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Attempts Toward the Standardization of Balkan Languages in the 19th Century: From Cosmopolitanism to Nationalism – A Comparative Perspective

Biljana Marinova
Independent Researcher, Faculty of Philology "Blazhe Koneski",
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia
biljana.marinova@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The standardization of Balkan non-Slavic languages (Greek, Albanian, Aromanian) and South Slavic languages (Macedonian, Bulgarian, Serbian) remains a relevant and productive field of research within Balkan studies and, more broadly, within linguistics. This paper offers a comparative overview of efforts toward language standardization across the region. Among the politically and socially subordinated South Slavic populations and other ethnocultural communities of the Balkan Peninsula, the early 19th century marked the beginning of a national awakening, inspired in part by the Romantic movements in Europe, which brought increased attention to linguistic issues. The complex processes of standardization involved various approaches concerning the choice of dialectal basis, the development of graphemic systems, and the formulation of orthographic principles. Philological thought in the Slavic linguistic context at the time was shaped by two contrasting tendencies: one promoting linguistic unification rooted in cosmopolitan ideals, and the other advocating for the development of distinct national languages driven by nationalist ideologies.

KEYWORDS: language standardization, Balkan linguistics, 19th century, cosmopolitanism, nationalism

Introduction

The beginning of the 19th century on the Balkan Peninsula marks the beginning of the end of Ottoman domination, driven by the strong pressure of organized struggles for the liberation of the oppressed nations. The position of oppressed communities within the Ottoman Empire continued to deteriorate, while their motivation to launch organized struggles for liberation steadily increased. Meanwhile, the early 19th century marked the beginning of a strong national awakening among these communities, influenced in part by the intensified Romantic movements that had emerged in Western Europe during the late 18th century. The national awakening also raised questions about the future written languages – their dialectal basis, the inventory of graphemes, and the principles of

orthography. In the Balkan countries, the complex processes of language standardization were carried out by a small number of educated individuals—most often teachers, writers, and less frequently—philologists, who conducted their debates primarily through the newspapers and journals of the time.

The resolution of language-related issues in the 19th century across all Balkan countries, both Slavic and non-Slavic, depended on their position in relation to the Ottoman Empire. The countries that succeeded in achieving a certain level of autonomy earlier had, by the 19th century already resolved key linguistic matters concerning the formation and standardization of their national written languages, while the others lagged significantly behind.

Empire, Revolutions, and Independence: The Balkans in the 19th Century

From a historical perspective, the Serbian uprisings at the beginning of the 19th century hold great significance, as they posed a major challenge to the stability of the Ottoman Empire. The First Serbian Uprising, which began in 1804 and ended in failure, nevertheless strengthened the spirit of resistance and significantly fueled the national awakening. Consequently, in 1815, through the Second Serbian Uprising, the Serbs succeeded in gaining autonomy (Pavlowitch, 2014, pp. 27-30). In 1821, the Greek struggle for independence began in the Peloponnese. The movement soon drew the support of major European powers—Russia, Great Britain, and France, who intervened on behalf of the Greeks. As a result of international pressure, an independent Greek state was established in 1830, making it the first sovereign nation to emerge in the Balkans (Pavlowitch, 2014, p. 39; Koliopoulos & Veremis , 2010, p. 16).

In 1876, the April Uprising broke out in Bulgaria; although it was suppressed, it played a crucial role in advancing the Bulgarian struggle for national liberation (Chary, 2011, p. 33). As a result of the Russian victory in the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878), the Treaty of San Stefano, signed on March 3, 1878, between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, established the Principality of Bulgaria. Due to dissatisfaction with the Treaty of San Stefano, the Congress of Berlin was held from June 13 to July 13, 1878, resulting in changes to the borders of the Balkan states: Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro became independent countries, while Bulgaria was granted autonomous status (Chary, 2011, p. 34; Howard, 2017, p. 294).

