Continuity and Identity of South Slavic Languages
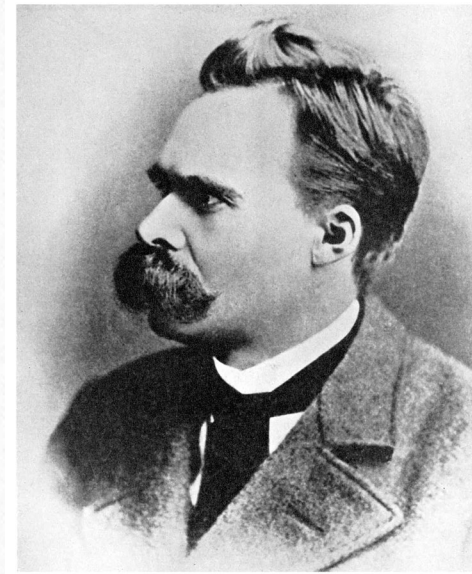
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An often overlooked problem

- F. Nietzsche: „Only that which has no history is definable
- Languages have histories: Ergo…

Structure of the talk

- Determine criteria for identifying languages over time.

- See how these criteria can be applied to South Slavic languages.

- Show that different criteria often contradict each other (and not just in South Slavic languages).

- Argue for a common sense approach to speaking about language identities over time.

Criteria of synchronic identity for languages

REF: Katičić 1996, Katičić 2000, Kordić 2010

- No two people speak *exactly the same* (i.e. their *idiolects* are different)

- When can we say that speaker X of idiom A and speaker Y of idiom B speak the same language?

- In synchronic descriptions, linguists usually apply the criterion of *mutual intelligibility*: if different idioms are mutually intelligible, they are forms of a single language (e. g. Australian and British English).

- However: mutual intelligibility is a scalar, and often asymmetric relationship; some Croatian dialects (e. g. Kajkavian of Bednja) are only partially intelligible to speakers of Standard Croatian; Finnish is more intelligible to speakers of Estonian than vice versa; similarly, Spanish and Portuguese).

Criteria of synchronic identity for languages
REF: Wichmann 2019, Matasović 2005

- The criterion of *identification by speakers*: if a community of speakers agrees that they speak a single language, they do. If they don't, they don't.

- This criterion often contradicts mutual intelligibility: Arabic in Morocco is mutually unintelligible with Arabic in Iraq; speakers of Adyghe and Kabardian (both spoken on the Caucasus) say they speak a single language (and call it Adygabza) but do not understand each other. Speakers of Dari (Afghanistan) and Tajik (Tajikistan) understand each other but insist they speak different languages… and so on.

- The criterion of *structural similarity*: if the grammars and lexica of two idioms are similar enough (i. e. if the linguists think so), they belong to a single language.

Criteria of diachronic identity for languages

- When can we say that text X written during period A is in the same language (or in a different stage of the same language) as text Y from the period B?

- The synchronic criteria are difficult to apply to history of languages:

- Intelligibility decreases over longer periods of time (Chaucer's English and Marulić's Croatian are unintelligible to speakers of contemporary English and Croatian, respectively). When do two stages of a single language become mutually unintelligible?

- We cannot ask the (dead) speakers of (dead) languages what they think about language identity.

Problems with diachronic identity of languages

REF: Ivić 2001, Matasović 2016

- „Marin Držić (Dubrovnik, 16th c.) is a great Serbian writer, because he wrote in (an ancient form of) Serbian language".

- „Shakespeare is a great Australian writer, because he wrote in (an ancient form of) Australian language".

- „Dante is a great Corsican poet, because he wrote in (an ancient form of) Corsican language".

- „Bonvesin de la Riva (Milan, 13th c.) is a great French, not Italian poet, because he wrote in Old Lombard (a Gallo-Italic language), not in Tuscan".

Onomastic continuity?

REF: Katičić 2017, Ham 2006, Stolac 1996

- The key to understanding language identity over time is continuity. Continuity is what gives languages their identity.

- That continuity does not necessarily need to be onomastic, as the same idioms can be called by different names.

- Glottonyms from the South Slavic domain:

- Croatian: Bartol Kašić (*Institutionum linguae illyricae libri II, 1604*), Ardelio Della Bella(*Istruzioni grammaticali della lingua illirica, 1728), Matija Relković Nova slavonska i nimačka grammatika, 1767*), Marijan Lanosović *(Neue Einleitung zur slavonischen* Sprache, *1778*), Josip E. Matijević (*Horvatzka Grammatika* 1810), Šime Starčević (*Nova ričoslovnicia ilirička, 1812*), Josip Đurkovečki (*Jezichnica horvatzko-slavinzka za hasen* Slavincev, 1826), Antun Mažuranić (*Slovnica Hervatska, 1866*), *Dragutin Parčić* (*Grammatica della lingua slava (illirica*), *1873*)

Onomastic continuity?

