

Serbian Language Acquisition in Communist Romania

Abstract: The paper analyzes a unique linguistic phenomenon characterizing Romania's western border areas for almost a decade, in the 1980s: the acquisition of the Serbian language by Romanians in Timișoara under the communist regime, primarily through exposure to Yugoslav television programmes. It gives a necessarily sketchy overview of private life under communism, notably the situation in the Banat province, whose privileged position as a result of being closest to the West both geographically and culturally was reflected in the acceptance of pluralism and a critical attitude towards authoritarianism. Taking into account the literature on foreign language acquisition through exposure to television programmes, the study is based on a research involving Romanian natives of Timișoara who, although lacking any formal instruction in Serbian, intensively and regularly watched Yugoslav television programmes in the period in question, and on evaluating their competence and proficiency in Serbian, through language tests, narrative interviews in Romanian and free conversations in Serbian. The conclusion is that most respondents, despite the varying degree of proficiency in Serbian depending on their active use of the language before and after 1989, showed a strong pragmatic competence, which appears to contradict the author's initial hypothesis.

Keywords: TV foreign language acquisition, Serbian language, Romania, Timișoara, communism

Introduction

To explore, today, the way in which the Serbian language was acquired, to a varying degree of competence, by the Romanians of Timișoara in the 1980s requires an interdisciplinary empirical and theoretical approach. It is only such an approach that, in my view, is apt to shed light on all elements and processes involved in language acquisition in such a specific historical context and region. Accordingly, the material used — the interviews with Romanians from Timișoara and the results of a Serbian language test — was placed in the theoretical frame of anthropology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, language acquisition and, to a certain extent, pragmalinguistics and communicology. It is my contention that only such an interdisciplinary research has the potential to look into the issue in question in all its complexity, and to trace directions for further research.

1. Everyday life under communism

The instauration of a communist regime in Romania, in March 1945, when the first communist government came to power, marked the beginning of a

new period in the contemporary history of the country, characterized both by a nation-wide political, economic and social transformation, and even more by profound changes experienced by each and every individual. In the second half of the twentieth century, communism became the “overwhelming fact of life for Romanians” (Hitchins 1992, 1080), functioning for over forty years as an ideological cover for a political and economical system turning Romania away from Western Europe and towards the East.¹ The 1980s were a period of extreme deprivation for the vast majority of Romanians. The generalized economic crisis was amplified by the painful process of debt repayment and by the implementation of gigantic projects of Stalinist inspiration, all of them at the expense of living standard: rationalization, electricity and food shortages, lack of proper medical care and drugs were new socialist realities.

Towards the end of Ceaușescu’s rule, the country’s deep economic crisis was accompanied by a widespread popular discontent: “A widespread atmosphere of *fin-de-règne* was imbued with hopelessness, corruption and universal fear. Discontent was rampant but in general, however, it seemed that Ceaușescu managed to keep a strict control over the country, nipping in the bud any form of dissent and resistance. His cult was unique in its absurdity and pompousness” (Tismăneanu 1999, 159). Everyday life was marked by fear, intimidation, corruption, suspicion that the person next to you might be an informer; political repression became extremely violent; professional promotion was not based on the merit principle. As in most communist states, propaganda was seen as the most far-reaching and most effective ideological tool; in the last decades of communist rule, it became a naturalized part of everyday life: simultaneously serving to legitimize the regime and for mass instruction, the propaganda apparatus resembled the military in its organization (Kligman 2000, 108–112). Workplace stealing was widespread, as people sought to develop strategies of supplying their households in response to the generalized privation and shortage of consumer goods.²

Part of this privation was also a drastic reduction in television programme. Due to the “energy saving project” initiated by Ceaușescu, between 1985 and 1989 Romanian Television limited broadcasting time to mere two hours a day, from 8 to 10 p.m., most of the time being devoted to the personality cult of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena. On top of this severe

¹ As the history of the Romanian communist regime is not our main concern here, an interested reader may find more in Cioroianu 2005, Deletant 1997, Tismăneanu 2005, Verdery 1991.

² For more on everyday life in communist Romania, see Budeancă and Olteanu 2010, Dragomir 2008, Neculau 2004.

restriction, radio and TV programmes but also the cinema, the theatre and other fields of artistic creativity were to follow the guidelines laid down in the *July Theses*,³ so that their educational and ideological role should prevail over their aesthetic value in order that they should become accessible to the masses, especially the workers and peasants, thus stopping the inflow of “decadent” Western products.

As a legitimate reaction to the drastic reduction of television programmes and ubiquitous communist propaganda, more and more people began to look for alternative ways to satiate their need for information and entertainment. As the televisions of the neighbouring states had a strong signal in the border regions, and even beyond, watching the programmes of Bulgarian, Hungarian and Yugoslav televisions became a way of escaping from the seclusion, isolation and insularity imposed by Ceaușescu’s policies, thus making a breach in the imaginary iron curtain which separated communist Romania not only from the West but even from the other, more lenient communist regimes in the region. Of all the aforementioned televisions, Yugoslav was by far the most liberal and offered the most diverse and interesting programmes. Furthermore, its signal was quite strong and covered the entire Banat, and a part of Muntenia and Oltenia, where it overlapped with that of Bulgarian television. The latter, however, was not as appreciated because of the poorer quality of its programmes and dubbed foreign language films.

2. *The Romanian Banat Province and Timișoara*

As for the Banat Province, it enjoyed a privileged position, both geographically and culturally, which was reflected even under the communist regime in an acceptance of pluralism and a critical attitude towards authoritarianism. Owing to its proximity to central Europe, its unhindered access to the mass media of both Hungary and Yugoslavia, intense contacts between the local Romanians and Serbs, and economic contacts with the Serbs from

³ The *July Theses* is the popular name of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s speech delivered at the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) held on 6 July 1971. Its official title was *Proposals of measures for the improvement of politico-ideological activity, of Marxist-Leninist education of party members and of all working people*. The *Theses* contained 17 “proposals” to be discussed by the PCR Central Committee in the autumn of 1971. The speech marked the beginning of a “cultural mini-revolution” (Verdery 1991, 107) in communist Romania: competence and aesthetics were to be replaced by ideology, professionals in different domains by agitators, while culture was to become a mere instrument of political-ideological propaganda (Bozóki 1991, 57). The *Theses* marked the end of a period of a somewhat “softer” attitude towards culture and the beginning of severe prohibitions and totalitarian measures.

