

Svetla Koeva

The language situation in Bulgaria

Abstract (English)

This paper briefly presents the language situation in Bulgaria and the distribution of different languages within the country. The dynamics of linguistic diversity in the country between 1870 and 2011 is shown. Further, the paper highlights the influence of the internet and media on the acquisition of the Bulgarian language. Finally, the role of education in teaching the Bulgarian language is discussed.

Резюме

Статията представя накратко езиковата ситуация в България и разпределението на носителите на различни езици на територията на страната. Разглеждат се начините, по които децата усвояват първи и втори език, и се посочват преимуществата на едновременното усвояване на два езика като първи. Представя се влиянието на медиите и интернет като езикова среда при усвояването на българския език. Накрая се посочва ролята на образованието за ефективното усвояване и използване на българския език.

1. General facts about Bulgarians and the Bulgarian language

Bulgarian is the official language of the Republic of Bulgaria. Data provided by the National Statistical Institute¹ from the population census of Bulgaria shows that at 1 February 2011, the population was 7,351,633. According to Eurostat,² at the beginning of 2016 the population was 7,153,800 and at the beginning of 2017 it was 7,101,900. A drop in natural population growth and economic migration are the main factors behind this population decrease of 51,900 people in one year.

The 2011 census shows that Bulgarian is the native tongue for 5,659,024 people, or 85.2% of the population; Turkish is the native tongue for 605,802 people, or 9.1% of the population; and Romani for 281,217 people, or 4.2% of the population. The data confirms that for the great majority of Bulgarians their native tongue is the official language of the country – Bulgarian.

¹ <http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2011final.pdf>.

² [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Demographic_balance,_2016_\(thousands\).png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Demographic_balance,_2016_(thousands).png).

The distribution of the population by native tongue³ is not uniform across the country. Table 1 contains data from the 2011 census and shows the number of citizens in different regions by their native tongue, according to the self-identification of the respondents.

Region	Bulgarian	Turkish	In %	Romani	In %	Total
Blagoevgrad	263,826	6,483	2.334	7,052	2.542	277,361
Burgas	293,613	51,257	14.179	16,621	4.597	361,491
Varna	364,688	33,128	8.12	10,116	2.479	407,932
Veliko Tarnovo	208,814	16,144	7.067	3,482	1.524	228,440
Vidin	86,155	127	0.136	6,864	7.369	93,146
Vratsa	152,705	381	0.239	6,182	3.881	159,268
Gabrovo	105,639	6,497	5.734	1,163	1.026	113,299
Dobrich	129,288	29,603	17.578	9,509	5.646	168,400
Kardzhali	39,102	86,637	68.257	1,188	0.935	126,927
Kyustendil	121,074	109	0.084	7,723	5.991	128,906
Lovech	118,564	3,884	3.046	5,050	3.96	127,498
Montana	125,285	274	0.193	16,249	11.458	141,808
Pazardzhik	204,575	15,361	6.431	18,887	7.908	238,823
Pernik	121,625	289	0.233	1,873	1.513	123,787
Pleven	218,745	7,719	3.392	911	0.4	227,375
Plovdiv	532,115	41,934	6.957	28,698	4.761	602,747
Pazgrad	48,849	59,653	53.379	3,214	2.876	111,716
Ruse	174,732	29,196	13.781	7,927	3.741	211,855
Silistra	63,410	43,360	39.625	2,654	2.425	109,424
Sliven	130,532	18,030	10.716	19,687	11.701	168,249
Smolyan	87,946	4,374	4.716	426	0.459	92,746
Sofia	210,607	540	0.238	15,184	6.708	226,331
Sofia-city	1,125,727	6,488	0.564	16,688	1.452	1,148,903
Stara Zagora	262,199	16,132	5.352	23,072	7.654	301,403

³ <http://censusresults.nsi.bg/Census/Reports/2/2/R9.aspx>.

Region	Bulgarian	Turkish	In %	Romani	In %	Total
Targovishte	58,122	39,643	38.104	6,272	6.028	104,037
Haskovo	178,889	28,837	12.918	15,495	6.941	223,221
Shumen	99,106	54,375	33.206	10,265	6.268	163,746
Yambol	105,827	3,791	3.160	10,321	8.605	119,939

Table 1: Native tongue self-identification of respondents by regions in 2011

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this, bearing in mind that: (a) the percentage distribution of native tongue is calculated only for Bulgarian, Turkish and Romani, excluding other languages present in the country; (b) the statistics are based on citizens' self-identification and could be influenced by different (including political and economic) factors; and (c) the information is from 2011 and there is not complete data for the changes that have occurred since then.

