

What does “mother tongue” mean to you?

On the meaning of the concept in vulnerable linguistic communities



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Mother tongue

- a familiar concept, widely used
- understood and defined differently
- a central place in the education curricula and censuses

The meaning the speakers attach to the term does not necessarily overlap with what is meant by researchers, educators or policy makers.

- The aim of this presentation: to shed light on the intricacies connected to the use of the term *mother tongue* by the speakers themselves.
- Frame of reference: the contemporary vulnerable linguistic communities of Serbia.



Mother tongue

- L1: provided by a child's direct attendants at home, in a natural environment, without the participation of educational institutions; the dominant, home or native language - or mother tongue.
- L2: a second language or a foreign language that is being studied. L1 is also called.

Chomsky (1986): all children have an equal degree of competence in their mother tongue and they are perfect in using it.

Dictionary definitions:

- “one's native language”
- a “language from which others spring”
- “the language into which one is born”



Mother tongue

- Since Medieval Latin had the term *lingua materna*, in European societies at least, it was the mother who was assumed to pass on her language to her offspring.
- The exact equivalent of the term *mother tongue* is found in many European languages: e.g. Ger. *Muttersprache*, Fr. *langue maternelle*, It. *madrelingua*, Rom. *limbă maternă*, Ser. *maternji jezik*.
- Some Slavic languages the terms *father tongue* or *native language* are used instead: e.g. Pl. *język ojczysty*, Rus. *родной язык*.
- However, recent genetic linguistic research support **the father tongue hypothesis** (van Driem 2010).



Mother tongue

- Historically speaking, it has been in the beginning closely connected to a majority context and to emancipatory movements.
- The concept started spreading in Europe from the 12th century on, while in the 18th and 19th centuries, mother tongue played an important role in nation building.
- This is the period when many mother tongues were unified and standardized, thus turning into ‘official’ or ‘national’ languages.
- Today the term tends to be used more for language minorities than for language majorities, and becomes most relevant in multilingual contexts.
- The numerous terms referring to the mother tongue from a minority perspective (e.g. *home language*, *native language*, *own language*, *vernacular language*, *ethnic minority/group language*, *community language*, *heritage language*) are in many cases just euphemisms “intended to recognize that they are not the majority language” (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997, 21).



Mother tongue in censuses

Subject to surprising interpretations in Europe and around the world.

- **India:**

- “the language spoken by the child from the cradle” (1881)

- “the language spoken by the parents” (1891)

- “the language of general use” (1901)

- “the language spoken by the mother”, “If the mother is dead, then write the name of the language generally used in the household” (1961)

- **Serbia:**

- “the language that a person predominantly speaks in the household” (1953)

- “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” (1961-2022)



Serbia

- 2022 population census: 6,647,003
- Serbia: one of the European countries with the highest number of registered national minorities.
- Serbs: 80.6%, Hungarians: 2.7%, Bosniaks: 2.3%, Roma: 1.98%, Albanians, Bulgarians, Bunjevci, Croats, Macedonians, Romanians, Rusyns, Slovak, Vlachs, etc.
- Official language: Serbian (active digraphia)
- **15 minority languages** spoken in Serbia: Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Bunjevac, Croatian, Czech, German, Hungarian, Macedonian, Romani, Romanian, Slovak, Ukrainian, Vlach and Vojvodina Rusyn.
- The province of Vojvodina is recognizable for its multiethnic and multicultural tradition: six languages in official use (Serbian, Croatian, Hungarian, Romanian, Rusyn and Slovak).



Endangered languages in Serbia

UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger

- Aromanian
- Banat Bulgarian
- Romani
- Vojvodina Rusyn
- Judezmo
- Torlak

Catalogue of Endangered Languages

- Aromanian
- Balkan Romani
- Baltic Romani
- Carpathian Romani
- Ladino
- Sinte Romani
- Vlax Romani



Vulnerable languages and linguistic varieties in Serbia

- Aromanian
- Banat Bulgarian
- Vojvodina Rusyn (Ruthenian)
- Judezmo (Ladino)
- Romani (Vlax and Balkan varieties)
- Megleno-Romanian
- Vlach
- Bayash Romanian

Ethnicity	Roma	Vlachs	Rusyns	Bulgarians	Aromanians	Bayash Roma	Megleno-Romanians	Sephardic Jews
No	131,936	21,013	11,483	12,918	327	/	/	/
Language	Romani	Vlach	Rusyn	Bulgarian	Aromanian	Bayash Romanian	Megleno-Romanian	Ladino
No	79,687	23,216	8,725	7,939	/	/	/	/





VLingS

Vulnerable Languages and Linguistic Varieties in Serbia

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Vulnerable Languages and Linguistic Varieties in Serbia is a research project supported by the [Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia](#) within the frame of the [IDEAS Program](#), the biggest research program of the Science Fund so far. The public call for the IDEAS Program closed on October 7, 2020. A total of 917 project proposals were submitted, out of which 105 received financial support.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Over the past decades, it has become obvious that many languages spoken around the world are threatened with extinction. As linguistic diversity is essential to human existence, researchers started focusing on language documentation, maintenance and revitalization, raising awareness of the need to safeguard the linguistic heritage, and creating databases of endangered languages. When it comes to Serbia, these databases differ widely in terms of assessing language endangerment, and often give insufficient or inaccurate data on the varieties spoken here. Our Project's ambition is to create a precise tool for assessing the degree of language endangerment and vulnerability, and to apply it to a statistically significant sample of speakers in Serbia. The



VLingS Questionnaire 0.0

Aimed at creating and testing a sample of questions which should be relevant for the assessment of language vulnerability in all linguistic communities.

