
LANGUAGES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN CENTRAL EUROPE: THE CASE OF CROATIA

MELITA ALEKSA VARGA

INTRODUCTION

There are different types of communication known to humankind. In order to communicate, we do not necessarily have to use words but gestures and mimicry, the most important thing is that we convey a meaning and fulfil our task, i.e. to pass on messages or information to the recipient. Some people actually say that communication is the essence of human beings. We communicate with nature, with animals, and even though some of us are challenged or deprived of some communication abilities, be it sound or sight, people found a way to express their ideas and pass them on to other generations (Pinker, 2007). It is this ability that makes us unique and all the signs, words and sentences we utter are parts of the infinite number of sentences, which belong to a great linguistic corpus and heritage. Therefore, in the course of this paper I am going to try to describe this great phenomenon, the language, and concentrate in certain issues on this part of the world, namely Central Europe. Some of the questions we are going to discuss are: What do we consider a language? How does the language map of Central Europe look like? How many languages do people speak generally and who can be referred to as a bilingual or a multilingual? Last but not least we will discuss what the language situation in Croatia looks like and how have languages been taught and learned in Europe.

WHAT IS A LANGUAGE AND HOW IS IT BEING LEARNED AND ACQUIRED?

Every human being has encountered the question of how a language comes into being and how we define the term language. How can we differentiate between the terms *language* and *dialect*? How are languages acquired, and learned?

There are several theories and linguists have been trying to answer these questions throughout history. Starting from the behaviourists who thought that language was being taught and learned by imitating the sounds, Chomsky's Universal Grammar and

Language Acquisition device to Steven Pinker, who started from the human instincts, all these theories have arguments which can be observed as pro or contra. We can do nothing but speculate about this miraculous phenomenon. Generally speaking, we can say that a language is a system of signs for encoding and decoding information. Nowadays, there are different languages and one can differentiate between natural and artificial languages, the latter being e.g. programming, formal, controlled languages etc. Human languages are referred to as natural languages and the common progression for them is that they are considered to be first spoken and then written. Languages live, die, they polymorph and change with time. If a language ceases to change or develop, it is categorized as a dead language¹. But what defines a language and how are languages being “born”? In order to qualify for inclusion, the language must have a literature, a history and be designed for the purpose of human communication. The only exceptions are pidgin and creole languages. A pidgin language is a simplified language developed as a means of communication between two or more groups that do not have a language in common. It is in linguistic terms a simplified means of linguistic communication. A pidgin is not the native language of any speech community and it usually has low prestige with respect to other languages. The language, which originated from the pidgin, is a creole, a stable language that has been acquired by children. According to Pinker (2007), the creole languages are the clear proof that we have a language instinct because children have learned a simplified language from their parents, and added a grammatical pattern to it, developing it to a higher stage. Apart from languages, there are also many dialects present in the world. However, there is no universally accepted criterion for distinguishing a language from a dialect.

If we consider the differences between the points of view of language acquisition, we can see there are several types of languages: L₁ (mother tongue or native language), L₂ (second language, which can be the official language of the state a person lives in, if it is different from the speaker’s L₁) and a foreign language (sometimes described as L₃). It is important to note that L₁ is being acquired, L₂ is being either acquired and learned (or both at the same time) and L₃ is mainly being learned.

Examining further the speakers of these languages, based on these language types, we can differentiate between monolingual and bilingual, i.e. multilingual speakers. Taking into account the fact that most people can speak one or more languages, the questions that arise here are what we mean when we use the terms “bilingual” and

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language>

“bilingualism”. According to François Grosjean (2008), bilingualism is the regular use of two or more languages (or dialects), and bilinguals are those people who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives. The bilingual is not the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals, but s/he has a unique and specific linguistic configuration. (Grosjean, 2008: 13)

THE LANGUAGE MAP OF THE WORLD AND CENTRAL EUROPE

A language family is a group of languages related by a common ancestor or the proto-language of that family. As of early 2009, there were 6,909 living human languages catalogued, but the exact number of known living languages varies from 5,000 to 10,000, depending generally on the precision of one’s definition of “language”, and in particular on how one classifies dialects². It is interesting to note that only in Nigeria there are more than 300 different languages, not dialects. The language map of Central Europe would therefore look like this.

Figure 1. Excerpt from the language map



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Distribution_of_languages_in_the_world, First accessed by the author on October 9, 2010

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_family

If we closely examine the language map of Central Europe, we can see that even in 2010 there was the term *Serbo-Croatian* labelled for the two languages of the former nation of Yugoslavia—Serbian and Croatian. If we consider the fact that more languages have come into existence since the fall of Yugoslavia, the ignorance of the language situation in Central Europe and the dissemination of false facts like this on the worldwide web remains a sad story. There is therefore a concerted need or struggle for correction and affirmation.

