

How Can Learning of Lesser-Used Languages Expand Our Frontiers?¹

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Abstract

The main aim of the following paper is to stress out the importance of foreign language learning, especially those languages which are classified as minor ones. Both the Greek and Serbian languages belong to a group of so-called “lesser-used languages”. Although necessity of their learning is mostly conducted by practical, political and economical reasons, the truth is that there are many other aspects which could be considered as starting point for the learning of these languages. Above all, both countries share the same Balkan social, religious and historical milieu and background. As Serbian and Greek can be viewed as regional languages, on a higher scale their learning enables crucial support and promotion of European regional and minority languages particularly in the domains of education, mass communication, public life and social affairs.

Key words: social expandibility, market of languages, Serbian, Greek

1. Introduction

One of the often asked fundamental questions is – why do people learn foreign languages? The answer to the question whether it is necessary to learn foreign languages has long been familiar because knowing and mastering foreign languages is the key element to understanding and to approach to other peoples, cultures and civilisations. Insufficient knowledge of others, even in the aspect of language, has conditioned (and it still does) erroneous premises driving conflicts at both internal (i.e. local) and external (foreign) social and national-political level(s). In this respect it is sufficient to take a brief look at history of the modern age marked by colonialism – each coloniser had a clear tendency to shape the conquered peoples according to themselves in terms of their civilization, culture, religion, customs and language, too.

Imposing the language of the coloniser and banning the use of local languages in communication of conquered peoples had quite reasonably caused inferiority complex and a sense of shame of the own native language (as well as of the own culture and moral values) as insufficiently worthy of communication. However, similar instances have been recorded in our own (European) surrounding. Anti-semitism emerged from the fact that the Germans had not been well acquainted with Jewish culture and thereby with the Hebrew language even though the Jews had been in direct contact with the Germans for centuries. Such insufficient knowledge was exactly

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what encouraged further strengthening and expanding of well-established and completely erroneous assumptions of the Jews in the Germans. Clearly defined internal policy in addition to the open nazi propaganda, which ultimately led to holocaust, were quite certainly additional elements responsible for the aforementioned. There are also similar examples even in the recent times. For instance, although the Croats and Serbs do know each other relatively well owing to the fact that they co-habitated in the same country for more than eight decades and that they even speak the languages that belong to the same South Slavonic branch, antagonism between them has been encouraged, *inter alia*, by the so-called „linguistic“ reasons still propagated as crucial by Croatian linguists, particularly as of 1974. The truth is that the differences between the Croatian and Serbian languages (that have always existed) to the largest extent have referred to the lexical rather than the morpho-syntactic domain. Insisting on the very linguistic purism, that is, on the introduction of new Croatian words or creation of calques even in instances in which it is not so necessary, accounts for a main means of establishment of differences between the pertinent languages. On the other hand, the fact is that regardless of the entire communist propaganda on the existence and nurturing of “brotherhood and unity”, no mutual approximation of all the peoples and nationalities had ever occurred in former Yugoslavia owing to a simple reason that this kind of propaganda in the form of internal policy had been imposed from above. The principle of brotherhood and unity was mostly accepted merely declaratively, whilst in the practice it was unevenly implemented. This resulted in bringing down the knowledge of the other peoples and thereby their language as well to mere basics (in the instance of e.g. Macedonian or Slovene), or it had entirely lacked (in the instance of minority languages).

The modern world significantly differs from the world three and more decades ago – the former political and block-related in addition to social-economical division into western capitalism and eastern communism is largely substituted by a division into regional and global economic groups of countries on the one hand and the unification of the world capital and creation of a market under the leadership of the very most developed countries that are members of regional and global economic organisations and groups on the other hand. Even in such altered conditions, learning of a foreign language (or of languages) still remains a priority of any society. Above all, the motives are rather clear – it is necessary to create the so-called strategic partners in all fields. On the other hand, the modern world is characterised by a large mobility of people and goods, which means there are no longer isolated societies within its boundaries. Migrations of the population significantly affect change in both social and national structure of almost any nation. Thus, the inflow of foreign workforce in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s to a large extent altered the almost monolithic linguistic and national image of Germany, France and the Benelux countries, for instance. Furthermore, the modern world implies all those situations where the inclusion of “foreigners” in solving complex social, political, economic and business problems is necessary (Hoftsed, 1991; Kopper et al, 1997), thus making them broader regional and international.

