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**A LONG-LASTING ASYMMETRY BETWEEN
ETHNICITY AND MOTHER TONGUE:
THE VLACHS OF EASTERN SERBIA**

Abstract: The Vlachs of Eastern Serbia are a bilingual population who, apart from Serbian, the state language, speak a dialectal variety derived from modern Romanian and heavily influenced by Serbian. Ever since the censuses started registering both ethnicity and the mother tongue of the population, there has been a discrepancy between the two among the Vlachs, meaning the number of people declaring Vlach as their mother tongue was sometimes strikingly higher than that of people declaring Vlach as their ethnicity. This asymmetry, which was not present with any other minority in Serbia, has been explained by ethnic mimicry, the simultaneous identities at play in this bilingual community, the low prestige of this ethnicity, both with the ingroup and with the outgroup, as well as by the advanced stage of assimilation into the surrounding majority population. This chapter aims to shed light both on this asymmetry and on the constantly dwindling number of persons who declare Vlach as their mother tongue based on in-depth sociolinguistic research from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective. To this end, drawing on the results of the VLingS project, which included 160 respondents of Vlach origin, the analysis follows two main directions of inquiry. On the one hand, I look into how Vlachs define the concept of the *mother tongue*, and on the other, I analyse their answers to several questions from the sociolinguistic questionnaire created and used during the project, intended to assess the attitudes of the respondents towards their mother

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tongue. The chapter offers a detailed analysis of the changes in census nomenclature during the last one and a half centuries and the subsequent changes in the numbers of inhabitants of Eastern Serbia declaring Romanian or Vlach as their mother tongue, against the historical and political background. Also, it shows that one of the reasons for the gradual decrease in the number of persons declaring Vlach as their mother tongue is equating the *mother tongue* with the language of the state and education.

Keywords: ethnicity, mother tongue, Vlach, Serbia, bilingualism

1. Ethnicity and mother tongue in population censuses

Language and ethnicity are often so closely linked that scholars see language as the “quintessential symbol of ethnicity” (Fishman 1977), much more than a mere instrument of communication. Therefore, the separation of ethnicity and mother tongue in population censuses may seem superfluous (Bugarski 2017: 744), assuming that data on the mother tongue “can be directly and confidently derived from ethnic affiliation, such that, for example, Hungarians speak Hungarian, Turks Turkish, Vlachs Vlach, Roma Romani and likewise in all other cases” (ibid.: 744). In reality, language and ethnicity are by no means related in a straightforward fashion. Social reality is made up of multilayered constructs, and it is not uncommon for the declared ethnic affiliation of individuals to collide with the declared mother tongue, although the mother tongue is considered a more objective indicator of belonging to a specific group than ethnicity in demographic statistics.

This disparity is more obvious in the European countries where the nation is understood ethnically rather than politically, that is to say, in the countries following the “Eastern” model, as opposed to the “Western”. Briefly put, the “Western” model, which has France as its progenitor, implies the practical identification of nation and state and makes determining the nationality of its citizens superfluous, while ethnicity may be derived from religion or mother tongue. In contrast, the “Eastern” model, notable in the case of multiethnic countries, requires mother tongue declaration at censuses, with the aim of securing special rights for national, ethnic or linguistic minorities (ibid.).

In today’s Serbia, as well as in former Yugoslavia, unlike in many other European countries (mainly those following the “Western” model),

censuses offer ample material for investigations into the linguistic and social reality of inhabitants, as they feature separate categories for ethnic and linguistic affiliation. Although still using the concept of the *mother tongue* (Sr. *maternji jezik*), a highly polysemous and metaphorical concept, deemed problematic in scholarship (Romaine 1995, Gupta 1997, Yildiz 2012), which disregards or fails to register widespread bilingualism (Bugarski 2017: 745) and is fraught by problems of collecting and processing the data, the Serbian population censuses are nevertheless a rich, though not always precise, source of information (Knežević 2023).

The demographic, linguistic, ethnic and interdisciplinary studies carried out on the basis of Serbian census statistics are numerous, and many of them pointed to a peculiarity: the largest discrepancy between the declared speakers of a mother tongue and their declared ethnicity emerges among the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia (Bugarski 1992, 2017, Radovanović 2002, Knežević 2019, Sorescu-Marinković & Huțanu 2023a). Namely, the number of people declaring Vlach ethnicity at some population censuses, in certain years and historical periods, was strikingly lower than that of people declaring Vlach as their mother tongue ever since both categories – mother tongue and ethnicity – have started to be used concurrently in population censuses in 1953 (Raduški 2006). This suggests that many who checked Vlach as their mother tongue in the census forms stated they were Serbs by ethnicity. This asymmetry, which was not present with any other minority in Serbia, was explained variously as a case of ethnic mimicry of the Vlachs (Knežević 2019), the simultaneous identities at play in this bilingual community (Dimitrijević-Rufu 1994, Durlić 2023), low prestige of the Vlach ethnicity, both with the ingroup and with the outgroup (Huțanu & Sorescu-Marinković 2018), as well as the Vlachs' advanced stage of assimilation into the surrounding majority population (Bugarski 2017).

