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# Mother tongue in the Balkans: a speakers' perspective on the meaning of the concept

Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković<sup>1</sup>, Mirjana Mirić<sup>1</sup>, Valentina Sokolovska<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Balkan Studies (SASA), Belgrade

<sup>2</sup> Philosophy Faculty, University of Novi Sad





# Aims

- The term *mother tongue*
- Speakers' attitudes to official languages and dialects are closely linked to their perceived social status, vitality and the resulting usefulness to their users, while personal and national loyalty to one's mother tongue is well attested (Giles and Johnson 1981).
- **The aim:** to shed light on the intricacies connected to the use of the term mother tongue by the speakers themselves
- **The frame of reference:** the contemporary vulnerable linguistic communities of Serbia, bilingual by default



# *Mother tongue* in sociolinguistics

- The dictionary definitions of *mother tongue*: “one’s native language”, a “language from which others spring” or “the language into which one is born”
- Contemporary linguistics: L1, L2 (Kroon 2005)
- L1 is also called the dominant, home or native language – or mother tongue
- Home language:
  - “small, uncodified, spoken varieties of dialects used in domestic speech situations which are frequently unacknowledged as distinctive dialects” (Tulasiewicz and Adams 1998, 7)
- Uses of mother tongue (Tulasiewicz and Adams 1998, 7):
  - ‘private’ language used among intimate groups of speakers
  - vernacular used as a ‘regional’ language
  - language which achieves national and official status



# *Mother tongue* in sociolinguistics

- **The first uses of the term:** a majority context and emancipatory movements
- In the 18th and 19th centuries, *mother tongue* played an important role in nation-building and language standardization turning many mother tongues into ‘official’ or ‘national’ languages (Heller 1999, Clark 2001)
- **Contemporary uses:** language minorities, multilingual contexts
- Possible negative connotations and political loading (Kroon 2005)
- *Home language, native language, own language, vernacular language, ethnic minority/group language, community language, heritage language* – **euphemisms**  
“intended to recognize that they are not the majority language” (Kaplan & Baldauf 1997)



# *Mother tongue* in sociolinguistics

- **Multilingual situations**
- The mother tongue might not be the first language of communication any longer, but the preferred language of the speaker, or the language that they feel emotionally connected to, which presumes a choice made from two or more systems.
- Some bilingual and multilingual users may employ more than one language on occasion.
- Mother tongue as a distinguishing marker of ethnic and national identity (Fishman 1977)
- Social reality is much more complex than the simple overlapping of one's mother tongue with one's ethnicity, and the declared identity of individuals often conflicts with the declared mother tongue.



# *Mother tongue* in demographic statistics

- **Census books**

- Several states are harmonizing their methodologies and they have similar practices due to the similarity of patterns and questions.
- In many censuses, defining the mother tongue is still a key problem.
- The need for a better and more precise definition of *mother tongue*, as well as changing the number and types of questions about the mother tongue in order to obtain more reliable and precise data (Oštarić 2018, 58-59).
- Language demography encounters “three natural obstacles: the speaker, the mother tongue and the multilingual speaker” (Blagoni and Jeletić 2018, 166)





# *Mother tongue* in demographic statistics

- **Census data in Serbia**
  - 1) Inadequate or limitative definitions of the mother tongue in the methodological explanations of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
  - 2) Lack of variants of answering the question about mother tongue
  - 3) The impossibility of applying longitudinal research in this area due to changes in the definitions of mother tongue, as well as changes in the question regarding ethnicity.
- National belonging and mother tongue - the two questions asked at all population censuses in Serbia after WW2 (except for 1948)
- **Changes in the definition:**
  - 1953: “the language that a person predominantly speaks in the household”
  - 1961-2022: “The language that a person learned to speak in childhood, i.e. the language that a person considers to be their mother tongue if several languages are spoken in the household”

# *Mother tongue* in demographic statistics

- The censuses between 1953 and 2011 revealed **three models of correlation** (Knežević 2019, 463):
  - 1) ethnicity overlaps with mother tongue, which implies the maintenance of linguistic identity, regardless of the intensity, direction and causes of demographic processes;
  - 2) a moderate correlation characterized by a smaller number of speakers of the corresponding languages compared to the number of nationally declared ones, in similar proportions in almost all censuses;
  - 3) floating, statistically variable ethnic groups – the biggest deviations were recorded among Vlachs and Roma.



