

# Linguistic Areas of Transfer: the European Diffusion Area and the Balkan Sprachbund

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the concept of linguistic area as it is reflected in research concerned with the Balkan and the European Sprachbunds. Both these diffusion areas have been identified or understood as Other in relation with the West and in the world-wide context, respectively. Several distinctive features that characterise the areas under scrutiny and identify them as Sprachbunds are dealt with in this paper. Our research briefly touches upon the way in which several historical circumstances have affected the cultural contact that lead to language change in these two linguistic areas.

**Keywords:** diffusion area, Balkan Sprachbund, Standard Average European, areal classification, typological similarities

Social changes are contingent upon two phenomena: the discovery of something new and the spread of culture through social contact (Miller, 2017: 347). While the two are obviously interconnected, as newly discovered objects or new ideas are prone to travel to other cultural spaces, the spreading of culture or cultural diffusion can take place in at least three ways: through mutual borrowing, as transfer from a dominant culture to a less powerful one or as transfer from an oppressed, or less powerful culture, to the dominant one. Such changes can occur by force, sometimes leading to the annihilation or engulfment of one culture, usually the minor one, which is completely assimilated or deculturated, or they can happen more subtly, through educational or economic processes that pave the way for the gradual assimilation of new ideas or practices. As Miller observes, “These

processes parallel degrees of language change resulting from contact with dominating cultures and languages” (348). There are many ways of investigating convergence areas in terms of features affected by linguistic change. In the present article we focus on the European convergence area (dwelling on Johan van der Auwera’s concept of Standard Average European) and the Balkan Sprachbund.

Linguistic diffusion has more frequently been researched across geographically identifiable regions, it is generally the result of language contact and is the object of study of areal linguistics. More conventionally, the geographical regions where languages come to share structural features, due to language contact and borrowing, are called “linguistic areas”, but other terms, such as “diffusion area”, “adstratum relationship”, “convergence area”, and “Sprachbund” may also be used for the same concept. Some researchers, who argue against the use of such terms as Sprachbund, suggest the employment of the term “language union” instead. According to B. Heine, linguistic areas have in common several characteristics: the languages that are spoken in the same area share a set of common linguistic features that cannot be accounted for by genetic relationship, drift, universal constraints on language structure or language development, or by chance (Brown & Ogilvie 2009: 4). Tomić refines the conditions, reducing them to two: “a typological language feature has been assumed to be areal if (a) shared by at least three languages of the area, at least two of which belong to different genetic families, but (b) not present in all the languages of the genetic family to which the language of the area belongs (if it belongs to a language family, at all) (Tomić 2006: 2).

Johan van der Auwera (2011: 291-300) analyses the concept of Standard Average European (henceforth, SAE), used by Benjamin Lee Whorf to underline the stark difference between

the bulk of European languages and the native American ones, that came to refer to a convergence area seen as an example of Sprachbund. According to Hapelmath (1998: 271), “Whorf was writing at a time when the radical otherness of ‘exotic’ languages was being emphasized by many linguists and attempts were being made to understand each language ‘from within’, without recourse to comparison with other languages”. However, modern linguistic research benefited from various studies that had under scrutiny various such convergence areas around the world, allowing for a more insightful contrastive perspective. The term SAE gained prominence in the early 1990s, when a group of linguists working on EUROTYP, a project founded by The European Science Foundation, fueled an interest in areal typology. Auwera demonstrates that the entire Europe is a convergence area by simply analysing the adverbial expressions of the phases of states, the ones for which English uses *not yet*, *already*, *still* and *no longer*. Bernd Kortmann, focusing on adverbial subordination in modern European languages, identifies a linguistic core containing West and Central European languages (Romance, including Romanian, West Germanic, North Germanic/mainland Scandinavian, Slavic, Hungarian, Albanian and Greek) and a linguistic periphery, containing languages located at the geographical margins of Europe (Basque, Celtic, North Germanic/insular Scandinavian, Baltic, Uralic (except for Hungarian), Altaic, Caucasian, Indo-Iranian, Armenian, Semitic) (Kortmann 1998: 507). Kortmann’s map (508) shows continuity of contact among the languages inside each of the said groups that are separated, on the map, by a clear demarcation line.

