

Contact as a major Motivation for Linguistic Change in the History of Balkan Slavic

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This paper presents theoretical, methodological and practical results obtained in the last decades in the field of comparative-historical Balkan Slavic linguistics. Against the backdrop of the major theoretical issues of Balkan linguistics, e.g. principles of genetic, areal, social or contact determination or restriction in language evolution [Friedman, Joseph 2023], contact is viewed as the major motivation for linguistic change in the history of Balkan Slavic [Sobolev 2019], and is responsible for the creation of the Balkan linguistic area.

The genetic, areal-typological, anthropological and socio-political analysis of Slavic languages in the Balkans reveals divergent and convergent developments which can be interpreted against the background of comparative-historical theory, geolinguistic theory, language contact and Sprachbund theory, including the dialectology of convergent linguistic groups [Sobolev (ed.) 2021]. General mechanisms of genetic splitting and typological merging, borrowing and calquing, language shift, and language and ethnic separation and symbiosis interplayed to make this a truly unique area of Europe and Eurasia.

South Slavic entered the Balkan peninsula as at least two genetically differentiated subgroups (socalled West South Slavic and East South Slavic,) but eventually became part of the Balkan linguistic landscape irrespective of this primary genetic subdivision. Due to profound multilingualism, the Balkan linguistic landscape can be viewed as an uninterrupted continuum of closely and distantly related dialects (languages), characterized by an array of isoglosses that run irrespective of “language borders.” Among the most prominent features are the following: identical or similar inventories of affricates as well as palatal consonants; the postpositive definite article; “case loss” and the analytic marking of grammatical relations on the noun; “infinitive loss”; the volitive future tense; the possessive perfect; grammaticalized evidentiality markers; and semantic patterns borrowed from Greek, Latin, and Turkish.

This extreme tendency towards borrowing is well-illustrated by (1):

(1) Golo Bordo dialect of Macedonian [Sobolev & Novik 2013]

'imat d'e 'veno	na=d'e fi
have distribute.PPP	PREP=rams.PL
'(They) distributed rams'	

This example illustrates not only the direct material borrowing from Alb. dash [daj] ‘ram’, partially integrated into the morphology of Macedonian, cf. daj SG.INDEF, d'ajof ~ d'ajot SG.DEF ‘ram,’ but also the adoption of the Albanian apophonic plural marking a ~ e, that is Alb. dash ~ desh, which is completely alien to Slavic, alongside the affixation of the common Slavic plural marker -i. The inclusion of the preposition na to mark the direct object, following the Balkan Romance model, adds the final touch to this extraordinary and highly redundant amalgamation.

At the same time, some particularly Slavic features persist and appear to act as barriers to language integration: stress shift on proclitics (as in Bulgarian b'ez=žena ‘without a wife’); the category of peripheral case forms as opposed to structural cases; the category of animateness and personness; opposing “short” and “long” forms of adjectives with unclear intrasystemic functions; the absence of any categorial marker for definiteness on any member of the nominal group, that is, of an explicit marker for individualizing, generic, specific, or indefinite meaning;

the category of verbal aspect with the admittedly vague general meaning of terminativity, expressed by a root morpheme or a suffix.

Thus, we see abundant evidence for major structural innovation motivated by contact, leading to a deep qualitative reorganization of Balkan Slavic languages throughout their history. On the other hand, certain inherited characteristics persist which resist these changes and do not spread beyond Slavic to other languages of the Balkan peninsula.

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