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MINORITY LANGUAGES IN VOJVODINA

Marija Mandić (ur.), *Manjinski jezici u Vojvodini.*
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(Marija Mandić (ed.), *Minority languages in Vojvodina. Language education policy, ideology and practice.* Novi Sad:
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The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina forms the northern part of the Republic of Serbia. Approximately two out of three inhabitants are Serbs, the rest belong to other ethnic minorities. This means that it is a very heterogeneous region, in which linguistic diversity is particularly notable. By far the largest population group after the Serbs are the Hungarians. Hungarian is an important language in many places and is used officially. Large cities in Vojvodina, such as Subotica and the surrounding area, are characterized by a strong visibility of the Hungarian language for centuries. All other languages are less common but are still relevant at a local level. Croatian, for example, is cited locally by many people as their mother tongue and is passed on to the next generation in educational institutions. However, it must be said that it is hardly different from Serbian and is therefore stable in its existence. The situation is different for smaller minority languages. Special school programs and concepts must be developed for them so that the legally prescribed and guaranteed language maintenance can be implemented. This applies to Romanian and Rusyn, for example. While Romanian is supported by the neighboring country of Romania and can be studied at the University in Novi Sad, Rusyns cannot hope for similar financial support from Ukraine, as they have created their literary language. Although it is very similar to Ukrainian, it uses its written variants in different countries (cf. in detail in Kokail et al., 2023). Another important minority language in the area is Slovak, which has

been very well preserved in some localities. Nowadays, it is also easier than in the past to obtain support from Slovakia (for further details see Соколовић, 2017a). This makes it possible to maintain a certain vitality of Slovak, which is much more difficult for Czech, for instance.

According to the legal situation in Serbia, ethnic minorities have the opportunity to receive education and other services in their mother tongue. These include, for example, television broadcasts, newspapers, media, and support from their national council. One of the most important goals for most minorities is the preservation of their own culture and the transmission of their language to the next generation. In the recent past, numerous studies have been carried out on both ethnic and linguistic minorities in this region, in connection with the question of what prospects and challenges language preservation currently faces. Reference should be made, for example, to the numerous works of Dalibor Sokolović, a colleague from the University of Belgrade who has dealt intensively with the issue of the Slovakian community and published important studies on this topic (Соколовић, 2017a). The Rusyns are also a strong focus of academic attention. They are being studied from a comparative perspective in several countries, for example in a recent book published in Prague (Kokaisl et al., 2023).

The book in our hands aims to cover selected minorities and shows how their languages manifest in the education system. Before reviewing the volume, we would like to give a personal note, emphasizing that we have been working with the issue of ethnic and linguistic minorities for quite a long time, and for good reason. In our city, as well as in the entire surrounding area, there is a Turkish majority whose dialects have been researched by numerous experts from both Bulgaria and Turkey. We have always valued the vibrant presence of two languages – Bulgarian and Turkish – as an enormous cultural enrichment in our environment, and we were also able to realize numerous expeditions throughout Southeast Europe and to produce publications on Muslim minorities in the region (e.g., Илиев, Михайлова, 2016; Илиев, Петков, 2019). Since then, we have taken up the important dialectological preliminary work of Todor Boyadzhiev (Бояджиев, 1991) and many other specialists, verifying it anew and supplementing it with empirical data. Moreover, we have conducted research in the dialects of the Albanian minority in Bulgaria and have concluded that genuine linguistic features have been preserved in a heterogeneous cultural context. Several trips then took us to Ukraine, where we analyzed not only the Albanian community but above all the Bulgarian settlers and their language in the past and present (for more background information on minority languages in Ukraine, we recommend the critical introduction elaborated by (Csernicskó et al., 2020)). And finally, we have documented the

Bulgarian language in Banat on both sides of the Romanian-Serbian borderlands (for more details, see Илиев, 2017; Илиев, 2019). That is why we think we are permitted to formulate our modest opinion on minority languages in Southeast Europe.

So, our academic background led us to realize with great interest that a further volume on the subject of linguistic and ethnic minorities has recently been published, namely on the Serbian north. Vojvodina is the most ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous region there. It is to be expected that the range of linguistic diversity will be represented in genuine studies. In the following, we will therefore have a look at which of the local languages are in the scope of the editor Marija Mandić and her contributors. What can we expect from this book, which is divided into six major sections?

The first section is a very comprehensive introduction by the editor Marija Mandić (pp. 13-70), a specialist in minority issues. She provides a basic overview of the linguistic situation in the Republic of Serbia with a special focus on Vojvodina. In addition, particular emphasis is placed on language policy and language planning. For example, we find the figures from the latest censuses with reference to people's mother tongue as well as an overview of the current legal situation regarding the use of minority languages (pp. 35-40). The length of this text is quite appropriate because it deals with the complex interaction of politics and society in a multi-ethnic region.

In section two, we find three articles dedicated to the topic of language policy against an international and national background. Belgrade professor Ranko Bugarski gives a brief overview of the spirit of the Charter for European Minority and Regional Languages (pp. 73-82). Next, Ljudmila Popović addresses the same document (pp. 83-120), but in the context of local needs, which are applied in Serbia and elsewhere (pp. 108-113), before Katinka Beretka describes the legal aspects related to education in a minority language in Serbia (pp. 121-154).