“As with other linguistic areas, the boundaries of this Sprachbund are not clear-cut, and there are more or less central members of the Sprachbund. But its extension and its defining

features are clear enough to use "Standard Average European" (abbreviated "SAE") as a technical term for the idealized language type that is manifested in the individual languages of the Sprachbund" (Haspelmath and Buchholz: 282)

The identification of structural similarities that confer the European linguistic area an unexpected unifying thread was possible only after linguists were able to analyze European languages from the perspective of an outsider, in the global context. Haspelmath notes that Western comparative linguists, mainly focused on the peculiarity of non-European languages, overlooked the similarities of languages they all spoke and were very familiar with. Towards the end of the 20th century, when these grammatical aspects were considered in comparison with properties of languages around the world, they were able to identify the peculiarity of the core European languages (Haspelmath 2001).

The acknowledgement of SAE as a linguistic unit with specific shared features happened long after languages of nation states played their distinctive roles in the creation of national identities, in a time when national boundaries ceased to act as political and geographical limits, despite the fact that the cultural contact that enabled the creation of a European Sprachbund probably dates back in the migration period. Another example of a smaller linguistic diffusion area is the Balkan Sprachbund, which is also the result of age-old political unrest and cultural transfer.

In the preamble of the volume *Balkan as Metaphor*, Michael Herzfeld underlines the stereotypical representation of the Balkan area results in its perception as a continuum, despite of its obvious cultural fragmentariness: "a persistent paradox infuses most of the negative stereotypes entertained in the self styled West: the Other is hopelessly diverse, fragmented, and internally divided—so much so that in the end all such peoples seem

radically alike. Who can make sense of so much difference? It is easier to dismiss it as all the same” (Dušan I. Bjelić 2002: 8). The need to be understood as separate countries was further intensified by the politicising of language that began in the nineteenth century, in close connection with the process of building national identity for which language was an important marker of distinction. Ironically, this very concern with demonstrating that they are different from one another is understood as a common element of typology, especially by the outside observer who, as Fleming remarks, consider that “Balkan countries are more or less interchangeable with and indistinguishable from one another, that there is a readily identifiable typology of politics and history common throughout the Balkans, that there is such a thing as a Balkan ethnic or racial "type" (Fleming 2000: 1218).

According to Eric Hobsbawm, in large territorial nation-states people cannot pretend to share a common ethnicity because they are too heterogeneous. He gives the example of southeastern states, with a special reference to the Romanian space: “the precise mixture of pre-Roman Illyrians, Romans, Greeks, immigrant Slavs of various kinds and various waves of central Asian invaders from the Avars to the Ottoman Turks, which make up the ethnicity of any people of southeastern Europe, is an eternal matter of debate especially in Romania” (Hobsbawm, 1997: 64). The situation is even more confusing when it comes to larger territories such as the Balkanic area, that is a region marked, at least historically, by disunity and conflict. In a volume focusing on various (mis)representations of the region in Western countries, entitled *In The Wake of the Balkan Myth*, Davis Norris considers the term Balkan has become a reference for the more extreme sense of Otherness to the West, that “the myth of 'Balkanization' is a product of the West's fears of the cultural

Other”. This is mirrored, linguistically, in the adoption of the forms ‘Balkanize’ and ‘Balkanization’:

‘Balkanize’, according to The Oxford English Dictionary, is a verb which means ‘to divide (a region) into a number of smaller and often mutually hostile units, as was done in the Balkan Peninsula in the late 19th and early 20th centuries’. The first recorded use of the term was after the First World War in 1920, but it has remained in British political vocabulary ever since. So pervasive has the level of connotation of political instability, fragmentation and aggression become that The Oxford English Dictionary now defines Balkan geographic space with a specific metaphoric addition as ‘pertaining to the peninsula bounded by the Adriatic, Aegean, and Black Seas or to the countries or peoples of this region; spec, with allusion to the relations (often characterized by threatening hostilities) of the Balkan states to each other or to the rest of Europe’ (Norris 1999: 10-11)

Norris reads “the Balkan myth” in the key offered by Edward Said’s work on Orientalism, finding similarities in the constructed identity of the Balkans and that of the Orient. He considers that many of Said’s formulations about Orientalism and the Orient can function identically for the Balkanic area, which was also created as a cultural sign meaning hostility and also contributed to the shaping of the West as progressive, modern and rational. While the Balkanic area is characterised by lack and ambiguity, “the West is a full signifier, replete with positive meaning which has created and requires its cultural other, the Balkans” (12-13).