Serbia, the Banat opened up to the outside world. Seeking to identify the reasons for the redefinition of the Banat Romanians' relations with other ethnic groups in the communist period, Chelcea (1999) argues that one of them had to do with the economic crisis and the shortage of consumer goods that began in the 1980s. Chelcea goes on to say that it was advantageous for the Romanians to establish closer individual interaction with the Germans, for example, because in that way they could gain access to the goods that were in short supply. Also, the shortages led to a redefinition of ethnic relations with the Hungarians and Serbs as well: "From the 1960s on, neighbouring Hungary and Serbia had much more liberal and consumer oriented policies, compared with the heavy industrialization path of Romania. The local Diasporas, but also the population from the border regions of the two countries was also helpful in the circulation of goods and images of the West" (Chelcea 1999). Victor Neumann also suggests that the communication and contact of the Germans, Hungarians and Serbs of the Banat with people in Germany, Hungary and Serbia respectively, helped maintain the flow of information between these countries and Romania. During the economic crisis, "the proximity of the former Yugoslavia and Hungary constituted an opening for diversity. Until 1989 the world could be watched through TV channels broadcast from Budapest, Belgrade and Novi Sad" (Neumann 2000, 122).

Furthermore, the Banat region has had a strong tradition of multiculturalism and interethnic tolerance, and the phenomenon of unfocused language acquisition is frequent there, if reduced to a basic variety of the language acquired. In comparison with other cities of central and south-eastern Europe, where the majority culture has linguistically assimilated that of any minority, Timișoara stands out by its cultural diversity and the shared history of its mixed population. Multilingualism and multi-confessionalism has been the city's dominant feature for three centuries, influencing the shaping of the mentality of its inhabitants and the functioning of society. Although the official languages have varied over time (German in the eighteenth century, Hungarian in the nineteenth, and Romanian since 1919), there has always been in Timișoara a propensity for learning several languages (Neumann 2008, 160). Remarkably good relations among the minorities of the Banat have always been facilitated by the region's widespread multilingualism. The Hungarians speak Romanian and German; the Serbs and Bulgarians have been bilingual, the Romanian language being adopted as a second language in families. The Jews have largely been multilingual, and the Slovak minority has been speaking both Romanian and Hungarian. As Neumann (2000, 123) puts it, "the social relations among minorities have been multifarious and have taken the form of cultural cooperation, of recognition and respect for the traditions of other regions. Their extensive

linguistic resources have enabled the local cultural minorities to acquire a thorough understanding of the particular inheritance of the Banat region”.

3. *The Romanian and Serbian languages*

One can often hear from the ordinary people of Timișoara that they have learnt Serbian through watching Yugoslav TV. The same thing can also be heard from writers who are natives of the Banat. Talking about their childhood and adolescence, they say that they were greatly influenced by the proximity of Yugoslavia and by Yugoslav TV, which helped them learn the Serbian language (see e.g. Gheo 2006). In spite of its presumed extent and possible importance in studying the motivation for and patterns of language learning, this phenomenon has never been looked at from a linguistic point of view. This exploratory study seeks to evaluate the linguistic competence of the Romanians who acquired the Serbian language during the last years of communism.

Before proceeding any further, we should warn that one cannot speak of semicomcommunication⁴ in the case of Romanian and Serbian. Nevertheless, it is a fact that one of the specific features of the Romanian language, which sets it apart from the other Romance languages, is a relatively large number of elements of Slavic origin, mainly at the level of vocabulary. As far as the Serbian influence on the Romanian language is concerned, dialectologists have concluded that it has a regional character, being restricted only to the Banat dialect (Gămulescu 1974, 226). However, these regionalisms can only account for the acquisition — or better said, recognition — of a small part of Serbian vocabulary, and cannot be considered as playing a decisive role in learning the Serbian language.

4. *Foreign language acquisition through exposure to television programmes*

The conventional view of developmental psychologists, psycholinguists and linguists is that television viewing does not contribute significantly to

⁴ The term *semicomcommunication* was coined by Einar Haugen (1966, 281) with reference to the linguistic situation in Scandinavia, defined as “the trickle of messages through a rather high level of ‘code noise’” (by “code noise” he meant differences in the linguistic codes hampering communication without positively barring it). Communication does not require that the participants have the same language. Despite the growing loss of efficiency in the communication processes as language codes diverge from one another, it is often astonishing how great a difference can be overcome by speakers if there is a will to understand. The concept of semicomcommunication can be applied, for example, to Czech and Slovak, Serbian and Bulgarian, Serbian and Russian, Romanian and Italian etc.

the viewer's language acquisition. Very few studies to date have demonstrated incidental foreign language acquisition, to some degree, through watching subtitled television programmes in a foreign language, during short-term experiments (d'Ydewalle and Van de Poel 1999; d'Ydewalle 2002), but a longitudinal study to assess cumulative effects on all aspects of language acquisition by watching television programmes at home is still lacking.

Most studies addressing this subject focus on the effect of subtitling on the acquisition of elements of a foreign language, in educational and non-educational settings, as compared to dubbing. It has been demonstrated that switching attention from visual images to reading the subtitles is effortless and almost automatic; thus reading the subtitle at its onset presentation is more or less obligatory and remains unaffected by major contextual factors, such as the availability of the soundtrack and the pace of action (d'Ydewalle 2002, 60). It has also been shown that, with adults, the reverse subtitling mode (with foreign language in the subtitles and native language in the soundtrack) results in more extensive vocabulary acquisition than does the normal subtitling mode (foreign language in the soundtrack and native language in the subtitles): more new words are acquired when they are presented visually than auditorily. However, unlike adults, children tend to acquire more when the foreign language is in the soundtrack rather than in the subtitles (d'Ydewalle and Van de Poel 1999, 241–242).

