

Tomasz Kamusella. *Politics and the Slavic Languages*. London, New York: Routledge, 2021. xvi + 334 pp. [Series: Routledge Histories of Central and Eastern Europe.] ISBN 978-0-367-56984-6 (hbk); 978-0-367-56985-3 (pbk); 978-1-003-10018-8 (ebk).

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The book *Politics and the Slavic Languages* written by Tomasz Kamusella is published in the respected Routledge series, Histories of Central and Eastern Europe. As stated in the preface of the series, “the nations of Central and Eastern Europe experienced a time of momentous change in the period following the Second World War”, but also later, during the Hungarian uprising and the Prague Spring, to name just the most prominent ones, as well as during the tumultuous 1990s and onwards. Therefore, as the editors underline, “the volumes in this series will help shine a light on the experience of this key geopolitical zone and offer many lessons to be learned for the future”.

Kamusella’s monograph consists of seven full chapters preceded by an introduction and followed by an addendum without a commentary (in which the original text of the *Declaration on the Common Language*¹ which circulated in four ex-Yugoslav countries in 2017 is published along with its translation into English) as well as a rather lengthy postscript on methodology. It deals with Slavic languages, especially the politics of the changing number of Slavic languages in the past two centuries, and argues that the politics of language is the politics in Central Europe. The author’s starting point is well known and generally accepted in sociolinguistics—that languages are artifacts and not only systematic entities. Their buildup consists equally of their history and culture, repositories of texts written in specific language varieties in a particular time period and, when it comes to national or official languages, actions of more or less enlightened decision-making bodies. Exactly because of that, and because humans are their creators, they can split or merge the languages according to political or other reasons. Kamusella characterizes these splits and mergers from the point of view of ethnolinguistic nationalism, arguing that the idea of national (official) languages directly corresponds to the splits

¹ Originally presented as *Deklaracija o zajedničkom jeziku* [The declaration on the common language], available at <http://jezicinacionalizmi.com/deklaracija/> (accessed 22 March 2024).

or mergers of nation-states. He even claims, referring to the use of writing systems, spelling conventions, and diacritics for creating and maintaining required differences among the Slavic languages: “These differences are often metaphorically referred to as language frontiers or lines of separation, which keep languages away from one another. These territorializing metaphors are a reflex of the main purpose for which languages are employed in today’s Central Europe—that is, for constructing, legitimizing, and maintaining ethnolinguistic nation-states.”

The monograph comprises the following chapters: 1. A brief *unnatural* history of languages in Europe with several subchapters: What is language?, A brief *unnatural* history of languages in Europe, One Slavic language or three Slavic state languages (and counting)?, Vanishing and metamorphoses, Breakups, Classifying Slavic languages; 2. Nonstate (minority or regional) Slavic languages; 3. The internet: A new frontier; 4. The politics of script; 5. Pluricentric or monocentric; 6. Russian as a pluricentric language; 7. Conclusion: the dilemma of numbers; 8. Addendum: *the Declaration on the Common Language*; 9. Postscript on methodology: People say what they want. As expected from a proper scientific text, the monograph is furnished with an extremely detailed bibliography and index.

Although the proclaimed aim of the book is to cover the past two hundred years of Slavic languages in Europe, most chapters span the recent past or contemporary relations and events. An overview is given in the first chapter, while an explanation of concepts, mostly the ideology of ethnolinguistic nationalism as a way to statehood formation, legitimation, and maintenance in Central Europe, is given in the postscript on methodology. This last chapter ends in a chart 60 pages long of what the author perceives as the formation of what he calls *Einzelssprache/Einzelssprachen* (language/discrete languages). In listing an extraordinary amount of data connected to the selected points in time and space, he starts in the 21st-century postcommunist and cyberspace age and goes back to the Roman Empire and 2nd century BC. In doing so, Kamusella defends his idea that “under the influence of the aforementioned ‘modernizing’ reforms, which were to preserve the existence of non-national polities in Europe and of colonies in Africa and Asia, the estate and colonial structure of society [...] began undergoing transformation. [...] National activists in Europe carried out the program of building nation-states across the continent, while anticolonial-cum-national activists in Africa and Asia adopted this Western ideology as their own and carried out decolonization in line with the logic of this ideology (cf. Mishra 2012). As a result, nationalism became the globe’s first ‘infrastructural ideology’—in other words, the sole accepted ideology of statehood construction, legitimation, and maintenance”.

