

THE ROLE OF HIGH PRESTIGE LANGUAGES IN THE FORMATION OF EUROPEAN LITERARY LANGUAGES



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I believe that contacts between popular dialects and high culture languages (mainly Latin and Greek) were the main factor driving the increase of language efficiency in the early period of forming literary languages of the European cultural area. Vernacular language patterns did not prompt developments in vocabulary, syntax and style until much later. Once intellectualized, dialects served as a tool for transmitting Greek and Latin culture, as well as logical and abstract thought. A purely popular language was unable to fulfill this function.

Key words: *bilingualism/multilingualism, language history, intellectualization of dialects, interference, literary language/general language/language standard, high prestige languages, language contacts, convergence, Bible translations.*

The literary language formation process¹ consists in enhancing the general functional and linguistic efficiency (i.e. the lexical, syntactic and stylistic efficiency) of unrefined dialectal substrates and the development of supradialectal language standards. As it appears, at the outset of the process the most important issue is the increase of general linguistic efficiency which is the main, or sole, feature distinguishing the nascent literary language from purely popular speech, since tendencies to standardize arise only later, gradually becoming the one of the determinants of a language's literary character. Ultimately, however, both approaches to forming a literary language should be given equal importance, as the appropriate level of linguistic means is the prerequisite for the formation of a functional tool for expressing thoughts, while language standardization is required for a general national language to develop.

Examining the issue of literary language formation, historians of Slavic and European languages consider both aspects of the process, but give decisive priority to the

dialectal origin of literary languages and the issue of their standardization. Thus, the achievements of historical dialectology in explaining the origin of literary languages can be said to be overvalued or even enshrined as absolute truth. Assessing the role that contacts with higher culture languages played in the formation of literary languages is not satisfactory either, as the contacts are treated only as auxiliary

factors supporting the more important, that is innate, forces tending to enhance the general language potential. I believe that the main notions of the language contact theory – bilingualism/multilingualism, interference and convergence (Weinreich, 1968) – could not be properly applied to a comprehensive survey of the initial stage of literary language development. In this article (showing the possibilities of using the language contact theory to explain the origin of literary languages) I will refer to some earlier publications of mine (Lewaszkiewicz, 1992a, 1992b, 1994, 1995, 2012).

My belief is that contacts between popular dialects and high culture languages (mainly Latin and Greek) were the main factor driving the increase of language efficiency in case of developing literary languages of the European cultural area. Native language models only became the most important force behind lexical, syntactic and stylistic development much later, for example in case of the Polish language possibly as late as in the mid-16th century. In contact with high prestige languages, popular dialects underwent intellectualization, meaning that they became enriched with new lexical units (especially abstract vocabulary), semantisms, idioms, foreign affixes and syntactic constructions. Language contacts were also conducive to the specialization of conjunctions (especially those introducing subordinate clauses), prompted increased ability to use coordinate and (especially) subordinate sentences as well as various types of compound sentences and linguistic means affecting the syntactical coherence of the text, inspired use of passive forms and promoted variations in style. As a result, language contacts produced mixed language texts, which evidence the interfering influence of higher culture language(s). Once intellectualized, dialects served as a tool for transmitting Greek and Latin culture, as well as logical and abstract thought. A purely popular language was unable to fulfill this function.

At this juncture, it would be useful to recall the most important facts on the history of the Greek and Latin languages.

The ancient Greeks laid the foundations of European material and spiritual culture. As early as several centuries before the common era, the Greek language was used to produce distinguished literary and scientific writings. Some of the relevant figures

included Aeschylus (525-456 BC), Aristotle (384-322 BC), Plato (427-347 BC), Sappho (6th century BC), Sophocles (496-406 BC), Socrates (469-399 BC) and Solon (ca. 640-560 BC). [2]. It should also be remembered that the *Old Testament* (originally written in Hebrew with additions in Aramaic) was in ancient times translated into Greek (as the *Septuagint* from the third or second century BC).

Latin owes its functional and linguistic efficiency largely to contacts with Greek, a prestigious language used by educated classes of Roman society. Livius Andronicus (fl. second half of 3rd cent. BC), recognized as the father of the literary Latin language, who translated the *Odyssey* into Latin, was of Greek origin. Another figure who made an important contribution to the development of Latin was Quintus Ennius (239-170 BC). He produced a prolific literary output written in a language variant that retained strong Hellenic influences, and also wrote a considerable number of works in Greek, thus being a Latin and Greek bilingual.