# *Mother tongue* from a speakers' perspective



# VLingS Questionnaire 0.0



- Project: Vulnerable languages and linguistic varieties in Serbia: <https://vlings.rs/>
  - Scientific Fund of the Republic of Serbia
- Sociolinguistic questionnaire administered in Serbian: pilot version (app. 190 Qs)
- 15 sections: Language usage, language acquisition and intergenerational language transmission, domains of usage, literacy, education, institutional support and linguistic landscape, publications, media, religious service, cultural manifestations, self-evaluation of language competencies, language attitudes, ethnic and cultural identity, language preservation and revitalization, demographic information

# Linguistic communities

- Aromanian
- Banat Bulgarian
- Bayash Romanian
- Ladino
- Megleno-Romanian
- Romani
- Vlach
- Vojvodina Rusyn



# Data acquisition



- 158 interviewees (Roma – 58, Vlach – 41, Rusyn – 29)
  - 57.3% women vs. 42.7% men
  - 4 generations: 1 (18–29; 14.6%), 2 (30–44; 28.7%), 3 (45–59; 27.4%), 4 (60+; 29.3%)
  - 86.4% (N=136) are at least bilingual in a target linguistic variety and Serbian
- 27 locations in Serbia
- Rural and urban areas (33.3% vs 66.7%)

# ANALYSIS

- Question no.6 from Section I *General data about linguonyms and language usage* “What does the notion of mother tongue mean to you?”
- 142 respondents answered this question
- 8 categories of answers



# The first language learnt

- N=31
- **The order of language acquisition:** their first language, the language they first learnt or the language they started speaking in
- **The time period:** the language they acquired from birth, from an early age, at the youngest age or during their childhood
- Vlach, Roma, Bayash, Rusyn, and Banat Bulgarian communities





# The language which is in use (most frequently)

- N=11
- **Language usage:** language one 'uses', 'speaks' or in which a person 'expresses oneself'
- **Frequency:** the language used 'most', 'every day', while speaking 'to most of the people', or even as 'the main language'
- Aromanian, Roma, Rusyn and Vlach communities



# The language learnt from the mother (and her family)

- N=18
- Language acquired from the mother or the maternal side of the family
- Language they learnt from their mother, the language their mother taught them or the first language somebody learns from their mother
- Language which their mother spoke
- Vlach, Roma, Rusyn, Aromanian, Bayash and Ladino communities



# The language learnt from parents and household members (spoken at home)

- N=31
- Language learnt, acquired or inherited from parents or the family as a whole
- Language spoken by the household members or in the home
- Bayash, Banat Bulgarian, Megleno-Romanian, Romani, Rusyn and Vlach communities



# The language of the community or ancestors

- The community and environment (N=6)
  - ‘Where I grew up’, ‘the tradition and culture you live in’ or ‘our people’
- Ancestors (N=13)
  - the language of their origin, their ancestors, their roots, or the history of the people
- Aromanian, Bayash, Roma and Vlach communities



# The language of culture and identity

- Language of (high) culture, of books and magazines (N=1)
- Identity (N=8)
  - ‘the identity of the community’, ‘the cultural identity of our nation’, and ‘my identity’
  - ‘our language’, ‘our property’, ‘something (that is) mine’ or ‘mother tongue is what you are’
- Banat Bulgarian, Roma and Rusyn communities

# The language of the state

- $N=3$
- Language of the state
- Banat Bulgarian, Roma and Vlach communities







# Other

- N=20
- a) **attitudes** towards the language expressed by the respondents (N=7)
  - ‘something you cherish’, ‘the most beautiful language in the world’, ‘the sweetest language’
  - ‘not ashamed of speaking their mother tongue’
- b) answers in which **a concrete language** is given instead of the definition (N=5)
- c) **unspecified** (N=7)
  - ‘Mother tongue can be anything and everything to me’, ‘Everyone speaks their mother tongue’
  - ‘It means a lot to me when I speak my language’
- d) **no equivalent** (N=1)
  - ‘I’ve never heard the phrase “mother tongue” used by a Vlach’

# DISCUSSION

- The diversity of answers
- Mother tongue as an obscure or redundant concept in multilingual environments
  - “Individuals and social formations are imagined to possess only one ‘true’ language, their ‘mother tongue’, and through this possession, they are organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation.” (Yildiz 2012: 2)
- This concept may be useful for language preservation, as the language transmission within the family, as well as the notions of identity, origin, and community, serve as vital elements in the definition of the concept of mother tongue.

# DISCUSSION

- Appreciative terms vs. Negative perception
- Answering in their respective mother tongues

# DISCUSSION

- Census definitions (1961 – 2022)
- “The language that a person learned to speak in childhood, i.e. the language that a person considers to be their mother tongue if several languages are spoken in the household.”
- Our findings: the age of acquisition

# CONCLUDING REMARKS

- The speakers give equal importance to the period of language acquisition, in early childhood, and the role of the family in language transmission for defining mother tongue.
- The definitions provided in the censuses in the Republic of Serbia do not overlap with the social reality, as the actual members of the communities perceive the concept as being more heterogeneous than assumed in the censuses.
- The results of our study may be applied in reconsidering both the definition of the term mother tongue in the census, as well as in advocating for the option of declaring multiple languages as mother tongues.



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- [annemarie.sorescu@bi.sanu.ac.rs](mailto:annemarie.sorescu@bi.sanu.ac.rs)
- [mirjana.miric@bi.sanu.ac.rs](mailto:mirjana.miric@bi.sanu.ac.rs)
- [valentina@ff.uns.ac.rs](mailto:valentina@ff.uns.ac.rs)



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