

Language fuels the Balkans' ethnic tensions, linguist says

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(Phys.org) —Nowhere has linguistic research involved more discord than in the Balkans. Serbian and Bulgarian linguists have both attempted to prove that Macedonian – one of the official languages of the Republics of Yugoslavia after World War II – was a degenerated dialect of their own languages, thus supporting their respective rights to rule. Horace Lunt's classic work on Macedonian grammar, identifying it as its own language, met with nasty criticism, says linguistics professor Wayles Browne, a former student of Lunt.

Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian, the languages Browne speaks best and the subject of much of his research, are close to being the same [language](#), as close as British and American English. "But in the Balkans, whatever country you're in the language serves as a national symbol. It's a big part of their identity," Browne says.

In his general linguistic work Browne focuses on syntax and the phonology (sounds) and morphology (forms) of words. He's interested in differences between languages as they occur naturally and those with a standard version – and the sometimes undesirable effects of standardization.

"People get to criticize each other for not obeying the standard," says Browne, "and they can draw some unwarranted conclusions, like 'anyone who speaks like that must be lazy.' In the Balkan region, people say some awful things to each other just based on how individuals speak and the words that they use. The language fuels ethnic tensions."

Religion has played into language divisions as well. Croatian is written in the Latin alphabet, like English, because of the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia. Serbian is officially written in the Cyrillic alphabet, similar to Russian, due to the influence of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Cyrillic has become a Serbian symbol, but some Serbians continue to advocate for Latin.

"Some [linguists](#) would say 'who cares how you write it, I only care how you pronounce it' because they analyze the sounds," explains Browne. "But when you look at how people use language in practice, writing is very important and standardization is important and prestige factors matter."

Browne's most recent work is an article, "Are Languages Named After Peoples or Places? Word-Formation of Language Names in Slavic Languages," for a forthcoming memorial volume honoring Lunt. Even linguists, says Browne, can be misguided about the topic, citing a colleague's paper at a recent linguistics meeting claiming that the name of a language is always derived from the name of the people who speak it, not from the country where they are from.

Browne proved how wrong this was by writing down about 30 names of languages and people in three different languages, demonstrating that derivations are fairly evenly distributed. Icelandic, for example, comes from Iceland; Danes, though they're from Denmark, speak Danish. Ironically, in the Balkans, most people and country names are indistinguishable: Croatians speak Croatian in Croatia, Bulgarians speak Bulgarian in Bulgaria, etc.

Browne's interest in politics extends beyond the Balkan languages. He is treasurer for the Ithaca Amnesty International Group and a member of the committee that supervises local public access TV.

In addition to his linguistics research, Browne is a translator. His "Cape of Good Hope" (2011) is a translation from Bosnian of poems by Sasha Skenderija, a refugee from the Bosnian War who worked for many years as a law librarian at Cornell.

Provided by Cornell University

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