- **16 sections:**

I: General data about linguonyms and language usage (19 + 1)

II: Data about language acquisition and intergenerational language transmission (9)

III: Domains of language usage (3 + 17)

IV: Literacy (11 + 5)

V: Education (17 + 2)

VI: Institutional support and linguistic landscape (13)

VII: Publications (9)

VIII: Media (4 + 10)

IX: Religious service (4 + 3)

X: Cultural manifestations (9 + 3)

XI: Language level self-assessment (8)

XII: Speakers' attitudes towards their own language (5)

XIII: Ethnic and cultural identity (2)

XIV: Language preservation and revitalization (8)

XV: Demographic information about the speaker (16 + 2)

XVI: Final remarks (2)



VLingS Questionnaire 0.0

I OPŠTI PODACI O NAZIVIMA I UPOTREBI JEZIKA			
1. KOJI JE JEZIK ZAJEDNICE (ETNIČKE GRUPE ILI NARODA) U KOJOJ SE RADI ISTRAŽIVANJE? zaokružiti broj → (popunjava istraživač)	1. srpski 2. cincarski (arumunski, aromunski) 3. vlaški (megleno-rumunski)	4. banjaški rumunski 5. vlaški rumunski 6. romski	7. rusinski 8. banatski bugarski (palčanski) 9. ladino (jevrejsko-španski) 10. neki drugi jezik/jezici: _____
2. KOJIM JEZIKOM/ JEZICIMA SE VI SLUŽITE? upisati broj(eve) iz (1) →		3. DA LI ZA ROMSKI POSTOJE JOŠ NEKI NAZIVI (NA SRPSKOM)? zaokružiti broj, upisati →	1. DA, sledeći naziv(i): _____ 2. NE 3. Ne znam.
4. KAKO SE NA ROMSKOM KAŽE ROMSKI? upisati naziv(e) →		5. KOJI JE VAŠ MATERNJI JEZIK/ JEZICI? upisati →	
6. ŠTA ZA VAS ZNAČI POJAM "MATERNJI JEZIK"? upisati →			
7. KOJI JE PRVI JEZIK KOJI STE NAUČILI KAO DETE? upisati broj iz (1) →		8. KOJIM JEZIKOM/ JEZICIMA SE DANAS NAJČEŠĆE SLUŽITE? upisati broj(eve) iz (1) →	
9. AKO SE SLUŽITE ROMSKIM, DA LI GA SADA KORISTITE ČEŠĆE, REĐE ILI PODJEDNAKO ČESTO KAO KADA STE BILI MLAĐI? zaokružiti broj →	1. Koristim ga češće. 2. Koristim ga podjednako često. 3. Koristim ga ređe. 4. Ne znam.	10. AKO IMATE PARTNERA/KU, NA KOM JEZIKU KOMUNICIRATE SA NJIM/NJOM? upisati broj(eve) iz (1) →	
11. DA LI SU OSOBE SA KOJIMA STE NAJČEŠĆE PROVDILI VREME U DETINJSTVU GOVORILE ROMSKI? zaokružiti broj →		1. Ne, nisu govorile romski. 2. Da, mogle su da upotrebe neke reči. 3. Da, mogle su da upotrebe jednostavne rečenice. 4. Da, govorile su tečno romski. 5. Ne znam.	

What does the concept “mother tongue” mean to you?

- The total number of interviewees included in the pilot research: 158.
- Members of all linguistic varieties included in the project.
- Question no.6 was answered by: 142.
- The answers were quite diverse, with a few of them given in the target linguistic variety, not in Serbian, the language of the survey.
- High emotional value.
- The primary criterion we used for classification was **a set of keywords** found within the answers.



Appendix. Categories of answers to the question “What does the notion of *mother tongue* mean to you?” in the *VLingS Questionnaire 0.0*