In what follows, I will try to shed light on this asymmetry, but also on the decreasing number of persons who declared Vlach as their mother tongue at population censuses, based on the results of an in-depth sociolinguistic research, which involved a representative sample of respondents of Vlach origin. First, after a short overview of the history and current sociolinguistic situation of the Vlachs, I discuss the methodology and results of Serbian and Yugoslav censuses that concern the Vlachs from 1859 up to the present, focusing on the changes in the nomenclature of the language and the definitions of mother tongue. Then, I look into how Vlachs define the concept

of the *mother tongue* and analyse the answers to several questions from the V LingS sociolinguistic questionnaire intended to assess the attitudes of the respondents towards their mother tongue. Finally, I discuss the findings and draw several conclusions about the reasons for the long-lasting asymmetry between mother tongue and ethnicity, as well as the constantly dropping number of persons declaring Vlach as their mother tongue.

2. The Vlachs of Eastern Serbia in population censuses

The Vlachs of Eastern Serbia are a bilingual population who, apart from Serbian, the language of the state and the wider society, speak a dialectal variety derived from Romanian, heavily influenced by Serbian, the contact language, which is today considered vulnerable (Sorescu-Marinković, Mirić & Ćirković 2020). The Vlachs have inhabited Eastern Serbia for the last two centuries. They originate from the areas north of the Danube, where they came from in the 18th and 19th centuries, according to the most plausible theories (Sorescu-Marinković & Huțanu 2023a: 26–32). The contact with Serbian has heavily influenced the variety the Vlachs speak at all levels of language structure: phonetic, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic. Today, Vlach is a distinct variety of Romanian with special features due to its dialectal basis, numerous Romanian archaisms, and intense contact with Serbian (Sikimić 2005, Sorescu-Marinković & Huțanu 2023a).

When speaking their language, the Vlachs call it *rumânește*, and when speaking Serbian, they use the Serbian term *vlaški*, which is also employed in population censuses. The same is true for the ethnonym, *rumân*, which is doubled by the Serbian exonym *Vlah*. The language has survived as an oral idiom and has been, until recently, restricted to family communication. Nevertheless, the last twenty years witnessed the language starting to be used in writing, introduced in the primary school system as an optional subject – “Vlach speech with elements of national culture”, but also “Romanian language with elements of national culture” (Huțanu & Sorescu-Marinković 2015), and even subjected to an admittedly hotly contested standardisation (Sorescu-Marinković & Huțanu 2023b).

Coming back to population censuses, it is important to say that the name of the language spoken by the Vlachs has also been subject to changes in the census nomenclature. While in the beginning, the censuses registered

Romanian as the language of the Vlachs (Sr. *rumunski*), the category Vlach language (Sr. *vlaški*) was introduced in 1953. The ethnicity of the people speaking this mother tongue has also fluctuated, as we will see below.

Up to the middle of the 19th century, the priorities of state statistic surveys were mainly of a fiscal nature, while data on the population's ethnicity was collected only sporadically (Knežević 2023: 501). The first census of the Principality of Serbia took place in 1834, but a direct interpretation of the national structure of the Principality and later Kingdom of Serbia was not possible until 1910 because the question regarding national or ethnic affiliation was omitted, and the citizens were usually classified according to their declared mother tongue and religion (which I will not discuss here, as both Serbs and Vlachs are Christian Orthodox).

Although there was no question that asked the respondents to declare their ethnic affiliation, the first more specific data on the ethnicity of Serbia's inhabitants comes from the 1859 census, but only regarding the distinction between Serbs, the majority ethnicity, and Vlachs, the most numerous ethnic minority in Serbia at the time. According to the results of this census, 122,857 Vlachs were recorded in the Principality of Serbia, representing 11.4% of the total population, but it is unclear whether this distribution was derived only from questions about linguistic affiliation (Knežević 2023: 501). However, the mother tongue of the Vlachs registered by this census was labelled Romanian, not Vlach, as the census did not offer the option "Vlach language".

The direct question about ethnic belonging was first asked in the 1866 census of the Principality of Serbia. Interestingly, one of the goals of what is considered to be the first modern census in Serbia was "to determine for each inhabitant whether they were Vlachs, Gypsies or other non-Serb nationality" (Jakšić 1869: 48, *apud* Knežević 2023: 502). The results showed that the Vlachs accounted for 10.5% of the population.

Starting from 1884, the Serbian citizens declaring Romanian as their mother tongue at the censuses were registered as being of Romanian ethnicity (Sr. *Rumuni*), not Vlach, as had been the case earlier. This was in line with the obligations assumed by Serbia at the 1878 Congress of Berlin, where the observance of minority issues was one of the preconditions for Serbia's international recognition as a state. This was also a legal consequence of the establishment of the Kingdom of Romania in 1881 (Sorescu-Marinković &

Huțanu 2023a: 31). Therefore, the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia were registered at Serbian censuses as *Rumuni* from 1884 to 1948.