There is relatively even distribution of the Romani native tongue between regions: up to 5% of the population in 16 regions of the country, between 5% and 10% of the population in 10 regions, 11.458% in the region of Montana and 11.701% in the region of Sliven. Comparing the data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses, the percentage of people for whom Romani is their native tongue has remained constant (it was 4.67% in 2001). As with earlier census returns, the 2011 data also highlighted the fact that the Roma minority is geographically scattered throughout the country. However, the data does not reflect the fact that in some small settlements there is an overall Roma majority within the population (e.g. Novachene village in the region of Botevgrad⁴), and that in some schools in the cities, Roma students are in the majority (e.g. "St. Cyril and St. Methodius" Primary School in the city of Ihtiman).

The Turkish speaking population is concentrated in several regions of the country (Lazarova/Raynov 2012): over 50% of the population are Turkish speakers in the regions of Kardzhali and Razgrad, and between 30% and 40% in the regions of Silistra, Targovishte and Shumen. According to A. Angelov and D. Marshall (Angelov/Marshall 2006) the percentage of ethnic Turks in the country (as of 2006) has not changed over the last 120 years and is about 10% (it was 9.1% in 2011).

To conclude, the language situation in the Republic of Bulgaria can be briefly characterised as follows:

- The data shows that the great majority of the population is made up of Bulgarians and the dominant native language is the official language of the country, Bulgarian.

⁴ Project "Zaedno napred!" (BC-33.14-1-061/01.10.2015).

- With over 5.5 million native speakers, the Bulgarian language is a relatively small language. However, some investigations state that the total number of people with Bulgarian as their native tongue approximates to 15 million throughout the world (Kocheva 2016).

2. The dynamics of linguistic diversity in Bulgaria

The data from the 1991 and 2001 censuses in Bulgaria shows a very strong correlation between ethnic group and native language (Pachev 2006, 142). Further, according to the 2001 census, there is a large difference between ethnic groups depending on whether they live in towns or villages, with the Turkish and Roma ethnic communities prevailing in the villages (*ibid.*, 143). St. Lieberson showed a correlation between the decrease of linguistic diversity in Bulgaria in the period between 1880 and 1970 with the increase of urbanisation and the decrease of illiteracy (Lieberson 1981). Linguistic diversity is calculated as proposed by J. Grinberg (Greenberg 1956, 109), namely: let **m** be the proportion of the speakers of language **M** to the total population, **n** the proportion of the speakers of language **N** to the total population, and so on; **i** successively takes on the values **m**, **n** and so on; and Σ is their sum. The index **A** is the measure of linguistic diversity at a given moment and is calculated by the formula (where **i** states for **m**, **n**, and so on):

$$A = 1 - \Sigma_i(i^2)$$

To measure diversity rather than similarity, the result obtained is subtracted from 1 so that the index varies from zero (where everyone in the community speaks the same language) to one (where everyone in the community speaks a different language). To put it simply, if in a community of 100 people, 99 speak the same language and only 1 speaks a different language, the **A** index will be 0.01; if 30 people speak one language, another 30 speak another language and the remaining 40 speak a third language, the **A** index will be 0.66, that is, linguistic diversity will be much greater.

The **A** index has been independently calculated for the 2011 data, and the result confirms the score published by K. Aleksova (0.264). The **A** index for linguistic diversity in 2011 was additionally calculated over the whole population, with the number of respondents that did not self-identify their native tongue being proportionally allocated among the four groups (Bulgarian, Turkish, Romani and other languages) as follows: 76.47%, 8.20%, 3.81%, 0.83% (see column 2011*) . With this redistribution, the **A** index becomes slightly lower at 0.259.

Year	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1950	1970	2001	2011	2011*
The A Index of Language Diversity	0.40	0.40	0.39	0.35	0.22	0.20	0.18	0.275	0.264	0.259
Urban population	21%	23%	23%	24%	26%	31%	54%	69%	72.5%	
Illiterate population	75%	–	62%	50%	40%	32%	9%	1.8%	1.5%	

Table 2: Linguistic diversity in Bulgaria for the period 1880-2011

The data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses shows an increase in the urban population and a decrease in illiteracy compared to the data from 1970, while the A Index shows an increase in linguistic diversity. A similar situation is also observed in other eastern European countries, such as Hungary (Paulik/Solymosi 2004). These results contradict the hypothesis of St. Liebersson, as they show no further impact from urbanisation and illiteracy on language diversity (Pachev 2006, 145-146). Indeed, the figures for linguistic diversity in 1930, 1950 and 2011 are very similar, and it can be concluded that a ratio has been achieved that is not further influenced by factors such as urbanisation and illiteracy. Other factors – such as the change in the political situation in Bulgaria after 1989 and economic migration – also undoubtedly influence the ratio.

