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CE AM ÎNVĂȚAT DESPRE DIALECTUL ROMÂNESC DIN MOLDOVA ÎN ULTIMA JUMĂTATE DE SECOL

1. INTRODUCTION

I first met Dorin Urișescu nearly forty years ago, when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, studying Slavic, South Slavic and Balkan Linguistics in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, and Dorin was a Fulbright Lecturer in Romanian in the Department of Linguistics there. I took a number of courses under Dorin's tutelage during that time, including several levels of Romanian language and the History of Romanian. He was a fantastic teacher, something he came to be known for while a faculty member not only at Chicago, but later at York University in Canada as well, where he was a professor and taught Romance linguistics for many years. Dorin was also a brilliant scholar of Romanian and Romance linguistics and a specialist in dialectology.

I owe my first academic publication and one of my most recent to Dorin – Dyer 1985 and Urișescu and Dyer 2021a¹, respectively – something I am confident no other person can say, and a fact I am extremely proud of. These articles came nearly four decades apart. In truth, Dorin helped me to write the first of these articles and was the inspiration for us to write the last. In 1984, when I was working on what became the article *The Interplay of Subjunctive and Infinitive Complements in Romanian*, Dorin had become one of my mentors and helped guide me through that article. In 2020, the year before his death, at age 73 (see Dyer 2021, an *In Memoriam* written with assistance from Dorin's wife, Gabriela), we worked together on *Romanian and Slavic in Contact*, and we completed the manuscript only a few months before he passed. These two articles represent not only veritable bookends for my career and four decades of my growth professionally in publishing in the field of Romanian linguistics, but also, thanks to Dorin, they represent a history of our professional relationship. They also serve as a departure point for my discussion of the Romanian dialect of Moldova in this article.

While he was a Fulbrighter there, Dorin worked closely at the University of Chicago with Kostas Kazazis, a Balkan linguist known for his work in Greek, Albanian and Romanian, as well as Eric Hamp, the well-known Albanologist and Indo-Europeanist. Both of these scholars have also passed away, Kostas in 2002, at age 68, and Eric, more recently, in 2019, at the remarkable age of 98. It was Kostas who first suggested I look at the dialect of Romanian spoken in Moldova, then the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (M.S.S.R.). He had visited Romania in 1979, and in 1982, he published an article entitled *How Non-Rumanian Is Moldavian?* in

¹ Reprinted as Urișescu and Dyer 2021b.

which he described what he had heard on radio programs emanating from the capital city of the M.S.S.R., Chișinău, while he was visiting București, 270 miles away. In a course on Balkan Linguistics that I was taking with him in the spring of 1983, Kostas suggested to me that since I knew Russian and was studying Romanian (with Dorin, in fact), perhaps I should investigate what the Soviets at the time were calling *Moldavskij jazyk*, the “Moldavian language”. This was the beginning of a journey for me that is still ongoing four decades later.

2. THE BEGINNING – *HOW NON-RUMANIAN IS MOLDAVIAN?*

At the end of his article, *How Non-Rumanian Is Moldavian?* Kazazis (1982) asked the eponymous question and replied in conclusion “not really.” Recognizing that what I am about to say about Moldavian – or the Moldovan dialect of Romanian, as I would prefer – benefits from forty more years of study and, in fact, four more decades of the evolution of this variety of speech, today I would add to Kazazis’s quip “but then again ...” In what follows, I will discuss what has happened in the study of the language of this land over the last forty years. I will investigate in particular five main themes. These include (1) Soviet linguistic obfuscation; (2) comparing standard Romanian with the dialect of the M.S.S.R./Moldova; (3) the post-Soviet legacy; (4) (Moldovan) language and politics; and (5) other works (on Moldovan) in the West. In the conclusion, I will offer my thoughts on the future of the linguistic situation in modern-day Moldova.

