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Title VIII Southeast European Language Training Program
Final Report

As a linguist in a Slavic department, I work with the languages of southeastern Europe in the context of their national cultures. As opposed to the primary research goals of general linguists focused on advancing theories of a particular subdiscipline of linguistics, my work is intended to lead more than anything to greater understanding of the South Slavic peoples and their cultures. It is for this reason that my time spent in Belgrade this summer was particularly valuable. Through both language classes and everyday informal interaction with people, of course, my linguistic knowledge improved greatly. Furthermore, spending time in Belgrade itself helped me to gain familiarity with Serbian culture, which is key to my research and is most readily acquired *in situ*. In short, the Southeast European Language Program was of tremendous value for my growth as a scholar.

Almost all of my research interests concern the interaction between language and culture. On the one hand, I am interested in the role of "folk" language as marked in comparison with the literary standard. A particular word or even unusual sentence structure, such as one that is usually reserved for proverbs, can be employed in a context where it would not be expected; this would then be expected to produce a certain stylistic effect. Naturally, there can be many motivations for speakers to map the form of one genre onto the content of another in such a way. While topics such as these are often explored by literary scholars, my current and future research aims to look at such situations from a linguist's point of view. One of my primary research goals is to define

systematically the particular phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics of folk language in order to explore the use of such features in standard speech.

I am also interested in language use under socialism, particularly with regards to the influence of Russian on Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (at the time, “Serbocroatian”) and Bulgarian. Both of the latter languages show lexical borrowing from Russian, especially political terms and words related to everyday socialist life. However, despite being typologically more different from Russian, Bulgarian appears to display a wider use of such linguistic patterns, occasionally to the point of even using syntactic constructions apparently intended to mirror Russian. Of course, this is a reflection of the different political relations that Yugoslavia and Bulgaria had with the Soviet Union after 1948, when Tito famously split from the influence of Stalin. Given this fact, I am interested in comparing the development of Serbocroatian and Bulgarian stylistics before and after 1948. While I have only begun to make preliminary observations on this topic, I hope to examine it more formally and in much greater depth in the future.

For topics such as these, of course, it is imperative to have a good sense of the spoken language of the people. While it is more or less possible to acquire a feel for the styles and patterns of a language’s artistic literature and academic writing, the language of everyday speech has plenty of subtle differences from the written standard. Because I want to work specifically with questions of register and genre, immersion in everyday spoken Serbian was extremely important for acquiring a feel for these differences.

Of course, spending time in Belgrade was useful simply for learning about the nuances of everyday life in Serbia. Having lived in Bulgaria, many customs were familiar

to me, but, in fact, this summer I uncovered many differences that I would not have even realized existed. Discovering these various patterns of daily life was very important for me, as such understanding is necessary for examining daily life from an anthropological point of view. Also, because I spent a great deal of my free time in Belgrade visiting museums and other cultural institutions, I have a more vivid awareness of the overall history of Yugoslavia. While one might be able to read about Serbian cultural history in a book and learn a great deal of facts, undergoing the minutiae of day-to-day life in Belgrade helped me gain a sharper understanding of the Serbian experience.

While research in the humanities is not often viewed as being of direct importance for American diplomatic interests, I hope that my work in South Slavic linguistics and culture can lead to better ties with the former Yugoslavia. Matters of language planning and policy are a very current concern when looking at the former Yugoslavia, and knowledge of the linguistic situation is key for developing U.S. practices in communication with these countries. While just several years ago it was common practice to refer to the language used in most of the former Yugoslavia as “Serbocroatian,” this terminology is now problematic, as state governments prefer to refer to their individual national languages. As individual dialects of BCS (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian) are being codified as separate languages, it is critical that American scholars be aware of this linguistic diversity and reflect the appropriate knowledge of separate linguistic standards in their work, demonstrating a regional understanding of each country for international communication. If America expects to work with states of the former Yugoslavia, it must have a body of experts aware of their changing linguistic situation.

Equally essential, however, is that Americans have a thorough understanding of other national cultures. While knowledge of epic songs, for example, may not seem to be directly relevant to policy formation, when certain cultural traditions are key to a nation's identity, it is important that those working with a country have an understanding of them. Time and again stories circulate regarding an embarrassing gaffe made by a diplomat or an international marketing campaign gone awry due to a lack of cultural understanding. It does little good when dealing with a foreign country to have knowledge of only its economy, infrastructure, or political situation. In order to work with a people it is necessary to understand their national identity, which we can come to understand through many different media including literature, music, folklore, and so on. In this sense, scholars from the humanities and social sciences working on research involving national culture and language play an essential role in the development of America's international relations.

It is for these reasons that programs such as the Southeast European Language Program are so vital. As a scholar, I benefitted tremendously by strengthening my Serbian language skills and knowledge of the local culture. Both of these points, of course, will allow me to conduct more in-depth and nuanced research as a South Slavist. On a greater level, however, the eventual result of the labors of scholars in my field will strengthen our nation's understanding of other societies and yield more fruitful cooperation with them. In short, my program this summer was extremely important for my career as a specialist of the language and culture of the Balkans, and I am extremely grateful to both American Councils and the federal government for their generous support.