

## CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF SEVERAL ARTICLES ABOUT VLACH COMMUNITY OF SERBIA – APPLICATION OF REFLEXIVITY IN THE ANALYSIS OF SCIENTIFIC WORK

**Abstract:** This paper aims to reveal the intentional neglect of Vlach-related data in the works of Anamarija Sorescu-Marinković and Monika Huțanu concerning their recent publications on Vlach language. The paper stresses certain inconsistencies in the data presented by the authors and concludes that the omissions were made deliberately. The analysis relies upon the postmodernist reflexive method and its scientific employment after postmodernity.

**Keywords:** reflexivity, postmodernism, Vlachs, Vlach language, Vlach script, intentionality

In this paper, I deal with a critical review of the articles written by Anamarija Sorescu-Marinković and her colleague Monica Huțanu. The first article, titled „Ideology and representation of Vlach Romanian online. Between linguistic activism and unengaged language use” discussed the use of Vlach language on the Internet, (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019). The second paper (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2017) is concerned with the systems of writing down the Vlach language, along with the problems of linguistic identity of Vlachs.). The present analysis also uses data from the work of Sorescu-Marinković published in 2016 about female Romanian immigrants in eastern Serbia (Sorescu-Marinković 2016), as well as the data previously written and published in Romanian language by the two authors (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2015). Upon closer examination of the published material it becomes evident that the authors decided not to use certain theoretical and ethnographic data on the Vlachs, which could be important for a more purposeful elaboration of the given topic.

Sorescu-Marinković and her colleague frequently employ the term „Vlach Romanian” in their recent article on the use of language on the Internet (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019). The Vlach language has not yet been standardized, nor has it been officially granted the status of a dialect of the Romanian language; nevertheless, the authors of the article considered the Vlach language as a dialect of Romanian. Some scholars have already warned us that the language could be a field which highlights the power of one community over another (e.g. Bourdieu 1991). As Bourdieu’s famous and often quoted example states, Parisian version of French speech is declared an official language and all other types of speech in France are subordinate to the officially declared one (Thomson 1991, 6). Thus, whether a language will be declared a dialect or not depends largely on current constellations of power and interests that go beyond the assumed „objective” structure of language. At the same time, dialects are, as a rule, always in a subordinate position in relation to the language as a whole. (Haugen 1966, 923). Furthermore, standardized language has, among other things, the goal of unifying the population of a certain area into one nation (Haugen 1966, 930). With these arguments in mind, it becomes clear that the tendency of equating the Vlach language of north-eastern Serbia with the Romanian language reveal certain research hypotheses, which are not exclusively linguistic by nature. As shown in my previous work, as well as in the research of Sorescu-Marinković (Sorescu-Marinković 2016), Vlachs and Romanians are two separate ethnic and linguistic communities. Although she tries to represent Vlachs as speakers of one of the Romanian dialects and classify them as the cross-border Romanian community (Sorescu-Marinković 2016, 43) the author states that Romanian immigrants are exposed to social and linguistic assimilation into the Vlach and Serbian communities (Sorescu-Marinković 2016, 51). It is in my view contradictory to present an argument about assimilation while assuming that the assimilated community is in fact the same as the assimilator. If someone belongs to a certain group, how can that group assimilate them?

Sorescu-Marinković (2016, 37) begins her work on Romanian immigrants with a description of an elderly Vlach woman who directed her to immigrant Romanian female workers, while conducting her field research.

Furthermore, she could not speak proper Romanian, only the broken speech from her village, stuffed with Serbian words, as she claimed. But, she added, there were real Romanian women (românoaice, as opposed to the local rumânce) in the village, who would for sure know much more and better than she did. Maybe I even knew them from Romania, she encouraged me. (Sorescu-Marinković 2016, 37)

The Vlach woman recognized Sorescu-Marinković as a person who is more familiar with immigrant Romanian women than Vlach women, so she sent her to meet them.

