

Ranko Matasović

“A Comedy of Errors: Language Naming and Language Identity in the History of South Slavic Languages”

This paper will first discuss a theoretical question - what is a language in the historical sense and what gives it identity over time? In Europe we find examples of languages that had different names in different historical periods, e.g. *ilirski*, *slovinski* and *hrvatski* for Croatian, *lingua toscana* and *lingua italiana* for Italian, or *kranjski*, *štajerski* and *slovenski* for Slovene: our intuition and the philological analysis of written sources show us that in each of those cases a single idiom is denoted by different names, yet it is quite a challenge to make explicit the criteria of historical identity of languages.

Languages are not physical objects, so their identity over time does not depend on any specifiable set of physical features that they must have. Rather, their identity is tightly tied to the continuity of their use by a community of speakers. However, the identities of “communities of speakers” over lengthy periods of time are also difficult to define, as identities of ethnic groups and other communities are often fluid, and individuals within groups can have multiple identities. Therefore, the first part of this paper will be dedicated to methodological issues. We will discuss a set of criteria that can be used (and have been used) to establish the identity of languages over time, like the following ones: (1) forms of language L1 used by the community C1 at time T1 are derivable (by regular sound development) from forms of language L2 used by the community C2 at time T2. (2) Language L1 used by the community C1 at time T1 has the same name as the language L2 used by the community C2 at time T2. (3) Texts recorded in the language are the language L2 used by the community C2 at time T2 are intelligible to speakers of the language L1 used by the community C1

at time T1. (4) The language community C1 at time T1 using the language L1 recognizes itself as a historical (cultural, ethnic and often religious) continuation of the community C2 at time T2 using the language L2. (5) The language community C1 at time T1 using the language L1 is recognized by other communities as a historical (cultural, ethnic and often religious) continuation of the community C2 at time T2 using the language L2.

After using several examples to show how such criteria are less clear than usually imagined and that they can, moreover, contradict each other – we shall argue that they can nevertheless be fruitfully applied to South Slavic languages and that prototypical cases, in which different criteria agree to a remarkable degree, should be distinguished from “outliers”, for which historical continuity is more difficult to establish. However, we shall insist that the same criteria must be used consistently for all languages, including those, such as Italian or Dutch, whose identity over long stretches of history is apparently uncontroversial, as well as those, such as Croatian and Macedonian, whose historical identity has often been challenged.