Ethnolinguistic and sociolinguistic approaches to the study of language shift in South-Eastern Europe

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Abstract

The present article aims to outline basic methodological and theoretical issues that reveal themselves in the linguistic study of small ethnic groups in South-Eastern Europe, particularly in its Slavic part.

The article (a) argues that sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic approaches to the study of small ethnic groups could contribute significantly to the research of possible strategies for the construction of their identity, (b) discusses theoretical and methodological approaches applied by researchers dealing with languages of particular minorities in the region, and (c) underscores the complexity of issues that arise when sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic situations of various ethnic groups are compared. Possible directions for the development of linguistic methods in the research of small ethnic groups are also discussed.

Keywords: ethnolinguistics, sociolinguistics, Balkan linguistics, discourse analysis, language ideology

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1. Introduction

In Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, there are about forty million people who can be considered members of ethnic minorities (Suppan 1996: 10). Their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities especially came into focus with the mutually opposing processes of enlargement of the European Union, and dissolution of socialist states (e.g. Soviet Union, FR Yugoslavia) and the emergence of new state borders in these regions. Among numerous minority groups, there are a lot of which are not treated as legal minorities by the states in which they live, and consequently they have no institutional support in areas such as education or cultural activities. The increasing attention paid to research of ethnicity, ethnic minorities and collective ethnic identities during recent years mobilized many scholars that belong to different traditions of social sciences. Political changes, on the other hand, caused the emergence of the phenomena that could be described as “ethnic revival”, or even “(re)discovery and (re)creation of identity” (Kürti and Langman 1997: 8, Haas 1999: 557). In this context, the linguistic identity of small ethnic groups becomes an important issue since specific language tradition is a potent symbol of collective identity, especially for small and isolated ethnic groups. Such groups always have to balance between the intention to be integrated into their environment as much as possible, on the one hand, and to preserve their own identity, on the other. Their linguistic behaviour, together with attitudes towards their own language (or dialect) and the majority language, can tell a lot about the identity strategies they choose.

In this article I will try to outline basic methodological and theoretical issues that reveal themselves in sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic studies of small ethnic groups in South-Eastern Europe, particularly in the Slavic part. This area is characterized (a) by a diversity of small ethnic groups which are not treated as legal minorities, and (b) by dramatic political, economic and social changes which affect significantly minority status and both their perception by others, and self-perception. Also, the enlargement of the European Union to include this region is expected to affect relations between various groups within it, as well as attitudes towards languages / language varieties, and values attached to them.

2 The term small ethnic group is used here to designate isolated, institutionally unsupported ethnic groups in the region, since the term minority is usually associated with legal acknowledgement of an ethnic group by the host state; it is nevertheless often used by other authors as a descriptive category, because the important component of the identity of these groups is conditioned by the differences between them and the majority. In sociolinguistic studies related to the area of South-Eastern Europe, such ethnic groups are marked in different ways: as stateless minorities / staatenloser Minderheiten, Sprachinsel, small linguistic communities, etc. (cf. Steinke 1990, 1991, 2001, 2003, Tsitsipis 1998: 9, f. 4, Hamp 1989).
2. Linguistic approaches to study of small ethnic groups

Sociolinguistic and ethno-linguistic approaches to the study of small ethnic groups could provide an essential contribution to the research of possible strategies for the construction of these groups' identity, since, as stressed by Bickel (1998: 16), "language provides essential resources for acting-out life styles, it provides a crucial means for establishing social identities".

In Western linguistics there is already well developed scientific discourse resulting from the linguistic research of small ethnic groups and concentrated upon processes such as language obsolescence, contraction and shift, functional reduction, etc. (see Dorian 1989). Some Western scholars have also expressed a significant interest in exploring these processes among minorities in the area of South-Eastern Europe. Among others, there are the works of R. G. Minnich, dealing with language codes and their roles in border areas (Minnich 1988, 1989), the papers of Susan Gal on code-switching and language-identity relation in the European periphery (Gal 1987); American Balkanologist Victor Friedman wrote numerous works on multilingualism in the Balkans and Balkan minority groups and their languages (cf. Friedman 1995, 2001, among others). Also, Eric Hamp has explored manifestations of language contact and multilingualism in communities of Prespa Albanians, younger speakers of Arvanitika in Attica, Slovenes in Resia etc. (cf. Hamp 1989); German Slavist Klaus Steinke focused on the linguistic identity of Bulgarian old-believers in Russia, Albanians in FYR Macedonia, etc. (cf. Steinke 2001). Finally, Christian Voss has recently dealt with the language and identity strategies of Slavophone populations in Northern Greece (Voss 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d).

