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BULGARIAN DIALECTS:
THE VIEW FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT

All ethnographers must contend with the “observer’s paradox” – the probability that the presence of the outsider-ethnographer affects the behavior being observed, and the resulting likelihood that it is not possible to observe a completely natural situation. Ethnographers are of course aware of this danger, and try to construct an interview situation which will be as natural as possible.

But the danger is twofold. Not only may the fact of being observed cause the informant to behave less than completely naturally, it is also likely that the observer – being human – will bring his or her perceptions to bear when reporting on (and interpreting) the observed behavior. Most ethnographers are also aware of this danger, but – again being human – are probably unable to correct for it fully.

The advent of technological recording devices has helped remove some of these dangers. When first introduced to the village situation, these devices were strange and frightening to villagers who did not even know electricity. Now, however, with the ubiquity of television and cell phones even in remote villages, these machines are taken for granted and probably do not affect behavior much more than it might already have been affected by the presence of the observer, at least when it concerns free conversation about non-controversial topics. And from the observer’s standpoint, such recordings provide a very valuable touchstone of objectivity.

With respect to dialectology, the subject of this contribution, the ability to make audio recordings of real speech, in real time, has been transformative. Not only do these recordings allow the investigator to listen repeatedly to the same material, and to make much more accurate transcriptions, but they have also revealed a much greater diversity in dialectal material than had previously been assumed. Indeed, once audio recording became the norm, it appeared likely that the regularity of reflexes reported on the basis of texts recorded by hand was illusory, and most likely due to unconscious normalization on the part of the investigator / transcriber. This is not surprising, given that such an investigator was required to follow a normal conversation, be on the lookout for pertinent dialectal forms, and make phonetic transcriptions of what he heard, all more or less simultaneously. Dialectal data published in the latter part of the 20th century, which give ample proof of this greater diversity, are
assumed to be more reliable simply because they have been transcribed from audio recordings. But there is still a drawback: because these materials exist only in print form, users have access only to those data which the investigator chose to transcribe, and then chose to present in print.

The next major step forward was the introduction of digitization, and the ability to provide immediate, cost-free access to digital files over the internet. Because audio files can now be made available not only to the investigator, but also to the user, one can move closer to a resolution of the observer's paradox. The most responsible way to do this is to provide audio files of real speech recorded in real time, accompanied by as much information as possible both about the material being presented and the context in which it was recorded.

These are the intentions underlying the construction of the database Bulgarian Dialectology as Living Tradition (BDLT, now available over the internet at http://bulgariandialectology.org), which includes 181 excerpts from field recordings made in 68 different villages throughout Bulgaria over the period 1986–2013. Each excerpt occupies a separate page containing the audio file, a transcription of the file's contents (in both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets), a translation into English, metadata about both the text and the circumstances of recording, and annotations of each word in each text, allowing users to search the database for items or traits of interest. At present the site includes only the texts plus annotations (which are still in the process of being assigned), but it will eventually include analytic prose commentaries (akin to normal research reports), both about the traits of each local dialect investigated and about salient treats of each individual text. The importance of this sort of presentation, which provides both the actual field recordings and extensive analysis of these recordings — is the possibility of verification. Users no longer need to trust that the investigator has made the right transcription or analysis: they can listen to the original and verify for themselves.

As noted above, there are two aspects of the observer's paradox. The first is that the presence of the observer may detract from the naturalness of the situation being observed, and the second is that the unconscious attitudes of the observer may affect the objectivity of the report about that situation. All responsible researchers, of course, do all they can to mitigate the effects of both these potential dangers, and the BDLT team is no exception. Concerning the first of these factors, dialectologists are fortunate in that audio recorders that are now so small as to be next to unnoticeable. This increases the likelihood that the informant, once having given permission to be recorded, will forget that the recording is taking place. The BDLT team has further acted to maximize the naturalness of the situation by eschewing questionnaires and choosing to record at length natural conversations between investigator(s) and informant(s). The team realized from the outset that by doing so they might fail to record certain specific wordforms, but they felt the choice was justified by the spontaneity (and consequent reliability) of what did occur in the recorded speech. The audio files provided on the BDLT site are unedited (except to excise random noises), thus allowing the user maximal access to this natural conversational situation.