Also, it is widely accepted that language acquisition following exposure to television programmes is largely limited to vocabulary (Koolstra and Beentjes 1999, 58; d'Ydewalle 2002, 64), while the acquisition of foreign language morphology and syntax can occur only after some formal instruction in the foreign language. Jovanović and Matic (2008, 333–335), in a contrastive study on adolescents conducted in Serbia, which assessed Spanish language acquisition by instructed learners as compared to Spanish *telenovela* viewers, have also concluded that even though language acquisition in the latter group occurred mostly at the lexical level, simple grammatical structures have also been acquired.

There are also a few studies which analyze the impact of watching foreign language television programmes (with no subtitles) on the language skills of immigrants (Buss 1995; Franceschini 2003). Finding themselves in a new language environment, immigrants can passively acquire the new language by watching television programmes over the years: the experience of “being exposed” to a foreign language can lead to unfocused language acquisition. However, many research findings on immigration indicate that language acquisition quite often comes to a standstill at the level of a basic variety, sufficient for a simple, practical communication, but not for expressing more sophisticated notions (Franceschini 2003, [50]).

5. *Hypothesis*

The case of foreign language acquisition we shall discuss here is quite specific, and no consistent research on similar situations has so far been conducted. From the early 1980s until the beginning of the 90s, the Romanians of Timișoara, without being immigrants, “found” themselves in a foreign language environment by watching Yugoslav television programmes. For many, Serbian became a third language. Thus, they watched foreign movies (American, French etc.) with foreign subtitles (Serbian) — a situation which has not so far been registered in the literature; various programmes (documentaries, shows, music, sports) in a foreign language (Serbian) with no subtitles; and cartoons dubbed in Serbian. D’Ydewalle concluded one of his studies on foreign language acquisition by saying that “possibly, a sequence of several movies, spread over a longer period of time, could [...] provide conclusive evidence that vocabulary acquisition due to subtitled television programs is supplemented with grammar acquisition” (d’Ydewalle 2002, 74). The aim of this research is to explore how this intense and extended exposure of Romanian-language speakers to Serbian television influenced their acquisition of the Serbian language. I have tried to investigate both vocabulary and grammar (morphology and syntax), together with communicative and productive skills. While expecting that intense exposure to different TV programmes should offer a rich context for vocabulary acquisition, I assumed that grammatical rules cannot be learnt without some previous formal instruction. Also, I expected that the level of Serbian language knowledge would be much lower today than it had been twenty years ago, and I was anxious that the time interval between the exposure to the Serbian language and the present research might affect its results considerably, leading to its ending in failure.

6. *The present study*

Based on the earlier experimental studies on children’s incidental learning of foreign words through watching subtitled television programmes (d’Ydewalle and Van de Poel 1999; Koolstra and Beentjes 1999), on adults’ language acquisition through exposure to foreign subtitled movies (Jovanović and Matić 2008) and on unfocused language acquisition by immigrants in a new foreign language context (Franceschini 2003), I conducted my research in order to determine whether, and to what degree, the native Romanian speakers of Timișoara in the communist period acquired Serbian language elements through exposure to Yugoslav TV programmes. Unlike these previous studies, mine was not performed immediately after the subjects’ exposure to TV material, but almost two decades after they had

stopped watching Yugoslav television.⁵ It is not a longitudinal study, but presents the synchronic, present-day situation of the respondents who used to watch Yugoslav television throughout the 1980s, and who claim either that they have learnt Serbian “from TV” or at least that they understood most of the spoken or written language on TV.

7.1. Research method and participants

The research was conducted in 2010 in Timișoara, the largest city in the Romanian Banat, using a sample of ten participants (eight men and two women), aged between 32 and 42, which means that they were between 11 and 21 years old at the end of the target period (1982–89).⁶ All were born and grew up in Timișoara, with the single exception of a person born in Turnu Severin,⁷ but presently living in Timișoara. All of them now hold a higher education degree and had no previous formal instruction in Serbian. Some were selected from among the author’s circle of friends and acquaintances, others by snowball sampling.

To assess the participants’ language skills, I have employed:

1) *A semi-structured narrative interview in Romanian*, about the period when they began watching Yugoslav TV channels, their favourite programmes, ways of dealing with the foreign language, other contacts with the Serbian language, both before, during and after the period in question.

2) *A language test*, consisting of a multiple-choice test, translation of words from Romanian into Serbian and vice versa, translation of two short texts from Romanian to Serbian and vice versa, and a reading task.⁸

3) *Free conversation in Serbian* with the most proficient participants.

7.2. Procedure and results

7.2.1. The narrative interview in Romanian

The narrative interviews have proved valuable in reconstructing the actual circumstances under which the respondents acquired the Serbian language,

⁵ For most participants in the study, that moment is roughly coincident with the Romanian Revolution of 1989, which overthrew the communist regime. Since that date, the Romanians have been free to watch foreign television programmes by means of cable television, and local television programmes have also been increasingly diverse.

⁶ As some of them were children, some adolescents and adults at the time of language acquisition, different respondents activated different psychological patterns of language learning.

⁷ Turnu Severin is a port on the Danube, in Western Oltenia, on the border with Serbia, so it is comparable to Timișoara as regards the exposure to the Serbian language through watching Yugoslav TV.

⁸ The language test is added as an appendix at the end of the paper.

since slices of memory contained in them provide clues to the experience of “being exposed” that can lead to unfocused language acquisition (see also Franceschini 2003, [48]). Despite their initial emphasis on their passive reception of oral language through exposure to television, the participants revealed a multitude of learning strategies as well as persons involved in their language acquisition. Thus they described many other interactions, which point to a multitude of situations in which spontaneous language acquisition can take place in general, such as their interaction with Serbian schoolmates, or with Serbs from Serbia who used to come to the flea markets in Timișoara to sell consumer goods that were much sought for during the harsh economic crisis (jeans, chocolate, sweets, T-shirts, *Vegeta* food condiment, music cassettes etc.), or later — during the embargo against Serbia, when the movement took the reverse direction and Romanians started going to the neighbouring country to sell various goods — the communication with people in Serbia.⁹ One should also keep in mind that there is in Timișoara a large Serbian community,¹⁰ and that relations between the two countries have always been quite strong, at least at a regional level.