2.1. Soviet Linguistic Obfuscation

The first wave of western studies of the Romance language spoken in the M.S.S.R., later the Republic of Moldova, was fostered by Michael Bruchis, a Soviet émigré to Israel from the M.S.S.R. His works, which were thematically more historical and political than linguistic, started the parade of western studies which ultimately led to articles and books questioning Soviet language policy in modern-day Moldova. As early as 1979, Bruchis was posing questions about the legitimacy of the Moldavian language. His publications – 1979, 1980, 1982, 1983, 1984a, b, 1987, 1988 – in fact caught my attention in the early 1980s and were instrumental in my early examinations of this linguistic situation. Bruchis discussed what he believed were Soviet machinations with regard to the speech of Bessarabia, which I will discuss later in this article. As a side note, at the urging of Michael Hamm, a historian from Centre College in Kentucky, all of us who were doing research on Moldova in the late 1980s and early 1990s gathered in Warsaw in 1995 to present our work. This group of scholars consisted of Hamm and Bruchis; Wim van Meurs, a political scientist then of Freie University of Berlin; Charles King, a historian then of the University of Arkansas; and me. Papers we presented at this conference later formed the core of a volume of „Nationalities Papers” on Moldova and Moldovan (see Dyer 1998), edited by Hamm in 1998.

I picked up the Moldavian-language thread in the late 1980s and 1990s with publications in which I examined Soviet language policy in the M.S.S.R. and sought to explain what was happening at the time with regard to politics, but in particular language. Dyer 1989, 1994a, b, 1996a, b, 1998 and 1999a, b, for example, were focused on comparing standard and dialectal Moldavian Daco-Romanian to what was – and is – spoken in modern-day Moldova.

By the 1990s, the Soviets for half a century had claimed what was spoken in the M.S.S.R. was the Moldavian *language*, in their view, a tenth Romance language that rested alongside (Daco-)Romanian² as a second member of the eastern Romance group³. In effect, the Soviets sought to convince the population of the M.S.S.R. that they spoke a language other than Romanian, because they feared the development over the years of a cross-border identity between those in that republic who spoke Romanian and the Romanians across the border. Among the strategies deployed to hinder this identification was the plagiarizing of textbooks from Romania, which were converted into Cyrillic versions (including grammars of the Moldavian language) and then used in the schools of the M.S.S.R. Moldavian linguists of the time could not refer to or construe the Romance language of the M.S.S.R. as *Romanian*. Because of this, some reputable Soviet linguists even changed the course of their research to avoid political trouble (personal communication, Silviu Berejan⁴, 1996).

2.2. Comparing Standard Romanian with the Dialect of the M.S.S.R./Moldova

It is well-established that there are phonological and grammatical differences among the dialects of Daco-Romanian. Six relatively distinct dialects of the Daco-Romanian are recognized, one of which is the dialect spoken in modern-day Moldova and the Moldovan region of Romania-proper, which below is placed in a broad geographic context:

The [...] commonly held view [...] is that Moldovan is a *subdialect* of the Daco-Romanian dialect of a greater Romanian. Daco-Romanian is spoken in Romania proper. It is generally considered to possess six regional dialects (Moldavian, Transylvanian, Maramureșan, Crișan, Banatian and Muntenian), and its literary language is based on the spoken language which surrounds the Romanian capital city of Bucharest, that is to say, the Muntenian subdialect (Romanian *grai*) of the Muntenian dialect. There are three

² *Daco-Romanian* is a term specifically used to refer to the Romanian of Romania-proper and not Aromanian, Istro-Romanian or Megleno-Romanian. These four Romanians constitute the group of languages descended from Common Romanian.

³ The nine widely accepted members of the modern Romance-language family are Catalan, French, Italian, Portuguese, Provencal, Rhaeto-Romance, Romanian, Sardinian and Spanish.

⁴ Dr. Silviu Berejan was a Romanian philologist, lexicologist and linguist from Bessarabia, one of the titular members of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova. He was a specialist in Romance and Slavic linguistics and the principal scholar at the Institute of Linguistics at the Academy of Sciences of Moldova. I met and interviewed him in 1996.

important subdialects of Muntenian Daco-Romanian: Muntenian, Oltenian and Dobrogean, the first two sometimes being referred to jointly as “Wallachian” (Dyer 2022, p. 7–8).

The Romance idiom of the M.S.S.R. – modern-day Republic of Moldova – shares features of the Moldavian dialect of Daco-Romanian. Dyer (1994a, b, 1996b, p. 97) pointed out 12 phonological and 13 morpho-syntactic features (Dyer 1996b, p. 97, 100) that are distinct from standard Romanian in this dialect, but these features were ignored when the Soviets “fashioned” the Moldavian language. As I mentioned above, they chose instead to just plagiarize grammars and textbooks of Romanian by converting them into Cyrillic versions. After more than three quarters of a century of contact with Russian (and Ukrainian) in the region, in fact, the Moldovan dialect of Romanian has diverged even further from standard Romanian and has taken on a number of phonological and grammatical characteristics influenced and motivated by those languages. The contact of Romanian with Russian and Ukrainian in this geographic region, for example, has caused the Romanian dialect of the area to take on dialect-specific linguistic features which make the speech of this area unique within the Romance-speaking world. For example, no other variety of Romance exhibits, on a phonological level, palatalized consonants to the degree this dialect does.

