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The Interslavic Language: An Opportunity for the Tourist Branch
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Abstract

One of the many faces of globalisation is a huge increase in mass tourism. The Slavic countries of Central and Eastern Europe are no exception: not only have they become popular tourist destinations, people from that region have discovered the pleasures of travelling the world themselves, too. But how to handle the language barrier between them and their local hosts? The standard solution, English, does not work well, because most people in the Slavic countries speak it either very poorly or not at all. Slavs can manage some simple communication by using their own language, but this method is limited in scope, and in general works only for neighbouring languages. As a result, many people are forced to refrain from any communication at all, leaving many possibilities and opportunities unexploited.

The Interslavic language can solve this problem. It is a so-called zonal constructed language: a lingua franca created for speakers of a family of closely related languages. It consists entirely of words and grammatical elements that are understandable to most, if not all, Slavic speakers. Extensive research and practical experiences have shown that speakers of any Slavic language can understand about 80–93% of an Interslavic text without prior learning. Consequently, Interslavic can bring great benefits for the tourist branch. Hotels, restaurants, museums, churches, beaches and other attractions can reach a very large audience at once by offering flyers, brochures, menus, signs and websites written in Interslavic—which incidentally relieves operators, owners and managers from the undoable task of having their materials translated into many different languages. Furthermore, some active knowledge of Interslavic would allow tour guides to serve multi-Slavic audiences, and also help them in passively understanding other Slavic languages.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe; Communication; Tourism; Slavic languages; Zonal constructed language

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, the world has witnessed a huge increase in mass tourism. Whereas thirty years ago it was still customary for many people to spend their vacations at the nearest beach or in the nearest forest, travelling to exotic destinations is no longer a prerogative limited to the happy few. Nowadays, jumping on an airplane, travelling the world and visiting remote places has become a way of life for the average European citizen. This is beneficial for both sides: the traveller can see with his own eyes that the world does not end at the borders of his own country, and for citizens in the receiving countries, tourism has become an indispensable source of income.

A problem every traveller encounters while being abroad, is the question how to communicate with the locals, or more specifically: how to cross the language barrier. Obviously, local populations cannot be expected to speak the language of every visitor, and likewise, tourists cannot reasonably be expected to learn the language of every country they visit. Any experienced traveller can tell how awkward, cumbersome and sometimes dangerous it can be if one is unable to speak with a shop owner, to ask for directions, to understand the answers, to read signs, etc. To cope with this problem, our traveller has two options to his disposal:

- using an intermediary language that both he and the local population can speak and understand,
- speaking his own language in the hope of being understood, and doing his best to understand the language of the locals.

It is often taken for granted that English, the world’s primary language of international communication, can solve the problem. While it is undeniably true that in large parts of the world tourists will easily get by using English, its possibilities are often overestimated when it comes to other parts. Among these other parts are the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Especially older people – often the best tourists, because they have more money to spend and care more for service – often speak English poorly or not at all, and even the younger generations are often unable to have a conversation in English. For the same reason, people from other parts of the world visiting these countries have difficulties communicating with the local population. In this article, we will attempt to demonstrate how a zonal constructed language, Interslavic, can help in overcoming this problem.

2. A LINGUA FRANCA FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE?

The region between Western Europe and Russia covers roughly one third of the European continent. It consists of twenty, mostly small countries, seventeen of which have a population smaller than Belgium. Most of these countries are inhabited by Slavic-speaking populations. To be precise, twelve of them have a predominantly Slavic population and
most of these can be considered Slavic nation states, four others have a considerable Slavic minority. In other words, a vast majority of the populations of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Russia itself, speak a Slavic language. The region is a patchwork of small linguistic islands, because practically every country has its own language. The Slavic languages have a very strong position in the places where they enjoy an official status, but in most cases this luxury is restricted to one country only. Outside the borders of those countries, knowledge of these languages is rare even in neighbouring states, being limited mostly to mixed families and language professionals. The only exceptions are the populations of younger countries due to their long-time exposure to the dominant languages of the states they used to be part of till the late 1980s or early 1990s: Czech in Czechoslovakia, Serbo-Croatian in Yugoslavia and Russian in the Soviet Union. These languages, however, are generally not spoken outside the territories of these former multinational states either, and even within these territories they are no longer automatically spoken by younger generations.