2. Social expendability and market of languages

If language is borne in mind in the modern world, monolingualism is an already overcome category at the global level, hence plurilingualism and mandatory learning of foreign languages at school is thus insisted on. However, when a language policy is created in every society it is necessary to know the answer to the question – what foreign languages should young generations

learn? In hindsight to the still valid Ferguson's social-linguistic classification of languages (Ferguson, 1996: 269-270, Stewart, 1968: 542), we will see that the language image is highly unbalanced not only in the European Union environment. As opposed to small groups of languages that are broadly expanded worldwide for numerous and mainly well-known reasons, out of which English is particularly dominant as a universal *lingua franca*, there is a group amounting to more than 3,000 languages considered minor and frequently endangered. Therefore, it is essential for each society to have the answer to the previously mentioned question. In order to obtain as precise answer as possible, the so-called social expendability (Italian: spendibilità sociale) is considered according to Vedovelli (Vedovelli et al, 2009: 14). This category is in its essence threefold since it pertains to:

- a) research of needs for the introduction (i.e. learning and acquisition) of a foreign language in a foreign environment,
- b) any factor affecting the possibility of its further acceptance and expansion in a foreign environment, as well as
- v) practical and pragmatic cost-effectiveness of knowledge and learning of a foreign language/languages.

In other words, social expendability is the appropriate economic parameter doubtlessly demonstrating whether and to what extent it is cost-effective to learn and/or speak a foreign language (foreign languages) in an environment, and in particular in the one belonging to a group of lesser represented languages. With this regard, all languages in the world are present in the so-called *market of languages* (Italian: mercato delle lingue)², thus competitive to one another. In our opinion, the basic concept of the idea of market of languages is closely related to strict economic criteria of the world market. This is a system stratifying languages in each society into two levels:

- i) on the one hand, according to needs conditioned by national, ideological, political, cultural, traditional, religious, regional and all other values relevant for any society,
- ii) on the other hand, according to the so-called semiotic identity of languages at the international level, that is, according to their hierarchical position directly conditioned by economic, industrial, technical and technological progress (e.g. these are the reasons as to why Chinese is nowadays learned much more than in comparison to only two decades ago)

In essence, the market of languages reflects an ability of a society in terms of offering its own and embracing foreign cultural influences, that is, a capability to adapt its own cultural identity at the international level. Due to that, the market of languages is highly dynamic since it is mostly dictated by non-linguistic instead of linguistic opinions. Thus, for instance, after the tragic breakup of the former Yugoslavia, learning of the Russian language at Serbian primary and secondary schools suddenly became “non-profitable” and even “unnecessary”, whilst the situation today is quite the opposite – a highly close economic and political cooperation between

² This term, which is far from being right one, since in a large number of scientific papers dedicated to sociology and philosophy of language has caused a lot of disputes and various controversies, we consider in a very large sense, particularly in metaphoric one.

the Republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation has once again increased interest in learning the Russian language, even though there is a very long tradition of learning of Russian in Serbia. The comprehensive 2001 study on establishing the Group for Dutch Studies at the Faculty of Filology at the University of Belgrade specified that in addition to economic, cultural and social-political movements, one of the main reasons for the establishment thereof lies in the urgent need for the cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and the Hague Tribunal. All of the aforementioned undoubtedly demonstrates that other social and political factors do prevail within the “society-language-culture” relationship, and those are factors that become relevant and that have an ability to draw attention to a certain language as such. The cultural dimension of one nation is directly acquainted with by means of language, since it is a prerequisite for the construction of life and cultural needs entirely affecting both the individual and collective form of life and work. Individual and general elements find their identity, that is, create their own cultural forms particularly in the domain of the structure and use of a language.