Inside the region, irrespective of the external perception and representations, social and cultural transfers resulted in a linguistic network of sameness patterns that have caught once again the attention of researchers in the past decades. The historical data concerning the languages spoken in the region and

the amount of research conducted over the past century places contemporary scientists in an advantageous position, giving them comparative evidence related to what languages were like even before “the intense contact leading to the Sprachbund” (Krapova and Joseph, 20-21).

The Balkan Sprachbund, one of the most widely recognised linguistic areas, that, according to Campbell (q. in Brown & Ogilvie, 2009: 62), covers shared characteristics of Greek, Albanian, Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, and Romanian. Some scholars also add to this list Romani and Turkish, while others include other Romanian dialects, such as Aromanian and Megleno-Romanian. Following the same core-periphery pattern that made the distinction between core and peripheral European languages, Bernd Kortmann, citing Solta, divides the areal group constituted by the Balkan languages “into a core consisting of Albanian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Rumanian and Greek, and a periphery including Serbian/Croatian, Turkish and Hungarian (Solta 1980: 7)” (Kortmann 1998: 497). The typological similarities shared by the languages spoken in this area were first pointed out in 1829, by Jernej Kopitar, who underlined the fact that “the languages spoken south of the Danube have analogous forms expressed through ‘different language material’”(Tomić 2011: 306). Even if different studies point out different linguistic features of the Balkan *Sprachbund* or Union, researchers seem to agree on seven defining traits of the researched area, one phonological feature, the presence of schwa (the central vowel /ə/), and the following six grammatical features: 1. the syncretism of genitive and dative forms, 2. enclitic definite articles, 3. periphrastic future, 4. periphrastic perfect, 5. the loss of the infinitive, replaced by the subjunctive and 6. the pronominal doubling of objects (Cf. Tomić 2006, 2011; Campbell 2009).

Such features are not displayed evenly in all the languages of the European or Balkan Sprachbunds, as differences in areal contact result in differences in language structure but also in the divergent representation of a particular feature. The attempts to scientifically identify the common thread that keeps the European or the Balkanic region together seem to be oblivious of former images promoted by travellers and writers at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the 20th century. For instance, in 1921, in a book entitled *Balkanized Europe. A Study in political Analysis and Reconstruction*, Paul Scott Mowrer gives the following definition to the term *balkanization*: “the creation, in a region of hopelessly mixed races, of a medley of small states, with more or less backward populations, economically and financially weak, covetous, intriguing, afraid, a continual prey to the machinations of the great powers and to the violent prompting of their own passions”(cited in Leersen 2007: 105-106). It appears it is precisely this medley of small states and the permanent region mobility and insecurity of borders that kept the process of diffusion alive and allowed for linguistic (and cultural) (ex)change. The stability of borders will have the opposite effect, as Tomic argues, citing Simeonov and Asenova:

The creation of nation states with standard languages has put an end to active Balkan multilingualism and marked the start of divergent developments, which also explains nationalist hostilities (cf. Simeonov (1977: 53-54). As a result of “linguistic patriotism”, some common features, developed in mutual contact, were abolished, and strong de-balkanizing normative tendencies showed up (cf. Asenova 1977: 29-30; 1989: 14) (Tomić 2006: 3 )

In the case of SAE, it is precisely the European multilingualism, integrative policies and constant cultural exchange in the past

decades that allowed for the acknowledgement of the shared grammatical features. For the wrong or for the right reasons, that also made the object of study of a large body of research, both Sprachbund are part of a narrative that builds the Balkan and the European areas as unified entities.

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