- Slovene: Marko Pohlin (*Kraynska Grammatika, 1768*); Ožbald Gusman (*Windische Sprachlehre, 1777*); Jernej Kopitar (*Grammatik der Slavischen Sprache in Krain, Kärnten und Steyermark,* 1809); Peter Dajnko (*Lehrbuch der Windischen Sprache*, 1824).

Literary continuity

- Because all evidence for older forms of languages is *written*, and we can often only speculate about unrecorded *spoken* idioms (and most people in most societies are bi- or multilingual anyway), it is better to focus on diachronic identity of *literary languages* (of course, that means the language of the elites, not ordinary people).

How to prove there is continuity?

- Linguists' solution: if there is continuity of grammatical forms (phonemes, morphemes, syntactic constructions) over time, we are dealing with different stages of a single language.

- Precisely, this means: if forms of the idiom of the text X, written at time A are derivable from forms of the idiom of the text Y, written at time B, then X is written in the same language (but its younger form) as Y.

Continuity of grammatical forms?

- Why is Modern Greek still Greek? Because of regular and continuous rule-based development of the forms of Ancient Greek during the last three millennia:

- Anc. Gr. *ē* yielded Mo. Gr. *i* (*mētéra* > *mitera* 'mother'; *dēmos* > *dimos* 'people, community'), Anc. Gr. *ph* yielded Mo. Gr. *f* (*phōs* > *fos* 'light'; *phýllon* > *fylo* 'leaf'; *phílos* 'friend' > *filos*), the Nom. Sg. ending *–os* was preserved, etc.

- Similar correspondences can be shown to exist between the language of *Baščanska ploča* and contemporary Croatian, e. g. the "syllabic *ľ*" (*lь*) yielded *u* (*klьni* > *kuni* 'swear'), *ě* > *je* (*běše* > *bješe* 'was'), the 1ˢᵗ person ending imperfect *-axъ* was reflected as *-ah* (*pisaxъ* > *pisah* 'I wrote'), etc.

Continuity of grammatical forms?

- However, similar rules can be observed in the development from Latin to Italian, e. g. Lat. *i* > It. *e* (*minus* > *meno* 'less', *fides* > *fede* 'faith'), Lat. *ct* > It. *tt* (Lat. *nocte-* > It. *notte* 'night', Lat. *lacte-* > It. *latte* 'milk', etc.).

- Why do we not then say that Italian is a form of Latin?

- Obviously, because other Romance languages developed from Latin in a similar way.

- The derivability of the sounds, forms and constructions in a later idiom from those found in an earlier one is often only approximative: OLG *ik* 'I' is at the beginning of OHG *Hildebrandslied*, just as OCS *azъ* 'I' is at the beginning of *Bašćanska ploča*.

Continuity of the community of users and/or the territory of usage?

- Other forms of continuity, not just the continuity of forms, are important.

- Identities of communities of language users (or any other human communities) are as fluid as the identities of languages. Moreover, most humans have multiple identities (just as they speak more than one language). And evidence for the identity of literary communities over time is likewise multi-faceted (it includes, among other things, the use of the same script, similar orthography, evidence of mutual influences, shared cultural values, religious beliefs, political organizations, etc.).

Continuity of identification by non-speakers?

- It is in the nature of social phenomena that they cannot be identified only by reference to the subject, or in-group, but only by reference to the interaction of the subject, or in-group, with their environment and/or out-groups.

- This applies to languages as well: it is not enough how one speech community views the historical continuity of itself and its language, but also how other speech communities view it.

- Languages like Greek, which have an undisputed continuity of sounds and forms during three and a half millennia, and are spoken by a culturally, linguistically and ethnically self-conscious community, which is moreover recognized as distinct from all others by its neighbours throughout its history, are an exception.

The criteria for the diachronic identity of languages

1. Sounds and forms of language L_1 used by the community C_1 at time T_1 are derivable (by regular sound development) from forms of language L_2 used by the community C_2 at time T_2, and no other language L satisfies that condition.

2. Language L_1 used by the community C_1 at time T_1 has the same name as the language L_2 used by the community C_2 at time T_2 and no other language L at either T_1 or T_2 has the same name.