Among Slavists in South-Eastern Europe, language varieties of small ethnic groups have also been a subject of interest for a long time. This interest, however, was developed in theoretically and methodologically different directions from that in the Western linguistics in previous decades: dialectology, being the most developed linguistic sub-discipline for the most of the 20th century in South-Slavic linguistics, predominates in the linguistic research of minority varieties as well. In this field, pastoral tradition prevails, with a “rhetorical convention which continually looks back, often nostalgically and for moral guidance, to

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a lost, but supposedly more pristine, rural, homogeneous, and authentic past” (Williams 1973). Within this tradition, researchers would look for “best speakers, who will provide evidence of the most ‘unadulterated’ form of the language” (Dorian 1981: 3), while the processes of innovation and results of language contact, would only rarely be noticed, and usually seen as a degeneration of an authentic language.4

In recent studies of language varieties spoken by members of small ethnic groups, there are notable efforts to go beyond any kind of description – whether it is dialectological, ethnographical, or description of the current sociolinguistic situation or the state of traditional culture, including its verbal expressions – and to relate minorities’ linguistic and cultural features to the identity strategies they are adopting within the frame of broader social processes. The approach selected in these efforts depends on the characteristics of the ethnolinguistic community studied,5 such as the number of speakers, the relation between varieties of communities in contact (whether they are mutually intelligible or not), the presence or absence of other markers of ethnolinguistic group (religion different from the majority's), broader ethno-cultural context (bi-lingual and bi-cultural or multi-lingual and multi-cultural setting), kinds of bilingualism existing in communities in contact, etc. The greater the similarity between the language variety of a minority group and that of the majority, the more difficult it is (a) to explore the relationship of the process of language-use to the linguistic structure which can be investigated,6 and (b) to determine which features of language-use result from the process of language shift, and which simply reflect inherent features of a dialect formed by contact with others. Another important factor to consider when deciding about the approach to the study of the language of small ethnic groups is the stage of language shift; this is closely related to the number of speakers of the language in question (Taylor 1989: 167):

4 Present lack of interest in the processes caused by language contacts is strongly opposed to the fact that the first researches of these phenomena were conducted exactly in this area: Schuchardt (1884: 30 quoted in Wilford 2003: 6) mentions Lucio’s discussion in 1666 of the mixture of Croatian and Romance dialects in Dalmatia, based on Dalmatian records from 14th century. Schuchardt, the first great creolist and pioneer in the study of contact languages, provided numerous examples of structural mixture and contact-induced change in the Balkan area.

5 According to Hamers and Blanc (1989: 166), an ethnolinguistic community is a group of people sharing norms, values and linguistic interactions.

6 For the theoretical implications of this relationship, refer to Hymes (1974); cf. also Gal (1989).
if the group is of sufficient size at the start of the investigation and the concentration of the linguistic community is gradual, there may be time and evidence enough to identify some of the phenomena early on, and to observe their development. If the group is already small, its membership not entirely clear-cut, and its further contraction rapid, then the researcher’s observations are likely to be more tantalizing and suggestive than full and conclusive, and the fieldwork and research problems will be compounded.

Ethnolinguisic communities undergoing the process of language shift in the area of South-Eastern Europe are characterized by a great variety with regard to the features described above. Some of these languages are genetically different from the language of the majority (Romanian and Aromanian speaking communities in Serbia and FYR Macedonia, German speaking communities in Slovenia, etc.), while others are genetically related to the majority’s languages (Bulgarian villages in Serbia, Serbian villages in Slovenia, etc.); varieties spoken by members of these communities and of the majority’s can even be just a different dialect of the same language, but with other salient characteristics which make a group a minority – such as different ethnic or religious identity. Kajkavian speaking Catholics in Vojvodina belong to this kind of ethnolinguistic communities. In this case, as well as in the case of Serbs in the Slovenian region of Bela Krajina, religion which is different from that of the majority, plays a significant role in the way in which the group identity is constructed; also, religion can determine the direction in which the language shift will be going – for example, the Polish ethnolinguistic community in Vojvodina adopted a Slovak identity and language, and not the majority Serbian language, because of the religion they shared with Slovaks.

