The Languages of Bai Ganyo:
Codeswitching as Social Commentary

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Just as can happen in the polyglot Balkans itself, so too in Aleko Konstantinov’s 
Bai Ganyo different languages signal social, political and historical commentary. 
Moreover, the languages of Bai Ganyo serve to index one of the novel’s major 
themeic dichotomies: the Ottoman East and non-Ottoman “Europe,” with Slavic 
playing a complex intermediate role. Aleko’s deployment of various languages is 
one of the stylistic devices that he uses to convey the value systems associated with 
these two worlds that are at times explicit and at times implicit in the novel itself. 
While Aleko’s use of Turkisms in Bulgarian is an obvious example of the expected 
contrast (see Rudin this volume, and also Kramer 1992), in fact his use of Turkish (as 
opposed to Turkisms) actually has a significantly different function. At the 
same time, Aleko uses other languages both to signal his own point of view and the 
that of his characters. The various languages of Bai Ganyo are thus a part of both 
its artistic effect and its social commentary. In this article, I shall examine how 
these languages function to construct Aleko’s world and that of Bai Ganyo. For the 
most part, the languages of Bai Ganyo are deployed either to signal humor or 
mockery or else to express sympathy, at times with a sense of coloring for 
emotional involvement or authenticity. 

The abovementioned opposition of Ottoman/non-Ottoman is itself based on 
the historical background of Bai Ganyo. As I wrote in my introduction to our new 
translation:

When Bai Ganyo was written, the modern Bulgarian state was less 
than twenty years old, having only recently emerged piecemeal from 
the Ottoman Empire with the help of czarist Russia, whose designs on 
the flegding country left Bulgaria’s citizens with a deeply ambivalent 
attitude. Bulgarians experienced a clash between the old values of a 
largely agrarian former Turkish territory and those of a new, 
modernizing European country, indexed by, among other things, Bai 
Ganyo’s attire: a Bulgarian brimless, peaked fur cap (kalpak), boots,
and a peasant’s Ashley and collarless shirt underneath an urban West European vest and frock coat (Friedman 2010: 4).

Like Bai Ganyo’s clothes, his languages and those of the novel are also iconoclastic. In addition to his native Bulgarian, Aleko used eleven other languages in his novel, and while modern Bulgarian editions frequently provide translations in footnotes, Aleko’s original did not. It can be argued that unassembled codeswitching in Bai Ganyo represents Balkan practice, West European hegemony and, as indicated above, an additional means by which Aleko provided implicit commentary both by and on his characters.

The eleven non-Bulgarian languages of Bai Ganyo can be divided into four groups based on a combination of who uses them and Aleko’s stylistic intent. The languages and groups are the following:

I. Ottoman = non-Slavic Balkan = Turkish, Romanian, and Albanian
II. non-Ottoman = three sub-groups
(a) European = French, German, Italian, and Latin
(b) Slavic = Serbian, Russian, and Czech
(c) incomprehensible = Hungarian

I should note immediately that some of these languages have more than one valence in the novel, and that these multiple valences represent the complexities of Aleko’s world and worldview.

The first foreign language to be used in Bai Ganyo occurs in Bai Ganyo Sets Off and is not really a language at all but rather the imitation of one, namely Hungarian. Its first occurrence is when Aleko’s narrator describes the sound of the stationmaster announcing the directions of trains in one of Budapest’s three stations:

Hő-gish-fi-kh-tä-he-gi, Kish-kh-nях, Se-ge-din, Uy-ve-dek (Bai Ganyo Sets Off, p. 16)

In Aleko’s rendering, there are four towns, but in fact the actual places are five: Horgos, Feketebágy (Visegrad), Kis Kolos, Sziget (Segedin in Serbian), Újvidék (Novi Sad, now in Serbia). Later in the chapter, Bai Ganyo himself imitates Hungarian:


I startled some guy and he shouted something at me in Hungarian — heke meke ... (Bai Ganyo Sets Off, p. 17).

Aleko’s use of Hungarian fits the popular stereotype of this language as difficult and unlearnable. As with Finnish and Estonian, Europe’s other nation-state Uralic languages, speakers themselves are aware of the difficulty of their languages for speakers of Indo-European languages and take great pride in this fact, as can be seen, for example, in their folk tales of the man who made a bet with the Devil that he (the Devil) would not be able to learn the relevant language and won. (The same tale also occurs in Basque.) Thus the place of the “incomprehensible” Hungarian is humorous, although at the same time it enhances the local color of the Pest train station. Bai Ganyo’s heke meke could just as easily have been spoken by Aleko himself.

