

MATEJ METERC AND JOZEF PALLAY

UNCONVENTIONAL REPLIES: A SPECIAL TYPE OF PHRASEME AND A PAREMIOLOGICAL GENRE

Abstract: The article investigates unconventional replies and their target statements using various examples from English and five Slavic languages (Slovak, Slovene, Czech, Polish and Russian) and a survey conducted among over 400 Slovene and Slovak students. This paremiological genre – a type of phraseological replies – has received little attention in worldwide research to date. We begin by formulating our own definition. Frequent mechanisms for establishing the link between a target statement and an unconventional reply are presented. Two unconventional replies from English used in internet memes are analysed along with their equivalents in Slavic languages. The initial results of sociolinguistic research we conducted on 20 Slovene and 20 Slovak unconventional replies are presented, with a focus on how respondents interpret dialogues with unconventional replies. A number of new Slovene and Slovak unconventional replies and their variants were collected in the framework of this research, and will need to be analysed in the near future. The conclusion of the article outlines aspects that offer potential for further research on this special type of phraseme and paremiological genre.

Keywords: unconventional reply, phraseology, paremiology, intersubjectivity, spoken language, internet meme, deautomatization, survey

1. The definition and the main features of the paremiological genre

Permyakov (1970: 90) mentions “humorous answers” (ru: *shutochnyje otvety*) among other paremiological genres. As an example he gives the answer *Potomu shto* “*potomu*” *konchaetsja na “u”* (literally Because “because” ends with a “u”) to the question *Pochemu?* (Why?). Permyakov does not define these humorous answers but says they have a “negative communicative function” (ru: *negativno-komunikativnaya funkcija*), which means they stop the communication (or at least a certain type of

communication). Below we explain why the term “unconventional reply” is more suitable than “humorous answer”.

As this hitherto neglected phraseological phenomenon lacks a concise definition, we have formulated our own. An unconventional reply is a phraseologically fixed, unexpected and usually humorous or absurd reply used by one person (B) in response to a certain target statement from another person (A). The link between the target statement of person A and the unconventional reply of person B has the character of a word game or pun, as the various mechanisms listed below show. The important thing is that person A does not expect such a reply or trigger it intentionally, as we would otherwise be dealing with a paremiological unit consisting of the dialogue as a whole.

It is however possible for person A, once confronted with the unconventional reply, to continue the conversation with another unconventional reply, resulting in a chain of replies. Such chains were found in the Slovene, Slovak and Polish material. This is an example from the Polish language (the rhyming words are underlined):

A: *Właśnie ...* (Exactly)

B: *Nie mów właśnie, bo ci kura jajem trzaśnie*, (Don't say exactly, otherwise the chicken will hit you with her egg.)

A: *Kura nie jest taka głupia żeby swoje jajka thukła* (The chicken isn't stupid enough to break her own eggs).

B: *Kura jajek nie żąda i ciebie bombarduje*. (The chicken does not care and will bombard you with them.)

A: *Kogut głupi jej odkupi*. (The stupid cock will buy her eggs).

In English such replies are often described as “comebacks”, “retorts” or “repartees” in everyday language.

1.1. The targets of unconventional replies

The targets of these replies are conventional, frequent or even fixed everyday one-word or multi-word utterances such as What?, Why?, What time is it?, What's for lunch?, Thank you or What a shame (found in three Slavic languages). Not all of these targets are questions, and sometimes person B has to interrupt person A to seize the opportunity to use the unconventional reply

– this mostly occurs in cases where revealing the whole context of the target statement would make an ostensibly wrong interpretation thereof impossible.

Calling this type of phraseological reply “humorous” is problematic in many ways. It would be comparable to calling proverbs “bits of wisdom”. Humour is not the main goal in many cases. In our opinion, the character of the targets merits just as much attention as the replies themselves.

Having analysed material from Slovene, Slovak and Polish, we can conclude that the more frequent, usual and fixed a certain statement is, the more likely it is to become the target of an unconventional reply. It seems that these paremiological units are used not only to avoid giving an answer, but also to attack frequent patterns which lead to the automatization or even uniformization of communication. The main function of unconventional replies is not humour but deautomatization. Quite a few unconventional replies seem to have a corrective message: the Slovene question *Kva?*, a substandard version of *kaj?* (what?) used in the capital Ljubljana and other parts of central Slovenia, is commonly subject to a mild critique in the form of the reply *Kva delajo žabe* (Frogs say kva; kva is the Slovene equivalent of English ribbit, that is, the Slovene interpretation of the sound a frog makes).