The Vlachs were thus quick in categorizing me: young Romanian woman, who has come, as tens of others, to their village in search of work. The Romanian women whom I met during my field trips in every Vlach village I put step into – or, better, I was directed to – were also there to work. As bartenders in the village tavern, to take care of senior residents, to work in the field. They also spoke Romanian, like the local Vlach community, but their Romanian was different. Different was also their Romanianness, the Vlachs felt. (Sorescu-Marinković 2016, 38)

Why didn't the women send me to the Romanians during the field research in eastern Serbia, but arranged meetings with me in their houses? Why did they recognize me as a part of the Self, and Sorescu-Marinković as the Other, if we all come from the same community? In addition, during my fieldwork, I also met one of these immigrant women, who stated that Vlachs and Romanians are similar, but different people and that their languages are not the same (Golubović 2014a, 26–27). Sorescu-Marinković also notices that Vlachs have two different terms in their language to denote Vlachs and Romanians:

Back then I was not aware of the huge difference between the two words that sounded almost the same: *români* and *rumâni*. While in standard Romanian both terms mean Romanians and Vlachs alike, the Vlachs make a strict distinction in their local dialect: *români* are the Romanians living on the other side of the Danube, in Romania, while only *rumâni* refers to „themselves”. (Sorescu-Marinković 2016, 38)

Although she is familiar with this ethnographic fact, Sorescu-Marinković brushes it aside without reflection, ignoring possible implications stemming from the fact that terms in Romanian and Vlach do not have the same meaning. To what extent, then, are the Vlach and Romanian languages the same, if they do not refer to the same thing? Vlach language is not officially determined as a dialect, nor is it considered by most speakers to be a dialect of the Romanian language. The female Romanian interlocutor quoted in Sorescu-Marinković's paper (Sorescu-Marinković 2016, 52), also does not seem to associate Vlach language – which she had to learn by marriage – with her mother tongue. Every designation of a certain language as a part of another language could be analyzed as a political act and the author's personal view, which even further disregards a modern definition of a dialect that includes the social component, i.e. the speaker's language perspective. As stated in one of the articles „... any modern definition of dialect includes social categories...” (Preston 2018, 33).

Many Vlachs, especially those gathered around the organization „Matica Vlaha”, do not recognize the Vlach language as a part of the Romanian language. They try to research and preserve the Vlach language in more detail including the modern forms of its existence. Members of the „Matica Vlaha” would never say that they speak Romanian Vlach, but only Vlach language. According to the principles of the postmodernist approach to study, the reality is viewed from several, not just one perspective. Scientific rules created after postmodern

reflexive reconsideration and elaboration take into account various viewpoints and tend to envelop perspectives that are different from the perspective of the writer of the study i.e. researcher. With postmodernism, reflexivity becomes a „necessary condition for playing a scientific game” (Milenković 2006, 166).

In anthropology and other disciplines that claim empirical status, the variability of observations is important precisely because of the tendency of society to treat the results of their observations as final (products). (Milenković 2006, 169)

As Milenković (2006, 169) also stated, reflexivity implies observing the world as an intersection of your own and others' perspectives and requires cognition of one's reference framework for observing reality. We necessarily comprehend the world from some point of view, but for a scientist it is important to know the limitations of his own vision.

The Observation itself, and not only the theoretical interpretation of the observation results, is conditioned by the reference framework of the observer. The frame of reference, which contains the native language and other languages we know, natural and artificial (including the languages of science), segments and classifies perceptual reality in some specific way. Such an organization of experience is, as a rule, unconscious, arbitrary and a priori. A frame of reference is a set of different factors, levels, or dimensions. (Milenković 2006, 168)

I know Anamarija Sorescu-Marinković personally. We spoke in October 2015 in one of the Belgrade cafés on Obilićev venac, at which occasion I gave her my scientific monograph on the ethnic identity of the Vlachs, at her request. So, Anamarija Sorescu-Marinković, at the time of writing her works in the period after October 2015 had in her hands (or on one of her shelves) an anthropological book in which is described the situation in the Vlach community in terms of identity and language.