The rise of mass tourism has also affected Central and Eastern Europe. Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria have become popular alternatives to the overcrowded beaches of Spain, Italy and Greece. Among tourists from countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Russia, these countries enjoy a huge popularity for their beauty and climate, but especially also because their price level makes them reasonably affordable. This leads to the question how a tourist from, say, Poland should communicate when visiting this part of Europe.

The most obvious choice for an international lingua franca is English, and people from one Slavic country visiting another are no exception. However, most inhabitants of Slavic countries are either monolingual, or their command of any foreign language is on a less than basic level. In the countries of former Yugoslavia, a lot of people are able to have a simple conversation in English, but in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria, English is spoken by only 13–23% of the population (Eurobarometer 2006). Especially in the countryside a traveller is unlikely to get by with English, and the further East one travels, the harder it becomes to find a person able to communicate in English or any other foreign language. In Russia, less than 5.5% of the population of the Russian Federation knows English (All-Russian Census 2010). Besides, these figures give little information about people’s ability to use the language in practice. In Poland, for example, only 12.7% of those who know a foreign language can speak it fluently (Eurostat 2015). Although statistics are gradually improving and English is generally taught in schools nowadays, the ability to speak and write in it remains at a persistently low level even among young people.

Among English speakers, the Slavic languages have the reputation of being very difficult to learn, but Westerners often forget that this works in both directions: for Slavs, English is an outright alien language. For example: The Slavic languages have 5 or 6 vowel phonemes, English ca. 20, diphthongs and triphthongs included. Also, the discrepancy
between spoken and written English is difficult to grasp for Slavs, who are used to rather straightforward orthographies. What complicates the learning process even more are the huge differences in morphology, semantics, syntax etc. In the Slavic languages, the role of words in a sentence is defined by grammar endings, so that word order is relatively free. In English sentences, on the other hand, everything depends on word order, even whether a word is a noun, an adjective or a verb. For that reason, computer translations between Slavic languages with English-based software like Google Translate rarely give satisfying results.

Apart from these practical problems, there is also a psychological factor. English represents a different culture and lacks vocabulary for typically Slavic things, such as culinary terminology. Many Slavs perceive the global domination of Anglo-Saxon culture as a threat to their own culture, and the English language as a symbol of Western arrogance. Using it in contacts with other Slavs is therefore often felt as inappropriate.

One might wonder if another language could serve as a lingua franca in the region. The most logical candidate would undoubtedly be Russian, mother tongue of almost half of the Slavs and spoken as a second language by another ca. 20%. The problem with Russian, however, is that the various Russian and Soviet regimes have been trying to impose it as a lingua franca with brutal force, using it as a tool for political domination. For that reason, it never gained much acceptance in the remaining Slavic countries, where it is perceived as the language of the oppressor, and even those who were forced to learn it in school are generally unwilling to use it (Donskis 2014). Besides, Russian has a complicated grammar, very specific phonetics and many words and constructions that are unknown in other Slavic languages, which makes it hard to for speakers of other Slavic languages to understand, and places it far from the imaginary center of the Slavic-speaking world.

Because the Slavic languages are considerably less differentiated than other language families of Europe, some people have argued that Slavs don’t need a lingua franca at all, because everyone can simply use his own language to make himself understood. One might therefore wonder how well our Polish tourist in Croatia or Bulgaria would manage by speaking his own language to the local population, while simultaneously trying to understand the language of the latter. This method of communication is known as “receptive multilingualism” or “passive multilingualism”. It is based on the assumption that a person can understand a different language without actively knowing it, if both languages are closely related and sufficiently similar to each other. This phenomenon is very common in the Scandinavian countries, and has been institutionalized in the Nordic Council. One clear advantage is that each participant of the conversation can express himself freely; all he needs to concentrate on is understanding the language of the other side.