Humour in our opinion is merely one possible side effect of establishing an unconventional link between two statements. Permyakov (1970: 90) noted that the entertainment function (ru: *razvlekatel'naja funkcija*) is present in paremiological units of all types, but that it is the main function only in some types of riddles (so called Armenian riddles). The sociolinguistic survey presented in part 3 will attempt to shed light on the matter by providing some idea of how often dialogues with unconventional replies are described as humorous or funny and presenting other reasons respondents gave for such communications.

1.2. Frequent mechanisms for establishing a link with the target statement

Our observations of Slovene, Slovak and Polish unconventional replies have revealed the following attitudes toward target statements:

1. direct critique of the statement: A: *Hvala*. (Thank you.)
B: *Hvala ni za v žep*. (You can't put thank you in your pocket.) (Slovene example)
2. a laconic answer: A: Why? B: Because. (all three analysed Slavic languages)
3. a seemingly wrong decoding/interpretation of the target statement: A: *Može*. (Perhaps). B: *Morze jest głębokie i szerokie, a w tym morzu pływa ryba, która się nazywa Chyba*. (The sea is deep and wide. And a fish named Probably is swimming in it.)
4. an accurate answer which gives no information: A: *Kakšna je voda?* (What's the water like?) B: *Mokra*. (Wet.) (A Slovene example also found in other languages)
5. pure nonsense: A: *Prečo?* (Why?) B: *Lebo citron je žltý a paradajka nemá zips*. (Because the lemon is yellow and the tomato has no zipper.) (Slovak example)

The most frequently used mechanisms for establishing an unconventional or absurd link between a target statement and an unconventional reply involve rhyme or homonymy and polysemy. Rhyming offers quite a few possibilities. In this Slovene unit, the rhyme is established between the words *kaj* (what) and *nazaj* (backwards):

A: *Kaj?* (What?)

B: *Mačka ima pa rep nazaj*. (literally The cat's tale is pointed backwards)

A similar rhyme is also found in a Slovak example, which, however, is unique in that a typical phraseological introductory formula is used as an unconventional reply to a greeting formula:

A: *Pan Boh daj zdravia*. (Let god provide us with health)

B: *Ako ľudia vravia*. (literally As people say./ So the people say.)

A rhyme can help to create an absurd laconic reply, as in these examples from English. Polish and Slovak:

A: *You know what?*

B: *Chicken butt.*

A: *You know why?*

B: *Chicken thigh.*

A: *Co? (What?)*

B: *Jajco. (An egg.)*

A: *Prečo? (Why?)*

B: *Lečo. (Lecho.)*

The Polish example below contains two rhymes – one connects the unconventional reply with the target statement and the other is within the unconventional reply itself

A: *Która godzina? (What time is it?)*

B: *Wpół do komina, komin otwarty, jest wpół do czwar-tej. (literally It is half of the chimney; the chimney is open so it is half past three.)*

The Polish humorous chain given above should also be noted in this context.

The use of homonymy, paronymy and similar semantic relations is very common in the paremiological material collected to date. It occurs mostly in cases where person B fakes an incorrect decoding/interpretation of the target statement. The Polish example given above is based on the paronymy between the words *może* (perhaps) and *morze* (a sea). After a homonymy in the first part of the unconventional reply, a rhyme based on the synonymous word *chyba* (probably) follows in the second part. Some Slovak and Slovene examples of units with polysemy will be presented in part 2.

1.3. Examples of research with unconventional replies: the case of Russian and Polish

In his typology of propositional phrasemes as examples of “intersubjective phrasemes”, František Čermák (2001: 95) lists some typical Czech unconventional replies (A: *Proč?* (Why?) B: *Pro slepičí kvoč* (Because of the chicken's bawk) alongside some rather different dialogical units, such as greetings (A: *Pozdrav pánbu!* (God speed!) and B: *Dejž to panbu!* (God willing!)), but draws no distinction between the units. Intersubjectivity is an

important feature of unconventional replies, but the difference between these two types of phrasemes is that an unconventional reply can either be an unexpected reaction to a non-phraseological statement either to a phraseological unit from person A.

