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PEASANT AND NATIONAL CULTURE IN SOUTHEASTERN
EUROPE: A COMMENT

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The papers presented by Professors Despalatović, Sanders, and Kazazis were most thought-provoking. It is to be hoped that they will provide stimuli to further research in an area which is particularly important to the study of the recent development of Southeastern Europe. As a linguist, and as one who has worked primarily in Macedonia and Kosovo, my comments will be based for the most part on the fields I know best.

Professor Despalatović's paper raises a number of points with which I particularly concur, viz. (1) the identification of language with national culture, (2) the statement that national culture renders the rural-urban interchange a self-conscious process manipulated by the intelligentsia or state, and (3) the idea that national culture uses peasant culture to authenticate itself and subsequently brings about the extinction of peasant culture. All of these concepts find verification in events occurring in Yugoslav Macedonia. Linguistic separatism was one of the prime factors in the Macedonian nationalist movement (see my article in *Balkanistica* II on this topic), and self-conscious linguistic standardization is a process which is gradually eliminating peasant dialects. This process, however, is still in its early stages in Macedonia, and it may be a very long time before it is completed, even assuming that unforeseeable factors do not intervene.

The four stages of the relationship between peasant culture and national culture which Professor Despalatović outlines with reference to the Croatian experience are also of particular interest. These four phases might be summarized in the following manner: (1) the literary language is established, (2) the language is brought to the peasant, (3) the peasant becomes citizen, (4) the peasant becomes museum piece. It is interesting to note that Macedonia appears to be passing through these stages at a much more rapid rate than Croatia so that they overlap. In Kosovo, where the new unified literary language (*gjuha unifikuar*) was introduced only during the present decade, and where

many other factors render it unique in the Yugoslav federation, the four phases appear to be inextricably intertwined.¹ While some scholars may have varying opinions on the precise nature and degree of periodization, Professor Despalatović's system seems to be quite applicable to Yugoslavia and is sure to engender much lively discussion.

Another point raised by Professor Despalatović which in turn raises further questions is the statement that national culture can be distinguished from pre-nineteenth-century urban culture by the former's use of a modern literary language based on the vernacular. One wonders how these phenomena relate to the West European experience, where literary standardization, industrialization, and nationalism did not all occur at the same rate or time as in Eastern Europe.

With regard to Professor Sanders' paper, it must be said that while it is certainly difficult to cover so broad a topic in so short a space, there are some statements which could be commented on. It would appear that the role of language in ethnic identity in Balkan history has been somewhat overstressed. Until relatively recently, religion was the major indicator of ethnic identity in the Balkans, and language was very much a subordinate factor. Thus, for example, in Northern Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo, if a Serbian family converted to Islam it generally became Albanophone, and vice-versa. Similarly, an acquaintance of mine, when asked why he was "Croatian," since he had the typically Serbian surname, Jovanović, answered "My grandfather was a Serb, but my father converted to Catholicism so I'm Croat."² Also, while it is true that local customs were and are a factor in ethnic identity, it is only recently that such identities have reached national proportions. Even today, there are regions at the current Yugoslav-Bulgarian border where the question of national identification is moot.

It is worth emphasizing that, indeed, the urban-rural interchange has always been in effect; hence, for example, the spread of dialectal isoglosses. Professor Sanders' point that the intellectuals render the urban-rural exchange more of a one-way affair by taking the peasant's language and then "returning" it to him as a standardized literary language is also important. However, it is something of an understatement to say that the new language differed "in minor details" from the peasant's speech. For speakers in some regions of

various Balkan countries, especially Greece and Albania, the differences were great enough to make the new language virtually incomprehensible, while even in Slavic areas such differences as those between literary Serbocroatian and some of the Torlak dialects of Southern Serbia are far from minor.

It is interesting to note that *Folklorism* is found not only in the arts, e.g., music and dance, but also in linguistic usage. Thus, for example, in the Skopje daily newspaper *Nova Makedonija* there is a section each Saturday entitled *Taka velit narodot...* 'So say the people'—with the dialectal form *velit* as opposed to the literary *veli*—which presents proverbs in dialectical form along with humorous cartoons. Similarly, when the same newspaper is reporting amusing court cases, e.g., when one peasant woman is suing another for calling her a name, the dialogue will frequently be quoted in a modified dialect. It is interesting to note that when peasant speech is self-consciously imitated or reported, as in the foregoing examples or when intellectuals use such greetings as *šo prajš* (literary Macedonian *što praviš* 'What are you doing' cf. *Wha's happ'nin'*), the dialectal forms are almost always from the southwest, i.e., the region whose dialects form the basis of the literary language itself.³ The use of peasant dialects in this manner would seem to indicate that the literary language considers its victory assured and that the peasant dialects are well on their way to museum-piece status.

One of the important points raised by Professor Kazazis' paper is the fact that the demise of the peasantry includes the demise of peasant languages. In many instances this simply means the homogenization of a dialectal situation. In the case of the *Arvanites*, however, ethnic and linguistics homogenization is involved. This appears to be due to the facts that the national culture is not based on this particular peasant culture and that there is no vehicle by which the peasant culture may identify itself with a corresponding national culture, e.g., that of Albania. This situation is in marked contrast to that of the Albanians of Kosovo, who have a type of subnational, i.e., Kosovar, culture of their own, as well as close cultural ties with Albania. The Aromanians of Macedonia, however, constitute a group which may share certain external features with the *Arvanites* of Greece. It is a subject worthy of investigation.

The statement by various *Arvanites* that an *Arbëruar* is just a Greek who can speak *Arvanitika* may well have been due to the factors identified by Professor Kazazis, and it is certainly in marked contrast to the feelings of the Slavs in Greek Macedonia. Like the *Arvanites*, these Slavs are Orthodox Christians, but even today such comments as the following, made by an old woman from Northern Greece, can be heard: "The Greeks say we're Greek, but we're not—we're different."

It is also interesting to note, with regard to the cryptolalic use of *Arvanitika* noted by Professor Kazazis, that Albanian constitutes a major lexical element in trade jargons and other secret languages of Macedonia.

I would like to conclude my remarks by observing that, from a linguistic point of view, national culture appears to have a rather predatory relationship with peasant culture. The former bites off a number of peasant dialects, chews them well, and, as it gains substance from this nourishment, gradually eliminates them. Eventually peasant dialects are completely replaced by the national language. Nonetheless, in view of what appears to be a natural tendency toward regional differentiation and linguistic variation, it is not to be expected that the current homogenizing trend will continue indefinitely. The phenomenon of one language or dialect replacing a number of others only to diversify in its turn is one which has occurred many times and which will, no doubt, occur again.

NOTES

¹As Kenneth E. Naylor remarked at the meeting, mass communication has been a significant factor in compressing the four stages.

²Thanks to Professor Naylor for recounting this incident.

³The existence of a kajkavian humor column in a Croatian periodical noted by Wayles Browne constitutes a different phenomenon. Kajkavian is a dialect with its own literary pretensions, while the Macedonian dialects generally used in *Nova Makedonija* are precisely those which could have no independent literary pretensions, since they constitute the basis of the literary language.