Owing to that reason, the market of languages is a kind of a metaphore of the social attraction ability – if perceived entirely all values of a society are those that cause the attraction and interest effect to a certain extent, i.e. the effect of rejection and indifference in foreigners. More precisely, the attraction ability of a language is manifested within the social, national, economic and cultural system it drives. In line with one research (Baker-Eversley, 2000), although Italian is only the 19th largest language according to the number of its native speakers (i.e. more than 70 million), it is the fifth most desirable language for learning according to the number of persons interested in learning thereof, starting from the USA and Great Britain, to Japan and African countries. The main reason for learning Italian worldwide lies in the cultural dimension Italy has gained as of Renaissance onwards, followed by economic and other factors. Although, for instance, the number of native speakers of Swahili as opposed to the number thereof of Italian is twice as big (according to estimates there are more than 140 million natives; Irele-Biodun, 2010), neither for the Italian, nor for the Greek or Serbian society is economically or geo-politically cost-effective to learn this language – from the linguistic and scientific point of view it certainly is. From the perspective of economy the question is whether Swahili speakers could use and cash their acquired knowledge in their respective societies in the right manner.

In his research, Calvet mentions the term “language market” as a rather important sociological category since it clearly demonstrates whether and to what extent a foreign language is attractive, interesting and acceptable for learning at the international level (Calvet, 2000:154). As Vučo et al. state “this process is a result of not only an internal semiotic identity of a language, but of a system translating into a language both social and production dynamics of communities, institutional policy of promotion of diffusion of a certain language, ability of societies to offer their own social and cultural identity shaped as points of support, successful and prestigious models” (Vučo et al, 2007: 500).

3. The Greek and Serbian languages in the market of languages

As we have already specified, the market of languages is largely conditioned by other non-linguistic elements more or less directly intertwined with social expendability and rationalisation of resources. However, the fact is that a different perspective of the world and thereby another form of culture is acquired by acquisition/learning of a foreign language regardless if it belongs

to a group of large or small languages. In this regard learning of foreign languages is considered very important since it largely contributes to the development of intercultural communication as well as of intercultural dialogue(s). According to Gogas, there are other major factors affecting the orientation to study a foreign language in addition to social expendability. He particularly points out that „for being one able to achieve a thorough understanding of another cultural load /s/he has to master the language of the other. In my view this is the only way if an individual wants to be incorporated in another society, avoiding thus any sort of alienation“ (Gogas, 2008: 244). At the same time, the same author underlines that „foreign languages as they are taught today do not facilitate intercultural communication“ (Ibid.). Therefore, we absolutely agree with Воробьев’s thought that the issue of the relationship and connection between a language, culture, as well as a direct motivation of a non-native to learn any foreign language is considered most important (Воробьев 1999: 126). No less important are the well-established collective stereotypes and prejudices about a certain people, since collective memory of a society largely determines the orientation of the entire community towards a language/languages to be studied as foreign in its territory (Стојичић-Мутаваџић, 2011: 270).

On the other hand, the truth is that the market of languages still supports the demarcation of languages into major and minor ones and even contributes to its further viability. Furthermore, the modern world imperative is mirrored in the need of safeguarding the entire language and cultural diversity which, in terms of linguistics, denotes nurturing, propagating and expansion of learning of less represented languages. For instance, Article 2:3 of the Lisbon Treaty itself states that the European Union “shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced” (OJEU, 2007: 11).

From the perspective of socio-linguistics, both Greek and Serbian belong to the group of minor languages. According to the number of their native speakers, the estimates of which are up to twelve million, Serbian is the 76th largest language in the world, whilst Greek is the 74th with a total of 12.3 million native speakers. If percentages of the number of native speakers to whom either of these languages is L2, Greek is in a by far better position than Serbian: since there is no official statistical data, rough estimates by socio-linguists are that Greek is nowadays spoken as L2 by a total of two million people (Χαρίδου, 1992: 216; Πάλλη, 1994: 335-337), whilst Serbian is spoken by only several dozens of thousands (Johnson, 1998: 298). For that reason, these two languages are and cannot be comprehended the same in the market of languages; neither can they be competitive to other languages. However, a rather different situation is observed perhaps not so much in the European continent as in the field of the Balkans: as opposed to Serbian, Greek is highly competitive and in demand. Reasons for this are to be sought for in the large Greek cultural and civilizational heritage, tradition of learning of classical Greek, as well as in the relatively close mentality (with respect to all the differences). If the area of the Balkan peninsula is taken into consideration, it should not be overlooked the fact that Greece was the first industrialized country there, the role of which is even today both in economic and geo-strategic sense extremely important for all the countries in its surrounding – suffice to say that despite the crisis affecting it since 2009, Greece has invested nearly € three billion of investments in Serbia³,

