

# A contrastive study of intersubjective phrasemes: Unconventional phraseological replies to *What time is it?* in Slovenian, Slovak, Polish, and Russian

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## ABSTRACT

Unconventional phraseological replies such as ‘Time to get a watch’ to a question *What time is it?* are based on different mechanisms to establish a link with the target statement of person A (a stimulus). Recently, some contrastive phraseological studies have been conducted on unconventional replies in Slavic languages. This article shows the potential of such studies using the example of phraseological replies to stimuli with the same meaning (‘What time is it?’) in Slovenian, Slovak, Polish, and Russian.

**Keywords:** phraseology; paremiology; intersubjective phraseme; Slavic languages; unconventional phraseological reply

## 1. Unconventional phraseological replies from a theoretical and paremiographical point of view

The reason why this type of expression has not been systematically analyzed (except for some research in recent years) is related to the difficulty of obtaining this type of phraseological material. I illustrate this problem using the example of the absence of phraseological replies in Slovenian paremiographical sources. When such replies do appear in the sources, they are often barely noticeable, difficult to identify, and therefore tend to escape scholarly attention. To begin with, let us take a look at rare examples of typological definitions of phraseological replies.

### 1.1 Examples of typological definitions

Norrick (1984, 196-198, 1993, 26, 2007, 304-305) describes phraseological replies such as *Not if I see you first* to *See you later* as “retorts” (punning and

non-punning) and also as “responses to standard requests” and includes them in his classification of set phrases in conversational humour as stock conversational witticisms.

Grigorij Permjakov (1988, 89) counts the so-called “humorous reply” among the paremiological genres. He gives an example of the Russian answer *Potomu što potomu končaetsja na ‘u’* (lit. ‘Because because ends with a ‘u’.’) to the question *Počemu?* (‘Why?’) but does not define it.

František Čermák (2007, 432-433) classifies phrasemes according to whether one speaker is sufficient for their realization (monosubjective phrasemes) or whether they require the participation of at least two speakers (intersubjective phrasemes). Among intersubjective phrasemes, there are different types of phraseological replies.

Dobrovol’skij and Baranov (2003, 39-40) call this type of phraseme an “answer formula” and indicate that the main pragmatic function of responses of this type is to highlight the inappropriateness of the previous speech act of the communication partner, but that they can also introduce additional meanings into the situation.

This type of phraseme has been studied most systematically in the Slavic context by Viktor Bondarenko (2012, 2013), who also published a dictionary of Russian phraseological replies in 2013. However, his dictionary contains both conventional replies (pragmatic phrasemes) and unconventional replies. Bondarenko (2012, 287) describes statement A (which is not part of a phraseme) as a “stimulus” and explains that the reason why statement A becomes a stimulus is that person B finds it undesirable, inappropriate, provocative, or stupid and thus uses a phraseological reply as a source of parody.

Unconventional phraseological replies have been defined as “inadequate, mostly humorous or absurd replies by person B to person A’s statement” (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 166). The target statements of unconventional phraseological replies are conventional, frequent, or even fixed everyday one- or multi-word utterances such as *What?*, *Why?*, *What time is it?*, *What’s for lunch?* (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 166).

## 1.2 The absence of phraseological replies in collections of phraseological and paremiological material - the example of Slovenian

In 2022, the Institute of Slovenian Ethnology at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts published an open access paremiological collection entitled *Pregovori* (‘Proverbs’) (Babič *et al.* 2022). It is organized as a language corpus and contains around 37,000 forms of Slovenian paremiological expressions, which includes different recorded variants. In addition to proverbs, this paremiological collection encompasses a small number of wellerisms and antiproverbs. Unconventional replies were sought not only within the corpus itself but also in the materials excluded from it. The excluded

material is heterogeneous in nature and therefore warrants analytical attention. In many collections of Slovenian paremiological material, one also encounters expressions that do not qualify as paremiological units, such as comparative idioms. Almost none of the unconventional replies were found, despite the fact that over 75% of Slovenian speakers are familiar with some of them (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 175). It seems that Slovenian collectors of folk material and paremiographers have not paid much attention to this genre. An exception is the expression *Skoraj še ni zajca ujel* (lit. 'Almost never catches a rabbit.'). which, by personifying the expression *skoraj* (meaning 'almost'), can serve as a phraseological reply to the statement in which someone uses this word, such as *Skoraj sem napisal pismo* ('I had almost written the letter.'). Surveys and language corpora suggest that this expression is a kind of amphibian: it is used both as a mono-subjective phraseme and as an intersubjective phraseme (unconventional reply). It is found in eight different variants in the *Pregovori* collection.

