Sound change versus analogy in some irregular Slavic comparatives

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In most Slavic languages, comparatives of many adjectives are derived via a suffix *-š-*, added directly to the root and often accompanied by a yod-mutation of its final consonant (e.g. *z* > *ž*, *s* > *š*). This is the reflex of *-jĭš-*, one of the allomorphs of the Common Slavic CPV suffix. However, **several dialect areas of Slavic attest comparatives with an entirely unexpected alternation *z, s > k,*** unparalleled in the respective standards. Cf., for the adjectives CSl *blizъkъ* 'close', *nizъkъ* 'low', and *vysokъ* 'high':

Slk	*blíz-k-y*	:	dial. CPV *blik-š-í*	'close'
Ukr	*blyz'-k-yj*	:	dial. CPV *blyk-š-yj*	
Slk	*níz-k-y*	:	dial. CPV *nik-š-í*	'low'
Ukr	*nyz'-k-yj*	:	dial. CPV *nyk-š-yj*	
Slk	*vys-ok-ý*	:	dial. CPV *vyk-ší*	'high'
Ukr	*vys-ok-yj*	:	dial. CPV *vyk-š-yj*	
Sln, BCMS	*vis-ok-(i)*	:	dial. CPV *vik-š-i*	

Since, in these examples, the *-š-* of the CPV suffix would clash with an expected root-final mutated *-š* (or *-ž* devoiced to *-š*), it is likely that the rise of these peculiar forms is connected with the dispreference for the arising geminate *-šš-* and its simplification (which would obscure the morphological composition[1]). However, the source of the innovative alternations remains unknown and has rarely been investigated. So far, the phenomenon has only been referred to vaguely as due to dissimilation or resuffixation (for Slk: Benedek 1983; for Ukr: AUM 1, Hryščenko 1978) – both difficult to substantiate. Furthermore, the facts of the respective languages have been described in isolation from each other.

We consider the material in its entirety, based on in-situ queries of dialectal data sourced from (mostly unpublished) materials of the Slavic Linguistic Atlas (OLA) as well as local, language-specific atlases. **We offer an alternative, principled explanation.** Note that root-final *-š-* arose via the yod-mutation in the CPV also when the root of the adjective ended in the velars *-x-* (e.g. CSl *sux-ŭ* 'dry' : CPV *suš-ĭš-*) and *-g-* (CSl *dorg-ŭ* 'dear' : CPV *dorž-ĭš-*, later *-žš-* > *-šš-*). Such adjectives could analogically reinstate the velar from the POS form, replacing the inherited *-šš-* with analogical (*-xš-*, *-gš-* >) *-kš-*. As long as these inherited and analogical variants coexisted, it was possible for adjectives with inherited *s ~ š* or *z ~ ž* alternations to develop such variants too. Taking dialectal Slovak as an example:

'dear'	CSl	*dorg-*	CPV *dorž-ĭš-*	
	Slk dial	*drah-*	CPV **draš-š-**	(inherited variant)
	Slk dial	*drah-*	CPV **drak-š-**	(variant analogical to POS, with [hš] > [kš])
'high'	CSl	*vys-*	CPV *vyš-ĭš-*	
	Slk dial	*vys-*	CPV **vyš-š-**	(inherited variant)
	Slk dial		**X**	X = **vyk-š-**

I.e., the synchronic competition of variant forms such as *drak-š-* beside inherited *draš-š-* may have led to the emergence of an analogical *vyk-š-* as a variant of inherited *vyš-š-*. This explanation can, mutatis mutandis, be applied to the other adjectives in Slk, as well as to the situations in Ukr, Sln and BCMS (cf. the existence of Ukr dial *dorokšyj* beside *dorožšyj* [-šš-] 'dearer' as a possible model for *vykšyj* beside inherited *vyššyj*; etc.).

The plausibility of this approach is supported by an outlier Polish dialectal CPV form **vyr-š-y** from **vys-okʲ-i 'high'**. It may, in turn, owe its existence vis-à-vis inherited *vyš-š-y* to the situation in the adjective *star-y* 'old': here, the two competing variants were *star-š-y* and *sta-š-y*[2], the synchronic coexistence of which may have spawned *vyr-š-y* as a variant of *vyš-y* < *vyš-š-y*. Note that all four areas – Pol, Slk, Ukr, Sln/BCMS – must have conducted their innovations independently.

The process is **interesing inasmuch as it does not conform to the classical pattern of four-part analogy** involving two pairs of forms differing in grammatical function, morphological class, etc. To consider the Slk situation schemed above, the POS stems *drah-* and *vys-ok-* remain without any tangent point and cannot be juxstaposed directly. Rather, it is the synchronic competition of two variant forms of the CPV of *drah-* that enabled the creation of a competitor for the inherited CPV of *vys-ok-*. Thus, the mechanism bears resemblance to the proposed type of diachronic change known as 'product-oriented innovation' (Bybee & Slobin 1982 etc.; previous applications to Slavic languages cf. Wandl 2020), although it can still be formalized as a proportional analogy. The scenario devised for the irregular Slavic comparatives invites **considering the question whether (at least some) other processes previously explained as product-oriented innovations could not be accounted for in a similar way**, especially if dialectal and substandard data are taken into account.

References:

AUM = Matvijas, I.H. et al. (1984–2001). *Atlas ukrajins'koji movy*. Vol. 1–3. Kyjiv: Naukova dumka.

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Abbreviations:

CSl – Common Slavic, Cz – Czech, BCMS – Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian, Pol – Polish, Slk – Slovak, Sln – Slovenian, Ukr – Ukrainian

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[1] Although this state is tolerated in some systems: Cz [vɪs-ok-iː] 'tall' : [vɪʃ-iː], cf. etymological spelling <vys-ok-ý> : <vyš-š-í>.

[2] The two variants may be considered competing reflexes of earlier *stař-š-y* < post-CSl *star'-ĭš-* (<< CSl *star-ě-jьš-*). Cf. standard Pol *starszy*, along with, e.g., Cz *starší*, Ukr *staršyj*.