

LANGUAGE USE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

USO DEL LENGUAJE EN MACEDONIA DEL NORTE

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Abstract

This study examines the role of language policies and practices in the multiethnic context of North Macedonia, with a particular focus on the Albanian language. In a society where Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Roma, and other ethnic groups coexist, language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a crucial marker of cultural identity and social inclusion. Using a qualitative sociolinguistic approach, the study analyzes the historical and legal framework (e.g., the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the Law on the Use of Languages), as well as language use in education, public administration, and the media. Preliminary findings indicate significant progress in the institutionalization of multilingualism, especially the use of Albanian in public life, while also highlighting persistent challenges in implementation and equity. Multilingual education and media have improved minority representation and participation, yet resource disparities and ethnic tensions remain. The paper argues that building a more integrated and equitable society requires not only legal provisions for language rights but also societal change through inclusive education and balanced media representation. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the impact of language on social cohesion in multiethnic states.

Keywords

North Macedonia, language use, multilingualism, sociolinguistics, identity, interethnic relations

1. INTRODUCTION

North Macedonia is home to a diverse ethnic population, including Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Roma, and others. In such a multi-ethnic context, language is more than a means of communication—it is a key element of cultural identity and social inclusion. As Risteska (2018a) notes, "language use influences not only representation

in society but also the perceptions different groups have of one another” (p. 74). This study aims to examine how language policies and practices shape the experiences of different communities in North Macedonia, with particular attention to the Albanian language.

Multilingualism is a fundamental characteristic of the country, and the use of languages plays an important role in shaping inter-ethnic and social relations. Language is not only a communicative tool but also a sign of identity and cultural belonging, as well as a key factor for the integration of different ethnic groups. Sociolinguistics, as a discipline that examines the relationship between language and society, can provide a deep understanding of the impact of language use in North Macedonia. This study explores the multifaceted aspects of language use, analyzing the historical and legal context, the role of language in education and public administration, and the influence of media. A particular focus is placed on clarifying the impact of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001), which granted official status to the Albanian language in municipalities where Albanians constitute at least 20% of the population—not just in those where they are the majority. Through this analysis, the study seeks to offer insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with fostering a cohesive multilingual society (Cakaj, 2020b).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative sociolinguistic approach aimed at understanding how language policy is implemented and experienced by different ethnic groups in North Macedonia. The methodology includes:

- **Document analysis:** Examination of key legal documents such as the Constitution, the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001), the Law on the Use of Languages (2019), and the Law on Primary Education (2019).
- **Literature review:** Analysis of scholarly work on language policy, multilingual education, and interethnic relations.
- **Preliminary field observations:** Conducted in Tetovo and Skopje, focusing on language use in public spaces, education, and administration.
- **Informal interviews:** Carried out with educators, civil servants, and citizens from various ethnic backgrounds to understand their experiences and perspectives on language use in everyday life.

This mixed-methods qualitative framework aims to identify key trends, persistent challenges, and progress made in promoting inclusive language use in public life.

3. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

3.1. *Historical and legal context of language use*

Following independence in 1991, Macedonian was declared the sole official language. This led to tensions among ethnic minorities, especially the Albanian community. The 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement marked a turning point by recognizing Albanian as an official language in municipalities where Albanians comprise at least 20% of the population. This paved the way for greater linguistic rights and institutional reform.

Building on the OFA, the Law on the Use of Languages (2019) further extended the official use of Albanian throughout the country, including in public administration, courts, and national institutions. Despite progress, implementation challenges remain, particularly regarding clarity in judicial contexts and the inclusion of other minority languages like Turkish, Romani, and Serbian (Cakaj, 2020a).

3.2. Historical background

The linguistic dynamics of North Macedonia have been influenced by its complex history, marked by periods of Ottoman rule, Yugoslav federation, and eventual independence in 1991. During the Yugoslav era, Macedonian was established as the official language, while minority languages were recognized to varying degrees. Post-independence, the 1991 Constitution designated Macedonian as the sole official language, which led to tensions among ethnic minorities, particularly the Albanian community. The lack of official recognition for minority languages contributed to feelings of marginalization and sparked demands for greater linguistic rights.

3.3. The Ohrid Framework Agreement

In response to the 2001 conflict between ethnic Albanian insurgents and Macedonian security forces, the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) was signed, aiming to enhance the rights of ethnic minorities. A key provision of the OFA was the recognition of Albanian as an official language in municipalities where Albanians constituted at least 20% of the population. This agreement marked a significant shift in language policy, promoting bilingualism in public administration, education, and other sectors. The OFA laid the groundwork for subsequent legal reforms aimed at institutionalizing multilingualism and ensuring equitable language rights (Cakaj, 2020b).