Compared to the Slovenian situation, the Slovak situation is quite different thanks to the rich paremiological collection of Adolf Peter Zátarecký from the end of the 19th century. Zátarecký (1896, 265-268) presented more than 140 unconventional replies in his work. He named them "humorous answers" and described them as "mostly humorous child's answers or answers to child's serious statements or questions with some cases in which the statements of person A are already humorous." Among them two replies were found to the question with the meaning 'What time is it?' – (28) *O jednu viac ako predtým* (lit. 'One hour more than before.'). and (18) *Jedny* (lit. 'One.'). (Zátarecký, 1896, 266) – described in section 2.2. These two utterances represent an exception within the material analyzed in the article, as all other cited expressions come from contemporary sources.

## 2. A contrastive study of unconventional phraseological replies to *What time is it?* in four Slavic languages

Slovenian, Slovak, and Polish phraseological replies were first collected using short surveys in which respondents were presented with a list of common stimuli (such as *What time is it?*) and asked to report frequent and humorous responses to them. These expressions are difficult – but not impossible – to find in written texts. Internet users sometimes use them when replying to each other in forums and social networks (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 171).

According to the results of surveys on the familiarity of these expressions, it was found that even very familiar replies in language corpora are very rare compared to equally familiar proverbs – nevertheless, the corpus search is also worthwhile (Meterc and Pallay 2020, 171). The most successful way of obtaining material was through surveys. A total of 192 Slovak and 209 Slovenian participants, all of whom were university students or secondary school pupils

from Bratislava and Ljubljana, took part in the survey (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 175-179). Additional material was collected by Leskovar Jereb (2022, 112-119), who included phraseological replies in two online surveys: the Polish survey was completed by 691 respondents, and the Slovak survey was completed by 432 (Leskovar Jereb 2022, 21). An internet survey on the variety and familiarity of 250 Slovenian phraseological replies was completed by 1533 Slovenian speakers in 2023 (Meterc 2023, 73-77). The Russian material comes from the dictionary of Russian phraseological replies (Bondarenko, 2013). Two Slovak phraseological replies come from Záturecký's collection (1896, 265-268).

When comparing unconventional phraseological replies in different languages, it is useful to first compare the stimuli (statements by person A) for them. After comparing the stimuli, the phraseological replies will be compared according to their mechanisms for establishing a link with the target statement.

## 2.1 Comparison of stimuli (target statements)

Stimuli with the meaning 'What time is it?' differ considerably in their lexical structure in the four Slavic languages:

- (1) Polish: A1: *Która godzina?* (lit. 'What hour?')
- (2) Slovak: A1: *Kolko je hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours is it?')
- (3) Slovak: A2: *Kolko máš hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours do you have?')
- (4) Slovak: A3: *Aký je čas?* (lit. 'What is the time like?')
- (5) Slovenian: A1: *Koliko je ura?* (lit. 'How much is the hour?')
- (6) Russian: A1: *Kotoryj čas?* (lit. 'Which hour?')
- (7) Russian: A2: *Skol'ko vremena?* (lit. 'How much time?')<sup>1</sup>

The Polish A1 (1) and Russian A2 (6) stimuli are constructed similarly. Slovak (A1) (2), Russian (A2) (7) and Slovenian A1 (5) replies are also similar, but in Slovak, the noun is plural, and in Slovenian and Russian, it is singular. The Slovak stimulus A3 (4) is less frequent than the other two (A1 and A2), but its use can be confirmed with the help of language corpora and internet searches, and phraseological replies that respond to this stimulus were also found in Slovak and are presented below. One of the Slovak replies is similar to the English reply to the same question:

- (8) Slovak: A3: *Aký je čas?* (lit. 'What is the time like?')  
B: *Čas si kúpiť hodinky.* (lit. 'Time to buy a watch.')
- (9) English: A: *What time is it?*  
B: *Time to get a watch.*

1 The stimulus in the Russian example reflects colloquial usage and does not conform to standard grammatical norms.

To illustrate how questions about the time can differ in different languages, I should also mention a stimulus in English, as quoted by Norrick (1984, 197):

- (10) A: What does your watch say?  
B: Ticktock, ticktock.

A statement with the same structure (and meaning) was not found in the Slavic languages analyzed, so it cannot serve as a stimulus. I did not consider stimuli from the dialects of the four languages included in the analysis. Many phraseological replies not only have many phraseological variants – many of them only exist in dialects because the condition of a precisely defined stimulus structure is only fulfilled for them in the dialect. Here, for example, is a stimulus and a reply from the dialect of the area around the town of Bovec in Slovenia:

- (11) Slovenian A2: *Kaj je ura?* (lit. ‘What is the hour?’)  
B: *Naprava za merjenje časa.* (lit. ‘A time measuring device.’)