³ http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/w_articles_ws2_1_04/05/2011_389553,
http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=06&dd=19&nav_id=86671

while at the same time the Greek banking sector “has been heavily exposed to countries in central, east and southeast Europe”(Bastian, 2010: 5).

On the other hand, the interest in learning the Serbian language is almost non-existent in the Republic of Greece as well as in other surrounding Balkan countries, which is for several reasons understandable to a certain extent. The underlying reason can be found not only in warfares and negative position of all social communities towards Serbia, but also in the lack of efficiency and interest of the state of Serbia to promote its own official language. The fact is that in the period 1975-1991 a large number of Greeks studied in Serbia (i.e. former Yugoslavia) and they learned our language, but as far as we know, there are no records thus far on whether they have ever been in a position to use Serbian for business purposes and if so, to which extent. Moreover, our country failed to use the Greeks studying in Serbia as a possibility to deepen and strengthen the relationship with Greece including also their knowledge of Serbia. Thus, in our opinion, a unique opportunity was missed to better position our language and culture in the Greek society. Additionally, all nations in the Balkans are prone to excessive ethnocentrism, which historically has (and still does) lead to numerous disagreements between them.

4. Conclusion

All of the aforementioned is merely a representation of part of the problem a small language is faced with. Since „the world is more global and mobile than ever before“ (Korhonen, 2004), today a particular emphasis is put on intercultural communication and thus on the intercultural dialog, which is a generator of all modern European geo-political and geo-economical streams. In intercultural communication it is essential to enable the promotion of cultural diversity between all peoples, as well as to promote cultural heritage of every environment, ethnical group, minority or nation under the same and equal conditions. In order to carry out this quite an ambitious task, it is necessary to learn foreign languages, regardless whether they belong to the category of small or large ones. Our opinion is that *The White Papers* are by far more explicit about it than any other European document. Thus, page 29 includes the following: „Language learning helps learners to avoid stereotyping individuals, to develop curiosity and openness to otherness and to discover other cultures. Language learning helps them to see that interaction with individuals with different social identities and cultures is an enriching experience“(Council of Europe, 2008: 29). According to our point of view, it does seem that this very important part of the *White Papers* is more likely to refer to majority groups, rather than to minority or ethnic ones.

The dream of a universal language able to unite and bring all human beings closer and eliminate the causes – at least the communicative ones – of misunderstandings and conflicts, has always been present in the history, therefore neither is our age immune to that myth. However, until a language such as that one has been invented there is nothing else to do but to learn foreign languages. Although this process can at times be very stressful, difficult and demanding because it entails personal effort and does take time, it also has certain advantages. One of them is the fact that “we think of our world in different dimensions” (Svitil, 2005: 20). This is exactly wherein the wealth of knowledge of foreign languages lies – it enables us to switch from one cultural, notional, and mental code to another as easily and painlessly as possible, whereas we continuously make comparisons to any adopted codes of the environment the language of which we acquired as native. The world we observe and think we understand is usually not the one observed and understood by others, even when it comes to peoples whose mentality, culture and

religion is close. Owing to the existence of such at times irreconcilable differences, learning of foreign languages implies visiting special worlds necessary to be explored and comprehended in order to approximate them to our own. That is why intercultural communication and intercultural dialog have a special importance, since they contribute to a better understanding of one another thereby to the acceptance of the other one as an individual. Therefore, language is the key factor in investigating our identity (either individual or collective) and in its formation, just as it was the case with modern Hebrew after Israeli independence in 1948.

We shall conclude our paper by words of a great thinker Mahatma Gandhi who was once accused of being too generous and lenient to Muslims and other non-Hindu nations. He responded to such allegations by the following statement: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any".

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