

“The Meaning of p”
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This historical linguistics presentation investigates mysterious sporadic diacritic patterns in a 13th-century Bulgarian Church Slavonic manuscript, the Dobrejšo Gospel. Most frequent among these sporadic patterns, which have not been found in any other Slavic manuscripts, is a dot, titlo (dash marking an abbreviation), or one to three acute accents over or near the letter p, which represents /r/, where the p is immediately preceded by another consonant letter: e.g., ṗ, ṗ', ṗ'. The diacritic most often occurs in the manuscript in canonical Old Church Slavonic spellings of words in which historically a front (ь) or back (ѣ) reduced vowel immediately followed the consonant cluster, such as прѣсть (*pr̄stь* ‘finger’, fol. 5v5). Less commonly, the dot or accent appears over a letter p adjacent to another consonant letter in words that did not historically have a jer either immediately preceding or immediately following /r/ in a consonant cluster: e.g., пѣтръ (*petr̄* ‘Peter’, fols. 8r5, 31r21).

With only one exception, these diacritics do not occur where the letter л, which represents /l/, is in the same orthographic environment, that is, immediately preceded by another consonant letter. Instead, also sporadically, where л is preceded by another consonant letter, the character ѣ, which represented a reduced mid-vowel, is inserted between the two consonant letters. Hence the diacritic over or near p and the inserted ѣ immediately before л are in complementary distribution.

A single or triple acute accent does appear sporadically, however, over or near the л in words formed from the root *glas-* ‘voice’, which there never had been a reduced vowel following the consonant cluster: e.g., гл'а'сомъ (*glasomъ* ‘voice-INSTR.SG’ fol. 114r6). The accent(s) can also be found on or near a p in a cluster that did not historically have a reduced vowel either: e.g. п'р'аведнѣ (*pravednĕ* ‘righteous-LOC.SG’, fol. 61v1).

What do these different inserted markings mean? Why are they different for /r/ and /l/? And what do they reveal about consonant clusters containing liquids in the scribe’s vernacular dialect of Middle Bulgarian, based on empirical evidence from modern Bulgarian dialects? We’ll tease out the red herrings and solve these mysteries together.