

The Concept of Language Affirmation in the Acceptance of New Languages: Evidence from the Former Yugoslavia

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The emergence of standard languages for the Slavic-speaking populations of the Balkan peninsula has been a prolonged and often controversial process. During the nineteenth century, proponents of literary languages focused on refining the Bulgarian and the Slovene languages, and proposed the establishment of a joint literary language for Serbs and Croats. During the twentieth century, processes of language birth in the Balkans intensified; Macedonian officially emerged in 1944 and the joint Serbian/Croatian language split into separate Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian languages beginning in 1991. The constellation of languages has evoked confusion among non-specialists in the field, especially when considering that frequently Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian are taught in a single course as BCS and the status of Montenegrin remains precarious in such formulations. Many observers have considered some of these new languages to be justified by the “linguistic facts,” while other languages were inspired by nationalistically-inclined agendas of specific ethno-national groups.

In this contribution, we draw on theories of identity affirmation to introduce the notion of language affirmation, which we define as a two-way process whereby language codifiers seek to gain international acceptance of the language they are promoting, and international experts or linguists reciprocate by affirming the existence of the language in their writings. This kind of language affirmation serves as a basis for other external validation processes, such as the establishment of an ISO code for the language, acknowledgement by diplomatic missions and governments of the languages, and the growth of language programs to facilitate the spread of these languages to speakers of other languages. Our preliminary research has shown that identity affirmation processes, like language affirmation, can include an emotional dynamic whereby the codifiers of a language seek to inspire a strong emotional response from stakeholders on the existence of a new language. Often, the early adopters, or “believers” in the new language play a key role in promoting acceptance alongside the local actors. To this end, we examine the processes of language affirmation for the newest South Slavic standard languages that officially emerged during the twentieth century. For instance, in the case of Macedonian, we consider the works of linguists based in Soviet Russia and the United States and their relationships with Blaže Koneski and other leaders in the development of the Macedonian language. For the Montenegrin case, we consider the work of the Faculty for the Montenegrin Language, and its ongoing efforts to secure support from leading linguists from outside the Balkan region in affirming the status of a Montenegrin language as separate from the other successor languages to the joint language of Croats and Serbs. We conclude that language affirmation is a

necessary final step to secure the legitimacy of new standards and when such affirmation is limited in nature, the controversies surrounding the new languages persist and the status of the new language remains precarious.