Language inter-comprehension is a relatively new field in linguistic research. One research project that explores the inter-comprehensibility of the Slavic languages is MICReLa (Mutual intelligibility of closely related languages) of Groningen University. The
conclusions of this study demonstrate that receptive multilingualism is common among Czechs and Slovaks in a way similar to the Scandinavians. To a lesser extent, the same is possible for the combinations Polish/Slovak, Slovak/Croatian and Croatian/Slovene, although in these cases more effort and experience is needed. Other combinations, however, are problematic, especially when Bulgarian is involved (Golubović 2015, 368). Although the MICReLa project deals with the languages of the European Union only, it is not unreasonable to assume that the same conclusions apply to the remaining Slavic languages as well. Thus, a Pole will be able to understand Ukrainian or Belarussian reasonably well if spoken slowly and clearly, but in the case of more remote languages communication is unlikely to succeed without the help of gestures or some other, intermediary language. Of course, our hypothetical Polish tourist in Bulgaria will be able to convey certain information anyway, but nothing even remotely close to a conversation, and important details are likely to be lost or misunderstood.

In written communication, a particular problem is posed by the fact that the Slavic languages are written in two different alphabets, which split the Slavic world in two halves. Among West Slavs (Poles, Czechs, Slovaks), knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet is a rare phenomenon. In the former Soviet Union and Bulgaria many young people have trouble understanding Slavic texts written in the Latin alphabet, due to their misunderstanding of letters like c and j (Kocór et al. 2017, 19). Yet, the possibilities of Slavic inter-comprehension are even more limited when it comes to auditive transfer, because the advantages of prosody and the lack of problems with regard to orthography stand in no proportion to phonological problems, such as the incorrect identification of phonemes and word boundaries, as well as misinterpretations on a morphological and lexical level, caused by deceptive cognates and wrong associations (Heinz 2009).

Slavic inter-comprehension can be enhanced with some additional training. Pioneer in the field is the Russian Slavish Lew Zybatow, who initiated EuroComSlav, a project aimed at demonstrating to the learner how much he already knows without knowing he knows. This is achieved by means of “seven sieves”, the most important of which are: international vocabulary, common inherited vocabulary, and recognizing correspondences between languages in sound, spelling and pronunciation (Zybatow 2002). This kind of knowledge would undoubtedly help our Polish tourist in having a better understanding of Russian, Serbo-Croatian or Bulgarian.

Nevertheless, this method has its limitations as well, because every Slavic language has idiosyncrasies that stand in the way of full understanding by speakers of other Slavic languages. Examples of such idiosyncrasies are: specific phonological alterations, grammar changes, shifts in the meanings of words and borrowings from neighbouring, non-Slavic languages. The next step is therefore to consciously avoid these idiosyncrasies and replace them with elements that are commonly understandable to Slavs, in other words, to apply
the seven sieves actively. The result of this approach is Interslavic, an experimental language extrapolated entirely from words and grammatical elements that can be found in most, if not all, Slavic languages.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION: THE INTERSLAVIC LANGUAGE

Interslavic (autonym: Medžuslovjansky) is a so-called zonal constructed language: an artificially created lingua franca for speakers of a family of closely related languages. Languages of this type are governed by different principles than artificial languages created to serve as a universal second language, such as Esperanto. Typically, the latter are expected to be culturally neutral and easy to learn. In zonal languages, on the other hand, every single element is dictated by the source languages. Their main purpose is to be as familiar as possible to the speakers of these languages, and to be understandable to them without prior learning. This does not mean a zonal language cannot be simple, only that the level of simplification is determined by the characteristics of the language family it serves, in this case the Slavic languages.

One might wonder in how far Interslavic can be considered a constructed language at all. Similar languages that are the direct result of human intervention are usually considered natural languages. Examples of such languages are Rumantsch Grischun, devised in 1982 as a common standard for various Rhaeto-Romance dialects; Katharevousa, an extremely archaic form of Greek from the late 18th century, intended to unite many Greek dialects; and successful attempts at reviving and modernizing extinct languages, such as Modern Hebrew and Revived Cornish. The process of creating Interslavic bears much more similarities to the codification of the aforementioned languages than to the creation of languages like Esperanto, as it is entirely based on research and does not involve any creative activity. For the lack of a binary distinction between natural and artificial languages, all that can be said is that Interslavic is somewhere in the middle of the scale.