In the early 19th century, the idea of ethnolinguistic nationalism emerged in Central Europe, asserting that each language group constitutes a nation with the right to its own statehood (Kamusella, 2015, p. 63). This idea soon spread to the broader region of the Balkan Peninsula. The processes of language standardization in the Balkans took place in a context of deep linguistic interference, meaning that none of these languages developed in complete isolation; rather, their standardization occurred in parallel with intensive interlinguistic contact.

According to this, the Balkan linguistic union is not the result of a common origin, but of long-term and intensive language contact among different ethnolinguistic communities under conditions of multilingualism and sociocultural interaction (Friedman, 2006, pp. 657-658).

Among all Balkan nations, both Slavic and non-Slavic, the 19th century marks a period when debates about national written languages begin to surface. These discussions, unfolding amid a still-unclear sense of national identity, gave rise to different views on how to resolve linguistic issues, including the well-known initiative of the Illyrian Movement, centered in Croatia, which promoted the idea of a unified Illyrian literary language for the South Slavs, an idea embraced by some writers from the Slovenian cultural sphere such as Stanko Vraz, Urban Jarnik, and Matija Majar (Greenberg, 2011, p. 372).

Linguistic Insights into the Standardization of Macedonian, Bulgarian, and Serbian

The Macedonians and Bulgarians are within the Ottoman Empire, but they also face strong Hellenization efforts carried out by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which is particularly evident in Macedonia. In contrast to the Macedonians, the Serbs and Bulgarians established their own states earlier, creating more favorable conditions for the resolution of linguistic issues, particularly those tied to the processes of language standardization. In the first half of the 19th century, the norm of the Serbo-Croatian language was established, and around the 1850s, it was confirmed. Today, its four variants, spoken in four different territories, have been administratively transformed into four separate Slavic languages: Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin.

The standardization of the Bulgarian language began in the 1850s. The final standardization was preceded by extensive discussions and different views regarding the features the future written language should possess—particularly in relation to the inherited Slavic grammatical model and the Balkan linguistic features that bring it closer to the neighboring Slavic language, Macedonian. In 1878, Bulgaria gained autonomy with the support of the Russian Empire, creating favorable conditions that would eventually lead to the standardization of the Bulgarian language.

In Bulgaria, discussions also took place regarding the future written language, with a focus on selecting the linguistic elements that would form its foundation. The linguistic debates centered on whether linguistic elements found in the Bulgarian vernacular, but absent from Church Slavonic and contemporary written Russian, could be accepted, and whether the new orthographic system should be based on the rules of Church Slavonic or constructed upon the foundation of the vernacular dialects. Nationalist-oriented Bulgarian intellectuals argued that the new literary language should incorporate elements characteristic of the vernacular,

highlighting its distinctiveness, while Bulgarian intellectuals with a hegemonist, Slavophile or Russophile orientation believed that the literary language should emphasize the unity of the Orthodox Slavic nations. In 1899, the Minister of Education, Todor Ivanchov, attempted to implement a standardization of the Bulgarian language by issuing an orthographic guide, but according to Hill (1988, p. 102), this reform did not constitute a true codification of the standard language. Efforts toward standardization continued into the first half of the 20th century.

In the 19th century, broad discussions about future literary languages took place among all Slavic communities living within the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, similar linguistic debates were occurring in Macedonia, focusing on which linguistic features should characterize the future Macedonian literary language. This question emerged during the 1850s and 1860s, coinciding with the beginning of the so-called church struggle, during which two main perspectives took shape. On one side were those advocating for a joint Macedonian-Bulgarian language, while on the other were the so-called 'Macedonists', who supported the creation of a Macedonian literary language based on the vernacular. Proponents of the first position advocated for the creation of a joint Macedonian-Bulgarian language, which also reflected the struggle of the Macedonian civic class against the powerful Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Supporters of the second position, by contrast, argued for the establishment of a distinct Macedonian literary language.

