

Greece, a perfect example of barbaric country?

Professor Victor Friedman is one of the world's foremost experts on Balkan languages, and has been studying them for almost four decades, since 1993 as a linguist at the University of Chicago.

Professor Friedman has a special place in his heart for Macedonia, which he first visited in 1971. This year finds him back in the country, as the recipient of a Fulbright-Hays Grant from the US Department of Education and a research grant from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. (All opinions expressed herein are his own and do not necessarily represent those of the funding organizations.)

Balkananalysis.com Director Christopher Deliso caught up with Professor Friedman recently in Skopje for an interview. Their engrossing and wide-ranging conversation, covering everything from linguistic history, politics and lobbying to national identity and multiculturalism, is reproduced below for our readers.

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Christopher Deliso: Victor, thanks for taking the time to discuss your ideas and your research, it's a great privilege.

Victor Friedman: Thank you, I'm always happy to speak about the Balkans and Macedonia.

Reminiscences

CD: Victor, the first time you visited Macedonia was in 1971. A lot must have changed since then.

VF: Indeed it has. When I first came here, during the height of Yugoslavia, many houses did not have telephones, and I recall you had to wait for 2 years to get one... even in 1994 when I was here for 3 months it was impossible for me to get one in the apartment where I was staying. Things have improved considerably since those days. And some of the damage from the 1963 earthquake damage was also still evident in Skopje.

CD: Even in the center?

VF: Even in the center. A lot of the new buildings were already completed, but there were still some piles of rubble near the Hotel Turist, today's Best Western on the Ulica Makedonija pedestrian street. Sewer lines were being laid in the Stara Charshija (the bazaar quarter in the old part of town) so you had to cross some streets on boards. And there were an awful lot of buildings still housed in purpose-built 'barracks.'

CD: Some of which still remain, for housing and offices.

VF: Probably so. And back then, the new main campus of University Ss Cyril & Methodius of Skopje hadn't been built yet, and the new building for MANU (the Macedonian Academy of Sciences & Arts) hadn't been rebuilt yet. It was housed in a mansion that I was told had once been owned by a Vlah merchant, and later served as the Italian embassy. There was one shopping center that just opened up in 1973.

CD: You mean the famous GTC (Gradski Trgovski Center)?

VF: Indeed, the GTC. And there were many ordinary consumer goods you couldn't get here. People went to Thessaloniki or Belgrade to shop for many items.

CD: Interesting. Many Macedonians proudly claim to me that in Yugoslav times they were on a much higher social and economic level than the Greeks.

VF: Actually, the Greeks and Yugoslavs were about on the same level then. With hard currency, you could get a good rate on the drachma. But the difference was that Greece never had Communism, and in the 1970s Greece already had American style-supermarkets; one had to go to Thessaloniki or the US Embassy PX in Belgrade to get peanut butter.

Fewer consumer goods were available in Macedonia than in wealthier parts of Yugoslavia, of course. In 1973, for example, meat was hard to find. I was told that the price for meat was better in Serbia and all the meat went there. On the other hand, public sociability was more vibrant and relaxed. In mild weather all of Skopje went to what was then Marshal Tito Square for korzo (corso). In those days, Skopje wasn't as big as it is now, and you could meet anyone you wanted to see there. It was also a great way to make new friends.

The Project of the Day

CD: So how about your project that brings you here this time. What is that about?

VF: My project investigates the continuing existence of multilingualism in Skopje.

CD: That's an interesting topic. I suspect you are spending a lot of time in the Stara Charshija?

VF: Indeed. Among the craftsmen's shops, tea houses, mosques, churches and open markets there, that is one of the best places in the city to find different social groups and languages rubbing elbows on a daily basis- Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Romani, even some Aromanian and Greek. My project studies the way that these languages are interacting today.

CD: And this idea was something you used to get funding for the project?

VF: Yes. As a linguist, I had to present my case, and the argument that won funding from the Fulbright-Hays (Department of Education) and Guggenheim is that Macedonia in general, and Skopje especially, represents the last place in the Balkans where the conditions that created the Balkan linguistic league are still present to some extent. So I wanted to study this and document its continuing existence today.

Grammatical Multilingualism

CD: 'Balkan linguistics league'- what do you mean by this?