Outstanding literary works and other writings in Latin date from a later era than their Greek counterparts. The most distinguished writers included Cicero (106-43 BC), Horace (65-8 BC), Plautus (ca. 250-184 BC), Seneca the Younger (ca. 4 BC-65 CE), Tacitus (ca. 55-120) and Virgil (70-19 BC). [2]. The prestige of Latin received a further boost from translations of the *Bible*, *Vetus Latina* and later the *Vulgate*, the latter produced from 382 to 406. The codification of Roman Law (*Corpus Iuris Civilis*) during the reign of Justinian the Great in the 6th century further fortified the status of Latin as the leading language of Western and Central Europe.

Late antiquity (4th to 6th century) saw the emergence of two new cultural European areas, Greek-Byzantine and Latin-Roman. Over time, Latin culture became dominant in Europe.

Greek has played a particular role in the history of Gothic, Armenian and Old Church Slavonic/Old Slavic languages. In the late 4th century, bishop Wulfila/Ulfilas from Moesia (311-384) translated the New Testament from Greek to Gothic (specifically the West Visigothic dialect). It was probably the first attempt to intellectualize that dialect with the help of the high prestige Greek language. A similar route was taken when translating the Armenian *Bible* between 390 and 440. Grounds for the development of Old Church Slavonic were laid in the latter half of the 9th century by Cyril and Methodius, two carefully educated Greeks who translated Biblical texts by using Greek language models to intellectualize the Slavic dialect spoken around Solun (now Thessaloniki) in ancient Macedonia (Topolińska, Vidoeski, 1984: 94).

Intense language contacts were facilitated by bilinguals and multilinguals who knew local popular dialects and, for example, Latin. They were usually foreigners (such as monks or priests) who stayed in a particular country for a long time, as well as people living near ethnic and cultural borders, such as those between Slavs and Greeks (Cyril and Methodius, above) and between Slavs and Germans. It appears that the formation of literary languages was (especially in the Middle Ages) primarily the domain of bilinguals and multilinguals, as they were the only ones able to read and translate the *Bible* and other religious texts as well as legal, scientific and literary works. Undertaking the complex translation duties (which also included, for example, simultaneous interpreting of sermons), the translator cut down the original sense expressed in a functionally efficient language to the as yet functionally inefficient popular dialect or less developed writing language, adopting some linguistic means and models from the source language. The most convincing example of the preeminent role played by bilingualism in the formation of literary languages is the history of Old Church Slavonic.

Indeed, apart from Latin and Greek, it is primarily OCS that can be reckoned among high prestige languages in the European cultural area. That role was also played, to some extent, by German after Luther's translation of the Bible appeared (1522-1534), as it contributed to the intellectualization of dialects and inefficient writing languages of nations affected by the spread of Reformation ideas. Of more regional character was the intellectualizing influence of Czech on the language efficiency of Polish, Slovak, Upper Sorbian and Lower Sorbian, as well as the influence of Polish on Belarusian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and partially Latvian, or Italian on Old Croatian.

In other cultural areas, the role of Latin, Greek and OCS was taken by such languages as Sumerian, Sanskrit, Chinese etc. Nowadays, intellectualization and standardization based on English and French language models is ongoing among languages of former colonial nations in Africa and Asia. English is the driving force behind emerging language standards of Australian Aborigines. In North, Central and South America, Indian language standards have been formed under the influence of English and Spanish. Portuguese contributed to the standardization of African languages in Mozambique and Angola as well as Indian languages in Brazil and Venezuela. The processes are driven primarily by bilingual and multilingual people.

Such approach to the formation of literary languages differs from the dialectological and philological perspective in that the linguist tries to imagine what occurs in the brains of people who come into contact with high prestige languages at the (preferably earliest) stage of literary language formation. When contacts between a

popular dialect and a high prestige language are very intense, the basic outline of a language standard may emerge after just a dozen or few dozen years. When the contacts are less intensive, formation of a general language often spans centuries. This statement is apparently confirmed by the history of origin of Old Church Slavonic and many non-European languages.

