

REVIEW
of
*"Bulgarian Language South of the Equator
(A Sociolinguistic Study of the Language
of the Bulgarian Emigrant Community in Sydney, Australia)*
dissertation submitted by Katya Grozeva Issa
for the acquisition of the academic degree Doctor of Sciences

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters (*Bulgaria's Policy towards Today's Emigrants and the Emigrants' Policy towards Present-Day Bulgaria; The Bulgarian Language in Sydney, Australia; A Field Study of the Language of the Bulgarian Community in the Foreign Language Environment of Sydney*), a conclusion, bibliography, appendices, a list of publications on the dissertation topic (30), and scientific contributions (10).

The research objective is formulated as follows: "to propose a methodology for tracing the changes in the native language of Bulgarian emigrants worldwide under the influence of the bilingual environment in which they find themselves." The author's ambition is to "develop a model for monitoring both the current level of proficiency and the subsequent (expected) changes in our language (from a theoretical standpoint) wherever Bulgarians live abroad," while the implementation of this methodology in practical terms is expected to be demonstrated "through the study of the Bulgarian language situation in the city of Sydney, Australia" (p. 5–6). Ms Issa starts with the idea that "the study should provoke Bulgarian linguistics for similar studies wherever Bulgarians live worldwide," and she hopes that the proposed methodology "will reduce the negative attitude of emigrants towards the possibilities of returning and potentially having a future in Bulgaria." The five preliminary research tasks are presented in detail, and are focused on the current problems of discovering the distortion algorithm of the native Bulgarian language when spoken abroad and the use of all opportunities and means to preserve the Bulgarian language for future generations.

The subject of the research in the dissertation are the Bulgarian immigrants living in Sydney, who participated in the scientific sociolinguistic experiments, and the object of the study is their Bulgarian speech in the foreign language environment. How the representative sample of 80 participants was selected is explained in detail. The main tasks for conducting the field research are then presented. The first one seems overly ambitious – "*creating a systematic theory, a model for studying the state of the language*, as it has been created in

Bulgarian sociolinguistics for the language of the city" (p. 43). I cannot agree with the statement that after studying the language of Veliko Tarnovo, the language situation in every Bulgarian city is easy to study "like a child's play" – if it were so, all urban language situations in Bulgaria would have been researched by now.

The main task, as formulated, is first accomplished through a questionnaire survey of Bulgarian emigrants in Sydney, despite the declared mistrust towards this method. The questionnaire could be presented as an appendix. The essential stage in the completion of the main task involves field research on the idiolects of the emigrants using the method of participant observation. The claim that "the Bulgarian language is used to a greater or lesser extent in separate Bulgarian settlements in different variants, mainly deviating phonetically" is not correct – differences exist at all language levels. The last, and as defined by the author, "the most difficult and ambitious task," is to establish the distortions and the algorithm of their movement – its step-by-step regularity, with *algorithm* understood to mean the "process of gradual fading of Bulgarian language uses and their replacement with English ones", referred to as "estrangement" (p. 50–51). Preliminary attitudes, assumptions, and expectations are presented, as well as the dependence of the algorithm on time and space. An interesting observation is that "the algorithm of distortion, which the surrounding foreign language environment imposes on the native Bulgarian language of Bulgarian emigrants abroad, is *slowed down* (but inevitable) even when observed in the first generation of emigrants, *accelerated* (and particularly present outside the family) when observed in the second generation, and *having completely (or almost completely) replaced* the Bulgarian language when observed in the third and each subsequent generation of Bulgarians" (p. 57–58). It is not clear which principles of linguistic geography and language geography determine the author's conviction (or bias) that "the dependence of the distortion algorithm of the Bulgarian emigrant language is inversely proportional to the distance of the emigrant community from Bulgaria" (p. 61). The introduction concludes with a section titled "The Inverted Cosmos of the Bulgarian, Immersed in 'Deep Blue Mountains' – a magnificent essay that I have listened to with bated breath at one of the sociolinguistic conferences.

The language of the author is emotional and metaphorical, but in some places there are unsuccessful and puzzling analogies and comparisons – the analogy of the spoon next to a pot of boiling water (p. 34); the comparison of our language with a "miner's lamp on a stubborn head, which does not bow down to anything" (p. 50), etc.