Within linguistics, and more broadly, in societal discourse, there are varying perspectives on the Macedonian language question, particularly with regard to the historical development of the language. While the existence of a contemporary standard Macedonian language is widely acknowledged, the pre-standardization period remains subject to different interpretations and scholarly debate. Macedonian was the last South Slavic language to codify a standard written form, as its literary language emerged amid competing nationalisms, neighboring language pressures, and shifting political contexts, requiring its codifiers to choose an orthography weighted with national, religious, and political significance (Kramer, 2015, pp. 287-288).

The Macedonian, Serbian, and Bulgarian languages, as three distinct diasystems, exhibit both differences and similarities in their processes of standardization—understood as the normalization of orthographic, phonetic, grammatical, and lexical norms of the written language, carried out during the 19th and 20th centuries. The basis of the contemporary standard Macedonian language is formed by the central dialects of the Western Macedonian dialect group; the standard Serbian language is based on the Shtokavian dialect; and the standard Bulgarian language on the Eastern Bulgarian dialects. The processes of standardization in the Macedonian, Bulgarian, and Serbian languages display significant similarities, stemming from the fact that, in all three linguistic contexts, the development of the modern standard language was closely linked to the

Russian recension of Church Slavonic. This variety, used as a written language in these regions during the 18th century, was blended with local traditions of Church Slavonic literacy. Due to the linguistic distinctions and the varied socio-historical circumstances in which they evolved, the Macedonians, Serbs, and Bulgarians each developed their own distinct strategies for addressing questions of language standardization.

Linguistic Insights into the Standardization of Greek, Albanian, and Aromanian

Greece was the first Balkan country to achieve autonomy through its successful liberation from Ottoman rule. With the support of the European powers – Russia, Great Britain, and France, an independent Greek state was established in 1830, making it the first sovereign state in the Balkans (Pavlowitch, 2014, p. 39). One of the most significant issues that emerged in the early 19th century in Greece, known in scholarly discourse as the Greek language question (το γλωσσικό ζήτημα), concerned whether the vernacular Greek language, Dimotiki (δημοτική), could serve as a suitable foundation for the future written language to be used in all spheres of society after liberation from Ottoman rule, or whether this role should be fulfilled by Katharevousa (καθαρεύουσα)—a conservative form of Modern Greek, devised in the late 18th century as a literary language and as a compromise between Ancient Greek and the contemporary vernacular, Dimotiki.

During this period, many prominent Greek intellectuals found it unacceptable for the national written language not to continue the tradition inherited from Ancient Greece and Byzantium. This language issue stirred intense debate throughout the 19th and the 20th century in Greece, and a final resolution—declaring Dimotiki the official language—was not reached until 1976. Due to its specific phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical features, Katharevousa was primarily comprehensible to the educated population, particularly the intellectual elite. The use of Katharevousa was made more complex by its frequent shifts and internal variations, as well as by the lack of a standardized form. Some of the variants came closer to the vernacular Greek language, making them more comprehensible to the general population.

Adamantios Korais (1748–1833) played a key role in the early 19th-century Greek language debate as the first modern Greek to gain international recognition as a classical philologist and writer, systematically linking language with national identity in the pre-revolutionary period (Mackridge, 2010, p. 102). Beaton (1994, p. 301) discusses Korais's views, noting that they reveal a certain degree of contradiction depending on the period and the context in which they are situated:

1. National self-determination depends on the successful re-engagement with the riches of the Ancient Greek language.

2. The contemporary written language, in general terms, must correspond to the grammar of the modern vernacular, which Korais regarded as an inseparable component.
3. These two propositions could be reconciled through a pragmatic program of 'correcting' those elements of the vernacular that visibly diverge from the features of Ancient Greek.