VF: Right. At the beginning of the 20th century, in the Balkans you had a range of diverse languages on the same territory- the Slavic languages, Greek, Albanian, local dialects of Turkish, three kinds of Romani, Romance languages like Romanian, Aromanian, and Megleno-Romanian and, before the Holocaust, Ladino (or Judezmo) - the language of the Sephardic Jews, a language derived from medieval Spanish with additions from Hebrew and local languages that too shape after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

In particular, the Slavic, Romance, Albanian and Greek languages share a lot of grammatical features that are the result of mutual multilingualism.

CD: Grammatical multilingualism? I can understand vocabulary, loan-words, shared by co-existing languages, but what examples are there of grammar influence in the Balkan languages?

VF: The replacement of infinitives by analytic subjunctive clauses using native material is an example of a shared grammatical feature among Balkan languages.

CD: Meaning the particle, like 'na' in Greek and 'da' in Macedonian?

VF: Yes. And what is really interesting is that even the Balkan dialects of Turkish, but only the Balkan ones, replace the infinitive with an optative- a verb form like a subjunctive but without a particle.

Linguistic Developments

CD: Wow- that's fascinating.

VF: Yes, the Balkans are very interesting. We know what Ancient Greek, Latin, and Old Church Slavonic, and Sanskrit look liked, and we have Turkic texts going back to the 8th century. We know what these languages looked like in the early medieval period. For Albanian, our oldest significant texts are from the early modern period. We know these changes, these grammatical influences, were taking place in the late medieval and early Ottoman periods (although some are older in some languages). It was really in the Ottoman period that the Balkan languages as we know them today came to resemble one another.

CD: Was this line of investigation something that had been applied elsewhere, or received attention from linguists for a long time?

VF: Well there was some talk in the 19th century of that sort of thing, but in the 19th century, when modern linguistics first took shape with the discovery of the regularity of sound change, most linguists were spending their time trying to find out how languages genealogically resembled one another.

CD: Genealogically, meaning finding a common ancestor, yes? Was this a result of the influence of Darwinism, some sort of intellectual zeitgeist of the time?

VF: Well, some people might tell you that, but most accurately we can say that it coincided with Darwinism and similar trends. But what got people really interested in the genealogical approach to linguistics was the British conquest of India.

CD: Really! Very unusual.

VF: Well think about it: you had these cultured British gentlemen, who had been raised on the full classical education of Latin and ancient Greek, coming to this land of supposed primitives and savages- and getting completely blown away by the resemblances between Sanskrit, which they came across for the first time, and Latin and Greek.

The Balkans: A Special Place

CD: So then, to return to the former topic, can I ask whether this grammatical influence of different languages within a specific terrain is a rare thing? Do you find it in other parts of Europe like, say, Switzerland, with its four official languages (French, German, Italian, and Romansch) as well as the linguistically distinct Swiss German?

VF: Not to the same extent as in the Balkans. French, German and those languages had specific influences of different kinds on each other, but the ordinary populations were not necessarily multilingual until relatively recently, and even today each language in Switzerland is influenced significantly by the usage in the neighboring nation-states where they are standardized.

CD: So what was it about the Balkans that made it so amenable to multilingualism?

VF: Well, going back to Ottoman times, we could consider it partially an issue of pragmatism for city dwellers, traders and so on, for whom knowing other languages was directly beneficial to their livelihoods and businesses, with such diverse populations living together.

It's also interesting to note that most linguistic studies of multilingualism today are being carried out in post-colonial areas of the world, or among immigrant communities living in wealthy countries. My research here in the Balkans is unusual in this context because this is a region with an endemic, long-existing, relatively stable and uninterrupted history of multilingualism.

Multilingualism as a Culture Value: A Telling Absence

VF: At the same time, multilingualism here was also a matter of a common cultural value, one shared by speakers of all the Balkan languages, except Greek. But we should also note that this language-ideological resistance on the part of Greek did not keep the language from being influenced by those with which it was in contact.

CD: Really! That's unusual. How do we know Greek lacks this value?

VF: One telling aspect, from a linguist's point of view, is that Greek is the only language in the Balkans that does not have a proverb to the effect that 'languages are wealth' or 'the more languages you know, the more people you're worth.' All other Balkan languages have some such saying that indicates a value placed on multilingualism.