While Hungarian is, strictly speaking, a language of the Europe that Aleko admires, Aleko does not take it seriously, hence my label of incomprehensible. Turning now to the languages that I have labeled European, we can observe that while Aleko admires the speakers of these languages, his actual deployment of codeswitching that uses them is almost always to mock either Bai Ganyo’s lack of Europeanization or to highlight his hypocrisy or that of the unscrupulous among his fellow-countrymen. The following quotation is illustrative of the first point. Bai Ganyo has awakened in a strange house and does not know how to find the bathroom.

It’s very bad when a person abroad doesn’t know the language; they can’t understand you even regarding the most basic things. You have to explain to them using your hands, point with your fingers. And it’s not like everything can be acted out. Bai Ganyo knew several languages. He could speak Turkish like a real Turk; he understood Romanian; he had a smattering of Serbian and Russian, but the Germans and the Czechs didn’t understand a single one of these languages. You couldn’t say that Bai Ganyo didn’t know any German at all; he did know a word or two. [...] he mentally composed a phrase in German that would correspond to our “Where is the you-know-what for number two?!” and finally cobbled together as a translation the phrase, “Wo ist diese für gross Arbeit?” (Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting, p. 61).

Elsewhere Bai Ganyo orders coffee in bad French (Bai Ganyo in Switzerland, p. 76), the point being that even though Bai Ganyo travels around Europe, he fails to learn from it, a topic to which I shall return later. One occurrence of Italian is a reference by the narrator to Verdi — Aleko’s favorite composer:

Grandissimo maestro Verdi! You don’t have, you can’t have, enemies! But if, God forbid, such a monster were to appear, it would be Satan himself. God is great, Estimo Maestro, and all the arrows of the Evil Spirit are powerless against you! One means alone, just one, can the Tempter use and ... and the entire musical world will be covered in mourning. We will pray, you pray, too, Divio Maestro, to the Almighty Creator, lest Satan be allowed to lead you into the salon where Bai Ganyo is singing "Terrible Is the Night" (Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting, p. 70).

Here Aleko is speaking with his own voice, and the Italian is simply to add to the contrast between Bai Ganyo and his pretensions. Italian occurs again in Bai Ganyo the Journalist (p. 120), when the narrator uses far niente as well as the German freilich in describing a scene in which he and his company are relaxing in the back room of a restaurant. These are non-ironic Europeanisms, meant to index precisely those qualities that are opposed to Bai Ganyo’s kef and “that kind of girl.” As Kramer (this volume) points out, however, the attitude toward women is underlyingly the same, and, we can add, the difference between far niente and kef echoes that between mapa and chorba in Bai Ganyo at Strelecki’s (p. 27). While in the latter case Aleko is mocking Bai Ganyo’s pretensions, in the former he is arguably engaging in the same valuation of “Europe” using his own voice.

Aleko deploys Latin only in Part Two. The first three occurrences are in Bai Ganyo Returns from Europe (pp. 91, 98, 99), and the fourth is in Bai Ganyo the Journalist. In both these chapters, Aleko was criticizing the post-1878 mud-slinging press that later found its echoes in the post-1889 press of the same type. The first occurrence — Et tu, Ochilka, et tu, Buđel? is in humorous banter among the narrators, but the others are all expressions used by Bai Ganyo and his circle as empty, pretentious phrases intended to lend an air of gravity to their scheming:

"You there! What’s so funny, huh?" And he wanted to jump out of the car and have it out with the Serb. What a hero! "Shh! Bai Ganyo, take it easy," begged the passengers. "Don’t cause a scandal. Keep in mind that you're entering Serbia." "Yeah? So what if I am entering Serbia? What are they going to do, scare me? What about Silvinita? Have they forgotten how they cried, ‘Retreat, brothers!’ at the battle of Silvinita?" Then an obscenity burst forth from Bai Ganyo’s mouth like a bomb (Bai Ganyo at the Prague Exhibition, pp. 35-36).