3. Language L_1 used by the community C_1 at time T_1 is used at approximately the same territory as language L_2 used by the community C_2 at time T_2, or there was a proven territorial expansion or reduction of the community C_1 between T_1 or T_2.

The criteria for the diachronic identity of languages

4. Texts recorded in the language are the language L_2 used by the community C_2 at time T_2 are at least partly intelligible to speakers of the language L_1 used by the community C_1 at time T_1, and no other language satisfies that condition.

5. The language community C_1 at time T_1 using the language L_1 recognises itself as a historical (cultural, ethnic and often religious) continuation of the community C_2 at time T_2 using the language L_2, and no other community C satisfies that condition.

6. The language community C_1 at time T_1 using the language L_1 is recognized by other communities as a historical (cultural, ethnic and often religious) continuation of the community C_2 at time T_2 using the language L_2, and no other community C satisfies that condition.

The criteria for the diachronic identity of languages

REF: Matasović 2016

- Crucially, it is not necessary that all six criteria apply in every individual situation, only that the majority of them do.

- The cases where all of the criteria apply and confirm the historical identity of a language are actually rather rare cross-linguistically.

Three cases from South Slavic

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- Are the "Freising Manuscripts" (10th century) written in (Old) Slovene?

- Are Marin Držić's (Dubrovnik, 1508 – Venice, 1567) comedies written in Croatian?

- Is the "Charter of Ban Kulin" (1198) written in (Old) Bosnian?

Three cases from South Slavic

REF: Kortlandt 2000, Snoj & Greenberg 2003

- We do not know how the author of the texts called his language.

- There is no continuity in the use of the Latin alphabet between those documents and the subsequent first attempts to use it in the West and South Slavic languages.

- The dialect in which the "Freising Manuscripts" were written cannot be demonstrated to be the ancestor of any living Slovene dialect.

- The texts themselves had no direct influence on the subsequent development of Slovene literature and language.

- The geographical position of the area where the dialect of the "Freising Manuscripts" was probably closest to the area where Slovene dialects are spoken today, and its dialectal features, in terms of diachronic derivability, do find their "best fit" in the northernmost Slovene dialects.

Three cases from South Slavic

REF: Katičić 1989, Krasić 2000

- Are Marin Držić's (Dubrovnik, 1508 – Venice, 1567) comedies written in Croatian?

- Although the *ijekavian* East Štokavian dialect is spoken by Croats, Serbs, Bosnians and Montenegrins, the contemporary urban Dubrovnik variety which had developed from the idiom used by Držić in his works is used almost exclusively by Croats, and there is a literary continuity of its use from Držić's period until today.

- Držić would not have called his own language Croatian; rather, he would probably call it "Illyrian" (*ilirski*), or "Slovinian" (*slovinski*), which are names used in the 16th and 17th century to refer to the language used by authors from Dubrovnik, the Dalmatian coast and parts of the interior of today's Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

- There is evidence that this community was recognized as having its own cultural, ethnic and linguistic identity by outsiders (e. g. by the Papal institutions in Rome) as early as the 16th century.

Three cases from South Slavic

REF: Ivić 2001, Brozović 1972, Pranjković 2000, Dragić 2017.

- Is the "Charter of Ban Kulin" (1198) written in (Old) Bosnian?

- It is in Old Štokavian, the dialect from which four modern standard languages developed (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian and Montenegrin) as well as dialects spoken by Bosnians Croats, Serbs and Montenegrins.

- It was written before many of the typical Štokavian sound changes occurred.

- The Cyrillic script in which the document was written was used, in that period, by both Catholic and Orthodox churches in Western Balkans. The author of the Charter was Catholic (less likely Bogumil).

- There is little literary continuity between this document and later traditions of Croatian Franciscan writers in Bosnia, or Moslem and Orthodox authors who wrote under Ottoman rule in Bosnia.

- The charter was undoubtedly written in Bosnia in an ancestor of dialects still used by Bosnian, Serbian and Croat inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Conclusions

- There are no scientifically precise, objective criteria to talk about historical identity of languages. Identity of languages (just as the identity of the communities that use them) is a scalar phenomenon, and it is based on Wittgenstein's concept of *family resemblances* rather than on sufficient and necessary conditions.

- All of this does not mean that there are no criteria for identifying languages in history: but these criteria are often vague and contradict each other.

- When talking about the identity of languages in history we should use common sense, a very powerful tool in the humanities.

- However, one person's common sense is often another person's ideology.

Thank you!

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