Speaker B, who knows that the stimulus in the dialect means ‘What time is it?’, takes advantage of this by answering the question as if it would be formulated in standard Slovenian with the meaning ‘What is a clock?’. The use of the reply (11) can be intended for mutual teasing between speakers from different parts of the language area, but it can also be added to replies that have a corrective function in certain situations (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 167).

## 2.2 Comparison of the mechanisms for establishing a link with the stimulus

I will examine and analyze the mechanisms identified so far in Slovak, Slovenian and German for establishing a connection with the stimulus (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 2025, 232-233), which arise from different types of relations between the reply and the meaning of the stimulus. The way in which the mechanism is implemented in different replies varies precisely because of the differences between stimuli that were highlighted in the previous section. I will focus on the mechanisms that were identified as the most common, mainly by analyzing the Slovak and Slovene phraseological material. The replies to the selected stimulus are categorized according to the mechanism by which a connection to the stimulus is established: 1. a direct criticism of statement A; 2. a laconic response; 3. a misinterpretation of the target statement based on a play on words using homonymy or polysemy; 4. a seemingly correct response that is not true to the target statement. 5. A seemingly correct answer that provides no information to person A; 6. Pure nonsense; 7. An addition to utterance A in such a way that, together with reply B, a completely different meaning is created (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 167-169, 2023, 71, 2025, 232-233).

The last of these mechanisms has so far occurred only in the following Slovak reply (Meterc and Pallay 2025, 233), in which speaker B, by adding *koláda*, creates the word *čokoláda* (meaning ‘chocolate’):

(12) Slovak: A: *Čo?* (What?) B: *Koláda.*

This mechanism cannot function in replies to stimuli with the meaning ‘What time is it?’ in the analyzed languages due to the very length of the stimulus. Since some mechanisms are extremely rare, we may assume that other rare mechanisms have not yet been identified at all. Attention should therefore be paid not only to identifying rare mechanisms, but also those that have not yet been attested. Among the replies to the selected stimulus, no new mechanisms have been confirmed.

However, some types of mechanisms prove to be highly productive. The following replies to the stimulus *What time is it?* represent a direct criticism of statement A:

(13) Slovak: A3: *Aký je čas?* (lit. ‘What is the time like?’)

B: *Čas si kúpiť hodinky.* (lit. ‘Time to buy a watch.’)

(14) Polish: A: *Która godzina?* (lit. ‘What hour?’)

B: *Dla biednych zegar w ratuszu.* (lit. ‘For the poor, the clock is in the town hall.’)

(15) Slovenian: A1: *Koliko je ura?* (lit. ‘How much is the hour?’)

B: *Za reveže je na zvoniku.* (lit. ‘For the poor, the clock is on the bell tower.’)

(14) and (15) are related; they have the same motivation: instead of providing an answer, they offer information about where a publicly accessible clock can be found and proceed to ridicule and mock the questioner.

Laconic answers to the stimulus *What time is it?* in the four Slavic languages were not confirmed. In the materials available to us, there is only one example of a Slovak reply in the form of a laconic response, which answers a differently structured prompt but requests the same information:

(16) A: *Neviete, koľko je hodín?* (lit. ‘You don’t know how many hours is it?’)

B: *Viem.* (lit. ‘I do know.’)

Example (16) is basically not a reply to the stimulus “What time is it?” but an unconventional phraseological reply to the stimulus *Do you know...*, which can contain various questions (the question about the current time is only one of the possible ones). In the Slavic languages analyzed, there are many phraseological replies with a seemingly incorrect interpretation of the target statement. In Slovak, the mechanism for establishing a link with the target statement in some replies – as in (17) and (18) – is based on the similarity of the words *hodina*

(meaning ‘hour’) and *bodiny* (meaning ‘clock’); the genitive plural form of these two nouns (*bodín*) is homonymous:

- (17) A1: *Kolko je bodín?* (lit. ‘How many hours is it?’)  
 B: *Veľa, a ešte sa aj vyrábajú.* (lit. ‘A lot, and they are still being produced.’)
- (18) A2: *Kolko máš bodín?* (lit. ‘How many hours do you have?’)  
 B: *Jedny.* (lit. ‘One.’)

In Slovenian, the mechanism for establishing a link with the target statement in some replies is based on the polysemy of the word *ura* (1st meaning ‘hour’, 2nd meaning: ‘clock’):

- (19) A1: *Koliko je ura?* (lit. ‘How much is the hour?’)  
 B: *Sto evrov.* (lit. ‘One hundred euros.’)

