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Sociolinguistic Challenges in Characterizing Bulgaria's 21st Century Language Situation

Социолингвистични предизвикателства при характеризиране на езиковата ситуация в България през XXI век

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Abstract. The contemporary language situation in Bulgaria is shaped by a complex interplay between global historical developments and internal social dynamics. According to Bulgarian linguists, it is defined as endoglossic, meaning it comprises all territorial and social varieties of the Bulgarian language, including the official literary standard. This status is affirmed by the Bulgarian Constitution, which declares Bulgarian as the official language. However, the actual language situation is more complex and unbalanced due to functional inequalities among language variants. Dialects play an important role, differing mainly in phonetics and vocabulary, without hindering mutual understanding. Urbanization and migration have led to the emergence of interdialectal formations, where the literary standard remains the dominant model. Language attitudes are influenced by globalization and new media, with social networks becoming a space for linguistic innovation. Among Bulgarians abroad, language dynamics are also notable—from preserving regional dialects to developing bilingualism in second-generation immigrants. All these factors contribute to a dynamic, diverse, and multilayered linguistic landscape in modern Bulgaria.

Абстракт. Съвременната езикова ситуация в България се определя от сложната взаимовръзка между глобални исторически процеси и вътрешни социални динамики. Според български лингвисти, тя може да бъде определена като ендоглосна, т.е. изградена от всички варианти на българския език, включително държавния книжовен стандарт. Конституцията на Република България потвърждава това чрез статута на българския като официален език. Въпреки това реалната езиковата картина е доста по-сложна и небалансирана. Това е така заради функционалните различия между различните езикови варианти. Диалектите играят важна роля в изграждането на езиковата ситуация в съвременна България. Те се различават основно на фонетично и лексикално равнище, но няма особени трудности българите от различни диалектни области да се разбират помежду си. Урбанизацията и миграцията водят до интердиалектни формации, при които книжовният език е следван като унифициращ езиков стандарт. Езиковите нагласи в обществото се влияят от глобализацията и новите медии, като социалните мрежи се превръщат в пространство за езикови иновации. Сред българите в чужбина също се наблюдават интересни процеси – от поддържане на териториални диалекти до формиране на билингвизъм у второто поколение. Всички тези фактори оформят динамична, разнообразна и многопластова езикова ситуация в съвременна България.

Keywords: language situation, contemporary Bulgarian

Ключови думи: езикова ситуация, съвременен български език

1. Describing a Language Situation

It is challenging to systematically describe the characteristics of any country's language situation. It is quite possible for a language to be revived and to begin its development from the very beginning and in a different direction. Therefore, the diachronic description of a linguistic situation is a more extended process than the tracking of its individual manifestations over time. It is necessary that each 'snapshot' of the language situation

at a given moment be diligently arranged in the album of the history of the language. Thus, the greater the number of such photos, the more different their compositions and colours, the richer, more historically reliable, and detailed this album of the language situation becomes.

The linguistic situation presented here is yet another of the many different snapshots of a moment in the historical development of the Bulgarian language during the first decades of the 21st century. We aim to include the main characteristics of the Bulgarian linguistic situation in this contemporary snapshot of the Bulgarian language. They will be presented from the perspective of the historical moment in which they are examined.

2. Descriptive Perspective

Krasimira Aleksova (Aleksova, 2016, p. 254) summarizes the work of Bulgarian linguists on the development of the theoretical framework used to describe the language situation in Bulgaria. She presents it in a four-dimensional model, which reveals:

1. Data on the number, type, and features of languages (when the language situation is multilingual) and dialects on the one hand, and on the other hand, the individuals who use them in the various communicative situations of the societies to which they belong.
2. The theoretical framework also includes the consideration of the forms of existence of languages and their functioning in the individual communities that make up national society. Important details that more fully present the linguistic picture are the descriptions of the interactions, hierarchies and stratifications of the language formations.
3. Another dimension involving the synchronous presentation of a given language situation is the public attitudes towards the state of the language and its forms of existence according to the members of each individual society.
4. Last but not least, studies of political influences in the planning and management of language processes provide important details about the language situation.