The Interslavic language goes back to the 9th century, when Konstantin the Philosopher, better known as St. Cyril, standardized the oldest attested Slavic language, Old Church Slavonic. Just like modern Interslavic, this language contained several elements typical for a constructed language (Meyer 2016, 290). It served as a literary language on different Slavic territories for centuries, and is still in use as a liturgical language. Because its sacral character prevented it from undergoing any natural development, it had become way too archaic for contemporary communication already by the 16th century, and efforts to adapt it to modern requirements mark the beginning of modern Interslavic. The oldest known example dates back to 1583, when the Croatian priest Šime Budinić translated the works of Petrus Canisius into a language he called Slovignsky, which was mostly based on Church Slavonic, Serbo-Croatian and (to a lesser degree) Czech and Polish. In the years 1659–1666 another Croatian priest, Juraj Križanić, was the first to write a grammar. From that moment onwards, authors from various Slavic countries have attempted to describe a
Pan-Slavic language that was essentially a modernized version of Old Church Slavonic. Today’s Interslavic is a direct continuation of that tradition. It reached its final form in 2017 with the merger of two active projects, Slovianski and Novoslověnsky. Currently, Interslavic has a complete grammar, a dictionary of ca. 18,000 words, textbooks in several languages, hundreds of texts, including a few books, a scientific journal titled Slovjani.info, a news site and a wiki. The main portal of the language (http://steen.free.fr/interslavic) also features a transliteration tool, a spell checker and a word learning tool. Interslavic has a community of ca. 2,000 active and passive users, active mostly on Facebook.

The main purpose of Interslavic is that speakers of any Slavic language can understand it without even knowing which language they are dealing with. It has an inflecting grammar, similar to that of the Slavic languages: three grammatical genders, four basic noun declensions, seven noun cases, singular/plural distinction, adjective agreement, two basic verb conjugations and verbal aspect. The language has few irregularities, which makes it relatively easy to use. Although Interslavic can be considered a modern and simplified version of Old Church Slavonic, its main ingredients were taken from the modern Slavic languages:

a) International vocabulary. Like the Germanic and the Romance languages, the Slavic languages have incorporated lots of international words, most of them originating from Latin and Greek, but also from French, German and English. The advantage of these words is that they look and sound practically the same in every language, and that their meanings are usually identical.

b) Pan-Slavic vocabulary. The Slavic languages are characterized by a relatively large number of words inherited from Proto-Slavic. More than anything, these words form the key to mutual comprehension. Unlike international vocabulary, however, they have undergone sound changes that differ from one language to another and are reflected in different spellings. Even so, these words might as well be written in one orthography that allows for multiple pronunciations, just like English orthography fits both British and American pronunciations. For example, the numeral “five” (Russian пя́ть, Polish pięć, Czech pět, Slovak päť, Serbo-Croatian pet) can be written as пет, a spelling that covers all five pronunciations and shows clearly that they are the very same word.

Of course, if the Slavic languages consisted purely of international and Pan-Slavic vocabulary, they would not even be separate languages to begin with. The truth is, however, that many Proto-Slavic words survived only in part of the Slavic languages, and in some cases their meanings drifted apart to such a degree that a logical connection can no longer be made. To deal with these problems, Interslavic strictly adheres to the following three design principles:
First of all, Interslavic usually follows the majority. This majority is neither based on the number of speakers nor on the number of languages, as both approaches would give undue weight to specific input languages. Instead, it is based on equal treatment of all six major Slavic sub-branches (Russian, Ukrainian/Belarussian, Polish, Czech/Slovak, Serbo-Croatian/Slovene and Bulgarian/Macedonian). When two options are both supported by at least two of the sub-branches, both options are included. Because the South Slavic languages are relatively often “outvoted” by the rest, measures were taken to compensate them.