CD: Are we sure this is true, that Greek lacks such a value? Or could someone just invent one for the sake of it?

VF: To the best of my knowledge, there is no such expression. And over the years I have asked every Greek friend of mine for such a proverb and not one of them has come up with one. And I am talking about linguists, experts on the Balkans who are not subjective.

An example I recall comes from the introduction to a recently published book on the minority languages of Greece (which is, alas, still a highly political topic in that nation-state). The author was talking about Arvanitika, the Albanian dialect/language of speakers who migrated to Greece a millennium or so ago. The introduction was written by a respected Greek linguist... he wrote that among the Arvanites, and probably, emphasis mine, among the other Balkan peoples, there is this expression of languages as wealth. But he didn't know of any such expression in Greek.

Confusion and Denial

CD: By the term 'Arvanitika,' you mean medieval Albanian?

VF: Most precisely, it refers to the Albanian dialects of Greece that separated from the main body of Tosk Albanian 600-1000 years ago. The dialects were spoken on many Greek islands, the Peloponnese, and in Attica and Central Greece. Greeks don't like to admit it, but they have had large Albanian-speaking populations for a very long time, not just post-Communist economic migrants. While these dialects are now moribund owing to hegemonistic Greek language policies, they can still be encountered in places like Livadhia.

CD: An interesting detail-

VF: And I recall one vignette: many years ago at a conference, I met a woman who was Greek, but she knew Arvanitika. So we communicated, I in standard modern Albanian, she in Arvanitika. It was close enough to communicate.

I asked her, 'how do you know you this language'? As a linguist, it was an interesting detail. She replied, 'well, I learned it from my grandmother.'

CD: Which would have meant she was of partial Arvanitika descent?

VF: Well, I asked innocently enough – I wasn't really aware of the politics at the time – 'why would a Greek learn Albanian if they weren't Albanian'? She was somewhat confused.

The next morning, however, when I saw this woman she said to me: 'I couldn't sleep all night thinking about what you said.' She was a bit upset. 'I thought about it,' she said, 'and no! I am Greek! I am Greek!' It was the last time I tried to suggest to a Greek that if they learned another language at home, it was because that was the native language of the speaker.

The Nationalist Trap and State Policies

CD: (Laughing) on that note, let's talk about the Macedonia issue now. Greece denies the Macedonian identity, referring to ancient history. What do you think about this?

VF: Unfortunately, with independence, some Macedonians fell into the nationalist trap set by Greece. The Greeks came up with a line claiming the Macedonians could not claim the name Macedonia unless they were descended from the Ancient Macedonians.

Well, no one can reasonably claim to be descended from the Ancient Macedonians, but this became part of the argument, instead of other more pertinent things. And so the issue has remained. But the Greeks have been denying the existence of Macedonia and the Macedonians all along.

CD: From your perspective, how far back does this go as a state policy? To the breakdown of Yugoslavia, or further?

VF: Oh, it's been that way ever since modern Macedonians began to call themselves Macedonians. The Greeks have been denying the existence of its Macedonian minority since acquiring Greek Macedonia at the Treaty of Bucharest following the Second Balkan War (1913), except for a brief period in the 1920s. In 1957, an otherwise respectable Greek linguist named N. Andriotis published a polemical and, from an academic point of view, deeply flawed booklet entitled 'The Confederate state of Skopje and Its Language' – referring, of course, to Macedonia and Macedonian within Socialist Yugoslavia.

CD: This is very interesting to me, because as you know, many Greeks today refer to the whole country of Macedonia by the name of the capital, and the people as 'Skopjeans.' So they were using this reference even then?

VF: Of course. But already in the 19th century, Macedonian speakers were calling themselves Macedonians (Makedontsi), their language, 'Makedonski.' This is documented.

CD: But they were also calling themselves 'Bulgarians' then.

VF: Yes, some were, and speakers identified as Serbs or Greeks or Turks, depending on religious loyalties, but most of the time, speakers called themselves Christians or Turks (Muslims).

CD: Because the Ottoman system used religion as the main factor in classifying its subjects?