The following period, spanning from 1880 to 1929, coincides with the consolidation of the Greek bourgeoisie, the beginnings of modern industrialization, and the rise of the national expansionist movement. Significant progress toward resolving the Greek language question was made in the second half of the 19th century, particularly during the 1880s. The Franco-Greek philologist of Greek origin, Ioannis (Yannis) Psycharis (1854–1929), played a key role in the struggle to establish Dimotiki as the written language. He proposed bringing Ancient Greek closer to the vernacular through phonological and morphological changes and recognized the necessity of developing a literary language based on a standardized written norm that would be intelligible to speakers of all Greek dialects (Horrocks, 2010, pp. 447-454). In the field of linguistics, Psycharis is also credited with introducing the term diglossia (διγλωσσία) to describe the linguistic situation in Greece. In 1911, Katharevousa was declared the official language, while Dimotiki was used solely as the language of textbooks in primary education. A turning point in favor of the vernacular occurred in 1941 with the publication of a Modern Greek grammar by Manolis Triantafyllidis (1883–1959), and the Greek language question was officially resolved on April 30, 1976, when a decision was made to designate Modern Greek as the language of education in Greece (Mackridge, 2010, pp. 119, 267, 301).

According to Robert Elsie (Elsie, 2017, p. 6; Elsie, 2010, p. 89), one of the world's most renowned Albanologists, the Albanians did not have a long tradition of writing, and illiteracy was widespread among them until the mid-twentieth century, despite a longstanding preoccupation with alphabets. One of the major challenges of the Albanian national movement was the search for a suitable and widely accepted alphabet for the Albanian language, with several scripts being proposed by Albanian leaders (Elsie, 2017, pp. 12-13). As in Macedonia, during the 18th and 19th centuries in Albania, the Albanian language was also written using the Greek alphabet. This practice was primarily associated with translated religious texts related to Orthodox Christianity, as well as dictionaries. The authors faced significant challenges, as the Greek alphabet was unable to adequately represent the distinctive phonemes of the Albanian language (*ë*, *q*, *dh*, *l*, *ll*, *gj*, *nj*, *s*, *sh*, *th*, *xh*, *z*, *zh*). The earliest known text in the Albanian language written in the Greek alphabet is the so-called Easter Gospel, dating from the 16th or 17th century (Elsie, 2017, p. 33). Greek influence was particularly pronounced in southern Albania, where writing in the vernacular Albanian language was significantly hindered—posing a substantial obstacle to the production of literary

works in Albanian and to the broader development of Albanian literature. The use of different writing systems in Albania was closely tied to the influence of distinct religious institutions: in northern Albania, the Latin alphabet was adopted under the influence of the Catholic Church, whereas in southern Albania, the Greek Orthodox Church promoted the use of Greek graphemes. In the 19th century, there were also attempts to write in the Arabic alphabet, closely linked to the Islamic faith (Chekrezi, 1919, p. 224). The importance of contact with the Turkish language during the Ottoman period, along with the changes of the 19th century, is fundamental to the development of the Albanian language within the broader processes of Balkan linguistic convergence (Friedman, 2005, pp. 39-41). The standardization of the Albanian language was the result of a long and complex historical process spanning nearly a century, culminating in key milestones such as the Orthographic Rules of 1967, the Linguistic Conference in Prishtina in 1968, and the Albanian Language Orthography Congress held in Tirana in 1972 (Kryeziu, 2018, p. 106).

The Aromanians are a transnational, non-state-forming minority in Southeastern Europe (Friedman, 2001, p. 26). In the mid-nineteenth century, with the support of the Romanian government, the Aromanians in the Balkans began to define their national identity (Minahan, 2002, p. 174). The Aromanians in the Balkans were significantly affected by the World Wars and the Balkan Wars, and were subjected to intense processes of assimilation. Following the fall of totalitarian regimes in the 1990s and the establishment of more democratic governments in the region, the situation of the Aromanians improved significantly (Minahan, 2002, p. 180).

The Aromanian language (*limba armãneascã*, *limba armãnã*, *armãneashti*, *armãneashte*, *armãneashci*, *armãneashce*, or *rrãmãneshti*) belongs to the Romance language group, alongside Romanian, Italian, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. The Romance languages, as related languages, developed from Vulgar Latin in different parts of Europe. The Aromanian language shares significant similarities with Romanian, particularly in terms of morphology, syntax, and lexicon—especially with regard to the inherited vocabulary from Latin. The differences between the two languages are the result of changes brought about by contact with different languages, Romanian has been influenced by Slavic languages, while Aromanian has been strongly influenced by Greek.