In 1900, we witnessed a short-lived introduction of the category *bilingual population*, which was applied specifically to those who spoke Romanian and Serbian. That particular census revealed 89,873 Romanian-speaking inhabitants, while bilinguals accounted for 32,556. At the 1921 census of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the number of Vlachs can be inferred from the citizens grouped under the “Romanian and Aromanian mother tongue” category: 139,567 without the territory of Vojvodina, where a compact community of Romanians lived (151,829 with Vojvodina), and without the southern regions of the Kingdom, with a significant Aromanian population (Gacović 2016: 536).

The 1931 census used a similar methodology; however, the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia were this time grouped under “speakers of other mother tongues”, as the Romanian language was missing from the offered options (*idem*: 542). Although this census included a question about ethnicity, the results have never been published.

In the first census in post-war socialist Yugoslavia, in 1948, the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia were divided, for the first time, by ethnic affiliation into two groups: Romanians (*Rumuni*), totalling 3,489, and Vlachs (*Vlasi*), totalling 93,440. This was also the period when the idea of introducing the Vlach language among the census categories appeared, which was realized starting with the following census (1953). This was connected to the post-WWII efforts of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and several Vlach intellectuals to write down and standardise Vlach for the first time (see Huțanu & Sorescu-Marinković 2023), which were nevertheless short-lived. However, one thing remained: *vlaški* as the name of the language spoken by the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, which was then introduced in the census nomenclature and remains in use to this day. Even the Vlachs employ, without exception, the term *vlaški* for their language when speaking Serbian, although they still use the glossonym *rumânește* when speaking their variety. After 1953, all following population censuses offer data on both the number of ethnic Vlachs and their mother tongue, Vlach (*vlaški*), with the second one always larger than the first, albeit the disparity shrinks as we advance to the present (see Table 1).

YEAR	VLACH ETHNICITY	VLACH MOTHER TONGUE
1953	28,047	198,861
1961	1,368	106,656
1971	14,724	139,902
1981	25,596	129,613
1991	17,804	71,534
2002	40,054	54,818
2011	35,330	43,095
2022	21,013	23,216

Table 1: The number of ethnic Vlachs and people declaring Vlach as their mother tongue at Yugoslav and Serbian censuses.

As we have seen, on the one hand, the dynamics of the number of people identifying as Vlachs shows a high degree of variability in the censuses, which is connected to the political and historical circumstances. On the other hand, the number of people who declared Vlach as their mother tongue shows an intense yet gradual trend of decline.

The mother tongue seems to be, in the case of the Vlachs, a much better indicator of the actual number of people in the language community than the declared ethnicity. The decrease in the number of people speaking Vlach can be connected to the pronounced emigration of the population of Eastern Serbia since the end of the 1960s and several decades of unfavourable fertility trends (Knežević 2019: 466), but also to the language shift and the different meanings the Vlachs attach to the concept of *mother tongue*.

The definition of mother tongue applied at population censuses in Serbia has changed over the years, from “the language that a person predominantly speaks in the household” (1953) to “the language that a person learned to speak in childhood, i.e. the language that a person considers to be their mother tongue if several languages are spoken in the household” (1961–2002) (Raduški 2006: 196). The definition of mother tongue in the 2011 and 2022 censuses remained the same as in the previous (2002) census, meaning that in the last 70 years, the definition of mother tongue in the Yugoslav and later Serbian population censuses has not been subjected to reconsideration.

However, the definitions applied at censuses are almost never read by the censors to the population, who, therefore, give answers based on their individual perceptions. It has been shown that what the speakers understand as the *mother tongue* in Serbia can be quite different from the census definition (Mirić, Sokolovska & Sorescu-Marinković 2024).

Yet, we get a slightly different image by fine-tuning and combining the numbers. Namely, according to the results of the 1991 census, more than 90% of those who identified as being of Vlach ethnicity declared Vlach mother tongue, while the rest declared Serbian or Romanian as their mother tongue. On the same census, the number of declared Vlachs was four times smaller than the number of those whose mother tongue was Vlach. At the same time, 23.1% of Vlach mother tongue speakers self-identified as Vlachs and 75.1% as Serbs (*ibid.*).

Regarding the smaller number of people self-identifying as Vlachs than as speakers of Vlach, after WWII, Serbian researchers proposed the hypothesis that this was the result of ethnic mimicry (*ibid.*: 466). However, researchers of Vlach origin put forth another, more nuanced explanation, arguing that Vlachs display a dual, contextual identity: a Romanian one, which comprises their mother tongue and traditional culture, and a Serbian one, which directs their ethnic loyalty towards the national state, Serbia, and which emerged during the creation of the Serbian nation (Dimitrijević-Rufu 1998, Durlić 2020: 39).