3.4. The Law and the Use of Languages

Building upon the OFA, the Law on the Use of Languages was enacted in 2019, further expanding the official use of Albanian across the country. The law stipulates that Albanian is to be used in all public institutions, including government agencies, courts, and

municipalities, regardless of the local ethnic composition. However, the law has faced criticism for its ambiguous provisions and challenges in implementation. Concerns have been raised regarding the law's clarity, particularly in judicial proceedings, and its applicability to other minority languages such as Turkish, Roma, and Serbian (AP News, 2024).

Despite these challenges, the law represents a significant step toward institutionalizing multilingualism and promoting linguistic equality in North Macedonia.

3.5. Language Use in Education and Public Administration

In education in North Macedonia, the use of Macedonian and Albanian is important to ensure equality of educational opportunities for all ethnic groups. In recent years, schools have started to offer more opportunities for instruction in Albanian, thus ensuring that children of ethnic Albanian groups can pursue their education in their mother tongue. According to Nikola Kolarov (2019a), "Efforts to integrate the two languages into the education system are a step forward for the development of an equal and integrated society." On the other hand, the public administration in North Macedonia has become more multilingual, ensuring that citizens can use their mother tongue in conversations and official documents. This change has contributed to strengthening trust between ethnic groups and promoting a sense of belonging. Education and Public Administration. Education is a key domain where language policy affects daily life. Albanian-language instruction has increased, allowing ethnic Albanian students to receive education in their mother tongue. However, Macedonian remains dominant in higher education, limiting access for non-native speakers. In public administration, progress toward bilingualism is visible in several municipalities. Citizens are increasingly able to access services in both Macedonian and Albanian. Still, implementation is uneven, particularly in rural areas and in smaller administrative offices (Cakaj, 2020b).

3.6. Education

The education sector now offers instruction in multiple languages, particularly Macedonian and Albanian. While primary and secondary education has become more inclusive, disparities remain in higher education, where Macedonian is still dominant. According to Kolarov (2019a), efforts to integrate the two languages into the education system are a step forward for the development of an equal and integrated society. In public administration, services are increasingly provided in both Macedonian and Albanian, improving access and representation. However, issues such as lack of bilingual staff and inconsistent policy enforcement, especially in rural areas, continue to pose challenges (Cakaj, 2020a; Eurydice, 2023; Kolarov, 2019b; OECD, 2024).

3.7. Public Administration

The integration of minority languages into public administration has been a focal point of language policy reforms. Following the OFA and the 2019 language law, public institutions are required to provide services in both Macedonian and Albanian, with provisions for other minority languages where applicable. Implementation of bilingualism in public administration has led to increased accessibility of services for minority communities and has fostered greater participation in public life. However, practical challenges remain, including the need for qualified bilingual staff, translation of official documents, and consistent application of language policies across institutions (OECD, 2024). Continued investment in capacity building and monitoring mechanisms is essential to ensure the effective implementation of multilingual public administration (Cakaj, 2020b).

4. MEDIA AND LANGUAGE USE

Media in North Macedonia plays a critical role in shaping public perception and interethnic dialogue. Outlets exist in multiple languages—Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Romani—contributing to cultural visibility. MRT₂, for example, offers programming in Albanian, Turkish, and Romani. Private channels like Alsat-M broadcast bilingually and aim to foster interethnic understanding.

However, representation is still uneven, and minority language media often suffer from underfunding and political pressure. Online platforms such as *Portalb.mk* and *Shenja TV* provide valuable Albanian-language content, while grassroots groups like *Romalitico* use social media to amplify Roma voices.

Despite their potential to bridge divides, media platforms can also perpetuate stereotypes. Ethical journalism and inclusive editorial policies are needed to mitigate the risks of hate speech and disinformation (Reporting Diversity Network, 2024).

4.1. Television and Radio

One of the most prominent examples of bilingual broadcasting is Macedonian Radio Television (MRT), the public broadcaster, which offers programming in multiple languages. MRT₁ primarily broadcasts in Macedonian, while MRT₂ is dedicated to minority languages. MRT₂'s schedule includes:

- Albanian-language programming throughout most of the day, including news, cultural shows, talk shows, and children's programming.
- Turkish-language shows such as "Merhaba Hayat" and news segments produced in cooperation with the Turkish community.