A question in the sense of ‘What time is it?’ can also be asked in a more indirect way; in Slovenian, for example, we can ask if someone has a watch. In this case, the stimulus is the broader formula *Do you have X?*, when X is an object from which the questioner wants to obtain information or borrow the object (like a lighter in the second case):

- (20) A: *Imaš uro?* (lit. ‘Do you have a watch?’)  
 B: *Ja.* (lit. ‘Yes.’)
- (21) A: *Imaš vžigalnik?* (lit. ‘Do you have a lighter?’)  
 B: *Ja.* (lit. ‘Yes.’)

Norrick (1984, 197) quotes an English stimulus that has a similar structure to the Slovenian stimulus (20) but is less literal, so the contrast between the stimulus and the reply is greater, and the reply appears absurd:

- (22) A: Do you have the time?  
 B: If you have the place.

The following Slovak reply (and its variants) (23) also involves pretending that person B misinterpreted the purpose of the question in statement A – the reply responds to the stimulus by answering it literally, which is not a conventional reply to a given question:

- (23) A3: *Aký je čas?* (lit. ‘What is the time like?’)  
 B: *Dobry.* (lit. ‘Good.’)/*Najlepši.* (lit. ‘The best.’)/*Výborný.* (lit. ‘Splendid.’)

Some Slavic phraseological replies represent an accurate answer which gives no information to the person A:

- (24) Slovenian: A1: *Koliko je ura?* (lit. 'How much is the hour?')  
 B: *Toliko kot včeraj ob istem času.* (lit. 'As much as yesterday at the same time.')
- (25) Slovenian: A1: *Koliko je ura?* (lit. 'How much is the hour?')  
 B: *Minuto več kot pred eno minuto.* (lit. 'A minute more than one minute ago.')
- (26) Russian: A1: *Kotoryj čas?* (lit. 'Which time?')  
 B: *Pervyj posle davesnogo.* (lit. 'First after last.')
- (27) Slovak: A1: *Kolko je hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours is it?')  
 B: *Tolko, kolko bolo včera o takomto čase.* (lit. 'As much as it was yesterday at the same time.')
- (28) Slovak: A1: *Kolko je hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours is it?')  
 B: *O jednu viac ako predtým.* (lit. 'One hour more than before.')

Most of the replies to the stimulus *What time is it?* in the four analyzed languages express pure nonsense. A very common mechanism in such replies is rhyme; either it is rhyming a word from the stimulus with a word from the reply, or it is a rhyme between the words in the reply itself (rhyming words have been underlined>):

- (29) Polish: A: *Która godzina?* (lit. 'What hour?')  
 B: *Wpół do komina, komin otwarty, jest wpół do czwartej.* (lit. 'Half of the chimney; the chimney is open, so it is half past three.')
- (30) Polish: A: *Która godzina?* (lit. 'What hour?')  
 B: *Pełta sprężyna.* (lit. 'The spring broke.')
- (31) Polish: A: *Która godzina?* (lit. 'What hour?')  
 B: *Dla takiego smarka nie ma zegarka.* (lit. 'There is no watch for such a snot.')
- (32) Slovak: A1: *Kolko je hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours is it?') / A2: *Kolko máš hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours do you have?')  
 B: *Kolko vládzem, tolko chodím.* (lit. 'I walk as much as I can.')
- (33) Slovak: A1: *Kolko je hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours is it?') / A2: *Kolko máš hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours do you have?')  
 B: *Plný komin.* (lit. 'A full chimney.')
- (34) Slovak: A1: *Kolko je hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours is it?') / A2: *Kolko máš hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours do you have?')  
 B: *Tri štvrt' na tvoju smrť.* (lit. 'A quarter before your death.')
- (35) Slovenian: A1: *Koliko je ura?* (lit. 'How much is the hour?')  
 B: *Pet rac in ena kura.* (lit. 'Five ducks and one chicken.')
- (36) Slovenian: A1: *Koliko je ura?* (lit. 'How much is the hour?')  
 B: *Toliko, da se mačka polula.* (lit. 'So much so that the cat peed.')
- (37) Russian: A2: *Skol'ko vremena?* (lit. 'How much time?')  
 B: *Vremja ne dremja.* (lit. 'The time is not sleeping.')