3. Aims and methodology

In what follows, I aim to shed light on the described asymmetry between the number of persons declaring Vlach ethnicity and Vlach as their mother tongue, drawing on the results of the VLingS project, which included 160 respondents of Vlach origin,¹ 66 men and 94 women. The interviewees were divided into four generations, with the following age range and distribution within the sample: generation 1 (age range: 18–29; 12.5%), generation 2 (age range: 30–44; 28.1%), generation 3 (age range: 45–59; 35%), and generation 4 (age range: 60+; 24.3%). The primary motivation for this categorisation

¹ The research included a total of 686 respondents belonging to different vulnerable linguistic communities in Serbia. Apart from the Vlachs, the distribution of the respondents in the general sample was as follows: 290 Roma, 85 Bayash, 78 Vojvodina Russyns, 29 Banat Bulgarians, 30 Aromanians, and 14 Sephardic Jews.

was to include interviewees who are of legal age (over 18) and subsequently distinguish between several generations of language speakers.

Interviewees came from both rural and urban areas (67.5 vs 32.5%, respectively). As for the education of the interviewees, the distribution was as follows: no education (0.6%), unfinished elementary school (1.9%), finished elementary school (12.5%), vocational school (16.3%), high school degree (28.1%), college degree (10.6%), university degree (25.6%), postgraduate/PhD studies (3.1%), and other (1.3%) (cf. with the general sample from the pilot research in Mirić, Sokolovska & Sorescu-Marinković 2024).

I follow two main directions of inquiry. On the one hand, I look into how Vlachs define the concept of the *mother tongue*, and on the other, I analyse answers to several questions from the sociolinguistic questionnaire created and used during the project, *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0*.² The questionnaire was administered orally, in face-to-face surveys, in Serbian so as to ensure the uniformity of the methodology in fieldwork research, and was coupled with interviews in Vlach, aimed both at language documentation and gathering qualitative information. *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0* is not an adaptation of any existing sociolinguistic questionnaire; it was created by the project members. It consists of 16 sections with a total of 151 questions, which elicit diverse information based on the interviewees' personal experiences. The sections of the questionnaire are: I. General data about linguonyms and language usage, II. Data about language acquisition and intergenerational language transmission, III. Domains of language usage, IV. Literacy, V. Education, VI. Institutional support and linguistic landscape, VII. Publications in the given language, VIII. Media, IX. Religious service, X. Cultural events, XI. Language level self-assessment, XII. Respondents' feelings towards their own language, XIII. Ethnic and cultural identity, XIV. Language maintenance and revitalisation, XV. Demographic information about the respondent, XVI. Final remarks.

4. Results

4.1. Mother tongue

Although in the last decades, the term *mother tongue* has received much criticism, being deemed insufficiently precise and metaphorical,

² See the *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0* at the end of the volume.

given that it suggests that mothers, as primary caretakers of children, are the only ones responsible for intergenerational language transmission (Romaine 1995, Gupta 1997, Yildiz 2012, Bugarski 2017), it is still the only one in use in population censuses and school curricula in Serbia: *maternji jezik*. Consequently, it is the preferred term in the Serbian public space, and, therefore, the only one which our respondents have encountered or are familiar with, and that is why we employed it in the *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0*.

The analysis focuses on the answers of Vlach respondents to the open question “What does the concept *mother tongue* mean to you?” (Question No. 6 of Section I. General data about linguonyms and language usage), and on the categories that I identified by means of a set of keywords used in the answers. The wide variety of answers reflects the prevalent view in scholarship that the *mother tongue* is a highly polysemous concept,³ and the meaning the speakers attach to the term does not necessarily overlap with what is meant by the census or education authorities.

Out of the 160 respondents of Vlach origin included in our research, 157 offered answers to the above-mentioned question, and 3 did not. The responses were quite diverse, which is in line with the results of the analysis carried out on the answers to the same question from the pilot questionnaire *VLingS Questionnaire 0.0*, answered by 158 respondents belonging to all vulnerable linguistic communities included in our project (Mirić, Sokolovska & Sorescu-Marinković 2024). The primary criterion used for categorising answers was a set of keywords encompassing various notions associated with the concept of *mother tongue*, such as: the order of language acquisition, individuals involved in language transmission, the frequency and contexts of language usage, attitudes toward the language, and other relevant factors.

In total, eight categories were identified (see Figure 1):

1. The first language learnt (N=53)
2. The language learnt from parents and household members (spoken at home) (N=25)
3. The language used most frequently (means of communication) (N=22)
4. The language of the state, place of origin, school (N=21)

³ See Sorgo & Udovič 2024 for an analysis of another polysemous concept, *kin state*.