Secondly, to ensure etymological coherence, Interslavic never borrows its words directly from any Slavic language. Instead, it follows a system of regular derivation from Old Church Slavonic or reconstructed proto-forms. This prevents the language from becoming a hodgepodge of elements taken from different languages and makes Interslavic words both recognizable and predictable for Slavic speakers.

At last, every Slav should be able to write Interslavic on his own keyboard and read it in a familiar orthography. For that reason, both the Latin and the Cyrillic alphabets are used, and texts are often given in both orthographies in a parallel manner. The standard Latin orthography contains four letters with a diacritical mark: č š ž ě, but those who cannot write ě are free to write e instead (much like the Russian letter ё is often written as е), Poles can write cz sz ż instead of č š ž, and those who have problems distinguishing between y and i can write i in all cases. Similar mechanisms apply to Cyrillic as well.

Any Interslavic text will inevitably contain elements that not every Slav can understand. A Slovene will not understand some words that are obvious to a Russian and vice versa. In most situations, ignoring these will not prevent the message from getting through. Still, much depends on an individual’s knowledge, intelligence and experience, and one monolingual speaker of a language may understand much less than another monolingual speaker of the same language. Also, listening to a language one does not actively know requires a level of concentration that can be achieved only if the listener is willing to cooperate. A person who has something to gain from the conversation will try harder than a person who is tired, annoyed and uninterested.

During recent years, several research projects have been carried out regarding the intelligibility of Interslavic among various nations, including a full-scale international Internet survey, organized in 2015–2018 by Vojtěch Merunka. Based on 1822 valid responses, the conclusion of this survey is that there are no major differences between the various Slavic nations when it comes to understanding Interslavic, although Czechs and Slovaks score somewhat higher than average (90% and 93% respectively) and South Slavs somewhat lower (80%), while the subjective appreciation of the language is slightly higher among South Slavs. There is, however, a correlation with education: Slavs who completed higher education have 88% of mean intelligibility, Slavs with secondary or primary education only 72–73% (Kocór et al. 2017, 24). Other surveys, organized in 2017 and 2018
among students of the University of Rzeszów (Poland) and Trakia University in Stara Zagora (Bulgaria), give similar results: participants are generally positive in their assessment of Interslavic and can understand it well (ibidem).

The effectiveness of spoken Interslavic is harder to quantify, especially since practical experiences usually happen on an individual level. However, some insight is given by two Conferences on the Interslavic language (CISLa) that took place in the Czech Republic in 2017 and 2018, both attended by 60–70 participants from many different Slavic countries. Most presentations where either held in Interslavic or translated consecutively into Interslavic. This turned out to be sufficient for all Slavic participants—including Poles and Bulgarians—to understand almost everything. These experiences demonstrate that spoken Interslavic is understood equally well as written Interslavic, and that one translator/interpreter can serve an entire conference.

The aforementioned research pertains to people with no prior knowledge about the Interslavic language. Considering how many speakers picked up Interslavic simply by reading and listening, even better results can be expected after a minimum amount of preparation. This could easily be achieved if a few basic Interslavic lessons were introduced at some level of the education systems in the Slavic countries. These lessons should not necessarily encompass study of the language itself, but rather teach people how to recognize correspondences by means of techniques as provided by the EuroComSlav project.

4. HOW INTERSLAVIC CAN SUPPORT THE TOURIST BRANCH

Let us now return to our Polish tourist in Bulgaria, Macedonia or Montenegro. The first question is: how can Interslavic help him in making himself understandable to the local population? If he has learned using Interslavic actively, that should not be a problem, but learning a language is not an easy task, and should he decide to do so anyway, he might as well choose English. There is one critical difference, though. For a Slav, learning Interslavic is not a matter of learning an entirely new language, but merely of learning how to manipulate his own language. Thus, the learning process is substantially different from learning English, because every learned item can be put to practical use immediately, and every learner can decide for himself how much he wishes to learn and use. For those unwilling to learn any grammar at all, there is also Slovianto, a simplified form of Interslavic that contains only the most necessary grammar, intended mostly for non-Slavs.

