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in the Yugoslav Successor States

Revisiting Language, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Former Yugoslavia

Robert Greenberg

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Guest editor

Roswitha Kersten-Pejanić



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Revisiting Language, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Former Yugoslavia

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This special edition on the language issues in the former Yugoslav space (AWPEL 2.1) provides some new perspectives and approaches to the study of the interplay of language, ethnicity and identity among the peoples of the former Yugoslavia. When I first began focusing on this topic in the early 1990s, the sociolinguistic and ethnographic linguistic literature on the peoples and languages of this multi-ethnic space seemed to be in its infancy. This volume reveals that the case of the former Yugoslavia has proven to be a fruitful field for scholarship in these areas of linguistic inquiry. It is pleasing to see here how younger researchers approach the complex issues arising from the breakup of Yugoslavia and the disintegration of the joint language formerly known as Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian.

As Roswitha Kersten-Pejanić has pointed out in the introductory essay, this area of research has many political and linguistic traps. I will never forget one of my own instances of falling into one of those traps. The year was 2001 and I was a Fulbright senior scholar in Macedonia. I arrived in the country only two weeks before the first clashes between Albanian rebels from the National Liberation Army and members of the Macedonian armed forces in the border village of Tanuševci. The conflict escalated and spread to the Tetovo and Kumanovo regions during the subsequent weeks. As part of my Fulbright, I was giving guest lectures at the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, in a series called “Language and the national Idea.” I was trying to demonstrate the link between language, ethnic identity, and nationalism in areas outside the Yugoslav space based on a course I had been teaching called “Languages and Nationalism” at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In one lecture I suggested that it may be useful to encourage the teaching and learning of the Albanian language in primary schools where Macedonian was the language of instruction, and that this innovation would be particularly useful in the ethnically-mixed areas of Western Macedonia. The very next day, one of the leading Macedonian language daily newspapers reported that an American linguist has recommended that the Albanian language should become a required subject in Macedonian-language schools. In a time of highly-charged relationships between the Macedonian and Albanian communities and the daily reports of armed clashes, I felt particularly vulnerable that my words had been taken out of context and misrepresented in a high-profile daily newspaper. I am therefore acutely aware of how difficult it is to write about these subjects without creating some anxiety among scholars, reporters, or ordinary people in the region of the former Yugoslavia.

I believe that the contributors to the volume skilfully have navigated this complex material and avoided the traps that can arise in unexpected places. In addition, the volume demonstrates that scholarship on this region has been following a variety of approaches that increasingly are ethnographic in nature. The contribution from Christian Voß looks at efforts towards language planning and language policy from largely an elite-driven perspective and provides a valuable and insightful account between language standardization processes in Macedonia and Montenegro. The work of Branimir Stanković and Marija Stefanović looks at the interactions of top-down standardization processes for Serbian and bottom-up perspectives from speakers of a regional dialect in the southeast of Serbia (the so-called Torlak dialects) which is markedly different from the standard. Their study documents some of the tensions inherent at that intersection and the pressures on individuals from the Torlak speech area to code-switch between local dialect forms and standard Serbian. Lumnije Jusufi shifts focus from the former Serbo-Croatian speech territory to Albanian speakers on either side of the Macedonian/Albanian border around the region of Dibra/Debar. Her study falls within a wider group of studies that take into consideration the influence of borders on language speech and language attitudes. While the border that Jusufi has looked at has been in place for over 100 years, there are other studies, including my own (Greenberg 2016 and 2018), that have looked at language policies on either sides of two of the new post-Yugoslav borders, namely the Montenegro/Serbia border and the Slovenia/Croatia border. In addition, in 2016 an entire edited handbook dedicated to the study of the Slavic languages and “identity and borders” was published (Kamusella et al. 2016). The final contribution in this volume by Snežana Stanković adds to ethnographic linguistics a new and original interdisciplinary dimension by analysing the needle-work created by women from Bosnia and Herzegovina living in Berlin who survived the genocidal events that occurred in Srebrenica near the end of the Bosnian war in 1995. This work combines linguistic and ethnographic theories and provides a poignant example of how the impact of the ethnic and linguistic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia have spread well beyond the Balkan region.

