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HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN



**International Symposium**  
**“Pluricentric Albanian”**  
**Berlin, 12 - 13 January 2017**

**Report by Andreas Hemming****Photos taken by Snežana Stanković****SUMMARY**

Linguistic pluricentrism often has a political aspect to it, nowhere more so than in regions where issues of identity and belonging – and thus of language as an identity marker and a sign of autochthony – are an issue. Thus it should be no surprise that in the run-up to the symposium „Pluricentric Albanian” held in mid-January 2017 at the Humboldt University of Berlin and co-financed by the Southeast Europe Association as part of its new young scholars grant program, the decision to discuss even the possibility of language divergence and – so the allegation – to

legitimize it in a scholarly forum was met with some derision. The list of speakers did not ease the suspicion, that this would be a scholarly discussion stained by ideology.



The conference organizer – *Lumnije Jusufi* (Humboldt University Berlin) – did well to address this issue in her opening remarks. While provocative, the goal was not to provoke political factions but to address developments in the use of language that should not be ignored and preceded contemporary political developments since the declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008.

The symposium was to be purely linguistic in its focus, objective and independent, as scholarship should ideally be. That said, it would necessarily

touch on history, culture and – inevitably, since states also influence language, if they want to or not – politics. To put politics before an objective examination of language was to put the cart before the horse.

This introduction was followed by the keynote address by the *grand seigneur* of linguistics in Kosovo, *Rexhep Ismajli* from the Kosovo Academy of Science and Art in Prishtina, who in a long and detailed history of the ‚Varieties of Albanian‘ discussed not only the development of the language and the various literary standards that had emerged over the centuries – literary Geg (16th C.), literary Arberesh (16th C.), literary Tosk (19th C.) – but also the several classification systems that have been used to order the language and its varieties. It does not make things easier that the contemporary standard was only defined in the course of the late 1960s and 1970s – that is, in living memory – and is to a degree still in the process of being defined in its details.



Challenged to take a position on the future of the Albanian language (among others by two translators who were understandably interested in hard and fast grammatical and orthographic rules), Ismajli was sure to stress that he was of the opinion that while everything was in motion and always had been, and while various dialects and variations might be used in everyday practice and might in the middle and long-term affect the standard language, this standard was in no way at risk.

In an interesting move for a linguistic symposium, the papers of the first panel on ‚Factors for the Development of Pluricentrism‘ were anything but linguistic and examined proximate aspects. In a theoretical experiment, *Robert Pichler* (Humboldt University Berlin / University of Graz) applied the term pluricentrism to the variety of relationships between nation and religion among Macedonian Albanians. And it seemed to work: Religion, like language, is central to local ideas of ethno-national identity; and while, like for language, there existed a central, what Pichler called a ‚Tirana model‘ of religious tolerance and indifference, it is varied upon locally.

The experiment did not work quite as well with *Idrit Idrizi's* (Vienna Academy of Sciences) contribution on ‚Party Control over Historians in Communist Albania‘. That said, although it was never addressed directly, it was clear that what was true for Albanian historians – that is, their mandate to flank political goals, aspirations and events with a grand, academically legitimated historical narrative – was just as true for other disciplines, linguistics among them.

In the second panel the focus returned to linguistics, but focused on development processes in other languages. *Christian Voß* (Humboldt University Berlin) presented the interesting examples of the state of implementation of standard languages in Macedonia in the 1940s, 50s and 60s and in Montenegro in the last two decades. Both are cases where new standards had to be developed and only slowly found a footing among the local population. The commonly held perception that national and linguistic belonging correlates and that to promote one would affect the other seems not to grasp especially in the case of Montenegro, where the correlation appears to be relatively weak.

Rexhep Ismajli added in one of many very interesting comments and anecdotes that he contributed throughout the symposium that interestingly enough, the most proficient speakers of standard Albanian were often enough members of national minorities, who first learned the respective standards at school and invested in speaking it well in their attempt to integrate themselves into the majority society. For the members of the national majority, in turn, a perfect or almost perfect command of the standard was not as important in positioning themselves socially, quite the opposite.

*Marija Mandić* (Humboldt University Berlin) then introduced the participants to another marginal region of Europe in her discussion of minority Nordic languages. Some processes in the Balkans are not really unique, so her point of departure. But her examination of developments in Northern Europe showed that developments there are more or less the opposite of what is happening in Southeast Europe. While language is still considered vital and central to the nations in the Balkans, in the Nordic area (and elsewhere in Europe) speaking and promoting a minority language – an explicit EU policy – is most often a purely cultural endeavor dissociated from territorial demands.

*Lumnije Jusufi* then returned to the podium to present some of her findings from her work among Albanian-speakers along the Macedonian-Albanian border, specifically the rural region of Dibra/Debar. Her examination of language use in four villages on either side of the border revealed beside a good deal of data on actual language use for example a tendency on the Albanian side of the border to use the standard in written and the local dialect in spoken communication while the dialect was used throughout in Macedonia – very little of this was conscious practice. Questions on language use were often enough met with incredulity and blank

faces, attempts at answering them led to the confusion of categories and concepts. This was all understandable; after all, so Jusufi, ,they are not linguists‘.

