

Documentation of small endangered languages in Serbia: entering and engaging the community

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Introduction

- Linguistic diversity and language endangerment have been topical for several decades → red books and inventories of endangered languages
- Serbia: information found in UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, Ethnologue and the Catalogue of Endangered Languages (ELCat) does not always correspond to reality, especially when endangered and vulnerable languages and varieties are concerned
- Data needs to be corrected and supplemented: ongoing project

VLingS

- *Vulnerable Languages and Linguistic Varieties in Serbia – VLingS (2021-2024)*
- Preliminary research established that “in several cases our evaluation of the current sociolinguistic status of the linguistic varieties roughly overlaps with that offered by the databases, in others it is rather divergent” (Sorescu Marinković et al. 2020: 66)
- Field work with two purposes: documenting and collecting data to establish vitality of Aromanian, Banat Bulgarian, Vojvodina Rusyn (Ruthenian), Judezmo (Ladino), Romani (Gurbet and Arli varieties), Megleno-Romanian and Romanian (Bayash and Vlach varieties)

VLingS

- 1st year: pilot research (Linguistic Vulnerability Assessment)
- 2nd year: main research with three generations of respondents (more than 600 respondents)
- 3rd year: data analysis + publication
- The first two years imply intensive contact with communities of speakers of vulnerable languages and linguistic varieties
- In some cases this contact has been established earlier, in others researchers entered the community for the first time while working on this project

Our paper

- We use interview as a method for collecting data
- Interview with seven researchers from the project (April-May 2023)
- Answers convey the researchers' experiences in the field and ways of dealing with various issues:
 - establishing (first) contact and recruiting informants (where they also rely on previous work in the community)
 - ways of getting informants' consent to research
 - how they explain the importance of language documentation for that particular community and its members

Our paper

- the issue of compensation that sometimes occurs, where informants expect either material or some other kind of reward for helping out the research team
- the ethical responsibility that the researcher has towards the community he/she is researching in terms of giving something back and providing a sustainable relationship towards the language or variety in question

Purpose of our research

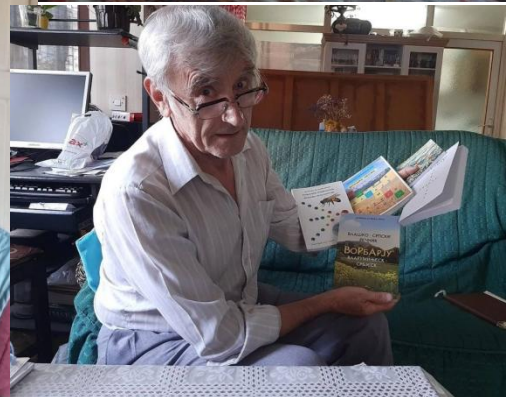
- To complement the existing knowledge about field work in Serbia (which has so far been done primarily for the majority language and its dialects)
- To gain insight into problems that field researchers encounter and establish how they solve these problems
- To single out cultural specificities of communities of vulnerable languages and language varieties

Entering the community

- **Romani:** a closed-off community, difficult to enter it, even if you have phone numbers and make arrangements, members of the community are distrustful – result of the social position of Romani people in the Serbian society
- Contact person is usually a figure of authority (social worker, lawyer, teacher, etc.) but even this is not a guarantee that informants will be willing to talk to researchers

Entering the community

- **Banat Bulgarian:** a fairly small community which only opened up towards researchers after a public forum in their village
- **Aromanian and Vlach:** students from those communities → immediate trust of informants; school principals and teachers → also very easy access to the community
- **Rusyn:** Department of Ruthenian Language → very easy access to the community
- All in all, best access is via figures of authority who are also already members of that community and have an established relationship with members.



Giving consent

- Two very opposing reactions: complete distrust and refusal to sign anything (even after elaborate explanations regarding the project and purpose of research) vs. openness and willingness to sign and participate
- The fieldwork coincided with the Census in Serbia, which caused additional trust issues and even anger of some of the potential informants

Compensation

- All researchers said they usually bring coffee and something sweet (chocolate, biscuits, etc.) with them as a present when they go on fieldwork, some of them bring books they wrote about the community and their language, one was asked to bring beer
- But there were cases when informants wanted more:
 - Money
 - Favours (filling in an application form for something etc.)
 - One researcher participated in picking blackberries to help out the community (which turned out to be an excellent way to establish contact with them, get to know them and later they were very willing to talk and provide all data)

Giving back to the community

- Lectures and public forums in the communities regarding the importance of their languages
- Support for teachers of these minority languages
- Recording narratives, life stories, poems, folklore stories, songs, etc. and publication on the project website so that community members can access it at all times
- All this can lead to and provides material for language revitalization
- Scientific papers and conference presentations to raise awareness



Conclusion

- By comparing the data from the researchers who are dealing with different communities of speakers we have ascertained:
 - that each of the mentioned vulnerable languages has its own cultural particularities and differences in terms of trust, authority and local customs
 - that they treat researchers in various ways ranging from complete distrust to great trust
 - that some expect compensation, while others just accept small gifts as tokens of appreciation
 - that most of them welcome the feedback from the project and appreciate the efforts to preserve the language, culture and customs

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