As already noted, the stimulus in (37) reflects colloquial usage and does not conform to standard grammatical norms. In normative Russian, the genitive form *vremeni* would be required; however, this would disrupt the rhyme scheme. Similarly, the form *dremja* in the reply is also not used in accordance with the rules of standard Russian. In the Slovak reply (33), the lexeme *komin* is used with the same meaning ('chimney') for the rhyme as *komin* in the Polish reply (29). Some of the rhymed replies given (e.g. (29), (34) and (35)) mimic to a certain extent the conventional replies to the question about the time by mentioning numbers (five, half past, a quarter), etc. In this respect, the replies in Slavic languages are similar to the English phraseological reply (38):

- (38) A: What time is it?  
B: Half past the monkey's ass.

In the following, let us look at replies that are pure nonsense in terms of their message but do not rely on rhyme, like the examples above. As I have already mentioned, some of the rhymed replies given mimic, to a certain extent, the conventional replies to the time question by mentioning numbers. Such a structure is also productive in nonsensical replies that do not rhyme:

- (39) Slovenian: A1: *Koliko je ura?* (lit. 'How much is the hour?')  
B1: *Tri četrt na pol.* (lit. 'A quarter to half.') B2: *Tri četrt na čarovnijo.* (lit. 'A quarter to magic.')  
(40) A1: *Kolko je hodín?* (lit. 'How many hours is it?')  
B1: *O päť minút plné vedro.* (lit. 'Five minutes to a full bucket.') B2: *Tri štvrte na odštiepenú.* (lit. 'A quarter to a split.')

In (41) and (42), absurdity is achieved with the help of the idea of a straw clock hand, and the false belief that covering one clock hand with another makes it impossible to tell the time. With such absurd replies, it does not matter what form the stimulus takes; it only matters what it asks for:

- (41) Russian: A1: *Kotoryj čas?* (lit. 'Which hour?')  
B: *Na moich solomennych korova strelku s'jela/slizala.* (lit. 'A cow ate/licked the clock hand on my straw clock.')  
(42) A2: *Skol'ko vremja?* (lit. 'How much time?')  
B: *Strelka na strelku zalezla – ne vidno.* (lit. 'The clock hand has covered the clock hand - it is not visible.')

### 3. Conclusions<sup>2</sup>

Although this is a phenomenon that has received little attention in phraseological studies compared to other types of phrasemes (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 166), the systematic collection of unconventional phraseological replies through questionnaires, informant interviews, and other respondent-based methods show that there are many more of these expressions than it seems at first glance and that many of them already have a rich range of phraseological variants within the standard language, and the study of dialects can provide even more material. Let us add that the surveys yielded the information that some phraseological replies are known to a very large proportion of speakers: for example, the Slovenian phraseological reply *Toliko kot včeraj ob istem času* (lit. 'As much as yesterday at the same time.') was known to 89.2% of 1533 respondents in an extensive online survey (Meterc 2023, 73-77) and the Polish phraseological reply *Wpół do komina* (lit. 'Half of the chimney) was declared to be familiar by 97% of 691 respondents in a survey of Polish native speakers (Leskovar Jereb 2022, 44). For the above reasons, they are not a negligible part of the language and are also interesting from other points of view, not only contrastively but also, for example, from a phraseodidactic point of view.

The contrastive study of unconventional phraseological replies is a very promising field of research. In this article, I have shown that, in some cases, there may already be sufficient material for contrastive research in order to analyze replies to stimuli with the same meaning. Unconventional phraseological replies are strongly dependent on the structure of their stimuli (target statements), as I have shown when comparing the situation in different languages. I have demonstrated that replies to the question *What time is it?* can vary even within a language, and when compared across languages, these differences become even more apparent. Despite the differences between the compared Slavic languages, the stimuli and their answers also have some similarities; they follow the same mechanisms for establishing the link between the stimulus and the answer, and in some cases, even similar phraseological motivation for the reply in the compared languages was found (e.g., the reply with the bell tower motif and the town hall in Slovenian and Polish and the replies with a chimney in Polish and Slovak).

Slovak, Slovenian, Polish, and Russian replies are based on similar mechanisms of establishing a link between the reply and the stimulus. No new mechanism was found in the analyzed material compared to previous analyses of replies in Slovak, Slovenian and German (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 167-169; Meterc 2023, 71; Meterc and Pallay 2025, 233), although it must be emphasized that the search for new (rare) mechanisms is meaningful and important, since

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there are also extremely rare mechanisms that have so far been confirmed in only one case in a single language (Meterc and Pallay 2025, 233). Just as until now findings have only been made based on the analysis of replies to various stimuli within a single language (Meterc and Pallay 2019, 168), also in the contrastive analysis of replies to stimuli with the same meaning, the most commonly used mechanisms include rhyme, homonymy or polysemy.

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