5. The language of the mother (N=12)
6. The language the respondents think in (N=5)
7. The language of the origin and ancestors (N=5)
8. The language connected to the self, authenticity and culture (N=5)

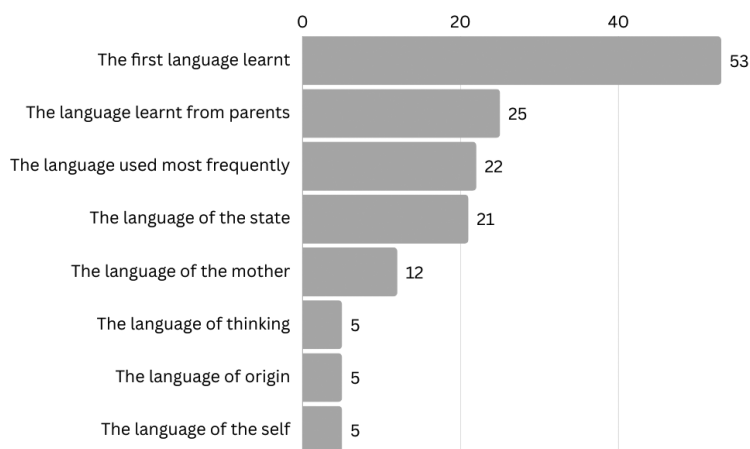


Figure 1: The distribution of answers to the question “What does the concept *mother tongue* mean to you?”

Nine respondents gave answers that cannot be classified in any of the aforementioned categories and form a separate class. The answers from this other category are either the name of the language alone, suggesting that the informants did not understand the question or were unable to give an answer, or explained how much their mother tongue means to them emotionally, indicating a different reading of the question, with the emphasis on the verb *mean*: e.g. “It means a lot to me”. Several other answers cannot be deciphered as explanations and classified.

The largest category consists of answers that prioritise the order of language acquisition, emphasising that the mother tongue is the language they first learnt or the language they started speaking in, which they acquired from birth or in their childhood. This suggests that the order of acquisition and the earliest age of acquisition are some of the most prominent characteristics of the mother tongue according to speakers of Vlach, which is in line with the answers provided during the pilot research by speakers of all vulnerable languages in Serbia included in the research. This finding might support the idea of the introduction of a better-fitting term, both in

the census nomenclature and the school curriculum, such as *first language* or *home language*, the preferred terms in the sociolinguistic literature.

A significant number of respondents nevertheless define the *mother tongue* differently, and their answers, numerically similar to one another, can be classified into three widely different categories: 1) the language learnt from parents and household members (spoken at home), 2) the language used most frequently (means of communication), and 2) the language of the state, place of origin, school. Paradoxically, a similar number of respondents believe that the mother tongue is the language spoken by the household members, giving an equal role in language transmission to both the mother and father and that it is the language of the state and the schooling system, which, in our case, is not Vlach, but Serbian. As for the third category, mother tongue understood as the language used most frequently, this also points to the preference given to Serbian when declaring the mother tongue in population censuses. This contradiction in the answers of Vlach respondents points to the existence of two different factions in the community: one that equates the mother tongue with Vlach – the language of family communication, and another that identifies it with Serbian – the language of the state. This might be one of the reasons for the dramatic drop in the number of people declaring Vlach as their mother tongue.

Interestingly, the mother tongue understood literally, as the language of the mother, was reported by only 12 respondents. This shows that the assumption that, when using the term *mother tongue*, respondents become biased and might define it solely as the language transmitted intergenerationally by mothers as primary caretakers of children is not supported in the case of Vlachs, who give more importance to the role of the whole family in language transmission instead of limiting it to the mother. This might be a consequence of the Vlachs' traditional way of life, with several generations living in the same household, where the entire family is involved in raising children and transmitting the language to the younger generations.

Three more categories with an equal number of answers (N=5) were detected: 1) the language of the origin and ancestors, 2) the language the respondents think in, and 3) the language connected to the self, authenticity and culture. While the first category emphasises the role of ancestors in defining the mother tongue and can be connected to other categories which assess the role of persons in intergenerational transmission, the last two give the respondents themselves a central place in the definition of

mother tongue. These findings should, nevertheless, be combined with the qualitative information obtained from the respondents during the open-ended interviews, which were carried on in their mother tongue after filling the questionnaire (see Mirić et al. in this volume).

It is important to note that some answers contained more than one category. More accurately, out of the 148 answers that can be categorised, 31 (21%) combined two or more keywords and could, therefore, be included in multiple categories. In this case, only the first answer was taken into account for classification purposes, to preserve consistency in the analysis and to minimise the effect of possible cognitive processes, such as reflection or reconsideration of the responses.

4.2. Attitudes towards the mother tongue

An important social factor that plays a crucial role in shaping language use, communication patterns, and interactions within the society are the attitudes of community members toward their own local language and towards other languages they come into contact with (Baker 1992, Garrett 2010). Language attitudes refer to an individual's evaluative reactions or opinions toward languages and the speakers of those languages, and they can be positive, negative, or neutral. Researchers agree that the positive attitude of the speakers of a given language towards their language contributes positively to its linguistic vitality (Sallabank 2013).