VF: Yes, but not just because of the Ottomans- religion was more important then as well. It was the late 18th/early19th century ideas, developed from the French Revolution that led to nation-state ideologies.

Organized Obliteration?

VF: But even well before this, some have made a case – and this refers again to the social resistance against other languages – that the Greeks have been trying to destroy Slavic culture in this area since the Middle Ages.

CD: 'Greeks,' meaning the Byzantines?

VF: Yes. For example, John Fine in his book *The Early Medieval Balkans* (p. 220) cites Vladimir Moshin, who published

an article in 1963 in a Russian academic journal in which he made the argument that the reason there are no Slavic language manuscripts from this region prior to 1180 is owing to their deliberate destruction by the Greeks/Byzantines.

CD: Really!

VF: Up until his article, people had been saying it was the Turks who destroyed everything. But there are Greek-language manuscripts from this period that survived in this region, whereas Slavic ones did not. And it is not as if the latter were not being composed in an organized way; the Ohrid literary school which began in the late 9th century is just one place where manuscripts were being written in large numbers. Which means that Greeks have been trying to destroy Slavic culture and literacy for a very long time.

CD: Many Bulgarian politicians and academics claim that Macedonian is just a dialect of Bulgarian. What do you say on this topic?

VF: The answer is of course Macedonian is a distinct language. It is similar to Bulgarian, but just as Swedish and Norwegian are similar languages, but separate, so, too, are Macedonian and Bulgarian.

CD: Why?

VF: Both sets of languages have different dialectal bases. And for this reason it is not at all like the case of Moldovan and Romanian. The Moldovan standard language is not based on Moldovan dialects; it is based on the same Wallachian dialects as standard Romanian.

In the case of Macedonian, however, the standard language is based on the dialects spoken in the west-central geographical area defined by Veles, Bitola, Prilep and Kichevo. It is not identical with any specific dialect, and has elements from the eastern ones as well. Standard Bulgarian is not based on a single dialect, but is based on eastern Bulgarian dialects, from Veliko Tarnovo to the Danube and further east.

CD: Why were these specific dialectal areas chosen, in both cases?

VF: What happened was that in the 19th century there were two major centers of literacy and prosperity- one in southwestern Macedonia, the other in northeastern Bulgaria. The Bulgarians decided to impose those eastern dialects from the area north of the Stara Planina range, east of the dialectal division called the yat line, and south of the Danube, on the whole state.

CD: What was the thinking? Was this an organized campaign for specific reasons?

VF: We're talking about the phenomenon of intellectuals fighting over what's going to happen when they get their own state- just like with the Congress of Manastir (Bitola) in 1908, when the Albanians were worrying about agreeing on a common Albanian alphabet before there was an Albanian state (in 1912). The Bulgarians didn't have a state until the Russo-Turkish War of 1878.

CD: What about the situation in Greece at the time, where different propagandists were at work from different sides? Were these dialects considered Bulgarian or Macedonian, or both? What can linguists reconstruct today?

VF: There are a number of dialectal studies. Some speakers considered themselves Macedonians, some Bulgarians, and some Greeks, and some Turks, depending, in part, on religious affiliation (Exarchist, Patriarchist, and Muslim for the last three at that time). Firsthand accounts are available in some books published in, e.g., Australia and Poland, and Canada, but the Aegean Macedonians who were victims of Greek abuse at that time are mostly dead.

The generation that suffered during the Greek Civil War (1946-49) however, is still alive. The ones who are still alive often do not want to tell their stories because they are afraid or the memories are too painful. Even for curious foreigners, if you go to Greece to do research on Macedonian, you run the risk that the police will take your tapes, destroy them, and kick you out for expressing an interest in what is still a taboo topic for them.

CD: Really! Are there some examples?

VF: Yes, and it happened to a colleague of mine who was doing dissertation research in a village whose name I will omit to protect the inhabitants.

CD: aha, the village of... near Kastoria?

VF: Yes, and precisely for this reason it is one of the most interesting Macedonian dialects, because it is the most southwestern Macedonian dialect. It is transitional between eastern and western types of Macedonian. And the Greek police confiscated the tapes of this linguist and interfered with his research. However, he did finish his dissertation on this

dialect. In fact, in his introduction, he made a point of thanking the Greek police for teaching him to always keep backup tapes!