The second factor, the goal of objectivity, is naturally of concern to all research endeavors. While the BDLT project makes no claim to full objectivity, its design nevertheless contributes an additional factor by expanding the point of view. Most dialectological enterprises are organized and carried out by research institutions within the relevant countries, with the obvious advantage that the researchers are native speakers, who are familiar with the landscape and the culture, and who have full access to research archives of past expeditions sponsored by these same institutes. By contrast, the BDLT site is an outgrowth of a series of joint Bulgarian-North American field expeditions spanning the period 1990–2002, and the majority of the material on the site is drawn from field recordings made during these expeditions. All levels of the project, therefore, from the original field expeditions through to the final presentation of research results, were undertaken collaboratively. The entire BDLT project, therefore, represents a combination of the insider's (the Bulgarian) and the outsider's (the American) view.

The value of the insider's point of view is obvious. As native speaker dialectologists, the Bulgarian side of the BDLT team directed the field work (though the Americans side also took part), did all the research underlying the selection of field sites, reviewed all the field tapes for the choice of excerpts and made the initial transcriptions, and continue to participate fully in (and provide the expert view on) the process of annotation, discussion, and interpretation of the excerpts. Their view provides the project with the extensive experience and institutional memory of the discipline of Bulgarian dialectology. But it is the combination of this viewpoint with that of the outsider that has made this project unique. It was the American co-organizers of the field expeditions who insisted that the sole focus be on recording long stretches of natural, spontaneous conversation, even at the expense of the questionnaire level of fieldwork. It was also the American side which devised the format of publishing transcribed texts along with audio segments, and of translating these segments into English so as to make them more accessible to the world outside Bulgaria. It was also this side which then proposed that the entire project be presented not in print (or electronic pdf) format but as a relational database accessible on the internet, and which then devised and implemented the form of this website.
The resulting website is unique even among the several such websites which now present Balkan dialectal data accompanied by audio files. This is partly because it combines the synchronic approach of a corpus with the diachronic slant of many of dialect atlas maps. In the first instance it presents a large amount of natural language data recorded in context, and provides a means to search for individual word forms within the speech stream; while in the second it tags individual items for a number of factors, many of which are of historical interest, and provides a means not only to search for items displaying these factors but also to depict their geographical distribution on a map. Finally, the site was has not required expensive custom programming, but was rather constructed using the open-source content management system Drupal, which is constantly being developed and improved by a worldwide community of volunteer programmers. 

This contribution’s title speaks of the insider’s and outsider’s viewpoints. But the “living tradition” of BDLT in fact speaks to three different levels. Dialect speakers for whom their means of speech is a way of life represent tradition at the core, inmost level. Study of these dialects according to the venerable traditions of Bulgarian dialectology represents tradition at the insider, local level. Finally, making the material of these dialects open to everyone through the means of modern technology represents the new tradition of the worldwide digital community.

Уте Дукова (Франкфурт на Майн)

БЪЛГ. ВЯРА В КОНТЕКСТА НА ОПОЗИЦИЯТА СВОЙ / ЧУЖД


В модела на света на българската традиционна народна култура противопоставянето между християнска вяра / безверие, чужда вяра се отличава със силен антагонизъм. Християнска вяра означава православна вяра. Като неверници, иноверци се считат не само привържениците на други религии, а и католици и протестанти. Принадлежността към вярата се определя преди всичко от спазването на ритуалите. В известния роман на Иван Вазов „Под итото” бай Марко укорява сина си: „Ти ставаш от съдата, без да се прекръсташ, протестантка!” (Вазов 1967: 13). Интересът към канонично християнската страна на религията се за- силва едва през Възраждането в градските среди на занаятчите (Бонева 1994:265). Вярата е преди всичко ярък национален белег. Информаторите
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ВЗГЛЯД
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ИЗВНЕ и ИЗНУТРИ

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