Nevertheless, speakers are not always appreciative of their own language and do not always positively regard other languages. Community members may promote their language when they consider it important to their community and identity, or they may use it but not promote it. They may be ashamed of it and avoid using it, which increases the vulnerability of the language (Garrett 2010, Dragojevic et al. 2021).

It has been shown that the Vlachs had feelings of inferiority and self-stigmatisation regarding their language in comparison with standard Romanian (Vălsan 1913/2008), but also with Serbian (Durlić 2020, 2023), perceiving their language as broken, not a real language, and not fit for proper communication on all levels. In what follows, I assess the current attitudes of the Vlachs towards their own language, focusing on the respondents' answers to the five questions in Section XII of the *VLingS Questionnaire 1.0*, Respondents' feelings towards their own language, and to two questions in Section XIV, Language maintenance and revitalisation.

Question No. 1 in Section XII reads: “How do you feel when you speak your language in the presence of other speakers of Vlach?”, with the following possible answers: 1. “I am proud”, 2. “I feel comfortable”, 3. “I feel as usual”, 4. “I feel uncomfortable”, 5. “I am ashamed”, 6. “I don’t know, I don’t think about it”. Question No. 2 of Section XII reads: “How do you feel when you speak your language in the presence of speakers of Serbian?” with the same options for answering. Answers 1 and 2 denote positive attitudes, 3 and 6 – neutral attitudes, while answers 4 and 5 point to negative attitudes.

The distribution of answers to the question “How do you feel when you speak your language in the presence of other speakers of Vlach?” is as follows: 1. “I am proud” (N=42), 2. “I feel comfortable” (N=34), 3. “I feel as usual” (N=67), 4. “I feel uncomfortable” (N=5), 5. “I am ashamed” (N=6), 6. “I don’t know, I don’t think about it” (N=2). Four respondents did not answer this question. This means that 48.7% of the respondents showed positive attitudes, 7% – negative attitudes and 44.2% – neutral attitudes (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that the majority of respondents in this group have chosen the answer “I feel as usual”, which points to the habitual nature of speaking their language. The respondents who answered that they were ashamed are, most probably, those less proficient in Vlach, who might feel the pressure of the community.

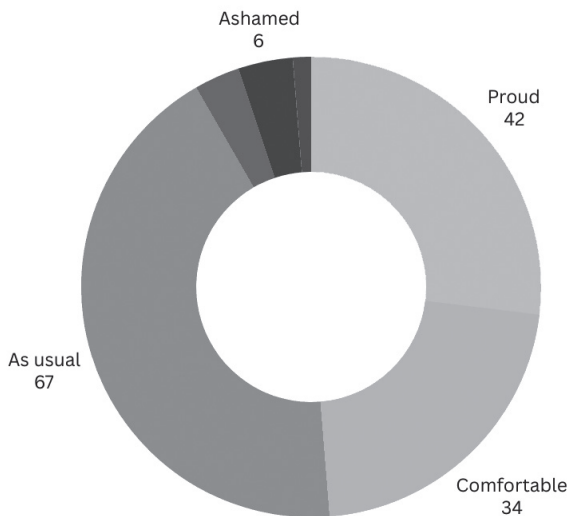


Figure 2: The distribution of answers to the question “How do you feel when you speak your language in the presence of other speakers of Vlach?”

However, the image is slightly different when it comes to the second question, which assesses the attitudes of Vlach respondents when they speak their language in front of speakers of Serbian (see Figure 3). The distribution of answers to this question is as follows: 1. “I am proud” (N=37); 2. “I feel comfortable” (N=9); 3. “I feel as usual” (N=59); 4. “I feel uncomfortable” (N=37); 5. “I am ashamed” (N=0); 6. “I don’t know, I don’t think about it” (N=14). Four respondents did not answer this question. This time, neutral rather than positive attitudes emerged as prevalent (46.7%). Positive attitudes were shown by only 29.4% of the respondents and negative by 23.7%. However, it is important to note that nobody said they were ashamed of speaking the language in front of speakers of Serbian, which points to the greater prestige of the language than reported in previous studies.

Nevertheless, many respondents pointed out that the questionnaire should have one more response option, as it is impolite to speak your language in the presence of persons who do not speak it. Therefore, one might infer that a large share of respondents would have checked this option had it been available and that they usually avoid speaking Vlach in the presence of speakers of Serbian.