Section three is followed by two papers on linguistic ideology. These are not tailored to individual languages but highlight complex mechanisms in a heterogeneous linguistic environment. Danijela Radović and Stanislava Popov explore a very exciting question. They examine how multilingualism, social factors and psychological well-being are linked to children and young people in Vojvodina (pp. 157-182). They include helpful tables in their study (pp. 163-177), presenting different parameters that have an impact on the research question. It is undoubtedly an important step forward for research to address this topic in depth. The significance of multilingualism in the family environment is similarly relevant. Against this backdrop, Karolina Landál-Kabók examines the cultural system underlying ideas of a language of education

in the home environment (pp. 183-208). She specifically selects ethnically mixed marriages in which Hungarian and Serbian are spoken.

This is followed in the fourth section on languages in education, which are already eagerly awaited after the many theoretical but very important prefaces. Edita Andrić starts off by explaining the role of the Hungarian language, its change of status and language teaching (pp. 211-237). Hungarian is undoubtedly one of the most important languages in Central Eastern Europe, and not only from a historical perspective but also with respect to its particular cultural role and the traditionally high level of education imparted in Budapest. What is important is that it is a language that, due to the shifting of state borders, is still vibrant today in practically all of Hungary's neighbouring states, where it is embedded in very different socio-political conditions (Cséricskó, 2020). Dalibor Sokolović, who has already made a lasting contribution to research into Slovaks and is therefore considered one of the most important experts in this field, takes a refreshing look at the Slovak language community in Vojvodina (see also Sokolović, 2017a). He sheds light on this language in local education (pp. 239-258). We find his approach very successful, and it is helpful that he uses geographical maps to visualize the settlement area of the Slovaks in Serbia (p. 242). Then, in her remarks, Mirjana Ćorković documents the Romanian regional education system. She provides a historical overview of the development and highlights the state of art (pp. 259-295). This is followed by a contribution by Mihajlo Fejsa on Rusyn (pp. 297-322). This language has been spoken in Vojvodina since the 18th century and, unlike the languages mentioned so far, is not a state language, but a language without a fatherland. For this reason, the Rusyns were not supported by another state in the development of their school system but were always dependent on domestic conditions. Today, this language is taught at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Novi Sad, among other places (p. 309). Marija Aleksandrović outlines the challenges involved in teaching the Romani language and cultural interdependencies (pp. 323-351), before Jelena Kostić Tomović presents current trends in the acquisition of German as a minority language and as a foreign language (pp. 353-396). While Romani is spoken in several countries, it is also true for this language that it does not have a home state, but that the speaker group must be supported by the respective country in which it lives. The situation is different for German, and financial support from rich and wealthy Germany is of course more than realistic. On the other hand, the group of German speakers in Vojvodina was very large before 1945 and has shrunk to a minimum today.

The fifth section is devoted to the question of multilingualism in the past and present. It deals with the Banat region and multilingualism in the

documentary prose by Tibor Várady (pp. 399-436). After an introduction to the author, there is an extensive interview with the volume's editor, before the sixth and final section consists of sources and appendices (pp. 439-446).

Now, let us summarize our findings. The book is a very nice piece of academic work and a strong result of intellectual production, and some portions of the content are elaborated with deep insights. It is well worth reading and the qualified authors have gone to great lengths to present minority issues and ethnically mixed communities in detail. However, despite the commendable content of the volume, the question remains as to why this book focuses on those minorities for which most studies already exist. There are countless papers and books on the Hungarian minority, which are also produced in Hungary, or on the Rusyns. In this respect, the present volume contributes to the completion of these approaches, but we do not find in the volume a study on those minorities whose roles in the education system are much less known. For example, it would have been interesting to focus more closely on the role of the small Polish community. There have only been a few studies on this to date (e.g., Sokolović, 2017b), and the enormous challenges for this group are obvious. The reader also misses a study on the Bunjevci, as this local community is less cohesive than, say, the Slovaks or the Hungarians. Moreover, the Bunjevci community had to deal with strong difficulties for a long time before their language could even be used in education (Henzelmann, 2016; Henzelmann, 2017). It would therefore have been interesting to take stock of the new developments in this small ethnic group and to critically evaluate the steps taken so far in the education system. The questions of their legal status would also certainly have been interesting. Furthermore, a case study on the Czechs is absent but would also have been desirable, as this small group has so far been researched primarily from the Czech Republic. Due to the small number of people who declare themselves to be ethnic Czechs and still speak the language, the challenges for shaping the future are all the more serious. In principle, interesting insights into the linguistic conception and its mediation among the Banat Bulgarians would have been worth reading, too (e.g., Илиев, 2017). Due to the distribution of the group across the countries of Serbia and Romania, there are very different requirements for language acquisition, but also for passive knowledge of Bulgarian. This is relatively easy with a solid knowledge of Serbian, while those Banat Bulgarians who grow up in a Romanian-dominated linguistic environment do not automatically acquire this passive competence. Not to mention the Croats, who have been able to make a strong mark in the education system. It is attractive and has a long tradition, although of course it has to manage various difficulties, such as a lack of funding, emigration and low birth rates. Other minorities, such as the Albanians

or Montenegrins, who moved to this region in the last century due to internal migration in Yugoslavia, are also not included in the work, but these are just my subjective thoughts in terms of completing the picture.

We notice that the reader will undoubtedly benefit from reading this volume, and that is what counts in the end. We gain insights into the latest developments in the education system and its tasks in Serbian Vojvodina. More, we get an overview of the different minorities living in this region and how they can organize the maintenance of their language. It is quite clear that it will never be possible to cover all groups to the same extent, especially when it comes to such heterogeneous structures as in the north of Serbia. Therefore, we hope that this book will be widely distributed and would like to suggest the production of a second part that focuses on those minorities that have been given less attention in this volume. As we all know, those of us who study the languages of ethnic minorities, there is still a lot of work to be done. We should always see this as our main challenge and never forget: *Fortes Fortuna Adiuvat.*

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