In the paper about writing systems of Vlach (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018) written a few years after publishing the monograph (Golubović 2014), the activities of „Gergina” Association regarding the creation and officially adopted Vlach scripts are presented without mentioning in more detail described ethnography about the same matter (Golubović 2014a, 148–155).

The proposed versions of the letters, which were adopted at the session of the National Council on January 24, were firstly supported by the NGO „Gergina”, an association for the preservation of the identity, culture, tradition and language of the Vlachs. The leading representatives of the association still emphasize in their public appearances that as an organization they have credit for creating the Vlach alphabet. For the Latin version, apart from my father's suggestion, there were no other suggestions, while for the Cyrillic version, besides the suggestion of Č. Radunkanović, existed as an option the version of the letter by Ljubiša Niculović Kići, which he calls „vlaoljica”. However, the association „Gergina” did not support „vlaoljica”. (Golubović 2014a, 148–149)

Commenting on the officially adopted Vlach script in 2012 by the National Council of Vlachs, the authors (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018, 11) assume that the letters for the sounds „ă” and „î” are „borrowed” from the Romanian alphabet. They look at the letters from the perspective of Romanian speakers and suppose that it is possible to see the given letters only in Romanian, but reality shows us that the situation is a bit different. For example, variations of the notation of the letters „ă” and „î” are also found in the ASCII system<sup>1</sup>, and perhaps the creators of the Vlach script found inspiration in the ASCII system? In older versions of the Malaysian script (Shellabear 1912), the letter „ă”, for example, is used in a similar context as in Romanian and Vlach today. Did the creators of that version of the Malaysian script also „borrow” a letter from the Romanian standard language? Do the French use the label „î” incorrectly as it does not match with usage in the Romanian alphabet? We can ask all these questions, if we go from the assumption that the Romanian alphabet has a „right” over a letter sign. The authors of the Vlach script adopted in 2012 chose 35 for the Latin and 35 for the Cyrillic version from the set of all available world symbols and made sets of „Vlach Cyrillic” and „Vlach Latin”.

The authors (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018, 12) conclude the paper on the Vlach script with a statement that books published in Vlach are rare and published at the expense of the authors. Maybe other books were printed at the authors’ expense and represent the personal initiatives of the authors, but the textbook which I wrote (Golubović 2014b) does not fall under their conclusion. In the paper from 2018 (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018), they mention the textbook for the first grade of primary school for learning the language and culture of Vlachs, but they do not draw attention to the fact that it is an officially approved textbook by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. In more detail, with the reference to the same Ministry, they described the textbook in their work in Romanian from 2015 (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2015). At the time the paper was written, classes for the subject of Vlach language and culture had been taught for the third year in a row, and the subject was attended by hundreds of pupils. Also, until August 2017, when the work was submitted for publication, the first collection of children’s works in the Vlach language was published by Matica Vlaha, which the authors will mention in their work from 2019 (Sorescu-Marinković and Monica Huțanu 2019, 79). With the approval of the Institute for the Advancement of Education of the Republic of Serbia, several seminars (which I developed) „Get Across... Meet the Speech and Culture of the Vlachs” were organized for teachers. In these seminars, the Vlach language was actively used.<sup>2</sup>

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1 You can view the ASCII table on the website: <http://www.asciitable.com/>

2 For more information check the program for professional development of teachers on the following link: <http://katalog2015.zuov.rs/Program2015.aspx?katbroj=341&godina=2014%2F2015>

As far as education is concerned, in 2013 Vlach Romanian was introduced as an optional subject, Vlach speech with elements of national culture, in a few schools in Eastern Serbia (Manovich 2014; Huțanu & Sorescu-Marinković 2015), following the printing of the first textbooks in this variety. At the same time, several other schools started offering, for the first time in the history of the region, optional classes in standard Romanian. (Sorescu-Marinković et al. 2020, 91)

In October 2015 Sorescu-Marinković maybe did not have a chance to take into account my book, published a year earlier (in 2014), but by 2020 she did. In the chapter titled „Discussions in the field of education of the Vlach national minority”, I have extensively written, from an insider point of view, about the subject of Vlach education, providing information which the authors never reflected upon.