With regard to the Aromanian language, two scholarly approaches are recognized concerning its status as an independent language. The first, widely accepted in Romanian linguistics and dominant prior to the Second World War, considers Aromanian to be one of four dialects of the Romanian language, while the second, aligned with contemporary international Romanist research, advocates for the full autonomy of all Balkan Romance ethnolects and recognizes them as distinct national languages (Oczko, 2021, p. 105). Some linguists classify

Aromanian, Megleno-Romanian, and Istro-Romanian as dialects of Romanian, whereas others treat them as separate languages.

As the Macedonians and Albanians, among the Aromanians there are also printed books in the Aromanian language written in Greek alphabet, dating from the 18th and early 19th centuries. The Greek script was later replaced by the Latin alphabet. A significant contribution to the development of the written Aromanian language was made by Teodor Kavallioti, Daniil of Moscopole, and Constantin Ucuta. The standardization of the Aromanian language is a complex and controversial process, marked by multiple attempts at codification, including the international congresses held in Germany (Freiburg) and the International Congress in Bitola, Republic of North Macedonia, in 1997. There was significant interest in abandoning the use of the Romanian alphabet (which had been used up to that point) in favor of creating a new alphabet, based on the script developed by Mihail Bojadji. The use of the Romanian alphabet was long considered acceptable, given that the Aromanian language was regarded as a dialect of Romanian. Nevertheless, authors faced challenges in representing the specific phonemes of Aromanian. What is commonly referred to as the 'traditional' system of writing Aromanian is, in reality, a composite of several orthographic traditions, in which some graphemes carry diacritical marks that vary in form, and multiple spelling conventions exist for the same words (Cunia 1997). At the Second International Congress on the Aromanian Language, held in Freiburg from August 25 to 28, 1988, the principles of a new alphabet, based on the Latin script without diacritical marks, were enthusiastically adopted. The new alphabet was accepted by the target community largely due to its ease of use. The Aromanian alphabet selected at this Congress for the standardization of the writing system consists of 34 letters: *a*, *ã*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *dh*, *dz*, *e*, *f*, *g*, *h*, *i*, *j*, *k*, *l*, *lj*, *m*, *n*, *nj*, *o*, *p*, *q*, *r*, *s*, *sh*, *t*, *th*, *ts*, *u*, *v*, *w*, *x*, *y*, *z* (Cunia 1997). At the same congress, orthographic principles were also established to facilitate the written use of the Aromanian language.

Conclusions

The efforts toward the standardization of Balkan languages in the 19th century were closely tied to the broader processes of national awakening and political emancipation. The position of each community within the Ottoman Empire at the time influenced the resolution of language-related issues. Slavic languages such as Serbian and Bulgarian, whose respective nations gained autonomy earlier, underwent language reforms and were standardized more rapidly, while others, like Macedonian, faced significant delays. Among the non-Slavic communities, the Greeks, Albanians, and Aromanians faced specific challenges related to the choice of alphabet, identity, and external influences. The Greek language question illustrates a long-standing ideological debate between the vernacular and the archaic form of the language. Due to geographical and religious divisions, the

Albanians experienced the simultaneous use of multiple alphabets before eventually consolidating around a unified Latin alphabet. Standardization of the Aromanian language was significantly delayed, largely due to transnational dispersion and multilingual surroundings. Language standardization in the Balkans was far more than a technical undertaking; it was a profoundly political act, intertwined with questions of identity, ideological orientations, ranging from cosmopolitan to nationalist, and broader struggles for societal autonomy. All Balkan communities were caught between tradition and modernization, external influence and internal disunity. These complex processes underscore the intricate relationship between language and nation-building in the Balkans—relations that, even in the 21st century, continue to serve as a source of division in the region.

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