The second day of the symposium opened with the presentation of a long-term examination by *Bardh Rugova* (University of Prishtina) on language use in Albanian-language print media. Based

on a sample of 15 issues each of two newspapers published in Albania (Shekulli, Panorama) and two in Kosovo (Koha ditore, Kosovo sot) in the years 2011-2013, Rugova could ascertain a marked difference: 29 % of words/word forms in the newspapers published in Kosovo are not in the dictionary and a third of these words were not used at all in the Albanian newspapers. These included loanwords, (64 % of English origin, 15 % of Italian origin), words with added prefixes/suffixes (i.e. ri-, -i), calques and alternative spellings. Asked, among other things, to what degree the scholarly debate had any effect on the use of language by journalists, Rugova had to disappoint: Scholars had little to no influence on these developments and he was not optimistic that this might change.

*Giovanni Belluscio* (University of Calabria) followed with a fascinating paper based on the close analysis of 20 minutes of two television programs in which he recorded among other things the number of syllables spoken per breath. This figure was significantly higher for Tirana than for Prishtina, verifying the subjective experience that at least on television, people spoke much faster in Albania than in Kosovo. This was only one factor of what Belluscio identified



as a divergence between Kosovo and Albania. But he did not leave it at that: How, so his provocative question, did Macedonia with its own significant Albanian minority fit into the picture? And might it be more appropriate to speak instead of a bifocal language situation (as he insinuated in the title of his paper) of a tri- or multifocal situation?

In the lively discussion that followed, Rexhep Ismajli insisted that the divergences, if any were not linguistic but merely cultural (without really going into the difference) and that it was more than premature to speak of anything resembling an independent Kosovo standard. He did admit, co-opting the image of a road in Belluscio’s powerpoint presentation, that even among scholars of his own generation, standard Albanian, after it began to take form after 1972, was often enough touted to be a wooden language, a ‘*gjuha e asfaltuar*’, an ‘asphalted language’ resistant to change and further development. One factor for this rigidity was surely that this Albanian standard was a fictional, not a natural standard.



The disparity between the formal rules of scholarship and the dynamics of everyday language use that until this point had remained an ancillary subtext came to the forefront in *Rrahman Paçarizi’s* (University of Prishtina) discussion of what he called a ‘*netlect*’, that is, the vernacular of the internet. Positioned

somewhere between written and spoken language, the developments in internet communication proceed much more rapidly than linguists are usually used to dealing with. A core factor in these developments – which include abbreviations, neologisms and loanwords and phrases for which Paçarizi provided

a number of interesting examples (i.e. flm = faleminderit = thank you; ntm = naten e mire = good night) – is the speed of the internet and internet-based communication applications.

Robert Pichler added his observation that there existed a clear difference in how these new terms were used in Tirana and Prishtina: Youth in Tirana appearing to be more accepting of terms that emerged first in Prishtina while the young in the latter capital tended to be more wary about terminology emerging in Tirana. Was this, so Pichler's rather provocative question, a sign of a Prishtina inferiority complex or a reaction to Tirana's colonialism? The same was true, so the response, between older, established parts of the population of Tirana and rural-urban migrant newcomers. It was not the first time in the course of the symposium that Tirana was attributed a certain degree of high-handed (linguistic) arrogance.

*Lindita Mëniku* (University of Tirana) followed with her discussion of the administrative language in Albania and Kosovo and the shifts that emerged in this administrative language after 1991 in Albanian and 1999 in Kosovo. The example of the comparison of how organizational units are named – from the names of ministries down to those of the subunits – proved indicative among other things of the different histories the two countries have faced. Cases in point are terms such as *divizion / divizioni* (= division) or *udhëheqë* (= leader), which are common terms in Kosovo administration but are considered archaic (in the later case) or only used in other, in the former case, in military contexts) in Albania.



The conference closed with *Lindita Sejdiu-Rugova's* (University of Prishtina) discussion of the use of standard Albanian in schools in Kosovo. The situation in the classroom is very dynamic, students switching unnoticed between (a flawed) standard Albanian and their everyday vernacular situationally. Standard Albanian was general perceived by the students as being overly academic and impractical. It is thus not surprising that they had little desire or will to speak or write standard Albanian properly. This situation is made worse

by the quality of the textbooks in Kosovo, which are not only boring and old-fashioned but also full of grammatical mistakes.

Thus ended two extremely interesting and illuminating days exploring various aspects of language development in the Albanian-speaking countries of the Balkans, augmented by extremely interesting and also humorous conversations during breaks and meals – linguists do appear to have a particular sense of humor. The Albanian language is developing rapidly and it cannot yet

be said, where the journey will lead. I look forward to the planned conference volume that might provide more detailed clues.

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