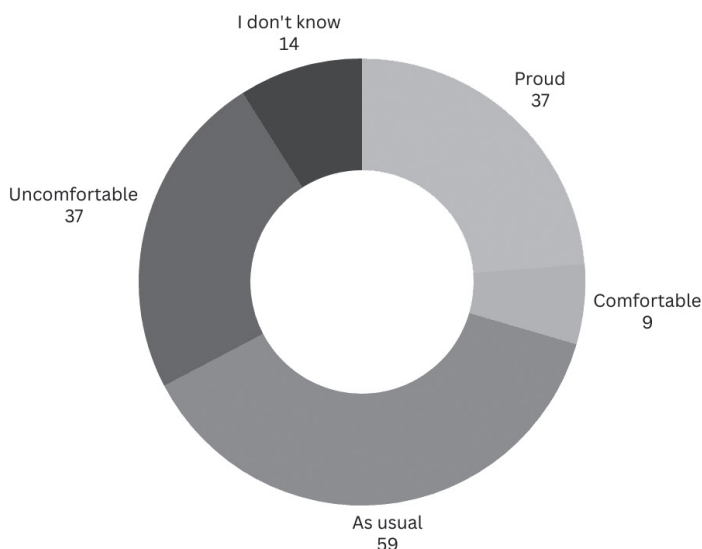


Figure 3: The distribution of answers to the question “How do you feel when you speak your language in the presence of speakers of Serbian?”

Question No. 3 of this section was an open question, one of three open questions in the *VlingS Questionnaire 1.0*: “How does your language sound to you?” Out of 160 respondents, 157 offered answers to this question. The answers can be grouped into two major categories: denoting attitudes and feelings toward the language (positive, negative, neutral) and containing comparisons to other languages.

In what concerns the first big category, which denotes attitudes and feelings toward the language, most of the answers contained keywords that group them into positive attitudes: “nice” (N=39), “super” (N=12), “melodic” (N=10), “interesting” (N=6), “familiar” (N=5), “archaic” (N=4). These were followed by answers denoting neutral attitudes: “normal”, “ok” (N=33), “like all other languages” (N=5), and by several denoting negative attitudes: “complicated”, “difficult” (N=4). We noticed a prevalence of positive attitudes (48.4%), followed by neutral (24.2%); a very small percentage of respondents showed negative attitudes towards the sound of their language (2.5%).

Concerning the second category, which contains comparisons to other languages, the answers fall into two groups: comparison with the Romance languages (N=21) and comparison with Serbian (N=15). This is indicative of the situation of Vlach, which is structurally a Romance variety influenced by Serbian. The speakers make comparisons with the two standard languages, Romanian and Serbian, to which their non-standardised variety is connected, or to the Romance group of languages and Serbian.

The answers comparing Vlach to Serbian can, in turn, be grouped into three categories, which essentially express the following: 1) Vlach is more beautiful than Serbian, more melodic, richer, and capable of expressing more emotions (N=9); 2) Vlach is similar to Serbian, normal, as beautiful as Serbian (N=4); and 3) Vlach is different from Serbian (N=2).

The comparison with the Romance languages, on the other hand, offers a wider range of answers. Some respondents compare Vlach to Latin and old Romance (N=2), some to Romanian (N=6): “It sounds like Romanian”, but also: “Romanian is clearer, Vlach is sloppy and weird”. Some respondents compare Vlach to Romance languages in general or with particular Romance languages (N=12): “It is very melodic, it reminds me of Italian”, “it is a bit harsher than French and other Romance languages”, “it is melodic like all other Romance languages, it sounds like Italian, French, Portuguese”, “Vlach belongs to the Romance group of languages, very fit for singing”, “it is part of the Romance languages, it is resonant, it is a rich language”, “it is similar to Romanian, but unique, it reminds me of Catalanian and the other Romance

languages”, “it reminds me of the other Romance languages, depending on the context it is harsh and rough or soft”. These comparisons reflect mainly positive attitudes of the respondents, who seem to highly value their language.

The last two questions in Section XII are: “Has anyone ever prohibited you from speaking your language?” and “Has anyone ever prohibited members of your family from speaking your language?” with the following possible answers: 1. “Yes”; 2. “No”; 3. “I don’t know”. The first question was answered affirmatively by 14 (8.7%) respondents, while the second one was answered affirmatively by only 8 (5%). Only three respondents answered “Yes” to both questions.

Although researchers of Vlach origin report instances of Vlach children being forbidden to speak their language when starting school and being punished by teachers for doing so and of Vlach men being laughed at, looked down upon and forbidden to speak their language in the army (Durlić 2020, 2023), and although the author of this chapter has also come across several interlocutors who remember that members of their family were punished for speaking Vlach in state institutions, the survey did not show a significant percentage of affirmative answers to these questions, even though 24.3% of the respondents belonged to the fourth, oldest generation.

The two questions from Section XIV, Language maintenance and revitalisation, which are also part of this analysis are Question No. 6: “Is it important to you to transmit your language to the younger generations?” and Question No. 7: “Is it important to you to introduce or keep your language in schools?”, both with the following possible answers: 1. “Yes”; 2. “No”; 3. “I don’t care”.