3. Describing the Bulgarian Language Situation

The language situation in Bulgaria is directly dependent on both global historical and social processes, and the processes in the micro-societies that constitute Bulgarian society. It does not differ notably from the language situations of other countries and represents a collection of the many language situations in all small and large social groups that make up Bulgarian society.

Mihail Videnov stated the following: “The present-day Bulgarian language situation has been elaborately studied from a modern sociolinguistic point of view through the investigation of the distribution of language varieties in Bulgarian towns and cities” (Videnov, 1999, p. 13). Bulgarian linguists share the opinion that the contemporary official language situation in Bulgaria should be defined according to Nikolski's terminology as ‘endoglossic’ (Nikolski, 1976), i.e., as formed by all territorial and social variants of the Bulgarian language, as well as by the state written standard (Videnov, 2000, p. 203). This fact is confirmed by the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, according to which “The official language in the republic is Bulgarian” (Article 3). The state language standard — developed, planned, and managed with the participation of the state institution — is referred to as the ‘literary language’ by the Bulgarian public and by all those wishing to learn Bulgarian as a foreign language. Its existence and historical development can be traced back to the Middle Ages, which gives grounds for Bulgarians to define the Bulgarian language as the main and most important feature of the national unification of Bulgaria. The Bulgarian language had its own writing system codified through the Cyrillic alphabet already in the Middle Ages (9th century). This fact provides additional perspectives to define the processes of the development of the language. They are described in detail in a historical context as well as from the viewpoint of their current language situation.

The evolution of the Bulgarian language largely reflects the dynamics of historical, political, demographic, and economic processes in Bulgarian society. On that account, the short definition of an ‘endoglossic language situation’ mentioned above should be discussed in detail in order to reveal the actual language situation in Bulgaria. It appears to be extremely dynamic, much more complex, and strongly influenced by the sociolinguistic factors listed above. Due to the uneven distribution of the variants of the Bulgarian language in the spheres of communication and because of their functional inequality, the definition of the Bulgarian language situation should be supplemented by qualifying it as ‘unbalanced’ (again according to Nikolski's terminology) (Aleksova, 2015).

Global historical processes have had a particularly strong influence on the formation and development of our literary language as a state language standard. However, they are also the main factors that have influenced the preservation of the territorial dialects of the Bulgarian language. Today, they are among the main primary language variants in the idiolect profile of every Bulgarian. The modern dialect map of the Bulgarian language presents the main dialect divisions, according to which two large sets of dialects (Eastern and Western) are clearly distinguished. The major difference between them is the reflexes of the common Old Bulgarian ‘jat vowel’, which is /e/ in the Western dialectal region, and /ja/ in the Eastern one (Videnov, 1999, p. 19; Angelov, 2006). The majority of Bulgarian citizens can easily recognize the dialectal background of their partner in the communication process by certain distinct phonetic and lexical features. However, the fact is that the dialect variants of the Bulgarian language differ mainly in phonetic, accentual and lexical features, and there are no particular differences in terms of grammar. This is what enables those who speak different dialects of Bulgarian not to experience insurmountable difficulties in communicating with each other, to perceive the state language standard as an absolute norm and to try to adhere to it when communicative situations require its use. The literary-colloquial form of the Bulgarian language is the norm in the structures of the state administration, in schools, universities, and the national media. Every Bulgarian citizen strives to the highest degree to conform their idiolect features to the literary Bulgarian language when they are in a communicative situation with higher-ranking individuals in the social hierarchy, with strangers, and when preparing administrative documentation.