2.3. The Post-Soviet Legacy

With independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Republic of Moldova plotted a new path politically and linguistically. A number of works in the west have examined the sociolinguistic situation in Moldova since the mid- to late 1990s. Among these pieces are Dyer 2002, 2006a, b, 2007, 2019 and 2022; Dyer and Coles 2013, and their findings include the following.

(1) Moldova can be considered a *Sprachbund*, one much like the Balkan linguistic league, with Russian and Ukrainian as superstrate languages that play a major role in the contact and reciprocal influence of those two languages with Romanian, Bulgarian and Gagauz, the latter a Turkic language (Dyer 2002);

(2) The legacy of claiming there is a separate Moldavian/Moldovan language continues in the works of Stati (2003, 2011), who use arguments of cultural identity in the place of linguistics (Dyer 2006a);

(3) The linguistic landscape of the country of Moldova continues to evolve after its independence, as languages spoken in the area vie for recognition and acceptance in the country’s educational system and politically (Dyer 2006b, 2007);

(4) A study of the phonology of educated speakers of Romanian in the capital city of Moldova focusing on features of the Moldovan dialect of the language explicated in Dyer 1994a, b reveals that these specific features were alive and well in the mid-1990s (Dyer and Coles 2013) and

(5) Identifying with a group is an extremely powerful motivator when it comes to cultural mores and political beliefs. Believing in the separateness of

Moldovan as an independent language can be more about conservative group dynamics than anything else (Dyer 2019).

2.4. Language and Politics

Seldom do language and politics collide so intensely as what we have seen in Moldova over the past 70 years. The Romanian language of Bessarabia for some seven decades was used as a Soviet pawn in a chess game of political power. The Romanian-speakers of this land were taught that they spoke a language separate from their brethren in the neighboring country of Romania as a way of trying to prevent pan-Romanism, something the Soviets feared in the way they feared pan-Turkism on their southern borders. The thinking was it was not in the Soviet interest to have Romanian speakers in the M.S.S.R. identifying with Romanian speakers to the east in Romania. Thus, it would be a good idea to make the former think and believe they spoke a language that was different lexically, phonologically, morphologically and even syntactically from Romanian in its varieties to the west – both standard and dialectal. Interestingly, though, while it was certainly possible, no attempt was made by the Soviets to capture these linguistic differences as they practiced their own brand of separatism.

What the Soviets practiced instead was plagiarism, as they copied grammars and textbooks of standard Romanian and Cyrillicized their original Latin-alphabet versions, expecting orthography to mask this process. We see this, for example, most obviously in publications like the two-part academy grammar of Moldovan (Korlètjanu 1969; and Dyrul and Čobanu 1970), which was in truth just a version of the Academy grammar of Romanian printed in the Cyrillic instead of Latin alphabet. Dyer (1994a) scrutinized the above Academy grammar and concluded that with the exception of one phonological and one morphological feature, the grammars displayed none of the features specific to the Moldavian dialect of the language. The one phonological feature that was incorporated was the monophthongization of the diphthong *i* before a nasal (Moldavian *kyně* ‘dog,’ Romanian *cîine*; M *myne* ‘tomorrow,’ R *mîne*), and the morphological feature was the use of the pronoun *dynsul/dynsa/dynši* ‘he/she/they’ as an unmarked pronoun in the third person for standard Romanian *el/ea/ei/ele* ‘he/she/they[m.]/they[f.]’ (Dyer 1994a, p. 243–244).

Nicolae Korlètjanu, a Soviet linguist working in the M.S.S.R., championed the argument for Moldavian as a separate language as early as 1966 in his piece on *Moldavskij jazik* ‘The Moldavian Language,’ which was included in the Soviet series *Jazyki narodov SSSR. Indoevropskie jazyki* ‘Languages of the Peoples of the U.S.S.R. Indo-European Languages’. In 1969, he was lead author of the lexicology volume of the Academy grammar of Moldovan, and then in 1983, Korlètjanu published *Moldavskij jazyk segodnja* ‘The Moldavian Language Today’.