What our respondents recalled while talking about the circumstances surrounding their acquisition of Serbian from TV was, in fact, part of their childhood and adolescence: all of them spoke with great pleasure and emotion about what can be termed the process of maturing. As emotional evaluations are important for cognitive achievements, the stronger the emotional involvement of a person, the stronger his or her memories and knowledge.

At the beginning of the interviews, the respondents were asked to tell something about preference given to Yugoslav TV over Hungarian. They all had the same explanation: except for those who spoke Hungarian, everybody else watched Yugoslav TV, because movies were not dubbed, as they were in Hungary, the programmes were more diverse as opposed to “pretty flat” Hungarian ones, the music was quite good and, in general, Serbian was easier to pronounce and understand. Industrial workers manufactured special receivers for “the Serbs” and for “the Hungarians”, for Yugoslav and Hungarian TVs respectively; initially, three channels were available with the Serbian receiver – Belgrade 1, Belgrade 2 and Novi Sad, and later on *Treći kanal* (Third Channel) as well. The receivers, as some respondents recall, even had special names: *Yagi 1* and *Yagi 2*.

⁹ A distinctive variant of spontaneous language acquisition is the level known as “unfocused language learning” (Franceschini 2003, [51]): learning a language “in passing” by being exposed to it and without paying much attention. Although such forms are not amenable to direct observation, one cannot help but agree that they provide a sufficient foundation or, at least, an opportunity for further acquisition.

¹⁰ For the ethnic identity of the Serbs in Timișoara, see Pavlović 2005 and 2006.

Because of their young age at the time, at first almost all respondents watched cartoons on Yugoslav TV. Interestingly, all of them, without exception, used the term *crtani film* (cartoon) without ever translating it into Romanian. The same goes for *vesti* (news) and *filmski maraton* (movie marathon). They practically grew up with Yugoslav TV, watching everything: from cartoons and music shows, through sports, documentaries, news, educational programmes, to movie marathons and even porn movies.¹¹ Thus, the respondents have been exposed to different registers of the language: from formal (the news) to casual and intimate ones (movies, interviews, live shows etc.). They listened to the literary language, but also to dialogues taking place in real-life situations, often dialectal, or to the simplified language of sports programmes, and they also learnt lyrics by heart.

Many of the participants had the visual memory of the opening sequence of various TV shows: “I used to watch *crtani film*. There was a big TV and a small TV [on the screen]. This announced the programme to follow. When the small TV showed up and started to dance, I knew cartoons were about to begin,” one participant explained, recalling a well-known children’s programme. The same participant spoke about the news programme: “Serbian TV was our only source of information. We also used to watch the news. *Vesti*. There were some dots and tick-tick-tick-tick-tick, like this, and the *vesti* would appear. It was incredibly great. There you could find out what was really happening in the world.” Others remembered different commercials (*Kiki* caramels, Lee Cooper jeans, *Eurokrem* chocolate cream, *Cipiripi* chocolate bars, juices, *C-market* products, drugs, etc.), visually and orally, adding that they did not learn what some of the commercials had promoted until long after they stopped watching Yugoslav TV.

Some of them recalled that, in the early 1980s, the Serbian Consulate in Timișoara used to receive Serbian newspapers and magazines with the Yugoslav TV schedule included, and that the secretaries used to produce

¹¹ For this generation, mainly in preadolescence and adolescence in the 1980s, learning Serbian and watching Yugoslav TV programmes was the only way to find out what was going on in the rest of the world. For their parents, as for most Romanians in other regions of the country, listening to Radio Free Europe was the only connection with the world. However, as one respondent put it, “we were quite young and our parents wouldn’t let us do it [listen to Radio Free Europe], because it was not good. Later on, when we grew up, we did listen, but couldn’t understand half of it. It was different with TV, though.” It should be noted that this phenomenon was in fact a continuation of listening to Yugoslav radio stations: before TV sets began to enter average homes (roughly after 1960), most of the respondents had used to listen to Yugoslav radio stations. This might have helped them to become familiar with the Serbian language, at least at a phonetic level; we believe, however, that the visual input played the most important role in their acquisition of Serbian.

several copies on their typewriters to disseminate them about the city. On Fridays no one would leave work before buying a typed copy of the TV schedule. After 1986, the Consulate started receiving more copies of the TV schedule, so people could get a real, printed one. The respondents, children or adolescents at the time, used to cut out pictures of celebrities from the programme, glue them in their notebooks and make highly valued collections of the cuttings.

All watched sport competitions and championships, both national and international, on Yugoslav TV. European or world football championships were the occasion for people to gather together, at first in the homes of those in possession of better receivers, then of those who had colour TVs. One of the respondents even admitted that he had taken up basketball “because of the Serbs”, having watched their championships and being impressed by their passion for the sport.

As for movies, American films were among their favourites. As I have already said, all movies were subtitled, and so people, relying on their English, made associations and learnt Serbian words, “a lot of them, step by step”, as a respondent put it. As for TV serials, they remembered watching the *Dinasty*, *Shogun*, *Alo, alo, MASH*. Some of them remembered watching the first erotic movies; others claimed that they watched even Yugoslav movies because these, unlike Romanian, contained a lot of erotic scenes (“We knew that there’d be at least one erotic scene in every Serbian film, while in Romanian ones — never”). In 1986, *filmski maraton* (movie marathon) was launched on the Third Channel. Different movies ran one after another Friday to Sunday. People would spend all night long watching TV and recording movies on videotapes, so on Saturday the children were sleepy at school, and their parents at work.

The respondents also recall watching music shows on Yugoslav TV.¹² Zdravko Čolić, Oliver Mandić, Lepa Brena, Bijelo Dugme, Riblja Čorba, Bajaga i instruktori, Magazin, are among the Yugoslav entertainers the participants most frequently mentioned and whose lyrics they knew by heart. One participant recalled: “We knew all the lyrics. Even now, when I sing Bajaga’s songs, I don’t understand half the words, but they come to my mind. And my pronunciation is bad.”¹³

¹² Records or cassettes with foreign music were also brought from Serbia and everybody was familiar with the international music top lists presented on Yugoslav TV. Also, most of the participants remembered Lepa Brena’s concert in Timișoara in 1984, a unique event in a period when no foreign entertainers could obtain permission to perform in communist Romania.