Let us now return to the linguistic issues of the Latin-Roman cultural area. In the Middle Ages, Latin dialects evolved into Romance languages. These in turn became literary languages/standards under the intellectualizing influence of Classical Latin that also affected German, Celtic and Ugro-Finnish languages such as Hungarian, Estonian and Finnish. As far as the standards of Baltic languages are concerned, the impact of Latin was secondary to that of Polish (especially in the case of Lithuanian) and German. Translations of the Bible played a very significant role in the formation of literary languages in the European cultural area (Krašovec, 1998).

The Slavic world is divided into two spheres: Latin-Roman and Greek-Byzantine. The former includes West Slavic languages (Polish, Czech, Slovak, Upper Sorbian, Lower Sorbian) as well as Slovenian and Croatian, while the latter comprises Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian (now, with the breakup of Yugoslavia, the spin-off Montenegrin and Bosnian) and East Slavic languages (Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian) (Oczkova, Szczepańska, Kwoka, 2011).

Old Polish dialects transformed into literary languages due to contact with Latin, a process that took centuries; from the 14th to 16th century the language of Old Polish writings gradually became a tool to express thoughts thanks to lively contacts with Czech. Old Church Slavonic, the first literary language used in Czech lands, was functionally enriching dialects (not only Middle Czech ones) as early as in the 10th or 11th century. Since the 11th century, the role of Latin in forming the Czech language increased, and slightly later its development was affected by regional variations of German. The Czech language, whose functional perfection is largely due to numerous translations of the *Bible*, has since the Middle Ages been used as a literary language in Slovakia. It was the main source of language efficiency of the Slovak cultural dialect (17-18th century), writings based on the West Slovak dialect (codified by A. Bernolák) and language based on the Middle Slovak dialect (codified by L'. Štúr). Sorbian literary languages were formed from the 16th to 18th century, principally in contact with German (translations of catechisms, agendas, religious hymns, Gospel readings, translations of the Bible in whole or in parts). Contacts with Latin and Czech played a secondary role in that period, but the part of Czech in enhancing Sorbian languages increased considerably in the latter half of the 19th

century, contributing to the emergence of modern language standards. Writings in that language came at first exclusively from the pen of bilinguals (including Germans), the result of a peculiar language situation of the Sorbians.

In Dalmatian territory, bearers of the Chakavian dialect were in contact with Old Church Slavonic and Latin already in the 10th century. For this reason, the beginnings of Croatian literary language based on that very dialect can be said to go back to the 12th and 13th century. In the 15th and 16th century, the language of Dalmatian and Dubrovnik writings developed due to language contacts between Italian and Croatian. As for the Slovenian literary language, its father is considered to be P. Trubar whose language (especially the *New Testament* translation produced between 1557 and 1582) represents a central Lower Kraina dialect intellectualized on the basis on German and Latin models.

The history of writings in the Greek-Byzantine (Orthodox) cultural areas located within Slavic lands is tied to the functioning of Old Church Slavonic and redactions of Church Slavonic² that served as literary languages. The national languages (based on native dialectal substrate) of Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedonians, Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians arose later than the majority of languages in the Latin-Roman cultural area. While redactions of Church Slavonic hampered the emergence of Slav national languages in the Byzantine cultural area, they also functionally enriched their popular dialects, and consequently in the age when the national consciousness of Eastern and some Southern Slavs increased and redactions of Church Slavonic were treated as foreign languages, the formation of national standards did not take long.

The modern Serbian language developed from reforms made by V. Karadžić in the first half of the 19th century. The modern Bulgarian language ultimately arose in the second half of the 19th century, while Macedonian was not codified until after World War Two. However, Macedonian dialects had been gradually standardizing since the mid-19th century, affected by the Macedonian redaction of Church Slavonic and Modern Greek, and then by contacts with Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian in the 20th century. It should be added here that B. Koneski, a distinguished writer and linguist who was the principal figure behind the codification of Macedonian, was a fluent speaker of Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian.

The 18th century, a period during which the Russian language developed, served mainly for perfecting Central Russian dialects and the vernacular of educated Moscow inhabitants and moving away from Church Slavonic which, however, had

been intellectualizing Russian dialects for centuries. Loans from that language, numerous in Russian, bear proof to its interfering influence. Modern Russian was also significantly affected by intense contacts with French, as evidenced by numerous French literary works translated in the 18th century and frequent use of French for conversation by the upper classes of Russian society.