Some previous studies conclude that although the country appears monolingual on the surface, there are also some complex problems that have to be studied carefully (Videnov 1998). On 19 September 2017, the Minister of Education and Science stated during a TV interview⁵ that between 18% and 24% of first grade students had a native language other than Bulgarian. The 2011 census shows that the total ratio of 9.1% for the Turkish native tongue and 4.2% for the Romani native tongue is valid for the 40-49 age group (9.3% and 4.1% respectively), but for children under the age of nine the ratio is 10.6% for the Turkish native tongue and 12% for the Romani native tongue, while for people in the 10 to 19 age group the ratio is 11.7% for the Turkish native tongue and 9.7% for the Romani native tongue.

There are many studies that conclude that early childhood is the best time for learning a second language. It is assumed that children who have begun to study a second language before six or seven years of age have a much better chance of mastering the first and second language equally (Bongaerts 2005). As 13.3% of the population in 2011 self-identified as Turkish or Romani native language

⁵ <http://m.btvnovinite.bg/article/bulgaria/krasimir-valchev-ot-obrazovatelnata-sistema-lipsvat-nad-200-hil-deca.html>.

speakers, and these ethnic groups live compactly in both villages and cities, it may be concluded that there are many children for whom a Bulgarian language environment in early childhood is not available.

3. Bulgarian on the internet and in the media

Since 1990 foreign (mostly American, but also Turkish) films and television series have begun to dominate Bulgarian broadcasting (Blagoeva/Murdarov/Koeva 2012). Foreign films and series are either dubbed (mainly by the national television and other bigger television companies who broadcast nationally) or subtitled (mainly at the smaller private television companies). Due to the strong influence of the media, the subtitling of foreign films should be the main method of translation, in order not to provoke unnecessary foreign language influence.

During the last 30 years there has been a noticeable trend towards the “internationalisation” of the Bulgarian lexicon as a result of the influence of English. Bulgarian has accepted new words and meanings predominantly from English, although many others have been taken from other European and non-European languages (Blagoeva/Murdarov/Koeva 2012). There are a number of terminological areas in which the lexicon has developed almost entirely under the influence of English: computer technology and the internet (файл [file], сайт [site]); finance, economics and business (дилър [dealer], брокер [broker]); contemporary music (диджей [dj], техно [techno], клип [clip]); sport (джогинг [jogging], бодибилдинг [bodybuilding]). The influx of English borrowings has also been seen in commonly used words, e. g., тостер [toaster], стикер [sticker], бодигард [bodyguard], and in teenage slang. Many of the new borrowings from English cause difficulties for speakers of Bulgarian. Some are difficult to pronounce, such as блокбастър [blockbuster], or мърчандайзинг [merchandising], while others are difficult to adapt morphologically. For example, some words give rise to uncertainty when used in the plural, ?бодигарди or ?бодигардове [bodyguards], ?чипсети or ?чипсетове [chipsets]. Older Bulgarians who do not speak English find these borrowings hard to understand.

The Law on Radio and Television⁶ states that Bulgarian National Radio must set aside not less than 5% of the subsidy from the state budget for the creation and performance of Bulgarian music and radio drama; while Bulgarian National Television is required to set aside not less than 10% of the same subsidy for Bulgarian television film production. However, the Law on Radio and Television does not provide a mandatory percentage for the Bulgarian language training programmes at the Bulgarian National Radio and the Bulgarian National Television, which aim to promote the correct and appropriate use of the Bulgarian language.

⁶ www.crc.bg/files/_bg/ZAKON_za_radioto_i_televizija_150310.pdf.

According to the World Wide Web Statistics website,⁷ which examines the use of the Internet compared to the population of various countries, there were 4,083,950 internet users in Bulgaria in 2014 (56.7% of the population) compared to 1,545,100 users in 2004 (20.3% of the population). According to the National Statistical Institute, in 2017 67.3% of households in Bulgaria had access to the internet⁸ and 61.9% of Bulgarians used the internet regularly (every day or at least once a week);⁹ 88.1% of active internet users were aged between 16 and 24 years. A complementary study¹⁰ which shows the number of sites visited within the Bulgarian internet space indicates that, after the most frequently visited international websites and social networks, the most popular sites in the Bulgarian internet space are those offering news in Bulgarian (abv.bg, dir.bg, Vesti.bg, Nova.bg, 24chasa.bg, Dnevnik.bg, and others). Bulgarian Wikipedia contains 239,078 articles¹¹ as at 6 February 2018, a considerably smaller number than the biggest Wikipedias (English, German and French) but occupying 36th place out of a total of 285 different languages in Wikipedia.