Category	Answers	Language
1. The first language learnt	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The language I learnt first, I – Serbian, but my mom Romanian from my grandma. 2. The language I have learnt from birth and the one we use in the family. 3. The first contact with family members is realized in that language. 4. The language you learn from an early age. 5. The language from birth. 6. When we were born, they spoke Romani to us. 7. As a child I spoke Serbian. 8. Romani; when our children are born, we teach them Romani first. 9. Something you were born with, something you inherited from your mother, <i>dejači čhib</i> (the language of the mother). 10. The language I speak, but nobody has not specifically taught me. The language I started speaking in. 11. The language we have acquired in early childhood. 12. The language we learn from birth, in which we think and talk to our closest (relatives). 13. The first (language), ours. 14. The language somebody started speaking in for the first time. 15. The language you acquire in childhood from your parents. 16. The language I first mastered in the home, when I was small. 17. The language we have acquired from birth. 18. The language I started speaking in, the first (language). 19. The language you started speaking in. I don't know why we don't call it father tongue. 20. From an early age, in the family. 21. The one which I learnt first. 22. Starting speaking and learning everything in Vlach. 23. The first words you learn. 24. The first language. 25. The first language. 26. The first language I learnt to speak and the language I think in. 27. The first (language) I mastered, before school. 28. (The language) I got in contact first. 29. That what I first learned. The meaning of things. 30. The language I have been speaking from birth. 31. The first language, the language of the mother. 	<p>BRO</p> <p>BRO</p> <p>BUG</p> <p>ROM</p> <p>ROM</p> <p>ROM</p> <p>ROM</p> <p>ROM</p> <p>ROM</p> <p>ROM</p> <p>RUS</p> <p>RUS</p> <p>RUS</p> <p>RUS</p> <p>RUS</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p> <p>VLA</p>
2. The language used (most frequently)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That which I use most, from childhood, in the house/ at home. 2. The language in which one writes, speaks, understand each other. 3. The main language. 4. I don't know what it means, the language I use. 	<p>ARO</p> <p>ARO</p> <p>ROM</p> <p>ROM</p>

Categories of answers

1. The first language learnt (31)
2. The language used (most frequently) (11)
3. The language learnt from the mother (and her family) (18)
4. The language learnt from parents and household members (spoken at home) (31)
5. The language of the community and ancestors
 - a. The language of the community and environment (6)
 - b. The language of the ancestors (13)
6. The language of culture and identity
 - a. The language of culture (1)
 - b. The language of identity (8)
7. The language of the state (3)
8. **Other**
 - a. Attitudes toward language: positive (4) and negative (3)
 - b. Concrete language (5)
 - c. Unspecified (7)
 - d. No equivalent (1)



Discussion

First two categories: *The first language learnt* (N=31) and *The language learnt from parents and household members (spoken at home)* (N=31)

- The order of acquisition (and the earliest age of acquisition of the language) and the persons responsible for transmitting the language (parents and grandparents) are given equal importance.
- Several respondents mentioned both the family as the main means of language transmission, and the order of acquisition, but their answers were categorized into one or another category by the order of the keywords:
- e.g. ‘The language you speak in the family, in which your mother talks to you while she breastfeeds you, the language you grow up in’, ‘The language we learn from our parents, the first (language)’, ‘The language you acquire in your family, when you are small’, ‘The language of the family, the first language’



Discussion

The language learnt from the mother (and her family) (N=18)

- This gives the mother a central place in transmitting the language, putting emphasis on the gender roles.
- Some respondents explicitly mention not only the mother, but the maternal side of the family.
- The fact that interviewees, in their responses, actually referred to their mothers, contrasts with the view that the concept of *mother tongue* relies on invoking the maternal without explicitly referencing the mothers.



Discussion

The language of the ancestors (N=13)

- Suggests the historical importance of the language and long-term language transmission within the family.

The language used (most frequently) (N=11)

- Switches the emphasis from the age of language acquisition and persons responsible for language transmission to the usage or frequency of usage of the language.
- This category partly corresponds to the notion of *primary language*, used in the sociolinguistic literature, which puts emphasis on the functional dimension of the languages.



Discussion

Other (N=20)

a) attitudes towards the language

Four respondents describe it as ‘something you cherish’, ‘the most beautiful language in the world’ and ‘the sweetest language’; three mention that they are not ashamed of speaking their mother tongue.

Subjective perception: positive, of the speakers (+), and negative, of the others (-).

b) the name of the language

c) unspecified

E.g.: ‘Mother tongue can be anything and everything to me’, ‘Everyone speaks their mother tongue’.

d) no equivalent

- ‘I’ve never heard the phrase “mother tongue” used by a Vlach’.



Discussion

- The Other (N=20) category plus the number of respondents who did not answer the question (N=12) could mean that they have not encountered the concept previously or that they are using it without being able to define it, which supports the idea that **mother tongue is a concept widely used, but difficult to define.**
- Even if the sample is small, we notice the tendency of certain linguistic communities to give a certain category of answers.
- E.g. the majority of **Roma** respondent define mother tongue as their first language, the language of their ancestors or of identity, but not as the language they use most frequently; they also show a defensive attitude (-)
- E.g. the **Vlachs** also consider mother tongue to be the language they learnt first, from the mother and her family, but also from other members of the household, and used most frequently



Conclusions

- We must keep in mind that the respondents are speakers not only of minority, but vulnerable languages, so the answers might be slightly different in other bilingual or multilingual contexts, where the languages in question are not endangered.
- It is also noteworthy that the communities included in the study lack a home country where their varieties, often non-standardized, could be employed as official state languages.
- Consequently, they lack external institutional and educational support, as well as typical mechanisms for preserving their language and cultural identity.
- Additionally, some varieties face controversies related to language planning and standardization processes.
- In light of these issues, the heterogeneous perceptions of mother tongue are not surprising.

