

Dieter Stern (U of Ghent)

The Privacy of Having a Language of One's Own:
Slavic Regional Standard Projects and Minority Agendas Online

Recent decades have seen an upsurge of regional minority claims throughout Europe, which according to deeply entrenched national romanticist ideas are regularly being expressed in linguistic terms. Especially in Eastern Europe, an apparently ever-growing number of hitherto unacclaimed, or even unheard of, minority languages have made a public as well as academic appearance. The demise of culturally monolithic and strictly centralized states after the breakup of the Soviet bloc coincided with the emergence of mass individualism and its challenges to top-down assignments of collective identity to yield an overall cultural disorientation, opening up new pathways for identity seekers of all denominations. Identity had become a matter of personal self-determination, and regionalized, more immediate forms of identity would seem to better suit the needs of the recently emancipated individual. Paradoxical as it might seem, the fragmentation and individualization of linguistic identity in Eastern Europe would invariably stick to nationalist rhetoric as a means of revalidating linguistic identities and claiming an ancient ethnic heritage for one's home region. Proposals for regional standard languages have been put forward in order to lend support to the legitimacy of one's regional linguistic claims. Until the mid-1990s, however, these proposals had to rely on traditional channels of propagation. The advent of the Internet would offer obvious facilities to help propagate regional linguistic agendas. However, the Internet, as I will argue in this paper, would also change the social preconditions for the renegotiation of linguistic identities. The decentralized modes of interaction together with the general grassroots attitude of most Internet users may effectively counteract all efforts at forcing standard models upon any target audience. Additionally, the Internet can turn out to become the remotest and most private place imaginable, despite all appearances of its users being plugged-in to the world at large. This is particularly relevant with regard to regional minority agendas, and even more so for regional standard language proposals, which more often than not leave the impression of a lonesome, individual quest rather than a collective striving for identity. Based on a sample of six Slavic regional minority languages (West Polissian, Kashubian, Silezian, Moravian, Banat Bulgarian, Burgenland Croatian), this paper sets out to evaluate the status of regional minorities and their languages by means of comparative content

analyses of a range of representative webpages and other online facilities. In this analysis, I presume that the range of genres and facilities actually found online for any regional minority language will be diagnostic of the particular character of individual minority agendas. I will show that while the particular web profiles of some minority languages testify to a healthy and firmly established regional identity on- and offline, those of others appear to indicate a failed attempt to launch a regional linguistic identity.