The increasing number of people who actively use the internet and the increasing amount of Bulgarian content on the internet are evidence of the important role played by the internet and the media in the acquisition and use of the Bulgarian language. While free online publishing is an impetus for progress in general, it would be good practice to have language editors for the Bulgarian content published on the websites of state and local authorities, Bulgarian schools and universities, the Bulgarian National Radio and the Bulgarian National Television, and so on. The internet gives access to large amounts of language data and also offers a wide range of application areas involving language technology. The wide usage of language technologies can make an important contribution by offering media, internet and mobile communications sophisticated language services.

4. The Bulgarian language in education

From the 19th century onwards, Bulgarian language and literature has had a very important role in education. According to Bulgarian legislation, all education and teaching provided as part of the current state curriculum, from pre-school through to university level, must be in Bulgarian (Law on School and Pre-school Education¹² and Ordinance No 6 of 11.08.2016 on the Mastery of Literary Bulgarian¹³).

⁷ www.internetworldstats.com/eu/bg.htm.

⁸ www.nsi.bg/bg/content/2828/лица-които-никога-не-са-използвали-интернет.

⁹ www.nsi.bg/bg/content/2814/лица-регулярно-използващи-интернет.

¹⁰ www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/BG.

¹¹ https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Българоезична_Уикипедия.

¹² www.mon.bg/upload/4051/zkn_PUObr_180717.pdf.

¹³ http://zareformata.mon.bg/documents/naredba_6_11.08.2016_bg_ezik.pdf

Special arrangements exist for children whose native tongue is not Bulgarian. The study of Bulgarian is compulsory at both primary and secondary school level.

According to research carried out by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA),¹⁴ which assesses the capacity to use scientific knowledge, to identify questions and to draw evidence, the results of Bulgarian students in 2009 (429 points)¹⁵ were higher than the average score in 2006 (402 points) and slightly lower than the average score in 2000 (430 points). The score for reading in 2005 was 432 points, and the highest average result was achieved in 2012 (436 points). PISA defines reading literacy as understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society.¹⁶ 10.9% of the Bulgarian students who participated in the survey in 2009 indicated that the language which they spoke at home was not Bulgarian. The average reading result for these students was 102 points lower than the average score of the students who indicated that they communicated in Bulgarian at home. By comparison, about 8% of participants in PISA 2015 indicated that they did not communicate in Bulgarian in their family, and their reading scores were 95 points lower than those of the other students. As shown in the PISA study of 2012, there are serious disparities in the education of children in urban and rural areas, with children in urban areas scoring more highly. As a general comparison, in 2015 the average achievement in reading of 15 year olds in Bulgaria was 432 points, compared to an average of 493 points in OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).

According to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which assesses the reading achievement of 4th grade students, Bulgaria was in 14th place in 2006 with 547 points.¹⁷ These results are lower than in 2001 when Bulgaria was in 4th place with 550 points. In 2016, Bulgarian 4th grade students ranked 14th (552 points) among participants from 50 countries.¹⁸ Good results are achieved by children living in family settings who support the development of reading skills, whose native language is Bulgarian, and who attended pre-school education (in Bulgaria there was an increase in employment in pre-school education from 87% in 2006 to 97% in 2016).

The difference between the PISA and PIRLS results can be found in the essence of the two studies. PIRLS is designed to measure basic skills for reading different types of text, while PISA is designed to assess the ability to interpret the content of text and to retrieve information from it. The Bulgarian PISA and PIRLS results

¹⁴ www.ckoko.bg/index.php.

¹⁵ www.ckoko.bg/upload/docs/2013-01/book_2010.pdf.

¹⁶ www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/Draft%20PISA%202015%20Reading%20Framework%20.pdf?TSPD_101_R0=627b06281170d6a3a235c3980ed99a4cz88000000000000000924a7655ffff0000000000000000000000000000005a8d6a3f00345e3868.

¹⁷ https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/PDF/PIRLS2006_international_report.pdf.

¹⁸ http://www.ckoko.bg/upload/docs/2017-12/PIRLS_2016_site.pdf.

can be used as an indicator to determine to what extent international educational standards are satisfied within the National School Curriculum.