Table 1. Number of Croats living abroad

1.	USA	1,000,000-1,200,000
2.	Germany	350,000-400,000
3.	Australia	250,000
4.	Argentina	200,000-250,000
5.	Canada	200,000-250,000
6.	Chile	150,000-200,000
7.	Hungary	90,000
8.	Switzerland	80,000
9.	Austria	80,000-100,000
10.	Italy	50,000-60,000
11.	France	40,000
12.	New Zealand	40,000
13.	Sweden	25,000
14.	Brazil	20,000-30,000
15.	South African Republic	8,000
16.	Belgium	6,000
17.	Ecuador	6,000
18.	Netherlands	6,000
19.	Peru	6,000
20.	Uruguay	5,000
21.	Great Britain	5,000
22.	Venezuela	5,000
23.	Norway	2,000
24.	Denmark	1,000
25.	Luxemburg	1,000
26.	Paraguay	1,000
27.	Bolivia	500-1,000

Source: <http://www.mvpei.hr/hmiu/tekst.asp?q=osio01>, February 4, 2008

LANGUAGE SITUATION IN CROATIA

Croatia has a territory of 56,594 km² and a population of about 4.5 million. Based on the size of the area, it takes up the 127th place on a world map. The official language

of Croatia is Croatian, and the majority of the population is Croatian. However, there is a large number of Croats living abroad who declare themselves as Croats, having a Croatian citizenship or belonging to the Croatian minority (Table 1).

If we closely examine Croatian minorities, we can see that there have been 23 different minorities recorded in Croatia from 1981 till 2001 (Table 2).

Table 2. Ethnic structure of Croatia.

Nationality	1981		1991		2001	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
1. Albanians	6,006	0.1	12,032	0.3	15,082	0.3
2. Austrians	267	0.0	214	0.0	247	0.01
3. Bulgarians	441	0.0	458	0.0	20,755	0.47
4. Montenegrins	9,818	0.2	9,724	0.2	331	0.01
5. Czech	15,061	0.3	13,086	0.3	10,510	0.24
6. Greek	100	0.0	281	0.0	-	-
7. Hungarians	25,439	0.6	22,355	0.5	16,595	0.37
8. Macedonians	5,362	0.1	6,280	0.1	4,270	0.1
9. Muslims	23,740	0.5	43,469	0.9	-	-
10. Germans	2,175	0.1	2,635	0.1	2,902	0.07
11. Polish	758	0.0	679	0.0	567	0.01
12. Romani	3,858	0.1	6,695	0.1	9,463	0.21
13. Romanian	609	0.0	810	0.0	475	0.01
14. Russian	758	0.0	706	0.0	906	0.02
15. Rusyns	3,321	0.1	3,253	0.1	2,337	0.05
16. Slovenians	25,136	0.6	22,376	0.5	13,171	0.3
17. Serbs	531,502	11.5	581,663	12.2	201,631	4.5
18. Italians	11,661	0.3	21,303	0.4	-	-
19. Turks	320	0.0	320	0.0	300	0.01
20. Ukrainians	2,515	0.1	2,494	0.1	1,977	0.04
21. Vlachs	16	0.0	22	0.0	12	0
22. Jews	316	0.0	600	0.0	567	0.01
23. Croats	3,454,661	75.1	3,736,356	78.1	3,977,171	89.6
other nationalities	1,553	0.0	3,012	0.1	21,801	4.49
undecided	17,133	0.4	73,376	1.5	89,130	2.61
regional ethnicities	8,657	0.2	45,493	0.9	9,302	0.2
unknown	64,737	1.4	62,936	1.3	17,975	0.4
Sum	4,601,469	100.0	4,784,265	100.0	4,437,460	100.0

Source: http://www.vsnm-ri.org/izvjesce_MRG_1.htm (October 9, 2010).

The Croatian law gives the minorities the ability to have a cultural autonomy, which means using their language officially, the symbols of the minority (coat of arms

and the flag) and toponyms (the name of the residential area, educational facilities, cultural societies, publishing companies, libraries, media, means of protecting the cultural heritage etc.). The level of cultural autonomy depends also on the local government. Examining closely the language situation in Croatia, based on Table 3 we can assume that the members of the different ethnic groups in Croatia would be at least bilingual.

Table 3. Number of students, members of the ethnic minorities in Croatia, who were attending schools in the minority language in the school year of 1998/1999

Minority language	Number of students attending school in a minority language in Croatia
Italian	13,653
Hebrew	40
Serbian	11,487
Hungarian	1,033
German	50
Slovakian	435
Czech	921
Romani	889
Rusyn	18
Ukrainian	12

Source: Tatalović 2001.

The next huge question, therefore, is the issue of preserving the minority language and the problem of assimilation, which will be the topic of some other papers. It is evident that many members of the minorities in Croatia have already assimilated and are therefore learning their minority language as a foreign language, which brings us to the question of history and the contemporary state of language learning in Central Europe.