In the third chapter of their article from 2019 (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019, 74), the authors describe the language of Vlachs by placing the theory of Vlach immigration from Romania in the foreground, while other existing theoretical explanations are only incidentally mentioned in footnotes. Instead of treating the different theoretical viewpoints equally, a structural minorization of the importance of perspectives was made with the data that does not coincide with the views of the writers of the paper. This, in my opinion, signifies the authors' intention to present their vision as superior. It is interesting to note that when talking about the data of the Vlachs in the census, the authors use the term Vlach language, without the addition of Romanian, and in the paragraph where the introduction of Vlach in education is discussed, they add the attribute Romanian. In the official documents, the school subject is in no way related to the Romanian language and culture. Also, in the final paragraph of the third chapter (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019, 75), the authors write about the introduction of Vlach language in schools and do not add Romanian. Did the authors forget to add the Romanian label when presenting the data from the census and from that last paragraph, or was it done with the intention of dissociating to some extent, because in those official documents (about the school subject<sup>3</sup>, and the latest census<sup>4</sup>) it is not written that Vlach is Romanian?

The authors declared the Vlach groups with different orientations to be „independentists” and „reintegrationists” (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019). The Vlachs of eastern Serbia have never been part of the Romanian state in order to seek independence from Romania, and yet, the majority of them are in favour of integration with the population of, Serbia, which they

3 For more information: <http://www.dmaksimovic.edu.rs/pdf/pravilnici/pravilnik-prvi-ciklus-treci-razred.pdf>

4 Census 2011. Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova 2011. u Republici Srbiji. Veroispovest, maternji jezik i nacionalna pripadnost. Podaci po opštinama i gradovima. Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia. Religion, mother tongue and ethnicity. Data by municipalities and cities, Beograd/Belgrade ([http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Knjiga4\\_Veroispovest.pdf](http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Knjiga4_Veroispovest.pdf)).

consider their motherland (for more information: Golubović 2014a, 122). Only by reading the authors' second work (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018) the reader can come across certain information that inspired them when naming different ideological factions within the Vlach community. They imported terms from the Galician-Portuguese situation (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018, 3), which can be read in more detail in, for example, Salgado and Monteagudo's work on the standardization of the Galician language (Salgado and Monteagudo 1993). They mention the identity orientations of the Vlachs, i.e. the pro-Vlach and pro-Romanian faction (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019), without referring to the text in which they were elaborated in detail (Golubović 2014a). Namely in my book, I have summed up my views on the ethnic identity orientations of Vlachs in the manner as follows:

Within the ethnic community itself, it can be stated that there are several different discourses and explanations of its members what would represent the ethnic group to which they belong. In the case of the Vlachs, precisely, according to one discourse, the Vlachs originate from the Romanians, i.e. the Vlachs are the same as the Romanians, according to another the Vlachs are Romanized Serbs, according to the third the Vlach ancestors are Vlachs (Vlachs as natives), etc. These would be the most common, the „loudest” discourses, which, however, are not the only ones. As it is previously presented, there are also individuals in the community who equate the Vlachs from northeastern Serbia with the Vlachs (Tzintzars) from Macedonia and Greece. Namely, there are individuals who identify themselves with the Vlachs of the Balkans, making a clear differentiation in relation to the Romanians. Also, some identify and connect their ethnic identity with populations that are distant in the historical-temporal perspective, such as e.g. Romans. On the concrete example of the Vlach ethnic community, in cases when individuals claim that Vlachs are the same as Serbs, Vlachs = Romanians or „Vlachs are Vlachs”, the existence of several the most pronounced identity orientations can be stated: Romanian, Serbian and Vlach. When the Vlachs are equated with the Tzintzars, one can also talk about the Tzintzars orientation, etc. (Golubović 2014a, 192)

In the same monograph, the dynamics of the construction of different identity orientations of the Vlachs are explained through the concept of a relational quadrilateral:

Within the Vlach ethnic community, different identity orientations and n-fold identities can be recognized. [...] At this point, we will look at the Vlach ethnic community as one unity. Heterogeneous, however, but still as one entity. So, if we put the Vlach ethnic community in the position of WE, we can recognize that THEY (1) are Serb-Serbia toward whom the relationship is being made and THEY (2) are Romanians-Romania. In theoretical considerations, there was talk about how the category of THEM can hypothetically be innumerable. One of the groups according to which the relationship is built are the Tzintzars and we can label them as THEY (3). However, the relationship that is built towards this group is not expressed to the extent like

it is a case with the relationships toward the designated groups within THEY (1) and THEY (2). In fact, in addition to the rational triangle Serbs (Serbia) – Vlachs – Romanians (Romania), it also could be stated the existence of the relational triangle Tzintzars – Vlachs – Romanians. [...] Due to the limited scope of work, the focus in this case will be only on the relational triangle in which the entities THEY (1) and THEY (2) are Serbs (Serbia) and Romanians (Romania). (Golubović 2014a, 186)

At the beginning of the 21st century, with the appearance of the representative bodies of the Vlachs, the establishment of a relational quadrilateral could be ascertained. The crucial relationship is the one that is established between the representative bodies of the Vlachs and European institutions, such as the EU institutions, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and similar. [...] Since the Witness (Arbiter) is a sufficient condition for the existence of the ethnicity of a certain community and the relational quadrangle has been formed, all that remains is to establish a balanced relationship of each entity in the relational triangle with the Witness (Arbiter) entity and at some future point, the researcher will be able to state how the liminal position of the entity We = Vlach ethnic community has been overcome. (Golubović 2014a, 188)

In the description of the „Matica Vlaha” website, the authors Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu (2019, 78) declared the Vlach language to be Vlach Romanian, which is not stated anywhere on the website. Such conclusion stands also in sharp contrast to what the members of „Matica Vlaha” assert. Thus, the authors' perspective was loaded into the ethnographic description. The content on the website has been translated into Vlach, not Vlach Romanian as the authors state. In the paper (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019, 79) the sentence „Ku sánataće kopij!” is misinterpreted as „Cheers, children!”. It remains unclear whether the authors do not know English or Vlach well enough, but that sentence from Matica Vlaha's Facebook page translated into English should be „Good luck, children!”, i.e. to wish good luck to the children. Many Romanian speakers think they know Vlach because of the existence of similar words. However, it happens that similar words have a contextually different meaning from the one they are used to. It is recommended for all researchers to get more information about the language of the researched population first, and then to draw conclusions in order to avoid misinterpretation of language statements.

The Facebook page „Vlasi na kvadrat” which the authors analyze in their recent article (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019, 80–82), was created as a joke about the guest workers of the Negotin region, and gradually it grew into a page where the author jokes at his own expense, since he is the member of the Vlach ethnic community. The creator of the Facebook page declares himself to be Vlach, yet while talking to me a couple of years ago he has not declared as Vlach Romanian. The authors Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu (2019, 81) present the Vlach words used by the administrator on the page as part of the Vlach Romanian language. The authors' conclusion that the page „mitigates the differences between the two factions” (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2019, 82) is, as I see it, incautious. Perhaps it just seems like the mitigation occurs,

because the administrator of the page is taking a neutral stance? There was a time when people stated that they would not follow the page if it was pro-Romanian. Most of my interlocutors (who followed the page) emphasized that they would not follow the page if the content referred to Vlach as Romanian.. Moreover, one man asked me a few years ago when I recommended the page to him, to check if the administrator is one of „ours” or one of those who tend to equate Vlachs with Romanians.