4. The Importance of Variants of Bulgarian

The 50 territorial dialects of Bulgarian have been described and studied in the smallest details and marked on the map of Bulgarian dialects in the Bulgarian Dialect Atlas, as Videnov summarised them in “four volumes to cover the four parts of modern Bulgaria within its present-day boundaries and a compendious fifth volume” (Videnov, 1999, p. 19) in the second half of the 20th century. However, their vitality and their role as a first language for many of their speakers are just one of the significant aspects of the contemporary linguistic situation in Bulgaria. The 1960s are considered to be the peak of a period of increased urbanization for the Bulgarian social picture. Cities were growing, and rural areas were depopulating. This socio-historical factor has had a strong influence on the linguistic picture in the country. The processes of integration and accommodation of territorial dialects from all possible dialect areas of the Bulgarian language, which began in the cities, became extremely intense and dynamic. This complex dynamic of urban speech leads to the formation of the so-called inter-dialectal formations of the Bulgarian language in Bulgarian sociolinguistics. These formations, according to Mihail Videnov, are complex variants of the Bulgarian language, in which the linguistic features of the local dialect are supplemented with markers from other – neighbouring or prestigious dialects (for example, the inter-dialect of the capital), spoken by specific social groups (Videnov, 1999, pp. 21–22). Often, urban inter-dialects also contain idiolect features from the speech of the leaders of the social groups that make up the urban demographic. This phenomenon is interesting but difficult to trace and can be studied within the theoretical framework of the Theory of Language Management, since such community leaders become language managers, unconsciously carrying out simple language management (Nekvapil, 2015).

However, the construction of the language formations, named ‘interdialects’ by Videnov (1999, pp. 21–22), does not stop at the level of the quantitative and qualitative accumulation of dialectal and sociolectal features. The factor that has played a decisive role in unifying and shaping the inter-dialects of the Bulgarian language is the state language standard, which since its creation and throughout all the historical periods of its existence has remained the variant of the Bulgarian language with the highest prestige. This is because of the strong influence of language policy on the part of the state institutions — the educational and academic system, the state administration, and the electronic and print media. Precisely because of their adherence to the language models set by the most prestigious authorities, the inhabitants of every major Bulgarian city are sure that they speak ‘the most correct Bulgarian’, which is the reason for many anecdotal disputes on the topic where in Bulgaria the most correct language is spoken, and by whom specifically.

5. Attitudes towards Lexical Change

It is the attitude towards the language and its features on the part of its speakers that constitutes another important aspect of the language situation. By describing and measuring the attitudes towards the language markers manifested in the speech of certain social groups, the hierarchy among the variants of the Bulgarian language is laid bare. In her study on language attitudes, Aleksova (2021) traces the attitudes of Bulgarians from large urban centers and the capital in comparison with the attitudes of Bulgarians from the countryside. According to the

results obtained, the globalization processes of the 21st century have a two-way influence on the attitude towards linguistic changes – mainly the introduction of Anglicisms into Bulgarian. On the one hand, the author observes pride associated with the denial of the introduction of foreign vocabulary, but on the other hand, the real attitude towards this process of internationalization is rather liberal. Such an attitude is demonstrated both by Bulgarians living in the capital city and Bulgarians from the countryside.

6. Bilingual Communities

Bilingual communities are also an important feature of the contemporary linguistic situation in Bulgaria. A significant proportion of Bulgarian citizens live in compact minority communities. These include the Turkish, Roma, Jewish, and Armenian communities. In these communities, the linguistic situation is generally perceived as bilingual, since their members speak Bulgarian, but the main language systems for communication between them are vernaculars of their ethnic language. The community of Bulgarian inhabitants of the northwestern part of Bulgaria, who speak Bulgarian and Vlach dialects, can also be included. These are strongly influenced by the Bulgarian dialects of the Romanian language (Marinov, 2024, p. 57). A detailed examination of the real linguistic situation in these regions and communities, however, presents a much different picture than the simplified bilingual one. Members of minority communities actually speak variants – dialect forms of their Bulgarian and ethnic languages. This means that in these communities the bilingualism is also accompanied by diglossia, which creates the prerequisites for describing the linguistic situation as exoglossic and unbalanced according to the terminology of Schweitzer and Nikolsky (Schweitzer & Nikolsky, 1978). Marinov (Marinov, 2024) confirms the dominant diglossic situation in several settlements of Northwestern Bulgaria, by examining not only the linguistic features of the variants of the language systems that Northwestern Bulgarians use, but also by tracking the changes in their attitudes towards them over a period of 20 years (Marinov, 2024).