CD: Ha! So with all of this intimidation, not to mention the journalist arrests we saw recently, what are the Greeks so afraid of?

VF: They're incredibly insecure. No, they're not just insecure. They have a linguistic ideology that insists on wiping out all other languages. This is an old ideology. It is the origins of the term barbarian. Think about it.

Why don't we have any traces of other languages preserved? As a matter of fact we do. There are some ancient inscriptions in Thracian.

CD: I thought the Thracians had no written language?

VF: They did. The inscriptions are in Greek script, but the words are Thracian. And the inscriptions are sitting in Greece, gathering dust. They know they're there, but no one's going to work on them because the language is not Greek. So they're not going to let anyone see them. I have this from a colleague of mine who is a classicist and interested in the subject.

CD: Your Greece vignette reminds me of being the village of Amyndaeo south of Florina last year. I came across these two old men speaking to each other in Macedonian. I said dobar den ('good day'). And you know what? This man was so alarmed that he reacted before he could think, instinctively, by blurting out ne razbiram Makedonski ('I don't understand Macedonian'). This was one of the most ironic examples of fear of speaking one's language I could imagine.

VF: Indeed.

CD: So I guess my question for you is, we asked the local people in Florina what percent of the people there speak Macedonian, since public life is mostly in Greek it was an interesting question. And several people said, 'oh, everyone speaks it.' What is your experience?

VF: Well, as far as I was told everybody in the area around Florina, or Lerin in Macedonian, over the age of 40 speaks Macedonian, whether they're Macedonian or not. This is according to a colleague of mine who has done recent research. However, the younger generation is not learning it. But it is a topic that requires further (unhindered) research.

CD: From what I understand from different stories, this is because it is not helpful to advancement in Greek society, and can even be a strongly negative factor-

VF: Yes. The Greek government is effectively carrying out 'linguicide' on the Macedonians of Greece. And it has been a long-running policy. For another example, I have a photo of a sign in Greek, from the 1950s, printed up in blue-on-white, urging people to forbid anyone from speaking in 'Vlahika, Makedonika etc.' There used to be many such signs in Greek Macedonia.

CD: Really! That is quite compelling. Do people know about this?

VF: I don't know-a friend sent the photo to me, I am finally getting around to publishing it in a review article in the journal *Balkanistika* next year.

But the Greek policy was always trying to kill the language. It was especially horrible in the 1930s. Macedonian kids would go to school, and if they spoke their language, the language they learned at home, numerous 'corrective' methods were used: teachers beat them, or stuck their tongues with needles, or rubbed a hot pepper on their tongues; anything to make them stop speaking Macedonian.

CD: Really! That sounds very extreme.

VF: Oh, they were terrible. In the 1930s, people were put in jail just for speaking Macedonian. The Greek government had people skulking around the windows of people's houses, listening to hear if they spoken Macedonian so that they could report them to the police. Mothers were thrown in jail for speaking Macedonian to their babies. They terrorized the Macedonians, and then, with the Greek Civil War, they drove many of them out.

CD: Never to return-

VF: And then there's the infamous 'race clause' in the amnesty law of 1982; it stipulated that to return the country and reclaim one's property, all those who had been banished had to declare they were Greek by *genos*, by race or birth. Macedonians who were expelled, many just children at the time, in 1949, were never allowed to reclaim their property. It was racism, pure and simple.

CD: Do you recall what was the reaction here in Macedonia, from the locals? And what about the European countries? Surely this would have been considered a great breach of European values?

VF: I was actually here at the time this was announced. The people were very upset, because they have been so badly mistreated all along. The 'Great Powers,' of course, said nothing.

CD: Well this is interesting, because here we have in America a new president, a black man who surely knows something about the meaning of racism, and indeed the issues of race and injustices resonated throughout Obama's campaign.

And at the same time, Obama signed that anti-Macedonian senate resolution, and has been a big supporter of the Greek lobby, who are probably counting on a return on their investment. Has anyone, to the best of your knowledge, pointed out this blatant hypocrisy regarding his support for a country that has a history of racist policies against its own citizens?

VF: No, I haven't heard anyone put this to his people. It would be nice if the message could be gotten out, but so far I haven't seen this happen. The Macedonians don't seem to know enough about public relations and American politics- they should be using lobby companies, getting their message out every day in Washington.