In the first chapter, the study focuses on Bulgaria's policy towards today's emigrants and the emigrants' policy towards present-day Bulgaria. Even though they are presented in a

journalistic style, important statements are made regarding: the culturally-oriented education in Bulgarian schools both in Bulgaria and abroad, as well as the necessity of developing *culture-focused methodology*; the organic connection between language and culture as the most reliable means of personal identification; the concept of transculturation, involving the personal strategies of accepting a foreign culture without abandoning one's own, as a policy of the multicultural society. The quality of textbooks used in the Bulgarian school in Sydney in 2016 is commented upon in a very emotional manner, and the extensive use of terminology in linguistic sciences is discussed in depth to end with the conclusion that "language teaching should be differentiated and adapted according to the target groups within which it is taught," i.e. to be modified for the Bulgarian children in Sunday schools abroad, whose Bulgarian language is their *second native language* (p. 129). The intention to establish the language attitudes is declared and this is to be done through a survey questionnaire – out of 24 questions in the survey conducted in Sydney, the answers to one question ("What language do you speak at home (with your spouse; with your children; with other family members)?") are commented upon, as well as the answers to three questions from the survey for Bulgarians worldwide. The survey forms had better be moved to the appendices. Staying true to her style, Ms Issa concludes the first chapter with a commentary on the functions of the language of Bulgarian emigrants in Sydney, referencing the literary work "The Seventh Function of Language" by Laurent Binet – another magnificent essay by the author about the significant "seventh function of the native language."

The second chapter is dedicated to the Bulgarian language in Sydney, Australia. The study of the contemporary language situation of the Bulgarian emigrant community in the Australian city, characterized by bilingualism and diglossia, constitutes a scientific contribution. The terminology and methodology of sociolinguistic studies in Bulgarian cities which was employed is well-motivated, and the foundation of a "new direction" in sociolinguistics – *sociolinguistic emigrantology* is established (p. 173). An attempt is made to provide a synchronous "snapshot" of the social structure in those spaces of the megalopolis where Bulgarian presence is detected. Section 3.2 traces the Bulgarian-Australian cultural connections, which, in my opinion, should not be included here. Language contacts of political immigrants in Sydney are presented through an analysis of the interviews with three refugees from the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria, in whom the bilingualism is coordinated, and the most noticeable interference is lexical. The language of Bulgarian families in Sydney is studied in detail because, as the author notes, "the vitality (and extent of usage) of our language is best seen in conversations within the family environment." Based on the

characteristics of the language of the host family ("our family") and "other families," important conclusions about the generational nature of the language are formulated: "the language of the first generation, of those who emigrated at a mature age, is entirely Bulgarian in the conversations between spouses"; "the family mesolect is the most maintained variant of the Bulgarian language"; "deviations, typical mainly for the speech of the children born abroad, *are not without exceptions*," and "their language interference is in the direction from English to Bulgarian," with their bilingualism being stylistic. Presenting the entire recorded conversation between representatives of different generations of Bulgarians living in Sydney (as well as the subsequent interviews in this chapter) is unjustified. Repetitive statements and claims are made, after having already been expressed. Truly valuable and thought-provoking is the interview with the elderly Greek woman who used to live in Bulgaria and speaks Bulgarian, but its proper place is also in the appendices. Similarly, the subsection "The Bulgarian Sunday School – Institution and Reality" does not belong here. Nevertheless, the ideas that "textbooks should not be adapted but *open to adaptation* by the teachers themselves" and that "the most important (and achievable) is the attitude towards the language as one's own," because "if bilingualism is achieved by Australian Bulgarian children, they will be able to focus the meaning precisely on the intersections between their two native languages" – "if they recognize them both as native, they will mutually enrich their existence." Section 3.6 presents the sociolinguistic circumstances that are taken into account – birthplace and origin, length of residence in Australia, education, profession, gender, social status, proficiency in Bulgarian, and age (*generational group*) as the most important factor. The inverted scale regarding the use of information technologies and social networks is of interest – elderly Bulgarians in Australia are the most active generation using internet technologies compared to their passive peers living in Bulgaria, while young people use English to communicate online with their peers, so the author determines that the children have *negligible* communication internet practices in Bulgarian. The conclusion that "if the language dies, the nation dies" is undeniable (as the Old Bulgarian word for *language* also means *nation*).

The third chapter is essential for the study, and its main goal is the field investigation of the language of the Bulgarian community in the foreign language environment of Sydney. The study includes 80 individuals, of which 36 are primary informants, 24 are students from the Bulgarian school, and 19 are their parents, categorized as additional informants. A description of the studied group of Bulgarian ethnic origin ("those who *identify themselves as Bulgarians*") is provided – this identification is the most unifying and essential characteristic.

