

THE MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE THROUGH STANDARDIZATION AND LANGUAGE POLICY IN A MULTIETHNIC SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the standardization and language policy of the Macedonian language within the multiethnic context of the Republic of North Macedonia. It analyzes the historical processes of the creation and codification of the Macedonian literary language, as well as the contemporary challenges it faces in conditions of increased multiculturalism, political sensitivity, and globalization. Special attention is devoted to the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the Law on the Use of Languages (2019), which significantly transformed the institutional status of the Macedonian language and the languages of the communities. The study applies a qualitative analytical approach, combining historical-linguistic analysis, sociolinguistic theory, and the examination of legal and institutional documents. The findings indicate that contemporary language policy simultaneously promotes linguistic equality and poses challenges to the symbolic and functional centrality of the Macedonian standard language. The paper aims to offer a critical insight into the balance between linguistic equality and the preservation of the Macedonian standard as a cohesive element of the state.

Keywords: *Macedonian language, standardization, language policy, multiethnic society, identity.*

Introduction

Language is not merely a system of letters and words but a carrier of culture, tradition, and historical memory. It represents identity and collective continuity. The Macedonian language, as the official language of the state, has a specific trajectory of standardization and institutionalization that began in the mid-20th century and was closely linked to processes of national and cultural affirmation.

Blazhe Koneski (1967) emphasized that raising the cultural level of the people directly contributes to the development of the literary language as a fundamental instrument in the construction of national literature. He further argued that the standardization of the Macedonian literary language was not merely a linguistic act but a process of cultural emancipation and national constitution.

Following the establishment of the Republic of Macedonia as an independent state in 1991, language policy entered a new phase characterized by challenges related to multiethnicity, globalization, and technological change. The signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001 introduced a new model of linguistic equality, recognizing the official use of several community languages. This development raised complex questions regarding the relationship between linguistic equality, social cohesion, and the maintenance of a unified national language standard.

In this context, language policy extends beyond norm codification and becomes deeply intertwined with issues of identity, political legitimacy, and social integration. The Macedonian language thus functions simultaneously as a means of communication, a symbol of statehood, and a marker of collective memory.

The central research questions of this paper are: (1) how contemporary language policy affects the status and function of the Macedonian standard language, and (2) whether the promotion of multilingualism fosters integration or contributes to linguistic segmentation. The aim of this study is to explore the contemporary challenges faced by the Macedonian language within the country's multiethnic reality, with particular emphasis on institutional language policy and its impact on linguistic practice and citizens' identity.

Theoretical Framework and Historical Context

The process of standardization of the Macedonian language began in 1945, when Macedonian was officially recognized as an equal literary language within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, the theoretical foundations of Macedonian linguistic identity were laid earlier. In *On Macedonian Matters* (1903), Krste Misirkov articulated the necessity of establishing a distinct Macedonian literary language based on central dialects and reflective of the cultural specificity of the Macedonian people.

Blazhe Koneski played a decisive role in the codification of the Macedonian standard language. He maintained that linguistic norms should emerge from the natural development of the vernacular and be grounded in scholarly analysis rather than political prescription (Koneski, 1981). His work in grammar, orthography, and lexicography laid the institutional foundations of the Macedonian standard.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language standardization is understood as a multidimensional process encompassing both corpus planning and status planning (Haugen, 1966; Cooper, 1989). While corpus planning involves the codification of linguistic norms, status planning refers to the allocation of social and political functions to a language. The Macedonian case illustrates a close interdependence between these two dimensions, as standardization was inseparable from nation-building and cultural emancipation.

Language does not exist in isolation but reflects broader social relations, power structures, and identity dynamics. In multiethnic societies, language policy must balance the preservation of the dominant standard language with the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity. In the Macedonian context, this balance has proven particularly sensitive, as language often becomes a focal point of political and ethnic debates. As Spasov (2021) observes, contemporary language policy in North Macedonia oscillates between the institutional reinforcement of the Macedonian language and its practical limitation through the expanded official use of other languages.

The Multiethnic Society and Language Policy in North Macedonia

Language policy in North Macedonia is deeply shaped by the country's ethnic composition and political history. According to the 2021 Census, the population is characterized by significant ethnic and linguistic diversity, including Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Roma, Serbs, Vlachs, and other communities. This diversity represents both a cultural asset and a challenge for state language policy.

The Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001 introduced a new model of linguistic equality. According to its provisions, any language spoken by at least 20% of the population is granted official

status at the national level, while at the municipal level, languages spoken by at least 20% of the population become official within local administration.

As a result, the Albanian language gained extensive institutional presence, particularly in education, public administration, and official communication. While this model aims to promote inclusion and equality, scholars have noted that it may also lead to linguistic segmentation. Trpevska (2014) argues that the parallel use of languages in institutions often does not result in increased interethnic communication but rather reinforces separate linguistic spheres.

The Law on the Use of Languages (2019) further expanded the official use of Albanian throughout the entire territory of the state and across all state institutions. This legislative development intensified public and academic debates regarding the role of the Macedonian language as a unifying state symbol. The central dilemma concerns whether official language equality implies functional complementarity or symbolic competition between languages. As Spasov (2021) notes, the challenge lies not in the recognition of linguistic rights but in ensuring that such recognition does not undermine the integrative role of the Macedonian standard language.

Standardization and Language Practice as Contemporary Challenges

Beyond political and legal dimensions, contemporary challenges to the Macedonian language also arise from social and technological change. Digital communication has significantly influenced linguistic practices, particularly among younger generations. On social media and in online media, Macedonian is frequently used in hybrid forms characterized by Anglicisms, non-standard spelling, and transliteration.

According to Minova-Đurkova (2022), such practices weaken the authority of the standard language and blur the distinction between normative and informal usage. The dominance of speed and informality in digital discourse places additional pressure on educational and cultural institutions to promote linguistic awareness and digital literacy.

Education remains a crucial domain for preserving linguistic norms. Teaching Macedonian in multilingual environments often faces challenges related to insufficient resources, teacher training, and updated curricula. At the same time, internal variation and regionalisms continue to shape everyday language use. While variation is a natural linguistic phenomenon, maintaining a clear distinction between standard and non-standard forms is essential for the stability of the literary language.

Institutions such as the Institute for the Macedonian Language and the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts play a vital role in maintaining normative stability through research, publications, and public engagement. As Veljanoski (2000) emphasizes, standardization is not a completed process but a continuous interaction between linguistic practice and institutional regulation.

Conclusion

The development of the Macedonian language represents a complex process of cultural emancipation, national self-affirmation, and linguistic standardization. From Misirkov's early theoretical insights and Koneski's codification efforts to the contemporary reforms shaped by the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the Macedonian language has evolved within changing political and social contexts.

Contemporary language policy demonstrates that linguistic issues cannot be separated from broader questions of identity, integration, and state cohesion. The Macedonian language today faces the dual challenge of preserving its standard form and symbolic centrality while functioning within an officially multilingual framework.

The key challenges for the future include:

1. Ensuring stable institutional support for the Macedonian standard language;
2. Developing linguistic awareness and digital literacy, particularly among younger generations;
3. Promoting intercultural dialogue rather than linguistic division;
4. Supporting continued research in sociolinguistics and language policy.

Language policy should be understood as a continuous and adaptive process rather than a one-time administrative measure. Only through balanced and inclusive policies can North Macedonia strengthen both linguistic equality and social cohesion in a genuinely multiethnic society.

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