As for Question No. 6, 138 respondents (86%) replied that it is important that Vlach is transmitted to the younger generations, 2 (1.25%) answered that it is not important, and 20 (12.5%) replied that they did not care. The answers to Question No. 7 showed a similar trend, meaning the majority of respondents answered that it is important that Vlach is introduced into the school system. Nevertheless, the percentage was lower than in the previous question: 77.5% (N=124). The number of respondents who were definitely against introducing the language into the school system was consequently higher than in the first case: 11 (6.8%), while that of respondents who answered that they did not care was relatively similar: 23 (14.37%). Two respondents did not answer this question.

The number of respondents who were against introducing the language into the school system should be put in connection to the answer to the open question: “What do you think should be done to preserve or revitalise your language?” Some answers to this question were: “Not to introduce it into the school system”. This answer, counterintuitive as it may seem, most probably had to do with the idea that Vlach has survived for so long solely as an oral language, spoken and transmitted exclusively within the family, and that its standardisation and introduction into the school system might put an end to its transmission or maintenance.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The lack of alignment between the number of declared Vlachs and that of speakers of Vlach recorded in the Serbian population censuses has been explained in previous research, as I have presented above, either by ethnic mimicry or by the double, contextual identity of the speakers. Nevertheless, starting with the 2002 census, the ratio between the number of people identifying as Vlachs and of people who declared Vlach as their mother tongue has been getting increasingly smaller, with these figures almost aligning in 2022: 21,013 and 23,216, respectively. Although the drop in the speakers of Vlach, as shown by censuses, can be interpreted as a direct consequence of the decrease in the absolute number of speakers for demographic reasons, as a sign of linguistic assimilation following ethnic assimilation, or as manipulation of census figures (given that the informal statistics of the community members offer much higher numbers of speakers), the results of the sociolinguistic research carried out within the VlingS project point to other possible reasons.

The first reason is the impossibility of declaring two mother tongues in the case of bilingual speakers, who more often than not opt for naming only Serbian as the more prestigious language. The other reason is the meaning that the speakers attach to the concept of the *mother tongue*, which can be quite different from the one implied by the census authorities. Finally, the decrease in the number of speakers of Vlach cannot be directly connected to the language attitudes of the Vlachs, who mainly evaluate their language positively or neutrally.

As shown in Section 3.1, there are eight categories of definitions of the notion of *mother tongue* that the Vlach respondents offered. Most defined

the mother tongue as the first language they learnt, which supports the criticism towards the term, which is misleading and imprecise, while the term *first language* might be a more appropriate solution.

The following three categories of answers are: the language learnt from parents and household members (spoken at home), the language used most frequently (means of communication), and the language of the state, place of origin, school. While the first category would also support the introduction and use of another term, such as *family language* or *home language*, already used elsewhere, the last two categories might come as a surprise. As Vlach still has a very restricted range of use and tends to be limited to family communication and informal settings, the language used most frequently refers to Serbian, as does the language of the state and school system.

Equating the *mother tongue* with the state language, the language of education, and the language with wider domains of use by the Vlachs could well be one of the reasons for the decrease in the number of persons declaring Vlach as their mother tongue. The adoption of this perspective has, nevertheless, a well-founded reason, as several school curricula documents that children and parents encounter during schooling use the term *mother tongue* but, in reality, apply only to the Serbian language. As there is still no available education in Vlach, apart from the optional subject “Vlach speech with elements of national culture”, which is taught in several primary schools in Eastern Serbia, pupils of Vlach origin are automatically assigned Serbian as their mother tongue subject by the educational authorities. Unfortunately, this trend will probably become even more pronounced in the future unless Vlach (or Romanian) is introduced into the school curriculum as a compulsory subject.

Contrary to expectations, only a small number of respondents associated the *mother tongue* with the language of their mother. The rest of them defined the *mother tongue* as the language they think in, the language of their origin and ancestors (now known as *heritage language* in scholarship) or the language connected to the self, authenticity, and culture.

While the majority of respondents consider it important to transmit their language to the younger generations and introduce it in schools, almost 15% answered that they did not care, and a small number declared that they were against introducing the language into the school system. Although sociolinguists and activists see the introduction of a vulnerable language into the school system as one of the important ways to revitalise it, there are

language-dependent and community-dependent differences, and vulnerable varieties should be treated on a case-by-case basis. As we have seen, some speakers of Vlach might not consider it important or are indifferent to the possibility of introducing their language into the school system, as their language still has a relatively large number of speakers, a long tradition of orality, and a relatively good intergenerational transmission.

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Acknowledgement

The manuscript is the result of the project “Vulnerable Languages and Linguistic Varieties in Serbia” (VLingS), funded by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia (grant number: 7736100) within the program IDEAS (2022–2024). The funding was provided through the Budget of the Republic of Serbia, and the World Bank project – the Serbia Accelerating Innovation and Entrepreneurship Project (SAIGE).

The manuscript is also the result of the author’s activity at the Institute for Balkan Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA), which is financed by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia based on the Agreement on the Implementation and Financing of Scientific Research of the Institute in 2024, no. 451-03-66/2024-03 dated 26.01.2024.