7. Effects of Internet

An important aspect of the language situation in Bulgaria today is the sociolectal influences of younger Bulgarians – especially in social media. Since globalization is most clearly manifested in the Internet space, many Bulgarians express themselves verbally in ways that reflect trends set by popular vloggers. In this social environment, it can be said that Bulgarian vloggers who are popular among Bulgarian Internet users, follow trends, both in their behavior and at the linguistic level, set by world-famous vloggers. Thus, they transfer these trends to their speech expressions in social media. This speech behavior and mainly its linguistic features are easily perceived by social media users throughout the territory of Bulgaria. They, in turn, follow it and reproduce it in their social contacts offline. The accessibility and popularity of social media, especially in the last 10 years, have led to the introduction of universal linguistic features into the speech of Bulgarians, and this is another detail of the contemporary Bulgarian linguistic picture.

8. Bulgarian Speakers Living Abroad

Another important aspect of the contemporary Bulgarian linguistic situation is the condition of Bulgarian in the Bulgarian communities living outside the borders of Bulgaria. The end of the 20th and the first two decades of the 21st century represent a period in which the demographic picture of Bulgaria is changing not only within the country's borders, but also outside them. The emigration of Bulgarians to countries from all continents during this period is intense and, since large Bulgarian communities have been forming in many EU countries and the United States, the linguistic processes these groups are undergoing are interesting. Among the members of these communities, a patriotic attitude towards the Bulgarian language and rather towards its variants, of which many of the members of the emigrant communities themselves are speakers, is striking. Such a community in Los Angeles was studied in 2012 (Mitsova, 2013) and the results of the included observation show that its members, with pleasure and a special sense of pride, try to use in communication with each other variants of Bulgarian that are as close as possible to the territorial dialects of which they themselves are speakers. The communication process is not only not disrupted, but is also 'pleasant', according to their answers to specially asked questions. Ten years later, however, when the members of these 'First Generation' Bulgarian communities are already integrated citizens of the countries to which they immigrated and their children were born and raised there, the

language situation has already acquired completely different characteristics. For the most part, ‘Second Generation’ Bulgarians abroad are already true bilinguals, with Bulgarian as a second language (Issa, 2023).

9. The Future of Bulgarian

The language situation in Bulgaria in the 21st century is marked by complexity, dynamism, and diversity. It can be seen as the result of the interplay of historical, social, political, and cultural processes, both within the Bulgarian state and beyond its borders. General definitions – such as those describing the situation as endoglossic and unbalanced – provide a conceptual framework. However, there are many other aspects that contribute to a fuller picture of the actual linguistic landscape and language situation. Therefore, there is a continuous need for profound and detailed studies based on geographic, social, generational, or digital criteria.

The digital world has become a central dimension of the life of languages in the contemporary era. In the early years of the internet, online communication had a strong impact on the global language situation. English took on the role of a contemporary lingua franca due to the need for its use in digital social spaces. Bulgarian, like other ‘small’ languages – especially during the first decade of the millennium – faced the challenge of preserving its Cyrillic writing system in online communication. The need to use the Latin alphabet in digital spaces raised many linguistic issues that had to be addressed by the current generation of Bulgarians.

One of these issues is the so-called “6liokavitsa” (shlyokavitsa – an untranslatable term used to describe the transliteration of Bulgarian using a mix of Latin letters and numbers that resemble specific Cyrillic letters, such as “ч” and “ш”, represented by 4 and 6 respectively). This global process, however, was successfully managed, and today there are numerous languages and writing systems available for online communication.

Nowadays, the Bulgarian online language situation is stabilized by the use of the Cyrillic alphabet and the widespread presence of computer science terminology, mostly borrowed from English and adapted to Bulgarian grammatical patterns (Mitsova, 2013). These recent developments in the language situation have allowed Bulgarian to find its place among other contemporary world languages and to face the newest challenges in communication, brought about by the rapid acceleration of AI technologies.

Many Bulgarians – especially younger generations – have become familiar with ChatGPT and similar tools, using artificial intelligence in their everyday lives. These developments offer a new perspective on the contemporary language situation in Bulgaria. Thus, due to global changes, an exciting new stream of potential research has emerged – one that can raise awareness among both ordinary speakers and sociolinguists in Bulgaria and the world.

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