The Russian phraseologist Bondarenko noted this difference (2012: 287-288), but apparently it was not significant enough to merit the separate presentation of the two types of phrasemes in his dictionary. This dictionary (Bondarenko 2013) compiles different “phraseological replies” (more than 900 of them), including dialogical phrasemes (greetings and similar phrasemes), and also includes quite a few unconventional replies. He describes statement A as a “stimulus” and lists different examples of this. This view is also interesting – statement A (which is not part of a phraseme) can be observed as a trigger or a target. Both views can lead to productive research. Bondarenko (2012: 287) states that the reason why statement A becomes a stimulus is that person B finds it unwanted, inappropriate, provocative or stupid and therefore uses a phraseological reply as a source of a parody.

The work of Polish phraseologist Ewa Kozioł Chrzanowska (2015) is another welcome exception to the rule on research of unconventional replies. She conducted very insightful research on a sample of 1000 humorous (mostly propositional) phrasemes sent in by readers of the Polish weekly newspaper *Przekrój*. Among her material are 30 units which she names “dialogical units”, and most of these fit our definition of unconventional replies. It is interesting to note that the same number of wellerisms (30) were found in her sample. Kozioł Chrzanowska (2015: 160-163) points out that some unconventional replies can only be used as part of a dialogue, while others can also be used whole by a single person. We feel that in the latter case we are dealing with paremiological conversion from one paremiological genre to another. Kozioł Chrzanowska says that the key to understanding different types of humorous phrasemes is Mihail Bakhtin’s concept of “carnivalization” (2015: 98), and Bondarenko (2013: 28) is of the same opinion. This view can easily be connected with the need to break with the automatization of usual, everyday, and thus conventional communication identified above.

1.4. Examples of unconventional replies found in collections and dictionaries

Unconventional replies are frequent in the spoken language of everyday casual and unofficial communication. They are rarely found in written sources. This partially explains why they are rarely collected and even more rarely form the subject of research. Even the rise of the internet and its tools and the revolution linguistics is experiencing with the use of language corpora have not generated a great deal of exposure or led to the recognition of this phenomenon as an interesting research topic. In Slovene, for example, only small traces of the genre can be found in the main Slovene-language corpus Gigafida (which contains over a billion tokens) even though it contains internet texts (16%), while the only corpus of spoken Slovene is too small for research of even the most common proverbs, since it contains only 120 hours of recorded speech (Meterc 2015: 2, 2017: 190). As it were the Gigafida corpus did not contain most of the unconventional replies known to more than 75% of respondents in the sociolinguistic survey presented in the following chapter.

The internet was the “best of the worst” among potential sources for these units before we started our sociolinguistic research using questionnaires. The internet is a huge source of every kind of data imaginable, and it comes as no surprise that unconventional replies occasionally pop up in internet forums or blogs. Googling one unit, we would sometimes find similar unconventional replies in a forum discussion or comment section. This constituted a second source for our database, the first being our personal knowledge and private collecting (asking friends and colleagues) and the third the material collected in the questionnaires presented in the next chapter.

Unconventional replies are very rarely found in collections. One exception is the Slovak 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.” A special comparison of the Zátarecký material and Slovak usage nowadays will be needed, but we can already confirm that some of the units are still known

to today's Slovak-speaking community. We also found some units with a similar motivation to the Slovene unconventional replies we are familiar with.

Unconventional replies are rarely included in dictionaries, even phraseological ones. Already mentioned Bondarenko's work is an exception to the rule. Some examples can also be found in a Czech phraseological dictionary:

A: *Půjdeme spolu ...* (Let's go together to ...)

B: *Půjdem spolu do Betléma.* (Let's go together to Bethlehem) (Čermák 2009: 53)

Čermák describes this unit as "a playful answer to a person who proposed going somewhere together." The user of the dictionary is also informed that the origin of the unconventional reply is the beginning of a widely known Czech Christmas song.

2. Two English examples and their Slavic equivalents

This section presents two examples of unconventional replies used in internet memes. Linguists have already stressed the importance of internet memes (Milner 2013, Koziol Chrzanowska 2017). There are different genres of internet memes as well as different combinations thereof. More traditional paremiological forms are also frequently used in internet memes, either as a quotation, as in the cases presented here, or as a constructional pattern. The constructional pattern of a wellerism is in our opinion very productive in this regard, while a constructional pattern for unconventional reply has yet to be found among internet memes. In an article about thematical-constructional formulas (Meterc 2016: 137), the production of memes has already been compared to the contextual actualisation of phrasemes as defined by Erika Kržišnik (2006: 256).

