

Towards an understanding of balanced bilingualism à la balkanique: the Montenegrin Velja Gorana and beyond

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The Balkans have been always considered an area of linguistic diversity and a significant contact zone, where the present-day condition of the Balkan languages results from a variety of contact situations. The importance of one particular type of such situations for the emergence of the convergent features of the Balkan languages and dialects was underlined in many studies where this type has been defined as “active bilateral bilingualism” (Русакoв 2007: 84), “intense, intimate, and mutual multilingualism” (Joseph 2010: 625), and most recently as “four-M”, or “multi-lateral, multi-directional, mutual multilingualism” (Friedman and Joseph 2017: 70), “nondominant bilingualism” (Соболев 2017: 420), and “balanced language contact” (Морозова, Русакoв 2018, after Aikhenvald 2007). The goal of this paper is to discuss the issue of the possible role of such situations in the common development of the Balkan linguistic area.

The paper thoroughly investigates the case of a particular small-scale Balkan community, and determines the general sociolinguistic parameters of the bilingual setting in this community based on the information about its history and the linguistic behavior of its individual members. The studied community lives in Velja Gorana, a Montenegrin village not far from the Albanian-Montenegrin border. All natives of the village (BCMS *goranci*) speak both Albanian and BCMS and relate themselves to the larger community of *the Mrkovići*, which is now almost entirely monolingual in BCMS. The 2012–2015 fieldwork of one of the authors revealed the following details of development and key features of the modern situation in Velja Gorana:

- The village was founded in the end of 19th century by bi- and/or monolingual Albanians and BCMS speakers from different regions of the Western Balkans;
- The maintenance of balanced bilingualism in Velja Gorana seems to be linked to linguistic exogamy (the local men prefer to bring wives from the neighboring Albanian villages). It should be noted that Velja Gorana is situated in an area including Montenegro and the northern part of Albania, which was known for the strong ethnic (and, as an epiphenomenal consequence, linguistic) exogamy in the past. So, we may suppose, that Velja Gorana follows the marriage pattern that could be previously typical for the whole area.
- The community includes groups with different linguistic behavior such as bilingual male natives, Albanian wives, and “Montenegrin” wives (girls from the village are usually married outside the community). The linguistic competence of the individual speakers may change over the lifespan, and the main tendency is the movement from monolingualism to bilingualism.
- The visualization and analysis of communication in several families shows that the patterns of multilingualism are not the same on the family level, and that the overall “balanced language contact situation” in Velja Gorana results from some micro-situations, themselves having rather unbalanced character.
- The preservation of the (balanced) bilingualism seems to have community-internal rather than external motivation. For example, the Albanian wives who used to study BCMS at school claim that they really learned this language only in their new families after marriage.

Further on in the paper, the situation in Velja Gorana, which is well-described from the point of view of its emergence and development, serves as a reference point for the study and evaluation of the role of such situations in the Balkan contact history. Evidently the Balkans have plenty of examples of contact situations with different multilingual settings: “border-area” multilingualism (Matras 2009: 48); language/dialect islands with asymmetrical relations between L1 and L2; language/dialect shifts, etc. Is the type of situation observed to Velja Gorana typical for the language contact landscape of the

Balkans in the past and present? If so, in what degree? For the sake of comparison, we consider several other Balkan microsituations that potentially involve(d) balanced bi- or multilingualism, e.g. the present-day Greek-Albanian bilingualism in Himara (Albania) and the past Albanian-BCMS bilingualism in the Kuči (Montenegro). Basing on our observations in Velja Gorana, we make an attempt to determine which extralinguistic factors (mixed marriages, identities, sociological factors, etc.) and characteristics of language usage are most likely to play a role in supporting the balanced bilingualism à la balkanique.

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