¹³ Even today, in Timișoara, this generation still play “oldies” of the Yugoslav popular music at their parties.

After the Romanian Revolution of 1989 overthrew the communist regime and cable networks began expansion, Yugoslav TV was not watched as much as before. Some of the participants remained at that level of Serbian language knowledge, which was mostly acquired passively and has never been really activated. As already noted, many immigration studies have shown that language acquisition can reach a basic level without making any further progress. Whether initially learning the language spontaneously or in school contexts, all learners pass through this basic variety and remain there for some time before moving on. Some, however, may remain at this level for the rest of their lives (Franceschini 2003, [50]). Some of our respondents, on the other hand, continued or began to use Serbian actively: some of them became engaged in the non-government sector and started collaborating with Serbian NGOs, others worked in different regions of Serbia for a while, interacting with the local population; one worked in Russia for some time, where he had ex-Yugoslav workmates. Another respondent, having graduating from the Medical School in Timișoara, even thought of going to Belgrade to do his specialization, relying mainly on the Serbian he had acquired from TV. Also, when incidentally meeting Serbian speakers, in informal contexts, either in Romania or abroad, my respondents were willing to try to reactivate their knowledge of Serbian.¹⁴

7.2.2. *The language test*

Only six out of a total of ten respondents took the language test. The rest were reluctant, claiming that their Serbian was not good enough. Of these six, two believed that their Serbian was quite good, but claimed that they had no experience in writing and proposed to do the test orally. Given that they had never used Serbian in its written form, the proposal was understandable and legitimate. Those who did the test in writing showed a high level of orthographic inaccuracy.¹⁵ Apart from this, as the test was sent to most of the respondents in electronic format and they completed it on their computers and sent it back, the omission of diacritics is acceptable.

7.2.2.1. *Morphology*

The multiple choice test — comprising ten questions in Serbian (in Latin script), each with a choice of five possible answers — was aimed at evaluating the use of instrumental and locative cases, which do not exist in Ro-

¹⁴ The issue of the prestige the Serbian language enjoyed in the Banat under communism will not be discussed here, as the subject is broad and deserves a separate study.

¹⁵ See Jovanović and Matić 2008, 330, 331 for similar observations concerning the poor orthographic competence of Spanish *telenovela* viewers as opposed to instructed learners.

manian, of different forms and cases of personal pronouns, the degrees of comparison of adjectives, forming of adjectives from nouns, greetings etc.

It is not surprising that the preferred choice in most cases was the instrumental case as the object of the preposition *sa* (with) — *sa vozom* (travel with train) — instead of the standard one, where the instrumental is the object of the verb — *Putovao sam vozom* (I travelled by train). It should be stressed that such a construction in Serbian usage is a trait of spoken language, to which they were intensively exposed. Moreover, the construction with the instrumental perfectly matches the Romanian grammatical pattern, where the preposition *cu* is used (*cu trenul*: “by train”). Therefore, this preference may be seen as mother tongue interference on the level of morphological structures.

The respondents showed an increased proficiency as far as the use of personal pronouns and degrees of comparison of adjectives was concerned. Some were even able to use the partitive genitive *vremena* (time): *Moja drugarica želi da idemo zajedno u grad, ali ja nemam vremena* (My friend wants us to go to town together, but I don't have time), but this may be explained by the fact that *nemam vremena* (I don't have time) has become a fixed expression in Serbian and is acquired as such.

Even though the respondents were not always able to choose the correct answer, it is important to note that they understood the context and were able to translate all sentences, which indicates their high language comprehension capacity.

7.2.2.2. Vocabulary

a) Word translation from Serbian into Romanian

The word translation part of the test was designed to assess the respondents' vocabulary competences. It consisted of seventeen words (adjectives, adverbs, verbs, nouns, pronouns and prepositions) and all participants succeeded in scoring more than fifty percent. The most commonly mistranslated words were abstract nouns (Ser. *olakšanje*: “relief”) and false friends (Ser. *tavan*: “attic”, Rom. *tavan*: “ceiling”; Ser. *pod*: “floor” and “under”, Rom. *pod*: “bridge”), to which they mostly attributed the meanings those words have in Romanian, along with the family of words sharing the same root (*večera*: “dinner”; *veče*: “evening”; *večeras*: “tonight”; *uveče*: “in the evening”), which proved to be quite confusing and led the respondents to give up and leave the last one or two words untranslated.

b) Word translation from Romanian into Serbian

The translation of words from Romanian into Serbian comprised thirty-five words of all types, as in the previous task. The participants' knowledge of

Serbian was noticeably characterized by the forms usually used in informal speech. As far as verbs are concerned, two infinitives offered in the test, *a cânta* (Ser. *pevați*: “to sing”) and *a merge* (Ser. *ici*: “to walk”), were translated using a wide range of verbal forms — first person plural present indicative (*idemo*); conjunction *da* + third person singular present (*da hoda*, *da pjeva*¹⁶); second person singular imperative (*hoda*, *peva*); third person plural present indicative (*idu*, *pevaju*) — probably those best known to, or most frequently used by, the participants. Their use of these forms indicates direct oral contact with native speakers, whether in “real” life or “just” through watching television. Nouns denoting concrete or usual things — *carte* (book), *noapte* (night), *alune* (hazelnuts; peanuts), *pâine* (bread), *mâine* (tomorrow) — were perfectly translated by the participants. However, they had difficulty translating one concrete noun — *desen* (Ser. *crtež*: a “drawing”). The syntagm *crtani film* (Rom. *desene animate*: “cartoon”) was learnt and remembered as such by all the participants; apart from the adjective *crtani*, they had no need to acquire the noun (*crtež*) or the verb (*crtati*) from the same word family; some of the respondents tried to derive it (*crtan*, *crtov*); one translated it as the diminutive of *cartoon* (*crtac*); another translated it as the adjective from the syntagm: *crtani* (drawn); while one added, in brackets, the word *film* to *crtani*. The latter respondent also offered the “context” from which he “extracted” the adjectives *albastru* (blue) and *roșu* (red): *plavi* (*moj safiru*) (“my blue sapphire” — a line of Bajaga’s lyrics) and *crvena* (*zvezda*) (“Red Star” — one of Belgrade’s best-known football clubs). This would certainly not happen to instructed learners, as they do not tend to connect words strictly with the context of their occurrence. Apart from two respondents, most were unable to translate the adjective *descult* (barefoot), but they came up with ingenious solutions: *bez cipele* (without a shoe) and *bez čarapi* (without socks),¹⁷ which also points to a powerful influence of the oral register. Most were unable to translate three days of the week: *vineri* (Friday), *sâmbătă* (Saturday), and *duminică* (Sunday); they could not remember exactly the name of the other days and generally confused them. As for the conjugation of the verb *mânca* (eat) in the present tense, the first and third person, singular and plural, were usually translated correctly, while the second person was simply skipped. It was also interesting to see how the respondents would translate nouns with a definite article (nonexistent in Serbian), by offering the following series: *copil* (child), *copii* (children), *copiii* (the children), *acești copii* (these children). As expected, they succeeded in translating the words