In the original, “Retreat brothers!” is in Bulgarian-accented Serbian (сутрац браци), which for Aleko’s audience serves to emphasize the scene. In our translation, however, this nuance simply had to be lost since it would have interrupted the flow too much. The point of both Bai Ganyo’s bragadocio and Bulgaria’s problematic relationship with its only Slavic-speaking nation-state neighbor are both clear from the context and my footnotes, and we were aiming for a popular as well as an academic audience. The paragraph immediately following this also emphasizes the problem of Bulgaria’s difficult relationship with Serbia:

Somehow or other we managed to cross Serbia. But don’t think we managed it in peace and quiet. Oh no! Bulgarians are no fools! Bai Ganyo never missed a chance to take a jab at the Serbs, to remind them of Silvinita. In Nish and even in Belgrade he asked all the clerks and porters, “You’re really a Bulgarian, aren’t you? C’mon, admit it. You’re all Bulgarians, but you’re trying to turn yourselves into Serbs!” (Bai Ganyo at the Prague Exhibition, p. 36).

Here Aleko is mocking an exaggeration of Bulgarian territorial pretensions. Serbia and Bulgaria justified their competing claims to disputed territories by maintaining that the population in the affected regions was Serbian or Bulgarian, respectively. At the time Aleko was writing, Bulgaria and Serbia had already gone to war once (1885) over their competing territorial claims. They would do so again officially three times in the five decades that followed Bai Ganyo’s publication (1913, 1914-18, 1941-44), and even today, Bulgarian dialectologists continue to claim southern Serbia well past Nish, albeit not all the way to Belgrade (Kotev 2001).

Later in Vienna, Bai Ganyo actually speaks Romanian in an attempt to communicate his desire:

We got our tickets at the cashier's window. Bai Ganyo demanded his change by pushing his hand through the opening under the window and rubbing his fingers together. The young woman behind the glass smiled and gave him the change. Bai Ganyo fixed his lustful eyes on her, scooped up the money, and, with a peculiar cough, revealed his feelings. She burst out laughing. Bai Ganyo, enchanted, twirled the left side of his mustache and bobbed his head. "Che frumosă este domneta." Stoycho, ask her if she knows Romanian. "Shiti rumuneshiti?" Bai Ganyo posed the question himself (Bai Ganyo at the Baths, p. 26)

Here Aleko is mocking the idea that Romanian could function on the level of an international language of communication like French or German. This choice of precisely Romanian could also be interpreted as conveying the idea that Romanian is no better than Bulgarian. In Aleko’s day, Romania and Bulgaria were competing for Dobrudja, which remained a source of international tension, and indeed the border between the two countries would be readjusted several times until the end of World War II. As will be seen below, Aleko’s attitude toward Romanians was not particularly positive.

Albanian is spoken by an Albanian (Bai Ganyo in Russia, p. 83), where its purpose is to emphasize a classic stereotype of Albanians as honor-bound and hot-tempered. One of the narrators on his arrival at his dormitory in St. Petersburg describes the Albanian, Kocho, in the following terms:

My bed had been kept by my faithful friend Kocho, an Albanian ... This Kocho was a good fellow. He'd give his life for a friend, but God forbid that you make him angry; in an instant all his Albanian tribal passions would boil over, he'd go pale with rage, and his eyes would become completely bloodshot: a real beast! (Bai Ganyo in Russia, p. 81).

The portrayal of Albanians as loyal friends having “fiercely tribal passions” is consistent with stereotypes of Albanians encountered both in the west and in the

down the toilet, now it’s Steilow.” [Stambolos einai bokhramaid.
Steilov se] (Bai Ganyo Returns from Europe, p. 96).

Later in the same chapter, Bai Ganyo uses Turkish to express his annoyance and pressure one of his friends into doing what he wants. In the original, Ganyo says Ama, Ganjo, kazadirma beni, which we translated ‘Hey, Ganjo, don’t get me riled.’ Although Ganyo’s utterance is a codeword in Turkish, we treated it as a Turkism for the sake of the flow of the narrative. Unlike the preceding example, where the use of Turkish could arguably have been intended to keep the meaning from being understood by bystanders, here the usage is affective without having such potentially secretive intent. Both usages index Bai Ganyo’s ‘Balkanismos’, but from the point of view of the novel’s narrative, the effect of Bai Ganyo speaking Turkish in the first instance is such that it can be overtly referenced in the translation, whereas in the second occurrence, the codeword signifies the kind of usage for which the best translational equivalent is an informal, almost dialectal register.