Since the main motivation for writing this book is the existence of the *Declaration on the Common Language*, I will concentrate on the issues related to concepts central to this impulse. In doing so, I first want to share an

impression backed up by my close reading, to wit, that the book was created, in a way, *backwards*. The author was intrigued by the *Declaration* and seemingly sympathized with its views and its cause, which led him to develop the central ideas in this book. My conclusions come from my reading but also from an analysis of the Index, where a few concepts stand out due to their frequency of appearance. Alongside more general terms, the most prominent concepts used throughout the book are: Einzelsprache/Einzelsprachen, ethnolinguistic nationalism, and nation-states.

This helps one perceive the rather unusual approach to the subject in the topics and the organization of the chapters because the problems the author deals with are not, at first glance, related to each other. What links them together is the idea of ethnolinguistic nationalism, elaborated in ways similar to those sketched in the *Declaration*. The idea of some clash between the Einzelsprachen and common languages runs through the book as a guiding thought. Taking all this into account, it is interesting that the book is, as the author states, offered "to the new generation of scholars from Central Europe, so that they may dare to peer *beyond* the dogma of the nation and the black box of Einzelsprache". I was intrigued when reading this dedication because it is aimed at scholars from Central Europe and not necessarily scholars doing research on Central Europe, which is per se interesting. But knowing other works of Kamusella's (especially *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe*) as well as having insight into the writing and thinking of most scholars *from* Central Europe, one better understands the need for such a direct call. In my opinion, insisting on ethnolinguistic nationalism as the sole cause of all the ills associated with language formation in the last 200 years, without putting individual linguistic situations and communities in the broader context of European history as well as one's own history and the history of values which persisted in communities for much longer periods (see Katičić 1992), sheds light on only one variable in the political existence of (Slavic) languages in Europe today and therefore asks for critical reading and open discussion.

The writing style is embellished, with many metaphors and with comparisons to the material world aimed at showing how linguistic science differs from the physical sciences, primarily because of the human intervention, which obviously follows the author's thought process. Therefore, I read this book as a combination of a scholarly, argued essay on topics connected through one central idea and as a personal statement on the state of affairs of different Slavic languages. In reading it with that second lens in mind, I agreed with many assertions in the book but also found many points of disagreement, especially where statements were presented without sufficient data and arguments. Therefore, if Kamusella's monograph is to be read as an open text and an invitation to dialogue, I welcome it, albeit with a bit of concern that the success of its reading will depend on the readers'

previous knowledge on the topic, assumptions, and preconceived notions. If, however, the book is to be read mostly by non-specialists in order to inform them of what the author takes to be the truth (as advertised on the publisher's web page) as well as by the new generation of (younger) Slavic scholars to inform them how to correctly treat contemporary Slavic languages, I would be more cautious. That is, although opening some new avenues that have not been systematically discussed in connection with Slavic languages, such as the influence of the internet on the status and corpus of languages, Slavic included, the author puts some questions in the foreground while not even mentioning others.

One of these is the question of how many languages we should even be talking about. On p. 175, he states: "This 'total number of Slavic languages' is a moveable feast, fully depending on the perceiver, alongside changing group views on and attitudes toward what should count as a 'proper' language and what ought not to. During the past two centuries, the pendulum has swung widely from one extreme to another, from a single or just a couple of Slavic languages to many". It is not true that the number of Slavic languages is fully dependent on the perceiver in the way Kamusella suggests by using the metaphor of a "moveable feast". More relevant and important than the number are the criteria according to which one divides the languages. These criteria, be they genetic, typological, or sociolinguistic, are not new in the field. Even sociolinguistic criteria, often disputed, should be discussed and explained, especially as new scholars are an intended audience.