The age of the informants is determined as the second most important factor and they are divided into three groups (A – "beginners," B – "bilinguals," the middle-aged generation, and C – "the elderly," with additional symbolic designations). "With them, the primary objective factor leading to the use/abandonment of the Bulgarian language within the English-speaking environment is generational" (p. 311). The other characteristics (education, profession, gender) are considered irrelevant by the author. It is expected and unsurprising that the switch in the subgroup of bilinguals "happens relatively quickly and effortlessly." However, I cannot agree with the statement that in Bulgaria "none of our territorial dialects is alive anymore because its carriers are not alive" (p. 324). It is also natural and expected to have deviations and fading functions of some elements from the regional dialect of the bilinguals in Sydney, and it is not that surprising that the *phonetic and morphological* system in their speech is almost "impervious to the attacks of English," as well as the absence of English language interference in the idiolects of the elderly (six grandmothers and one grandfather). The next section provides a sociolinguistic description of representative idiolects – "typical patterns of linguistic behavior of all the 80 surveyed individuals that illustrate the speech diversity in the language of the Bulgarian people in Sydney" (p. 329). Out of a total of 25 recordings, recordings from classes at the Bulgarian school are presented first, followed by recordings from family gatherings, and finally, recordings from meetings in public places and secret recordings in the host family, accompanied by comments on the observed deviations, interference, and distortions (mostly in the children). The conclusion drawn based on the speech of the only recorded third-grade student that "whatever the circumstances, whoever the teacher, the functions of the Bulgarian language diminish with age" (p. 363) is superficial. The conclusion about the language of the students (which factors determine their level) is not based on objective data, as there is a lack of quantitative analysis (as with the following recordings). It becomes clear that the recorded speech of the informants represents a different Bulgarian language, namely "the one in use in our country at the time of their emigration" (p. 415), or that it is a language with an intermediate system – a superstrate, as it is marked by the dominance of Australian English, or an adstrate, as it absorbs borrowings from the English language, mainly lexical, en masse (p. 495).

The conclusion (as many as 70 pages) shows the desire to summarize the interference in the language of the Bulgarian emigrants in Sydney (lexical, phonetic, and grammatical), to characterize the transitory nature of this language, to propose an algorithm for "delaying its becoming forgotten" and "preserving it for as long as possible." My expectation was for systematic and numbered conclusions. This is not the place for a list of the authors cited (p.

500-501, as well as later on). Based on the commentary on the recordings, the language of the three surveyed generations is defined as English (in group A), mixed (in group B), and Bulgarian (in group C) – with the well-grounded general term "transitional language,". Instead of the promised algorithm, three ways "to delay the forgetting of the language" are mentioned – related to self-identification in the family and in the school, and to state policies. And once again, there is the insistence that Bulgarian linguistics "is to preserve the Bulgarian language because it can."

The bibliography includes 186 sources (Bulgarian and English sources are not differentiated), of which 36 are self-citations (references to the author's own works). A significant omission, for example, is the *Map "The Bulgarian Language in a New Place in the World" with text* (2016) by A. Kocheva. There are a total of 30 publications on the topic of the dissertation.

The appendix contains interesting photographic and textual material. It was surprising for me to learn that Maria Staykova, daughter and sister of renowned artists from Smolyan, lives in Australia and plays such an important role for the Bulgarians in the distant country, "introducing Australia to Bulgaria and vice versa."

I acknowledge with some reservations the ten scientific contributions that the author of the study mentions at the end of the dissertation (that the "code-switching process" in a diachronic plan is presented for the first time, and that through the methods of sociolinguistic emigrantology the algorithm of distortions and deviations in the speech of Bulgarian emigrants in Sydney is established).

In conclusion, I would like to say that despite those remarks, the merits of the study are evidence of the author's ability to successfully conduct field work under unusual and difficult conditions, to organize a vast amount of material and interpret it captivatingly, more in a popular science manner than in a strictly scientific one. This type of research requires great diligence, effort, and precision, which are sometimes lacking. The punctuation errors, as well as the spelling and technical mistakes, are unpleasantly noticeable. The suggested work would benefit from reducing repetitions and cleaning up the texts that the author herself defines as "my naive fantasy." The optimal length would not exceed 400 pages.

The merits and valuable contributory aspects of the presented dissertation give me reason to believe that it deserves a favourable assessment, and its author Katya Grozeva Issa should be awarded the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences."

Date: 27th July 2023

Reviewer: Prof. Elena Nikolova, DSc