The preliminary stage of development of the Ukrainian literary language is tied to the intellectualizing influence of eastern redactions of Church Slavonic on Ukrainian dialects and, since the 16th century, also to contacts with Polish. The linguistic efficiency of the “plain Ruthenian dialect” was enhanced in the 18th century by multilingual writers such as J. Galatowski, P. Mohyla and M. Smotrycki who were fluent in, among others, Church Slavonic, Greek, Polish and the living Ukrainian vernacular. The Ukrainian standard that ultimately developed in the 19th century also used Polish and Russian lexical and syntactic means as many Ukrainian writers, essayists and national activists were bilingual or multilingual. It should also be noted that Polish borrowed hundred of words from Ukrainian.

A similar outline can be applied to the earliest stage of Belarusian language history. The beginnings of modern Belarusian go back to the works of bilingual writers such as J. Czeczot, F. Bohuszewicz, W. Dunin-Marcinkiewicz and others who used high prestige Polish language models to upgrade the living vernacular of Belarusian peasants to the rank of literary language. It appears, however, than Belarusian did not become a fully functional language until the 1920s.

I believe that language contacts with the respective Slavic macrolanguages are the most important source of language efficiency for both developed and developing Slavic microlanguages³, such as Kashubian and Silesian (←Polish), Carpathian Rusyn/Lemko (←Ukrainian), Moravian (←Czech), Molise Croatian (←Croatian), Pomak (←Bulgarian), Resian (←Slovenian).

The development of literary languages was also furthered by interdialectal language contacts that made it possible to borrow lexical, syntactic and stylistic means and develop language standards of different dialectal origin. The mixed nature of supradialectal standards bears witness to intense interdialectal contacts in all systems of a language. Occasionally a dialect did not contribute to the standardization of literary language but instead strongly affected its general level of development. Thus, an eminent role played by a dialect in language standardization does not always match its importance in developing the functional efficiency of literary languages.

I will restrict myself to just a few examples. The supradialectal Greek language is koine, used during Hellenic times, that is since the conquests of Alexander the Great⁴ through Roman rule and until the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire (395-1453). The successor of koine is Modern Greek. As far as formal and linguistic aspects are concerned, the common Greek language initially demonstrated mainly Ionian and Attic, and later principally Attic, features, but its potential had undoubtedly been indebted to a considerable degree to other literary dialects, for the simple reason that some literary genres were not written in Attic, while the pan-Greek language was a versatile language of writings.

French language historians assert that it was the Parisian dialect that assumed the status as the language of French literature in the late 15th century. This reasoning is unimpeachable from a formal and linguistic point of view, but it is a known fact that the most prestigious Old French literary monuments were written in other dialects, for example the *Song of Roland* represents the Anglo-Norman, and the renowned *Bible historiale* the Picardian dialect. The Parisian dialect undoubtedly enhanced its linguistic means in contacts with the language of regional writings, but as a rule did not borrow its peculiar dialectal features. From the time of Martin Luther's work as writer and translator, the German language underwent standardization mostly on the basis of East Central German dialect features, yet it must be remembered that Luther utilized an efficient language substrate derived from the tradition of regional literary languages.

The standards of the Ukrainian language developed mainly on the basis of the Poltava-Kiev dialect, although there was a rich and widely read literature (written by M. Shashkevych, I. Franko, Lesya Ukrainka and others) in the West Ukrainian variant⁵. These writings did not contribute much to the standardization of Ukrainian, but had a huge impact on the development of its language efficiency. Similar facts can be observed in the history of other Slavic languages.

It can be alleged that this article interprets complex issues in a simplified manner. While I am conscious of this, I believe that the article can serve as a basis for a polemical discussion that should contribute to a deeper understanding of how Slavic, European and non-European literary languages formed.

¹ "Literary language" is here understood to be synonymous with terms such as language standard, general national language and the language of writings.

² The prevailing idea in Slavic studies is that, up to the 13th century, the language of manuscripts was Old Church Slavonic, while later writings (with language features of territorial Slavic dialects)

correspond to individual Church Slavonic redactions. Since a long time, the liturgical language of the entire Orthodox Church has been the Russian redaction of Church Slavonic.

³ A. Duličenko (2003-2004) listed 18 Slavic microlanguages and 2 projects/experiments. Currently, around 30 microlanguages are recognized in the Slavic world.

⁴ The empire of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) was a time of migrations that supported the development of a common literary language.

⁵ Franko, for example, revised subsequent editions of his works to bring them in line with the Poltava-Kiev variant.

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