The articles in this volume that concentrate on the former Serbo-Croatian speech territory give prominence to the 2017 “Declaration on the Common Language.” This declaration provided expression for those linguists and intellectuals who oppose the breakup of Serbo-Croatian into four separate and distinct languages. The Declaration considers Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian to be a single polycentric language that can still retain its four nationally-inspired names. This Declaration was signed on 30 March 2017, and is one of several landmark language declarations to have been concluded in the month of March. It may be a sheer coincidence that the 2017 Declaration was signed almost exactly 167 years after the Literary Agreement of 1850 that is often viewed as the first agreement to establish a joint literary language for Serbs and Croats. However, it is not coincidental that the 2017 Declaration was signed in the month of March almost exactly fifty years after the March 1967 Declaration on the Name and Position of the Croatian Literary Language. If the 1967 Declaration is often viewed as a pivotal event in Croatian linguistic secessionism from the joint language traditions, the 2017 Declaration is seen as rejecting nationalist-inspired separate languages and as reasserting the commonalities of the Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian languages within

a single over-arching polycentric language. The signatories of this most recent March declaration included some 200 linguists, academicians, and intellectuals from the Yugoslav successor states of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia. While the 2017 Declaration has received significant media attention, members of the leading political parties have rejected the notion of a common language as have mainstream academicians (see Milekić 2017). The signatories did not include any members of existing language commissions within the successor states; i.e., none of the advocates of the separate languages have joined the ranks of those supporting the notion of a common language.

As the articles in this volume also demonstrate, the new linguistic realities on the territory of the former Yugoslavia have had some negative consequences that were also recognized by the signatories of the 2017 Declaration. These consequences include: (1) social, political, and cultural disruption across the territory of the former Serbo-Croatian language; and (2) separate school curricula in the various languages/cultures, creating educational segregation, which is seen especially in ethnically-mixed areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The Declaration insists on language-related changes in the Yugoslav successor states to include the following provisions: (1) To end discriminatory policies based on use of language in the successor states; (2) to end rigid definitions of the four separate languages; and (3) to end unnecessary and expensive translations from one of the languages to another (see Declaration 2017). The signatories of the Declaration have not made any progress in advancing their goals of changing the sociolinguistic positions of the successor languages. Since 2013, the Serb authorities in Republika Srpska have been working to harmonize their education system with that of the Republic of Serbia (see Kovačević 2018) and they no longer recognize the term “Bosnian language” for the language of Bosniaks, preferring instead to call the language the “Bosniak language” (see Panić 2015). These decisions have further polarized the ethno-national communities in the entity, as Bosniak parents have been boycotting the official schools of Republika Srpska and setting up their own unofficial schools (see Jukić 2015). Other conflicts regarding the use of the Cyrillic script have arisen in areas of Croatia where Serbs make up at least 33% of the population (see Greenberg and Hristova 2015). It is clear that the signing of the 2017 Declaration cannot in itself reverse over 25 years of contentious inter-ethnic relations across the former Yugoslav space.

This volume has been refreshing in how it has moved away from considering the entrenched nationally-driven policies and provides a perspective that in many ways is more hopeful. As Voß has pointed out, the Macedonian language question has largely been resolved, and now, with the resolution also of the long-standing Macedonian “name question” with Greece, we can see how compromise can prevail in the Balkan region. Thus, while the situation in Montenegro may be volatile and confusing, the possibility exists that patience may bring about greater clarity and toxic unresolved issues could eventually find productive solutions. Similarly, Stanković and Stefanović’s look at the interaction of top-down and bottom-up processes may be instructive for how the “codifiers, educators, and implementors” may find common ground and mitigate the tyranny of the elites in determining linguistic norms. When considering Jusufi’s contribution, the border between Macedonia and Albania is a much softer one than it had been during the days of Albanian and Yugoslav

communism, and in some ways is softer even than some “internal” borders within Bosnia and Herzegovina or Macedonia. The situations described are dynamic and undergo constant change, and these perspectives are particularly valuable to keep in mind. The nationalist discourse in the former Yugoslavia so commonly seen in the media has a true antidote in the contributions in this volume, and that gives me hope.

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About the author

Robert Greenberg is currently serving as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and a Professor of Linguistics at the University of Auckland. He previously was a Dean and Professor at Hunter College of the City University of New York, and for ten years a Professor (adjunct) in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Yale University. His PhD is from Yale University in 1991, and he has held teaching positions at Yale, Georgetown, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is a specialist in South Slavic languages and linguistics, and has worked primarily on sociolinguistic issues in the former Yugoslavia. He has explored issues of language, nationalism, and ethnic identity both in Tito's Yugoslavia and in the years following

Yugoslavia's breakup. His publications include numerous books and articles on South Slavic and Balkan Slavic topics. His book, *Language and Identity in the Balkans* (Oxford University Press, 2004, second revised and expanded edition, 2008), received an award in 2005 for the best book in Slavic Linguistics from the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. In 2010 he was the recipient of the William Clyde DeVane medal for excellence in teaching and scholarship at Yale University.