2.1. First example: A: *What time is it?* B: *Time to get a watch.*

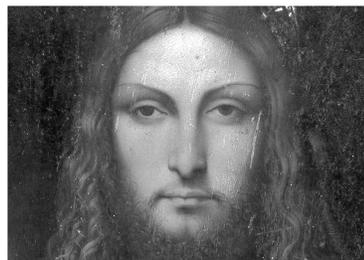
The first English example features an "accurate" answer which, while not immanently absurd, is definitely not the answer person A was looking for. The focus of this internet meme is the reaction of person A, who was given an unconventional reply. The example was found among a subgenre of internet memes that take classical works of art as a reference.

There's no shortage of unconventional replies to the question What time is it? in Slovene, Slovak and Polish. One of the Slovak respondents even named the reply *Čas si kúpiť hodinky* which means literally the same as the English reply *Time to get a*

Me: What time is it?

Someone: Time to get a watch

Me:



watch. One unit found in Slovene and Slovak is also ostensibly correct and does not provide person A with any useful information: Same as yesterday at the same time (*Toliko kot včeraj ob istem času* in Slovene, *Toľko, koľko bolo včera o takomto čase* in Slovak). The variant *Minuto več kot pred eno minuto* (A minute more than one minute ago) was also named by Slovene respondents. Other quite common Slovene unconventional replies to this question include a rhyme with the word *ura* (hour) and the underlined words below: *Toliko, da se mačka pocura*. (literally Time for the cat to take a piss) and *Pet jajc in ena kura* (literally Five eggs and a chicken). A Polish equivalent based on a rhyme was mentioned in chapter 1.2. Another Slovenian equivalent is based on a rhyme within an unconventional reply: *Tri četrt na zelen, če maš ljubčka, se pa oženi* (literally Three quarters to green, marry if you have a lover). The element “three quarters” seems to be quite productive among Slavic unconventional replies to this question, since we also found the Slovak examples *Tri štvrte na Vianoce* (Three quarters to Christmas) and *Tri štvrte na nekonečno* (literally Three quarters to infinity).

The fact that the Slovene word *ura* means both hour (*Koliko je ura?* literally means How much is the hour?) and clock seems highly conducive to unconventional replies: one unconventional reply is *Za reveže je na zvoniku*, which means For poor people, it is on the church tower (that is look at the church clock because you can't afford a watch because you are poor). There are also a number of variants on this unconventional reply which rely not only on the polysemy of the Slovene lexeme *ura* with the meanings hour, clock and watch, but also on the fact that the pronoun *Koliko?* (How much?) is used in other contexts to ask the price of something: *Za 10 evrov ti jo dam* (I'll sell it to you for 10 euros) and *Lepša je, dražja je* (The nicer it is, the more expensive it is). And there is a unit in the Slovak language based on a similar polysemy: *Veľa a stále ich vyrábajú* (There are many, and they are still being produced; the Slovak question contains the noun *hodín*, which means "hours" but also "clocks").

2.2. *Second example: A: Are you free? B: No, I'm expensive.*

The next English example is a Grumpy Cat meme with a unit based on a polysemy of the word "free". Here Grumpy Cat is supposed to be the one using the unconventional reply (person



B), which means the visual component of this meme is the opposite of the visual component of the meme discussed above.

The two meanings used in the unconventional reply have two different lexical equivalents in Slovene (*prost* and *zastonj*), Slovak (*voľný* and *zadarmo*) and Polish (*wolny* and *zadarmo*).

An internet search led us to a Polish unconventional reply to the same question based on the same model. It uses the homonymy of the word *wolny* (free) and a non-standard shortened form of the word *powolny* with the meaning slow and answers the question with the opposite of slow: A: *Jesteś wolny?* (Are you free?) B: *Nie, szybki.* (No, I am fast). To date we have not found any unconventional replies to this question in Slovene or Slovak.

3. Sociolinguistic research of 20 Slovene and 20 Slovak unconventional replies

The sociolinguistic research was conducted using a survey of 401 students in two Slavic-speaking countries, Slovakia and Slovenia. We are currently only able to present a few preliminary results. Below we will focus on those that shed light on the nature of the paremiological genre.

