
neither of these treat the formal and semantic problems. Further, Martynov (1963: 
186) has proposed connecting (5) *s(s)kórm ‘cattle’ (< *kólti ‘to impregnate, 
propagate, multiply, give birth (said of animals)’, četa and OCS sńcátati ‘unite’.)

Of these possibilities, (1) and (3) are unsatisfying on formal grounds and may 
be rejected with a degree of safety. Explanation (5) may yet have merit in our 
view, though the derivational path may have been reworked, i.e., *k’et-+*k’ot-
two ⇒ *s(s)-kórm ‘offspring of (animals)’ ⇒ kólti ‘to reproduce (of animals)’ 
(i.e., “to make two”; see below on the reconstructed primary meaning of the root in 
question). Because (2) and (4) pose fewer obvious formal difficulties and both 
give rise to plausible semantic developments, they cannot be so easily abandoned 
(despite Trubac̆ et al., who summarily dismiss Jakobson’s idea as “vrajLI 
verna” [1977: 92–3]). Connection (2), however, encounters difficulty at the 
derivational level. The Common Slavic derivation *četo, *čest, *četati ⇒ *četa, 
supposed by Trubac̆ et al., goes against the normal pattern of postverbal 
formations from verbal roots in -o, which show a-grade rather than e-grade in 
the noun, cf. četati ‘to draw’ ⇒ čerta ‘line’; of the twenty-seven postverbal roots 
in -o listed by Vailant, the only example of an e-grade is *čerh (1974: 238–45). In light of this we find derivation from the verb unlikely.

In light of the shortcomings of explanations (1)–(3), let us explore further the 
possibility of explanation (4), which derives *četa from a relic form in common 
with četýře ‘four’. The obvious difficulty that must be overcome is the analysis 
of IE *k’yetar- ‘four’ into its constituent parts, a task that cannot be taken lightly 
in view of the fact that, although the word is considered a compound, it has so far 
defied analysis (Winter 1992: 17). There are a few fragmentary pieces of evidence, 
in addition to the tangential arguments in the present paper, which help us make at 
least some guesses at its morpheme structure. The first piece of evidence, we 
believe, lies in the second syllable of the cardinal numeral *pen-ke* ‘five’ in IE, 
in which Menninger sees the first constituent of IE ‘four’ (1970: 147). Perhaps 
compounded with *s(s)pen-, the resulting form would have meant ‘four with an

additional item attached’. This further assumes a metanalysis *pen-k’et- ⇒ pen-
k’etar- where the -t- became associated with the ordinal suffix -to-, permitting 
the cardinal form to occur with an open second syllable. This suggestion may not 
seem extraordinary when it is considered that such a compound formation 
responds to Winter’s reservation about the antiquity of IE *penk’e: “[ ...] in spite 
of its easy reconstructability, PIE *penk’e does not appear to be a Proto-
Indo-European form of longstanding. Two arguments can be raised against it: 
for one, *penk’e has two full-grade vowels, and this is in violation of old ablaut 
rules. The second point is just as serious: the use of the ordinal suffix -to- 
outside ‘tenth’ is secondary [...]” (1992: 15). Secondly, a more primitive meaning of 
*sk’et-+*sk’ot- may be detected in *s’k’tel- ‘which of two’ (cf. Lith. kartas, 
kataras; Gk. πότερος; Goth. hvapunjah). Thus, the root *k’et-+*k’ot- meant ‘two’ 
when extricated from the compound *s’k’tel- ‘which of two’, which had become simplified by haplology to *s’k’el- ‘cf. OCS eter ‘someone, a certain one’, which occurs as -nr in the Codex Closionans and as eter in the Enin Apostol).

If the first part of IE ‘four’ meant ‘two’, then the second part must have 
been a multiplier. Menninger suggests comparing Skt. varga- ‘group, row’; thus 
*sk’et-yōra- meant ‘(two) groups/rows of two’ (Menninger: loc. cit.). Attractive 
though this may be semantically, this suggestion has no merit with respect to the 
sound correspondences and must be rejected. Another multiplicative meaning is 
found in Skt. vāra- e.g., panceva- ‘five times’, which Emmerick believes 
is limited to Indo-Iranian (cf. Zoroastrian bār, Modern Persian bār ‘fois’, Ossetian 
bārā ‘will’, all from Proto-Indo-Iranian *va-ār- (1992: 188). If we assume that 
this element is the same as that in the second syllable in IE ‘four’, it follows that 
at some point the compound became opaque to IE speakers and became 
understood not as ‘two times two’, but simply as ‘four’ and that the simplex 
*sk’et- continued with the more specific meaning of ‘pair, partner’, hence Sl. 
*čet ‘even number’.

A collective meaning was obtained by adding the desinence *eh₂ (cf. Sl. 
nogā ‘foot, leg’, originally ‘a multitude of toenails’ [uogats]; see Marko Snoj’s 
to the semantic development from a number word to the more specific meanings 
‘pair, partner’ and ‘military unit’, we must assume that the Russian meaning ‘pair’ 
is primary and that the meaning ‘military unit’ is derived from this. For a parallel 
we may compare Latin ex quadra ‘from a (battle) square’ (i.e., an array of four 
soldiers), which gave rise to Ital. squadrone ‘battle square, squad’; with an 
 augmentative suffix also Ital. squadrone, Fr. esquadron, both ‘squadron’. The
meaning developed from the formation of pairs or rows of soldiers in a battle formation (Menninger 1970: 179).

The Sl. data present further formal difficulties. If derived in the normal manner, Common Slavic *četá (< *k'-et-eh₂) should yield final stress in the daughter languages, as attested in Russ. četá (cf. *g'-en-eh₂ > *žená 'woman'; Russ. žená 'wife, woman', with retraction Srb./Cr. žena, Sln. žena). The South Slavic data, however, reveal stem stress: Bulg. četa, Srb./Cr. četa, Sln. četa. This stress cannot have been original and we must assume for South Slavic an analogical replacement of the stress. One possibility is the reanalysis of the nom. sg. fém. as a nom. pl. neut. of the type Srb./Cr. sêla 'villages', an oxynome paradigm (Stang's a-class). In this form the short falling vowel, such as we find in Sln. četa. This explanation is weakened in light of the fact that the formation of the nom. sg. neut. in Srb./Cr. četa, which should have developed a short rising stress in neo-Stokavian if analogous to sêla:sêla (nom./acc. sg.: nom./acc. pl.) Rather, the relationship čelo:četa suggests Slavic barytone accentuation (Stang's a-class). A model for this accentual pattern would be the deverbalative *játo/*játa 'pack (of animals), flock (of birds), school (of fish)' (cf. OCS jato, Srb./Cr. jato, Sln. jeta), which received root stress by Hirt's law *jeht-eh₂ > *játa (cf. Skt. yáta 'journey, hike').

To summarize, the development suggested here is *k'-eh₂ 'two' > *k'-et-eh₂ 'multitude of pairs', which is attested in Sl. as 'troop, group, band (of soldiers)'. The formation of a singular (Srb./Cr. čelo) indicates the reinterpretation of *četá as a plural. A newer collective formation is implied by the accentuation *četa, analogical to *játa.

References


4 The difference in accent marks reflects the diachronic distinction between “old acute” stress, which arose only on long vowels, and “neo-acute”, which was not thus restricted. At the time of the analogical development described here, the two (historical) stress types may have had identical properties.