Vasile Stati, a post-Soviet linguist of Moldova, picked up the torch for the Moldovan language after the turn of the century, compiling two different versions

of a Moldovan-Romanian dictionary (2003, 2011) in the front and end matter of which he continued to argue for the separate status of Moldovan as an independent literary language, using for the most part his own historical and cultural arguments to make his points (Dyer 2006a, 2019).

2.5. Other Works in the West

As mentioned earlier in this article, in three books and a number of articles beginning over forty years ago and continuing into much of the 1980s, Bruchis (see the Bibliography) started the parade of western works which questioned Soviet language policy in modern-day Moldova. As early as 1979, he was asking questions about the legitimacy of the Moldavian language.

In addition to Bruchis, there are other western scholars – although they are few – who have focused their attention on Moldova and the Romanian of Moldova or Moldovan itself. In particular, Charles King, now Professor of International Affairs and Government at Georgetown University, wrote extensively during the 1990s and 2000s on Moldova, Moldovan identity and the Moldovan language. King 1994 and 2000 are seminal works in the field of Moldovan history and politics that deeply examine cultural identity and linguistics. Matthew Ciscell, a Professor of English at Central Connecticut State University, has also been a prominent scholar in the field of Moldovan studies over the past two decades, focusing on Moldovan language and linguistic policy, particularly in-country, at the local level and utilizing fieldwork (Ciscell 2006, 2007, 2017). My colleague here at the University of Mississippi, Valentina Iepuri, a Moldovan herself, has published several pieces on the linguistic situation in Moldova, examining Romanian/Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian (Iepuri 2016, 2018), including earlier studies with me on lexicology (Dyer, Iepuri and Kadyrbaeva 2009, 2010). The fact of the matter is, that in the west, Moldova and Moldovan language have not figured prominently in historical, cultural or linguistic studies.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Decades of studying the Romanian of Moldova has produced important research in several areas. These include semantics, phonology, lexicology, languages in contact, socio-linguistics, language and culture and *Sprachbund* studies. The languages of Moldova have caught the eye of a number of linguists, as well as historians, anthropologists, sociologists and others. Moldova's history itself over the past century has bred new topics for study uniquely suited to language, identity and politics – migrations of peoples and national independence, among others. The former of these phenomena brought new peoples to the region and created environments for languages and different peoples to mix. The latter marshalled along battles and conflicts over linguistic and culture identity, which provided venues for educational changes in the study of state languages. Through it all, golden

opportunities for scholarly study have presented themselves, and I suspect that with the recent migration of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine for relative safe haven in Moldova, even more opportunities for the study of an evolving national linguistic landscape will emerge. Thus, the work is not over.

Urițescu and Dyer 2021a, a piece framed in historical linguistics, the history of Romanian and phonology, Dorin's professional calling cards, examines Slavic-Romance linguistic contacts in the Balkans over the past several centuries. As it concludes, he and I share with the reader the unique features of the Romanian dialect of Moldova, a connective thread to the story told in the present article and a fitting end to our collaboration over the past forty years. That article is a worthy tribute to a scholar who is dearly missed and who was one of a kind. I am deeply honored to have come along on this one last journey with him!

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WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE ROMANIAN DIALECT OF MOLDOVA IN THE LAST HALF CENTURY

(Abstract)

The Romance language spoken in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic and later the Republic of Moldova has been studied for nearly half a century. The Soviets characterized this Bessarabian dialect of Romanian as a separate Eastern Romance language for political reasons, as they feared the development of cross-border pan-Romanianism. Western linguists, beginning in the late 1970s, wrote of this linguistic obfuscation and uncovered the Cyrillicized plagiarism of Romanian textbooks and grammars used in the Moldovan school system. Due primarily to its century-long contact with Russian and Ukrainian, the dialect of Romanian spoken today in Moldova has departed considerably from standard Romanian in its lexicology, phonology and to some extent, even in its grammar. The characterization of the Moldovan idiom today as the Moldovan language or a dialect of Romanian continues to carry political and sociological ramifications

Keywords: *Moldovan, (Daco-)Romanian, dialect, Romance, linguistics, Soviet.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *limbă moldovenească, dacoromână, dialect, limbi romanice, lingvistică, sovietic.*

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