3.1. Basic information about the research

The survey was conducted in 2017 and included 209 Slovene students and 192 Slovak students. The youngest Slovene respondent was born in 2003 and the oldest in 1981. The youngest Slovak respondent was born in 2001 and the oldest in 1990. Respondents came from all parts of Slovenia and Slovakia, but a large number of Slovene respondents lived in the central part of Slovenia or near the capital Ljubljana and a similarly large number of Slovak respondents came from the western part of Slovakia or the vicinity of Bratislava. This is largely due to the fact that the high schools consulted in the survey are located in Ljubljana and Bratislava. At the same time university students from the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana and the Faculty of Arts in Bratislava were included, and a lot of them came from other parts of Slovenia and Slovakia.

The survey consisted of two parts. The aim of the first part was to discover how people describe unconventional replies, regardless of whether they were familiar with the presented units. We were interested in learning how respondents identified these units – did they describe them as fixed, frequent, useful, positive, negative, absurd, humorous, etc.? The aim of the second part was to obtain information on the students' level of familiari-

ty with 20 selected unconventional replies, as well as any information the respondents could offer about variants and other potential unconventional replies to the presented target statements. In both parts of the questionnaire, respondents were encouraged to write down paremiological units similar to the ones presented.

3.2. *Initial results*

In this section some initial results from the survey will be presented. In the first part of the survey, unconventional replies and their respective target statements were presented to respondents. The latter were given instructions to describe the short dialogue presented to them in a sentence or two or with a few words. They were also encouraged to write down any associations that occurred to them. After they answered this question we explained to them what an unconventional reply is, and they were asked to mark their level of the familiarity with each of 4 units according to slightly modified Ďurčo's model (2002, 2014) of a FTP (full text presentation) questionnaire. They could choose from 5 different options: 1. I know the unit and I use it 2. I know the unit but I do not use it 3. I did not know the unit but I recognized it as a fixed expression 4. I did not know the unit and I did not recognize it as a fixed expression 5. I know a variant. Data about the level of familiarity of each paremiological unit and its most frequent variant forms, as well as newly collected material, will be published in Slovene and Slovak articles in the near future.

The first important takeaway from the survey is that people readily recognize the paremiological genre of unconventional reply when they come across a unit that they do not know (answer 3 described above). In both languages unconventional replies were more frequently recognized as fixed expressions (224 times in the Slovene and 196 times in the Slovak survey) than not (149 times in the Slovene and 126 times in the Slovak survey).

One factor that influenced the relatively high rate of recognition of the units as fixed expressions might be the fact that some of the presented target statements have other, much better known unconventional replies. The second Slovene dialogue shown to the respondents was the one containing the unconventional reply *Za reveže je na zvoniku* (literal meaning It is on the church tower

for poor people) to the question *Koliko je ura?* (What time is it?) mentioned in chapter 2.1. It turned out that the unit was known to only 24.4% of respondents. However, over two thirds of the respondents (107 out of 158) who did not know this unconventional reply recognized it as a fixed unit. Another reply to the same question, *Toliko kot včeraj ob istem času* (Same as yesterday at the same time) was known to 97.1% of respondents. An important factor was also that once a respondent recognized one reply as a fixed expression, they may have been more likely to identify the other presented units as such as well. Thus we intentionally did not include any unit that used rhyming in the first four units presented to the Slovak and Slovene respondents.

We were especially interested in the paremiological and non-paremiological names the respondents gave to the presented units. Unconventional replies were most frequently described as jokes (*šala*, *vic* or *hec* in Slovene, *žart*, *vtíp* or *sranda* in Slovak). Multiple respondents also described them as word play or puns (*besedna igra* in Slovene, *slovná hra* in Slovak) and sarcasm or sarcastic answers (*sarkazem*, *sarkastični odgovor* in Slovene, *sarkazmus*, *sarkastická odpoveď* in Slovak). Less frequent descriptions include irony, insults, arrogance, a waste of words, clichés, threadbare phrases, phrasemes, humorous phrases, making fun of someone, nonsense, absurd answers, primitive answers, rude questions, childish answers, provocative answers, useless answers, humorous answers, witty answers and philosophical answers. The reply with the church tower mentioned above was even described as a proverb by some Slovene respondents!