In the one place where Turks speak Turkish, however, the speakers are portrayed sympathetically, as victims of Bulgarian corruption:

The Turkish voters began to evaporate one by one, saying “Why should I get myself beat up?” [Ne me yazdim bana deyin em] (Bai Ganyo Does Elections, p. 119).

Here, too, the codeword into Turkish cannot be indicated in the flow of the narrative for reasons related to, albeit not identical with, those for not identifying the utterance as Turkish in kazadurma beni. In both cases, the Turkish signals an intimate register, but the significance is quite different when a Bulgarian speaks Turkish to another Bulgarian as opposed to a Turk speaking Turkish, and as much to himself as to any potential addressee. This usage is actually related to the use of Albanian cited above. Just as the Albanian expression emphasized the Albanianness of the Albanian, so, too, the Turkish expression draws attention to the fact that the speaker is himself a Turk. However, when Kocho uses Albanian he is expressing heightened emotion; the codeword contributes to the stereotype. The Turkish voters, on the other hand, are simply muttering in their native language. In the course of a nineteenth century Bulgarian narrative, this use of


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Turkish amounts to a kind of local color, although in its context, it can also be read as an implied criticism of the failings of the Bulgarian political system at that time.

Arguably as significant as the languages that are present in Bai Ganyo are the languages that are absent. Despite the fact that the English are mentioned and background for Bai Ganyo in Dresden — where Bai Ganyo’s sister Marika and her American boyfriend die in a biking accident — is not a word of English occurs in Bai Ganyo. Since we know that Aleko went to Chicago for the Columbian Exposition that he must have picked up some English. I would argue here that English was still so absent from the Balkans that Aleko could not assume it would be comprehensible to his audience. French was the language of international relations at that time, and German, then as now, the language of hard necessity.

Gypsies, Jews, Vlachs (i.e. Daco-Romanian-speakers living in Bulgaria), Kostovlaks (i.e. Aromanian-speakers), Greeks, Armenians, Amtolians, and even Chinese are also mentioned in Bai Ganyo, but they never speak. Representations of them fall more appropriately under the rubric of ethnic stereotypes. Gypsies are either musicians or thugs to be ordered around by the likes of Bai Ganyo. Like many Bulgarian intellectuals of his day — and ours — Aleko despises their music and considers it as something that sullies the national character.

“Icho, tell me now, why do you detest Bulgarian songs so much?” asked Drevichka as they left. “Who, me? You think I detest them? I’m sorry, my dear friend, that you misunderstood me. I’m capable of taking delight, of losing myself, of being transported into ecstasy by our beautiful, melancholy folk songs, by true Bulgarian songs, and not by those disgusting parodies of foreign popular songs that the Bai Ganyos of this world pass off on us distorted beyond recognition by those Gypsy grace notes and vocal contortions of drunken trills and embellishments ... We have songs, but we don’t have singers. I’m ready to embrace my enemy if he sings to me, as it should be sung. The song ‘O Bogdan, May God Strike You Dead’ or ‘Hey, Vela, My Girl, Roll Up Your White Sleeves’ and to look askance at my friend when I see that he’s taking delight in ‘Green Leaves’, ‘Little

Carnation," and other such Gypsy treats" (Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting, p. 71).

The same sort of thing could have been written today, especially about the Balkan polygnot East-West fusion style known in Bulgaria by the Turkism chaipa.

As for Jews, although the Jewish quarter of Prague is mentioned as a place where Bai Ganyo gets lost (Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting, p. 63), none of the inhabitants of the quarter speak. Jews are mentioned twice when Bai Ganyo is in Switzerland:

After another day or so, the group was joined by several bitter, nihilistic young Jews who snarled at the capitalist tyrant from the dark corners of the taverns. I don't understand the sympathy for these dark heroes, who were capable of being simultaneously nihilists and agents for the secret police, at the same time anarchists and the lowest sort of abusers of social funds, libraries, and other institutions ... these boys of ours found their ideal either among the Jews, or the Greeks, or some Armenians ... (Bai Ganyo in Switzerland, p. 73).