¹⁶ This dialectal form is easily explainable, as it can be frequently encountered in the lyrics of Bosnian or Croatian singers of the time.

¹⁷ This translation was made on the Romanian model: *fără ciorapi*.

from the series, but, probably sensing the inappropriateness, skipped the noun with the definite article.

It should also be noted that the most proficient participant in Serbian translated *pâine* (bread) as *kruh*, a predominantly Croatian term, and not as he was expected to, as *hleb*, the term used in Serbia. When asked if he had acquired this term through watching TV, he admitted that it was just an attempt to test my own knowledge of Serbian and Croatian, and that he learnt the word subsequently, in a Croatian-speaking environment. The same participant was the only one who drew my attention to the distinction between the Serbian words *kikiriki* (peanut) and *lešnik* (hazelnut), *alune* being wrongly used in spoken Romanian for both; the other respondents translated *alune* as *kikiriki*, while in fact the proper translation should be *lešnik*.

7.2.2.3. Syntax

a) Text translation from Serbian into Romanian

Out of the four tasks of text translation from Serbian into Romanian, the respondents scored very well on a short nine-sentence text, which confirms a general tendency in language acquisition for comprehension to precede production (see Clark 2003, 127–130, Hendriks and Koster 2010), both in the mother tongue and in a foreign language.

Minor errors mainly occurred in translating times of day. In Serbian, half hours are expressed as relative to the next hour, so “half past six” is expressed as “half to seven” (*pola sedam*), while Romanian uses virtually the same formula as English: *șase jumătate*: “half past six”. As a result, with one notable exception, all translated *pola sedam* (half past six) as *șapte jumate* (half past seven) instead of *șase jumate*, which obviously indicates mother tongue interference.

b) Text translation from Romanian into Serbian

The translation of an eight-sentence text from Romanian into Serbian seemed to pose the greatest difficulty, as only three respondents were willing to give it a try at all; one of those who abstained said that translating into Serbian “gives him a headache”. The three respondents who did the translation showed a quite creative, if not always accurate, use of language: the levels of fluency (or, better said, intelligibility) were quite high, even though the translations could hardly be described as grammatically correct. The occurrence was observable of the same mistakes as those made in the first tasks of the language test — the use of accusatives instead of locatives, the incorrect translation of time resulting from the use of the Romanian model, the erroneous use of instrumentals. In addition, a series

of other, different kinds of errors was also observed, such as the omission of the reflexive pronoun in reflexive verbal constructions in the first person singular: *duširao sam* instead of *tuširao sam se* (I took a shower), *probudio sam* instead of *probudio sam se* (I woke up). This can be easily explained by the fact that, in the Romanian verbal system, the reflexive verbs are conjugated with personal pronouns in the first and second person, and with the reflexive one only in the third. Also, one respondent's persistent mistake was the incorrect word order in constructions with the unstressed form of the verb *biti* (to be) where the personal pronoun is omitted: *Juče bio sam vrlo umoran* instead of *Juče sam bio vrlo umoran* (Yesterday I was very tired) and *Spavao sam vrlo dobro zašto bio je toplo u sobu* instead of *Spavao sam vrlo dobro zato što je bilo toplo u sobi* (I slept tight because it was warm in the room). In the last sentence we can also notice the incorrect use of *zašto* (why) instead of *zato što* (because), as well as the use of the locative case instead of the accusative (*u sobu* instead of *u sobi*).

Generally, the respondents were unable to form the future tense in Serbian, which is another feature of the spoken language, where the present is often used instead, with a time determinant. As far as the conditional is concerned, it was translated correctly by one respondent (*želio bi* "I'd like"),¹⁸ another used the present tense instead (*hoću da* "I want to"), while a third used a corrupted form of the conditional – *hoćeo bi*, instead of *hteo bih*, probably because the infinitive (*hteti*) does not resemble the third person singular present, *hoće*, the form most frequently used, as is the case with the verb *želeti*, for example. None of the respondents was able to use the correct literary form of iterative time adverbs: *in fiecare vineri* (every Friday) was translated as *svakom petku* or *svaka petaka*, but also as *svaki petak* (which is quite frequent at a dialectal level). Additionally, one of the respondents accommodated phonetically the neologism *vikend* (weekend) to the Romanian model — *ujkend*.

7.2.2.4. Reading in Cyrillic

The last task of the language test was a reading task: the participants were asked to read a short text written in Cyrillic. Interestingly enough most were able to do that. They remarked that they recognized some of the words visually, and added that, unlike commercials, movies on Yugoslav TV had never been subtitled in Cyrillic.¹⁹ The fact that many of them had studied

¹⁸ This is another dialectal variant frequently encountered in the songs they were listening to.

¹⁹ The switch from Latin to Cyrillic script took place in 1991, and therefore could not be remembered by our respondents, as they had stopped watching Yugoslav TV after 1990.

Russian in school, however, may be a possible explanation for the increased proficiency. Those who did the test on their computers just retyped the text in Latin script, underlying the words they did not understand. As expected, there was much confusion between *h̃* and *h̄*, and incorrect transcription of *h̃* and *h̄*.