CD: Yes, I concur with that-

VF: And, at the same time, the Greeks get away with this 'cradle of democracy' image! Give me a break! Ancient Greece was a slave-owning society. And you know, some scholars argue that Modern Greece is a creation of the Western European romantic imagination- for example, Lord Byron's romanticized view of Ancient Greece projected, on the modern population. This is persuasively argued in a book of academic Michael Herzfeld, called *Ours Once More*.

CD: That is an interesting school of thought, I had not really conceived it as such but there is something to it. What was the reaction to this book?

VF: I do not think there was a huge reaction, but Herzfeld was involved with another book, Anastasia Karakasidou's *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood*, which did generate a great deal of controversy. Published by the University of Chicago Press in 1997, this book was actually a very mild challenge to Greek hegemonistic notions. What it dared to do, based on fieldwork in Greek Macedonia, was to state that there were citizens of Greece who did not feel themselves to be ethnic Greeks and that they still spoke their own language.

Cambridge University Press had committed to publishing the book with minor revisions, and then they suddenly decided not to publish the book. They had committed to it and suddenly changed their minds. Prof Herzfeld was on the editorial board of CUP's anthropology series at the time, and he resigned in protest, as did other members of the board.

CD: Yes, they cited 'the safety of their staff in Greece' as their reason, right?

VF: Well they said that. However, the way I heard it, CUP had a monopoly on English-language testing in the schools of Greece as well...

CD: Do you believe that the Greek government threatened that they would lose this privilege?

VF: I have no idea, but assuming that they had a monopoly- two plus two, what are you going to make of that, four or twenty-two?

CD: But then you guys saved it-

VF: Yes, the University of Chicago went ahead and published the book, to their credit. But the whole situation is just disgusting; it makes Europe look like what she was called at the beginning of the 20th century, as depicted in the Bulgarian film *Mera spored Mera*, made in the 1980s. It was somewhat provocative, and received criticism from some quarters of the Communist government, because it used Aegean Macedonian dialects, as it was about the post-Ilinden period just after 1903.

The memorable line from the film, which was part of a real folk song dating back to 1878, was something like this: 'be thou cursed and thrice cursed Europe, O you whore of Babylon and murderer of Macedonia.'

CD: So, what do you think then of the international negotiations over the name issue, and the constant pressure for Macedonia to 'compromise' with Greece here?

VF: There is no real compromise. There can't be. Think about it: if a thief comes up to and holds a gun to your head and says 'give me your money,' do you say, 'I'll give you half,' and call that a compromise? That's Greece. They are trying to

destroy Macedonia's identity, plain and simple.

Note that no one on the Macedonian side is saying that Greeks cannot call themselves Macedonians, or their province Macedonia. But they never call themselves as such out of this context- they are, to themselves, Greeks first and foremost. So nobody actually needs the name Macedonia, and no one needs to call themselves Macedonians for their primary identity, except for these people in this small country that is not a threat to anyone.

CD: On that note, to conclude, let me ask this: based on your research, do you think that Macedonia gets enough credit for preserving its multiculturalism? And does it reflect at all on the temperament of the people here that it has been able to do so?

VF: First of all, Macedonia doesn't get any credit. And in fact the isolation that Greece has succeeded in imposing on Macedonia in the last 17 years has been a major factor in adding to interethnic tension here, as we saw unfortunately in the 2001 conflict.

If the Greeks had just left the Macedonians alone to begin with, there would have been fewer such problems, or at least greater capacity to deal with the existing ones. But it was the Greek government (especially after 1991) and the Serbian government (especially after 1981) who exacerbated most of the problems, for their own purposes.

You know, the vast majority of normal people of all ethnicities in this country live together peacefully. There is a saying in Macedonian: *nie sme krotok narod*: 'we are a mild people.' A peaceful people. This is something that is constantly overlooked by the Great Powers- that, relative to the rest of the Balkans and much of the world, for all the very real problems that exist, Macedonians are still among the most peaceful and tolerant people you will find anywhere.

CD: Victor, thank you very much for your time and insightful comments. I appreciate it.

VF: And thank you. //(c) Balkan Analysis //C. Deliso