Until 2018, I collaborated with „Matica Vlahi”. I am not a member of any institution or organization. As Professor Slobodan Naumović (2014, 12) called me in the review of my book, when it comes to science I tend to be a „free-floating intellectual”. I am in the position of Vlach-oriented Vlach, which means that I define my ethnic identity with orientation (A=A)<sup>5</sup>. I have cooperated in educating people about the language and culture of Vlachs, but I am primarily a scientist, and when I write scientific papers I present all the facts as a researcher. In the review of the monograph „The Ethnic Identity of the Vlachs”, my style of work was described as:

Finally, „well-timed” reflexivity enables the author to step into the domain of applied science, a science that the author sincerely believes can help her community cope with the problems, without falling into the trap of „partisanship”, and avoiding the trap of „eradication” from one’s own community. The attempt to build a well-balanced, „mature” scientifically based activism is perhaps the most outstanding achievement of this study of small volume, but with significant competent contribution by the author. (Naumović 2014, 12)

As a scientist, I disapprove when representatives of scientific institutions, under the guise of scientific work, present „select” information, ones that suit them the best. Since I am a Vlach of Vlach orientation, via my example, but also the example of a considerable number of people from my surroundings, I need to point out that the authors’ statement that we define the uniqueness of the Vlach language through the hybridity of Romanian and Serbian (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2017, 3) is generalizing and inapplicable to a good part of Vlachs and their knowledge and perception. Although I also know the people who fit the description given by the authors, I would like to stress the fact that this is not a universal, nor a prevailing opinion among people of Vlach orientation. A good part of us is aware of the differences between the Vlach and the Romanian language, which do not result from hybridity with the Serbian language, but from the lexical and morphological structure of the Vlach language. As it is stated in this paper Vlachs have phrases, words that sound like Romanian, but could have quite different meanings than Romanian. All the languages could be declared as the same language if we overpass the special meaning that people give to certain phrases, combinations of sounds and words. The Language of Vlachs of northeast

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5 „Orientation does not necessarily have to be directed towards another entity, but can also be directed towards the entity that is taken as the basic one (A = A).” (Golubović 2014a, 59)

Serbia still contains uninvestigated words' structures and I hope that in the future they will be linguistically elaborated. Talking about Vlach Romanian language is relevant only in the context of those Vlachs and researchers who define identity orientation in relation ( $A=B$ )<sup>6</sup>. Many Vlachs do not consider their language as Romanian, even if some tend to manipulate with their ethnic and linguistic identity (declaring themselves as Romanians) in order to gain some material and symbolic benefits. There are, however, still those who do not use that convenience of ethnic business (Golubović 2014a, 201–209). What those other Vlachs want is the human right to express themselves without impositions and misinterpretations. Awareness of the endangered position of Vlach language is important. The attempt of Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić and Ćirković (2020) to help in achieving that official status in UNESCO could be welcomed by much bigger numbers of Vlachs, but do they speak about the same language as we are? Vlach Romanian was presented as an endangered dialect of Romanian (Sorescu-Marinković et al. 2020, 90), not as endangered Vlach language or perhaps in plural, as Vlach speeches (because it has not been standardized, yet). As stated in the introduction, declaring speech as a dialect to another language is rather a question of power than a linguistic matter. For the purpose of preserving the Vlach language, it would be more helpful if the power relations would be less employed, and different perspectives fully taken into account. I conclude this critical review with the hope that taking into consideration emic perspectives of various members of the community will be more frequently applied in scientific research, accompanied with reflexivity in today's post-postmodern era.

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6 „Unlike dual and n-fold ethnic identity where a person considers himself a member of every of the entities A, B and C... making a clear distinction between these entities ( $A \neq B \neq C$ ), in the case of ethnic identity orientation the person declares himself as a member of the entity A also as a member of entity B, but at the same time considers that A and B are one and the same ( $A = B$ ). It is necessary to point out that one of the entities is always taken as a basis and the orientation is determined in relation to the other entity. Based on the entity that a person chooses as basic, at a given moment he is categorized as a member of that entity, i.e. that ethnic community, regardless of his orientation. Ethnic identity orientation cannot be multidimensional at one time. A person can change orientations in terms of their ethnic identity, but cannot be 'directed' to two or n different sides at the same time.” Golubović 2014a, 59)

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