7.2.3. Conversation in Serbian

This task was not originally included in the research plan, as I did not expect the participants to be able to perform a series of communicative functions in a realistic-like situation. However, the last two participants, who were also the most proficient in Serbian, suggested that we should speak in Serbian. Each conversation lasted for about ten minutes; the participants mainly talked about their past and present experiences, and about their interaction with native speakers of Serbian, a qualitative assessment of the audio-recording being made in the end (see also Jovanović and Matić 2008, 331–334 for a similar language assessment). The vocabulary used was not too rich, but one can notice a skilful use of the acquired words: very few lexemes were used to cover a wide range of concepts. The respondents were mainly able to use simple language structures to express much of what they wanted:

Ja sam isto radio tu. I kad sam bio tu uvek sam pričao srpski. I kad pričao srpski si Ser. I u Rusiju isto je bilo. Kad oni su... Dobro, na početku su mislili... Oni nisu znali da smo Rumuni. I dobili smo pivo besplatno.

(I also worked there. And when I was there I always spoke Serbian. And when you speak Serbian you are Serb. In Russia it was the same. When they... Ok, at first they thought... They didn't know we were Romanians. And we got beer for free.)

The less proficient participant performed quite poorly on grammatical accuracy, frequently switching back to his first language when lacking the Serbian equivalent: *Bagz Bani ima ženski comportament* (Bugs Bunny has a feminine behaviour). Also, he frequently used loan constructions from Romanian, not only on the lexical level, but also on the syntactical one: *Moj brat ima pet godina starije nego meni* (Rom. *Fratele meu este cu cinci ani mai mare decât mine*: “My brother is five years older than I”).²⁰ Both participants used various strategic devices, such as repeating the question in order to buy more time to think of an answer, or using the expression *Kako se kaže?* (What's the word?) to ask for the lacking vocabulary item,

²⁰ Romanian influence on the Serbian language will not be discussed here. For more, see Bošnjaković and Varenika 2008, Ivić 1990, Simić and Caran 2006.

or requesting clarification. On the other hand, grammatical accuracy of the more proficient respondent was quite high; he even used both Serbian and Croatian word variants to demonstrate that he was perfectly aware even of such subtle lexical differences. Both had quite good pronunciation and no difficulty pronouncing Serbian phonemes; one of them was even capable of differentiating between the affricates *č* and *ć*.

Interestingly, the last, and most proficient, respondent slipped Serbian words and phrases into our conversation in Romanian, which may be interpreted as a proof of high proficiency in Serbian:²¹ lacking the term that would perfectly express his thought, he resorted to code switching. Namely, he picked up lexemes from the other language register he mastered very well, from Serbian, those which he thought to be more appropriate in the given context:

Da, ne uitam la Treći kanal... Āla era mai mult umetnički, zabavnički.

(Yes, we watched the Third Channel... It was more artistic, entertaining.)

Aicea la noi in Banat se spune că nu găsești cal verde și sârb cuminte. Ās ei mai nărozi așa și mai tvrdoglavi. Da' în rest Ās ei ok.

(Here, with us, in the Banat, there is a saying that there is no such a thing as a green horse and a good Serb. They can be pretty silly and stubborn. But, apart from that, they're ok.)

In our conversation in Romanian, the same respondent, when using fragments of direct speech from his own conversations with Serbian speakers in the past, rendered them in Serbian:

Și i-am zis: "Ma nemoj! Misliš da danas sam došao iz šume?"

(And I told him: "Come on! Do you think I've only just come out of the backwoods?")²²

It may be said in conclusion that the respondents showed very high pragmatic competences. Even though they were unable to produce longer descriptive or explanatory passages, and requested "help of the sympathetic interlocutor" (Jovanović and Matic 2008, 333), the researcher, they were not inhibited by the fear of making mistakes, as is usually the case with instructed learners. Lacking a normative system to standardize their utterances in Serbian, they felt free to use the language following their intuition,

²¹ A similar code switching phenomenon can be encountered in bilingual individuals. For more on the Serbian-Romanian bilingualism of the Vlachs of northeast central Serbia and the Bayash of Croatia, see Sorescu-Marinković 2007b, 2008.

²² This is a frequently observed phenomenon in bilingual persons (for more details, see, for example, Petrović 2005, who analyzes the ideological functions of direct speech in the process of language switching with the Serbs in Bela krajina).

and thus showed a great creativity in employing the Serbian they acquired by watching TV.

8. *Conclusions*

In view of the twenty-year gap between the exposure to the Serbian language and the realization of the research, the obtained results were quite surprising and permitted me to draw relevant conclusions concerning the Serbian language acquisition in communist-period Timișoara. Even though the respondents showed a varying degree of proficiency, depending on their active use of Serbian before and after 1989, and although some of them had not enough confidence in their knowledge to take the language test, others showed a very high communicative competence.²³ This contradicts my initial hypothesis insofar as it shows that intensive exposure to Serbian-language TV programmes over a longer period of time resulted in the acquisition of a quite large vocabulary, supplemented with grammar acquisition as well.

As expected, the most conspicuous was the lexical level of the Serbian language acquisition. When translating from Serbian into Romanian, the respondents generally encountered difficulties only with abstract concepts and false friends. When translating from Romanian into Serbian, they made use mainly of forms detectable in informal contexts. Some of them even offered the whole construction from which they had “extracted” the given words, which suggests that they learnt many expressions by heart, either from TV or from lyrics. When they lacked the exact Serbian equivalent for a Romanian word, many respondents used their limited vocabulary resourcefully and came up with ingenious solutions.

At the morphological level, the respondents showed an increased proficiency as far as the use of personal pronouns and degrees of comparison of adjectives is concerned. Traits of spoken language were observable at this level as well, such as a preference for the instrumental case as the object of the preposition *sa* (with) instead of the standard one, where the instrumental is the object of the verb. Also, they were unable to translate the infinitive and the future tense of verbs, but used a wide range of verbal forms instead. However, the fact that morphology was also acquired is undeniable.

As for Serbian syntax, that it was the most difficult aspect of the language to master is evidenced by the fact that only three respondents agreed to try to translate a text from Romanian into Serbian, and two to engage in a conversation in Serbian. Even though they were not able to translate the text perfectly or to produce longer portions of description or explanation in

²³ According to Canale and Swain 1980, communicative competence includes grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence.