3. From contents to context

In the field of the South-Slavic linguistics, recently there have been some attempts to explore the process of language shift in small ethnic groups, applying sociolinguistic methodology, and to determine the degree of ethnolinguistic vitality in the sense of Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977), i.e. to relate social variables such as status, demography, and institutional support to the degree in which the variety in question and its communicative functions are preserved (Vuckovic 2000, Petrovic 2002). Such research has shown that the aspect of economy is crucial for the ethnolinguistic vitality of these kinds of minorities – improved financial circumstances and increased mobility of population results,
as a rule, in the decline of both the use and speakers’ competence in the native variety.

Contrary to the postulates of traditional Yugoslav dialectology that looked for an “ideal speaker speaking unspoiled native idiom”, current studies of small linguistic enclaves in South-Eastern Europe attempt (a) to deal with languages in contact, without neglecting the results of that contact, both in diachronic and synchronic perspectives, and (b) to observe linguistic situation in these groups as a process and not as a static category. Dealing with the ethnolinguistic community of Kajkavian speaking Croats in Vojvodina, Vuckovic (2000) paid special attention to the context-related phenomena, such as two-way interference and speakers’ accommodation caused by interlocutors and topic.

The significant shift of focus towards context is also observable in ethnolinguistic works. Ethnolinguistics developing in South-Slavic languages is under the strong influence of Russian ethnolinguistics, established and developed by N. Tolstoj and his colleagues (for basic theoretical postulates of the Russian ethnolinguistics, see Tolstoj 1982, 1995, Tolstaja 2002); this discipline significantly differs from what is usually understood by ethnolinguistics in the American scholarly tradition. In the Slavic sense, ethnolinguistics is a complex discipline covering the whole content of culture, folk psychology and mythology, regardless of forms of their manifestation; for this discipline, language is not the only object of research, but it includes all forms which express collective consciousness, folk mentality and perception of the world (Tolstaja 2002). Apart from a description of traditional culture and its verbal forms in idioms faced with obsolescence, ethnolinguistic methodology is being used to obtain information such as functioning of particular terms of traditional culture in context, then a degree of interference between interviewer and interviewee, etc. For methodological purposes of ethnolinguistic research undertaken in this way, the notion of ethnodiaclectological text was introduced by one of the leading Russian ethnolinguists, Anna Plotnikova (cf. Domisleckaja, Plotnikova and Sobolev 1998). Such texts should contain information about the contexts in which they were recorded, about the interference of interviewers and interviewees, etc. Such texts can provide very important resources for a group’s identity establishing strategies in a multicultural situation which is characterized by functional contraction and obsolescence of the group’s native variety. They could carry very valuable information on the attitudes of carriers of a certain culture towards its values, and indicate in- and out-group relations, establishing oppositions such as then vs. now, me vs. them, us vs. them (Sikimic 2002). These subjective comments provided by the interviewees help to obtain the complete,
multi-level picture of a traditional culture, with all the interactions that characterize it, both inside the ethnolinguistic community and in relation to other communities.

4. Possible directions of further development

The state of the art in the South-Slavic linguistics, in regard to the process of language shift research, indicates that the focus is being moved from the description of isolated linguistic material towards the context in which the process of language shift takes place. Having in mind current trends in the sociolinguistic and anthropological linguistics in the world, one can expect that the next step undertaken by Slavistic scholars would be towards the anthropological aspects of language shift and towards looking for a key for understanding the process of language shift, as seen from the inner, speakers’ perspective, for which discourse analysis could serve as a suitable tool; in this regard, the research done by Tsitsipis (1998) among speakers of Arvanitika in Greece can be an important reference. Analysing their narratives, he reconstructs the *linguistic ideology*, as the arrangement of the elements of the narrative allows one to reconstruct the speakers’ views on the causal relationships between the phenomena of the spiritual and social life.\(^7\)

Another potentially fruitful field could be the analysis of particular speech genres, their persistence and functions in the varieties undergoing language shift.\(^8\) Also, it is important to document productive mechanisms of such varieties and to link innovations with the process of language shift (cf. Gal 1989). This would help to get rid of the rhetorical construct in which the language shift is seen only as a corruption and loss of language, culture, and tradition, and not to overlook an important aspect of language shift, to be found in the fact that it is “the cumulative process of language change that results from the self-interested, rational decisions that individuals make in the course of their lives, which happen to include choices between and transmission from one language to another” (Errington 2003: 725).

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\(^7\) For the theoretical framework of linguistic ideology and empirical applications of these concepts in various linguistic fields (see Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998, Kroskrity 2000).

\(^8\) The following authors, among others, have dealt with the interrelation of the language shift and various language genres: Tsitsipis 2000, Hill and Irvine 1992, Kroskrity 1998.
References