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LANGUAGE TESTING IN CROATIA AND CENTRAL EUROPE

The history of language teaching in Central Europe is rich in different methods and their various applications. Starting from the grammar-translation method, through the direct method, behaviourism, audio-lingual method, silent way, suggestopedia and the community language learning, we have reached the contemporary times and the communicative method. In Croatian schools it is obligatory to learn at least one foreign language. Children are starting to learn a foreign language at grade 1

of primary school. Most of them after finishing their secondary school have been learning at least one foreign language for 12 years, since the second foreign language is not obligatory in every secondary school type, which can be seen in Table 4. It is important to note that the most frequent languages taught in Croatian schools are English and German, in a communicative method (Aleksa-Bagarić, 2009).

Table 4. Croatian school types and the languages taught

School type	Education type	Age of entry	Duration of education in years	Foreign languages possibilities (at least)
primary	compulsory	6	8	first foreign language, second foreign language
secondary	optional	14	4	first foreign language, second foreign language
specialized secondary	optional	14	4	first foreign language
vocational (3-year programme)	optional	14	3	first foreign language
vocational (4-year programme)	optional	14	4	first foreign language
university	optional	18	(3+2) or (5+0)	first foreign language (in the first two academic years)

The level of the students' foreign language knowledge after having finished the secondary school is, according to the Common European Framework³, estimated to be B2, whereas the level of their foreign language knowledge after finishing the

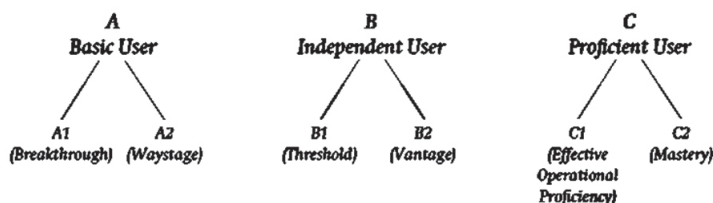
³ "The Common European Framework provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis. The Common European Framework is intended to overcome the barriers to communication among professionals working in the field of modern languages arising from the different educational systems in Europe. It provides the means for educational administrators, course designers, teachers, teacher trainers, examining bodies, etc., to reflect on their current practice, with a view to situating and coordinating their efforts and to ensuring that they meet the real needs of the learners for whom they are responsible. By providing a common basis for the explicit description of objectives, content and methods, the Framework will enhance the transparency of courses, syllabuses and qualifications, thus promoting international cooperation in the field of modern languages. The provision of objective criteria for describing language proficiency will facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications gained in different learning contexts, and accordingly will aid European mobility." (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf)

vocational school would be A2-B1, depending on the school type. In order to closely explain the competences of the language users on the levels mentioned, here is an excerpt from the description of the levels from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (see footnote 1).

It seems that an outline framework of six broad levels gives an adequate coverage of the learning space relevant to European language learners for these purposes.

- Breakthrough, corresponding to what Wilkins in his 1978 proposal labelled 'Formulaic Proficiency', and Trim in the same publication 'Introductory'.
- Waystage, reflecting the Council of Europe content specification.
- Threshold, reflecting the Council of Europe content specification.
- Vantage, reflecting the third Council of Europe content specification, a level described as 'Limited Operational Proficiency' by Wilkins, and 'adequate response to situations normally encountered' by Trim.
- Effective Operational Proficiency which was called 'Effective Proficiency' by Trim, 'Adequate Operational Proficiency' by Wilkins, and represents an advanced level of competence suitable for more complex work and study tasks.
- Mastery (Trim: 'comprehensive mastery'; Wilkins: 'Comprehensive Operational Proficiency'), corresponds to the top examination objective in the scheme adopted by ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe). It could be extended to include the more developed intercultural competence above that level which is achieved by many language professionals.

When one looks at these six levels, however, one sees that they are respectively higher and lower interpretations of the classic division into basic, intermediate and advanced. Also, some of the names given to the Council of Europe specifications for levels have proved resistant to translation (e.g. Waystage, Vantage). The scheme, therefore, proposed to adopt a 'hypertext' branching principle, starting from an initial division into three broad levels – A, B and C:



User C2 can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. S/he can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. S/he can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.

User C1 can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. S/he can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. S/he can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. S/he can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

User B2 can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. S/he can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. S/he can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and independent disadvantages of various options.

User B1 can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. S/he can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. S/he can produce simple connected texts on topics, which are familiar or of personal interest. S/he can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

User A2 can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). S/he can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. S/he can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate basic need.

User A1 can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. S/he can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. S/he can

interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. (CEFR, 2001: 24)

Unlike Central Europe, there is no system of acknowledging the language exams in Croatia. However, the only language exam in Croatia, known to me so far, which makes it possible to test one's knowledge of a language spoken in the European Union is the exam of the European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages, known as the ECL exam.

It can be taken in English, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Slovak, Spanish, Serbian, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Russian, Czech and Croatian.

CONCLUSION

The history of languages and language learning and teaching in Europe is rich and very complex, as could be seen above. Croatia, as a new member of the European Union, has already adopted the regulations issued by the Council of Europe, as well as the contemporary language teaching methods and the foreign language learning and teaching policies. Regarding the present language map of Croatia, it can be stated that it shows a European country with a Central European language heritage, yet to make its new history as part of the EU in the near future.

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