Serbian, and requested the researcher's assistance, the presence of basic syntactic structures was evident. Furthermore, they were not inhibited by the fear of making mistakes and used the Serbian language creatively.

8.1. Limitations of the study

There are a few limitations to this study that should be acknowledged and addressed. The first one resides in the fact that the group of respondents was not uniform enough, given that experimental studies on language acquisition are usually conducted with levelled groups (the same number of men and women, the same number of participants in each age group etc.). I believed it important to do the research anyway, as any delay could have led to the complete failure of the study. The second limitation is due to the fact that not all participants were willing to take the language test. The third limitation concerns the extent to which the findings are amenable to generalization. As the number of respondents was too small for broader generalizations, further evaluations are needed in order to be able to replicate the present findings.

8.2. Future research

This exploratory study may be seen as an invitation to further and similar research. It would be interesting, for instance, to compare the nature of communicative competence of Serbian-language learners at difference competence levels with that of persons who acquired Serbian only through watching Yugoslav television programmes.²⁴ Also, similar research might be conducted on the acquisition of Bulgarian in southern Romania, or of Serbian in Albania, through exposure to TV programmes in roughly the same period as the one studied here.

8.3. Concluding remarks

The fact that the respondents were highly educated facilitated the research greatly.²⁵ All of them instantly understood the purpose of the research and were willing to help. Indeed, they hailed it as an important and needed initiative. They came up with innovative suggestions as to its methodology, such as the inclusion of a conversation in Serbian, and were able to theorize and even to interpret the research results. They were familiar with the language categories we were trying to evaluate by the language test, and re-

²⁴ See Jovanović and Matić 2008 for a similar study on Spanish language.

²⁵ See Sorescu 2007a for a detailed analysis of the obstacles and problems encountered in the field while interviewing persons from traditional rural communities.

ardless of whether they fulfilled the tasks or not, they drew many pertinent conclusions and offered their own observations on what had enabled and helped them to fulfil them. All were very anxious to see the finalization of the research, and eager to read the study once it is published. For all that, I am greatly indebted to all of them.

Appendix: LANGUAGE TEST

I. Choose the correct variant:

1. Letos sam išao na more. Putovao sam _____.
 - a) sa voz
 - b) vozom
 - c) sa vozom
 - d) voz
 - e) na vozu
2. Danas je sunčano i deca se igraju _____.
 - a) napolju
 - b) napolje
 - c) u napolju
 - d) u napolje
 - e) napolji
3. _____ sam, ne mogu sad da pričam!
 - a) Na posao
 - b) U posao
 - c) U poslu
 - d) U posli
 - e) Na poslu
4. Darko je u kolima. Kaži _____ da dođe da priča sa nama.
 - a) ga
 - b) joj
 - c) mu
 - d) mi
 - e) vam
5. Ja sam doktorka. A ti, _____ se ti baviš?
 - a) kome
 - b) čime
 - c) sa kim
 - d) čemu
 - e) na čemu
6. Moja drugarica želi da idemo zajedno u grad, ali ja nemam _____.
 - a) vreme
 - b) vremena
 - c) vremenom
 - d) vremenu
 - e) na vreme
7. Kad smo bili mladi izlazili smo često, a sada izlazimo _____.
 - a) veliko
 - b) dugo
 - c) retko
 - d) malo
 - e) brzo
8. Austrija je mala zemlja, a Malta je još _____.
 - a) manja
 - b) veća
 - c) mala
 - d) malka
 - e) male
9. Studenti imaju dva raspusta tokom godine: zimski raspust u januaru, a _____ u julu i avgustu.
 - a) prolećni
 - b) letnji
 - c) leto
 - d) u leto
 - e) na leti
10. – Danas mi je rođendan.
– _____ ti rođendan!
 - a) Zdravi
 - b) Veliki
 - c) Srećno
 - d) Nazdravi
 - e) Srećan

II. Translate from Romanian into Serbian:

desen _____; carte _____; noapte _____; alune _____
 _____; pâine _____; mâine _____; deseară _____; a merge
 _____; a cânta _____; gol _____; desculț _____;
 frumos _____;
 pe _____; în _____; lui _____; roșu _____;
 albastru _____; galben _____; verde _____; negru _____
 _____; maro _____; portocaliu _____; luni _____; marți
 _____; miercuri _____; joi _____; vineri _____;
 sâmbătă _____; duminică _____; mănânc _____; mănânci
 _____;
 (el) mănâncă _____; mănâcm _____; măncați _____;
 (ei) mănâncă _____; copil _____; copii _____;
 copiii _____; acești copii _____.

III. Translate from Serbian into Romanian:

odlično _____; zdravo _____; trčim _____; gurati _____
 _____; sutradan _____; neodoljivo _____; zajedno _____;
 svi _____; nama _____; lako _____; olakšanje _____
 _____; tavan _____; pod _____; večera _____; veče _____
 _____; večeras _____; uveče _____.

IV. Translate from Serbian into Romanian:

Nada je kod kuće, čeka Nikolu. Trebalo je da dođe oko pola sedam iz grada. Sada je već osam sati.

Nikola: Stigao sam.

Nada: Gde si bio tako dugo, brinula sam se.

Nikola: Znaš kakav je saobraćaj u Beogradu. Pre bih došao peške nego autom.

Rado bih otišao na neko pusto ostrvo. Potrebni su mi mir i tišina, čist vazduh.

V. Translate from Romanian into Serbian:

Ieri am fost foarte obosit, așa că aseară m-am culcat devreme. Am dormit foarte bine, pentru că a fost cald în cameră. De dimineață m-am trezit la șapte și jumătate, am făcut un duș, mi-am băut cafeaua și am plecat la serviciu, cu autobuzul. Azi e vineri și noi în fiecare vineri mergem la bere. O bere bună e bine venită la sfârșit de săptămână. Aș vrea ca weekendul să țină toată săptămâna! Luni voi merge fericit la lucru. Am de lucru, dar nu mai am probleme.

VI. Read the following text:

Познато је да су животиње верни човекови пријатељи. Међутим, људи понекад изгубе кућног љубимца или га оставе. Има много прича о животињама које су прешле дуг пут да поново нађу свог газду.

UDC 811.163.41'27(498.5)
 316.774(=163.41):329.15(498)"198"

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