Realistically speaking, however, our tourist has probably never even heard of Interslavic, and the odds that he can speak it are minimal. Let us therefore see what the other side can do. Any place that is frequently visited by foreign tourists should be equipped with means to address them. This is not only a matter of hospitality, but also of sheer self-interest and even self-preservation, because tourism is an indispensable source of income, and customer satisfaction plays a crucial role in that. Of course, nobody can be expected to know
the language of every visitor from every country, nor do most hotels, restaurants, museums, churches and other attractions have the means to have all their materials translated into dozens of languages. Instead, they provide materials in English, sometimes also in languages like French, German, Italian and Spanish. As we have demonstrated above, however, these materials are not very helpful to the average tourist from a Slavic country. Statistically speaking, the odds are that this tourist can understand the same text a lot better when it is written in Interslavic. Thus, given the enormous increase in the number of tourists from these countries, Interslavic provides a great opportunity for the tourist branch: websites, flyers, brochures, menus, signs and information boards written in Interslavic can reach a very large audience, while simultaneously relieving travel operators, owners and managers from the undoable task of having them translated into many different languages.

Since translations can easily be commissioned, none of the above would require anybody to learn Interslavic actively. Those who decide to learn it anyway, have the additional advantage of being able to communicate directly, not only by making themselves better understood, but also because Interslavic helps them in passively understanding other Slavic languages. Especially tour guides could benefit greatly from speaking Interslavic actively, as it would enable them to serve any multi-Slavic audience.

5. CONCLUSION

Due to a massive increase in tourist numbers from and to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, finding a means to communicate with the populations of these countries is more necessary than ever. Interslavic might the best solution to this problem, because the average Slav can understand it much better than English or any other international language. Active knowledge of Interslavic enables a traveller to make himself understood to the local Slavic population and to passively understand much of the local language. Likewise, Interslavic can be very helpful at places that are frequented by tourists from Slavic countries: a travel guide who speaks Interslavic can use it to show around mixed groups, and printed matter in Interslavic (information brochures, leaflets etc.) can provide tourists from Slavic countries with useful information. Because of the positive role it can play in making Slavic tourists feel comfortable, while simultaneously saving local hosts both trouble and money, Interslavic can immensely valuable to the tourist branch.
APPENDIX: TWO EXAMPLES

1. Hotel Oasis

In 2012, Interslavic was implemented by Hotel Oasis at the Dead Sea coast in Israel (Merunka 2018, 156). The following is a fragment from an information leaflet for Slavic guests:

Dragi gosti! Do hotela se možete priglasiti do 15:00. Iz hotela treba se odglasiti do 11:00.

Vreme otvaranja restauracije Marine (na 1. etaži): zajutrat 7:00 – 10:30, večerja 18:00 – 20:30.

Lobby-Bar je otvoren vsak dan od 11:00 do 22:30. Lobby-Bar ves den predlagaje nam male jedenja. Večerom vas v Lobby-Baru preglašajemo na veseljenje z živojo muzikojo.

Kompleks SPA je otvoren od 8:00 do 18:00. Usluge SPA sodržavaj pasen s vodojo iz Mrtvega Morja, jacuzzi, saunu, tureško kupanje in fitness. Sovetujemo vas, da po telefonu na čislu 8040 rezervirate usluge sobno.

Hotel takšno ima svojo privatnu plažo. Plaža je na drugoj strani ulice desno (napravo) od Ambulancije. Vstup na plaža je 7:30 do 18:00. Na plaža takšno ide hotelove transport vsakih 15 minut od centralnega vhoda.

2. Prague astronomical clock

The following is part of a description of the famous Prague astronomical clock (Van Steenbergen/Merunka 2018, 53).


Pražski orloj je astrolab dvižen časovnikovo mašino in je še imajuci mnoge tehnične uløjštenja. Ime orloja je iz latinškega slova "horologium". Na obrazu orloja je planarna projekcija globusa Zemje iz pozicije Prage na kosmično ravnino (jest to projekcija obraza iz 3D na 2D), kde možemo videti ekvator, tropične paraleline linije od konstelacije Raka in Kozoroga, zvezdnou sferu, Lunu, Solnce in nebo.

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