The other one is the perception of the *Declaration on the Common Language*, written five years prior to the publication of this book. While it is true that "some prefer to see it as a single Einzelsprache rather than as the officially recognized and separate four post-Serbo-Croatian languages of Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian" (p. 175), sociolinguistics always must ask whether some view is, or historically was, representative of the linguistic community. I am aware that the views from the inside and the outside might differ, primarily in their granularity and emotional load. However, in an attempt at objectivity, one must acknowledge that the majority of linguists, as well as "others" who bothered to take an interest in the *Declaration*, perceived it as a text provoked by the political reason of "unification". The main reason is that the *Declaration* was composed and published 25 years after the South Slavic languages based on the Štokavian dialectal base were formally proclaimed as independent and a few years after Croatian became an official language of the European Union. (Croatia and Slovenia are, amongst ex-Yugoslav states, the only two countries to become members of the European Union to date. Croatian automatically became an official language of the EU like all others.) Therefore, the *Declaration* is really an opinion of some with the right to proclaim and defend their view, which is unquestionable in democracies nowadays. Whether these views stand up to scrutiny through

the lenses of concepts such as ethnolinguistic nationalism (seen as unwanted) and pluricentric languages (seen as wanted) is another question entirely.

For the sake of building a fair argument, I want to remind readers of two sociolinguistic frames. Both can be seen as political, but this is also not new in sociolinguistics (see, for example, Haugen 1983; Joseph and Taylor 1990; Spolsky 2004; Langston and Peti-Stantić 2014). Firstly, by mentioning Anderson's (1983) imagined communities, the author seems to forget that a community, no matter what its size and level of formality, is most often built around some values that shape its identity and that this identity can also be seen as a moving target. Therefore, as there are some who see their language as being a variety of a common language, there are certainly others who see it as a separate one. For some, the main criterion is mutual understanding, while for the others it is the depth of this understanding and the fact that the languages are embedded in culture and literature. Secondly, the concept of pluricentric language is not as undebated as presented in this book. To point only to one issue related with it, one should notice the essential difference between the pluricentric languages listed in the *Declaration* (German, English, Arabic, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and *many other languages across the world* (highlighting APS)) (p. 179 of the reviewed book) and the South Slavic situation. The group of languages that serve as a comparison and point of departure for the formation of a definition are among the most spoken languages in the world, colonial languages spreading over vast territories by means of political power. Therefore, their pluricentricity is of a different kind and guided by different reasons in time and space than, supposedly, the South Slavic ones (see Jakobson 1995 on time and space). For that reason, as well as others, including a viewpoint that there is no significant (or even some) "linguistic segregation and linguistic discrimination in education and public institutions", (p. 180 of the reviewed book) which was one of the main motives for writing the *Declaration*, many members of South Slavic linguistic communities simply considered the *Declaration* as irrelevant, scholarly unargued, and politically incorrect.

To conclude on a positive note and seeking to emphasize the value of the monograph, I want to stress that the author presents many thought-provoking insights and analyses, especially in comparisons with non-Slavic languages. One such instance is when dealing with the nonstate (minority or regional) Slavic languages, where many data points for contacts between domicile and migrant communities are given. Also, he addresses already established issues such as the question of when it is appropriate to treat languages as pluricentric as opposed to monocentric, although the author shifts his attention to Russian from the usual focus on South Slavic languages. This portion of the analysis became even more provocative in the course of events during the past several months, as what Kamusella already classified in the book as "Russia's

continuing ideological and military attack on Ukraine since 2014" (p. 148) reached its apex. I am hopeful that by reading, discussing, and clarifying our positions, our communities can reach a better understanding of and tolerance toward each other in the near future. I see this book as a brick in building this bridge towards helping each other to understand and appreciate each other's values more deeply.

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