According to the most recent National School Curriculum, Bulgarian language teaching is conducted within the framework of a cultural and education study sector: Bulgarian Language and Literature. This sector is traditional within Bulgarian schools and the universities train specialists – middle and high-school teachers – in this subject. The annual number of classes in Bulgarian Language and Literature at the 4th grade is 238 hours. At the 7th grade it is 180 hours, including 90 hours for Bulgarian language (of which 18 hours is for the development of communicative competence). At the 8th grade it is 144 hours including 72 hours for Bulgarian language (of which 18 hours is for communicative competence development). At the 10th and 11th grade it is 108 hours including 54 hours for Bulgarian language (of which 18 hours is for communicative competence development). At university level there is a lack of lecture courses and seminars in Bulgarian (in most universities) to help future experts in different fields with successful professional communication and practical literacy. One of the ways of increasing the effectiveness of Bulgarian language teaching is for it to be focused on as a specific and important scientific area. Although traditionally seen as a humanities discipline, linguistics is concerned with the formulation of rules according to which language units are inter-combined, and is thus close to the sciences.

Language skills are the key qualification needed in education as well as for personal and professional communication. Increasing the volume of Bulgarian language teaching in schools is one possible step towards providing students with the language skills required for active participation in society. Language technology can make an important contribution here by offering so-called computer-assisted language learning (CALL) systems.¹⁹ Such systems allow students to experience language through play; for example by linking special vocabulary in an electronic text to comprehensible definitions or to audio or video files supplying additional information, e.g. the pronunciation of a word. Computer applications can be used to develop and practice reading, writing and comprehension skills, as well as students' speech communication skills. Over the past decade a number of important electronic language resources for Bulgarian (dictionaries, corpora, lexical databases²⁰) as well as programmes for their processing (word sense disambiguation tool, spell checking, etc.) have been developed. However, the scope of the resources and the range of tools are still very limited when compared to the resources and tools for the English language, and they are simply not sufficient in quality and quantity to develop the kind of technologies required to support the development of society.

¹⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/languages/library/studies/clil-call_en.pdf.

²⁰ <http://ibl.bas.bg/resursi/>.

References

- Aleksova, K. (2016): Ezikovata situatsiya v Sofia na fona na ezikovata situatsiya s Bulgaria (varhu danni za etnolingvistichното mnogoobrazie). In: *Problemi na sotsiolingvistikata. T. 12. Ezikovata situatsia – sastoyanie i tendentsii*. Veliko Tarnovo: Znak 94, 254-271.
- Angelov, A./Marshall, D. (2006): Introduction: Ethnolinguistic minority language policies in Bulgaria and their Balkan context. In: *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 179, 1-28.
- Blagoeva, D./Murdarov, V./Koeva, S. (2012): *Bulgarian language in the digital age*. (= White Paper Series 14). Heidelberg/New York/Dordrecht/London: Springer.
- Bongaerts, T. (2005): Introduction: Ultimate attainment and the critical period hypothesis for second language acquisition. In: *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 43 (4), 259-267.
- Greenberg, J.H. (1956): The measurement of linguistic diversity. In: *Language* 32 (1), 109-115.
- Kocheva, A. (2016): *Balgarskiyat ezik na novo myasto po sveta*. Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN "Prof. Marin Drinov".
- Lazarova A./Raynov, V. (2012): On the minority languages in Bulgaria. In: Stickel, G. (ed.): *National, regional and minority languages in Europe: Contributions to the Annual Conference 2009 of EFNIL in Dublin*. (= Duisburger Arbeiten zur Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft 81). Berlin: Peter Lang, 93-97.
- Lieberson, S. (1981): *Language diversity and language contact: Essays by Stanley Lieber-son*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Pachev, A. (2006): *Ezikovite obshtnosti v usloviyata na evropeizaciya i globalizaciya*. Sofia: SEMA RSH.
- Paulik, A./Solymosi, J. (2004): Language policy in Hungary. In: *Noves SL. Revista de Socio-lingüística* Spring-Summer 2004, 1-7. www.gencat.cat/llengua/noves/noves/hm04prima-vera-estiu/docs/paulik.pdf.
- Videnov, M. (1998): The present-day Bulgarian language situation: Trends and prospects. In: *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 135/137, 11-36.

Bibliographical information

This text was first published in the book:

Gerhard Stickel (ed.) (2018): National language institutions and national languages. Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2017 in Mannheim. Budapest: Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [299 pages.]

The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>