The first mention of Jews arguably refers to Ashkenazim, whom Aleko himself described in anti-Semitic terms in his travelogue Do Chicago i nazad "To Chicago and Back." He contrasted them to Sephardim, whom he described as "our Jews," and who were exempted from his disparagement. In this sense, Aleko's voice is not much different from Bai Ganyo's in the use of Člpati to refer to the Viennese (Bai Ganyo at the Opera, p. 23, Bai Ganyo at the Baths, p. 28, Bai Ganyo Returns from Europe, p. 100). The second reference in the passage quoted above is unclear, since here the Jews are grouped with Greeks and Armenians, whom Aleko regards as backwardly Balkan, like Bai Ganyo himself.

In Part Two (From the Correspondence of Bai Ganyo Balkanski) a Jew — presumably Bulgarian — is mentioned as being more clever and corrupt than Ilovkov, a character portrayed elsewhere in the novel as being a junior version of Bai Ganyo. Here, however, it could also be argued that Aleko is mocking anti-Semitism as hypocritical, at least in Bulgaria.

Another reference to Greeks and Armenians (and other relevant Balkan peoples) occurs with Bai Ganyo goes Visiting:

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If he [Bai Ganyo] goes to Vienna, he'll stay at the Hotel London. It's just as stuffy there, it has the same smells of cooking and hydrogen sulfide, as at home; he meets with the same Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Serbs, and Albanians that he's used to meeting every day; he won't go to the Café Hapsburg, since he's afraid that they'll freeze him. Instead, he'll go to the Greek coffeehouse, where it's just as dusty and stuffy from eternal smoke as in our own coffeehouses. If he's traveling on business, he'll go to Bulgarian merchants, and because they are his intermediaries, he doesn't even realize that he's coming into contact with Europeans. And the fact that it is precisely outside of this circumscribed sphere that European life begins is something he neither knows nor even cares to know. The upbringing, the moral world of the European, his domestic situation, the fruits of centuries of tradition and the gradual refinement of intellectual movements, social struggles, and manners and customs, the museums, the libraries, the philanthropic institutions, the fine arts, the thousands of displays of progress, do not burden Bai Ganyo's attention (pp. 64-65).

What we can call Aleko's Eulogy (i.e., his idealization as well as his idealization of [western] Europe) even extends Chinese civilization when he writes:

"It's not as if my father was always listening to opera," says Bai Ganyo, and bewitched by this principle of formalization and ultraconservatism, he isn't terribly impressed by the "new fashion," that is, by civilization. But for all that, Bai Ganyo doesn't have the fortitude of the Chinese, who surrounded themselves with a wall against the forces of civilization ... (Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting, p. 65).

A Chinese reader, of course, would be surprised to see the wall that was intended to keep out barbarians described in these terms, but the passage serves to remind us of the power and arrogance of west European hegemonic discourses.

In Bai Ganyo in Switzerland, Anatolianis are listed separately from Turks in Bai Ganyo's account of the problems he encountered in Switzerland trying to sell his genuine rose oil. The reference was to an actual glut of rose oil adulterated with geranium oil that resulted from a poor rose harvest in 1899.
The Anatolian mafia has chewed us up and spit us out! And you see, pal, it’s not just one or two of them. They came swarming through Europe in hordes: Anatolians, Armenians, Turks, Greeks, and they lie, they cheat people, and they’ve burned someone here, put the touch on someone there, and people are sick of them. If you smell of roses, they run for cover (Bai Ganyo in Switzerland, pp. 74-75).

Of the other ethno-linguistic groups, Vlahs (here, Romanians in Bulgaria) are violent (Bai Ganyo Does Elections, pp. 107, 117), and Kutsavlahs (Armenians) are simply a source of honor (From the Correspondence of Bai Ganyo Bulansk, p. 156). To some extent, codeswitching in Bai Ganyo is like stereotyping — it signals characteristics that Aleko and his presumed audience associate with particular groups. But codeswitching does more than stereotype and add local color. It also serves to communicate Aleko’s point of view on various social and political issues of his day. Aleko’s deployment of codeswitching, like Aleko himself, has elements of both the desire to be “European” and an awareness of Bulgaria’s specific situation. It reveals the extent to which Aleko himself, like Bai Ganyo, is a product of his times.

Notes
1. “How beautiful you are!” (in standard Romanian).
2. Aleko’s rendering of an Albanian oath, “Shëna-sheva,” roughly “I swear on my honor,” Shëna (definite article, oath, honor, trust) is a central concept in traditional Albanian law and culture.

References