The humorous part of the units was often relativised (“person B is trying to be funny”) or directly criticised (“bad joke”, “strange joke”, “a joke that isn't funny”, “cringe”) by the respondents. It was very rare for a respondent to describe a reply as a “good joke”.

Some respondents sought the motivation behind the unconventional reply in the stupidity of the question itself, saying it was reciprocal. Interestingly, it was not uncommon for a respondent to formulate his or her thoughts paremiologically, by citing a proverb: *Kakršno vprašanje, takšen odgovor* (literally Like question, like answer) in Slovene and *Hlupá otázka, hlupá odpoveď* (literally Stupid question, stupid answer) in Slovak.

Other proverbs were also found among the respondents' comments: *Hec je pol zdravja* (Slovene, literally a Joke is half of health) and *Vsak zakaj ima svoj zato* (literally Every "why" has its own "because").

Other reasons for using unconventional replies listed by the respondents include:

"Person B does not like the question and wants to avoid answering it."

"Person B did not want to reveal details."

"Person B is either joking or in a bad mood or simply not in a mood for conversation."

"Person B is having a bad day and is answering a banal question in a provocative manner."

"Person B doesn't have any rational argument to offer."

"We say this reply to a person we don't like."

"I use this answer when talking to people who understand the joke."

"Stopping the flow of the conversation."

The last comment comes very near to the negative communication function described by Permyakov. Some respondents describe mechanisms of polysemy and homonymy and identify wordplay on the part of person B, who is said to be interpreting parts of person A's question in an unusual context.

Respondents often stressed that such communication is part of more private spheres of communication or communication between friends, schoolmates and neighbours. They frequently wrote that such communication is typical of children or of parents when talking to children, for example: "Parents say this when they are fed up with a child's questions." Some respondents wrote that they hear such replies from their own parents.

In the future, the overall paremiological performance – "the active and the passive overall knowledge of proverbs by all informants in a paremiological experiment" (Đurčo 2014: 190) – of the Slovene and Slovak respondents will have to be compared with that of older adults and measured on a larger sample of paremiological units. At the very least, the results obtained for 209 Slovene speakers show that this genre is quite alive among university and high school students in Slovenia: twelve unconventional replies were known to more than half of the respondents

and seven were known to more than 75% of them. The situation is similar among Slovak students: half of the units were known to more than 50% of respondents and six were known to more than 75%.

4. Research potential of the paremiological genre

The respondents also named a number of variants and new units which will have to be evaluated and analysed in the near future. We estimate that we gathered somewhere between 200 and 250 new units in both Slovene and Slovak. The construction patterns of both the new unconventional replies and their targets will have to be analysed once a larger collection has been made for a given language. To name just one pattern we discovered: the target statement Do you have x? (x being the watch, money, etc., with the meaning Can you tell me the time? Can you give me some money? etc.) and the unconventional reply *I do*. Another interesting phenomenon is the variety of chains of unconventional replies we have already encountered in the Slovene, Slovak and Polish material. These will need to be classified and checked with further sociolinguistic research.

We also found some examples of paremiological conversions – jokes which have the same motivation as unconventional replies, or sayings which can function either on their own or as unconventional replies to a specific statement. Another interesting phenomenon we observed was the use of unconventional replies with non-verbal actions or targets such as sneezing.

It would be very interesting to investigate this paremiological genre from a historical perspective. We could even start with some examples of unconventional replies of evidently modern origin: in Slovene, for example, part of a commercial for laundry detergent is used as an unconventional reply to the question Is it new? (No, it was washed with Perwoll). The role the Internet can play in popularising such units could also provide potentially fascinating insights.

Contrastive analysis of this part of phraseology offers interesting possibilities for research. So far we have noted interesting cases of similar construction patterns or even units with the same motivation in three Slavic languages. It would be quite interesting to know to what degree languages – either those which are

genetically close or those which are not – share a common stock of unconventional replies.

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Matej Meterc
Inštitut za slovenski jezik Frana Ramovša ZRC SAZU
p.p. 306
1001 Ljubljana
Slovenia
E-mail: matej.meterc@zrc-sazu.si

Jozef Pally
Filozofska fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani
Aškerčeva 2
1000 Ljubljana
Slovenia
E-mail: jozef.pally@gmail.com