- Romani-language programs like “Roma Avazi”, which highlight Roma culture and social issues.

Local and private broadcasters also contribute to this multilingual environment. *TV Koha*, based in Tetovo, broadcasts exclusively in Albanian, serving the western part of the country, while *Alsat-M*, a national private TV channel, operates bilingually in Macedonian and Albanian, aiming to promote interethnic understanding. Its slogan “Bringing People Together” reflects this mission. According to Risteska (2018a), “The presence of Albanian in private and public television has increased the visibility of the Albanian community, but also introduced linguistic diversity into the homes of Macedonian viewers”.

4.2. *Print and Online Media*

The print media in North Macedonia includes newslets and magazines in several languages. For example: “Koha” is a leading Albanian-language daily newslet that provides news, political analysis, and cultural content. “Nova Makedonija”, published in Macedonian, is one of the oldest newslets in the country. “Lobi” is a weekly magazine published in Albanian, known for its focus on politics and social issues affecting the Albanian community.

Online media has grown significantly in recent years, creating more space for minority language content. Portalb.mk, an Albanian-language online news portal based in Skopje, provides independent reporting on national and regional issues, often with a focus on minority rights, governance, and education. Its work is often cited by international human rights organizations for its role in strengthening media pluralism. Another example is *Shenja TV*, an Albanian-language online and cable broadcaster, which produces political debates, documentaries, and religious programming targeting the Albanian Muslim population.

4.3. *Social Media and Minority Voices*

Social media platforms have enabled minority communities to bypass traditional media barriers and express themselves directly. Activist groups, such as *Romalitico*, use Facebook and YouTube to share content in Romani and advocate for Roma rights and political participation. However, the digital space also poses risks. Instances of hate speech and nationalist rhetoric have emerged on social media platforms, especially during periods of political instability. A 2023 report by the Reporting Diversity Network highlighted how some Macedonian-language online forums spread disinformation and ethnic stereotypes, particularly during election cycles.

4.4. *Challenges and Opportunities*

While the diversity of language use in media has increased representation and access to information, challenges remain:

- Funding: Minority-language media outlets often face financial instability and rely on donor support, which affects their sustainability.
- Political pressure: Some outlets are subject to editorial control or influence from political parties, reducing journalistic independence.
- Limited coverage of minority issues in Macedonian-language media: Topics affecting ethnic Albanians, Roma, or Turks are often underrepresented or framed from a majority perspective.

Yet, the growth of bilingual and minority-language media has had a significant positive impact on interethnic dialogue. According to Katerina Risteska (2018b), "The use of multiple languages in media serves not only the function of representation, but also that of bridging the gap between communities".

5. DISCUSSION

Language policy in North Macedonia has undergone significant transformation since the Ohrid Agreement, with notable advancements in institutionalizing bilingualism and promoting minority rights. The legal recognition of the Albanian language has enhanced the participation of ethnic Albanians in public life and improved access to education and services. Nevertheless, full implementation remains uneven. While urban centers show more progress, rural and monoethnic areas lag behind. Public attitudes toward bilingualism also vary, influencing how laws are enforced and respected.

Beyond legal reforms, societal change is needed—particularly in attitudes, education, and media—to promote genuine inclusion and interethnic understanding. Language should be seen not as a dividing line, but as a bridge toward a more cohesive, respectful, and democratic society.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Language use in North Macedonia is a critical issue that intertwines with identity, social equity, and interethnic relations. The country has made significant progress, particularly after the 2001 Ohrid Agreement, but ongoing challenges remain in achieving consistent, fair, and meaningful multilingual inclusion. Future research will focus on collecting more systematic data from multiple municipalities and conducting structured interviews with public officials and media professionals. Continued efforts are needed to foster inclusive language practices, ensure fair representation, and create opportunities for dialogue through education, administration, and media. The use of languages in North Macedonia is a multidimensional

issue and extremely important for the development of a stable and equal society. In a country with different ethnic groups, where Macedonians, Albanians and other ethnic groups share a common space, language is a key factor related not only to communication, but also to the identity, integration and coexistence of different groups. Consequently, the use of languages is not only a means to carry out daily functions, but also a means to preserve and promote the cultures and identities of different ethnic groups.

In recent years, North Macedonia has achieved significant progress in the integration of different languages, focusing particularly on the use of Albanian in public administration and education. The Ohrid Agreement (2001) has had a significant impact, enabling Albanians, as the largest ethnic group after Macedonians, to use their language officially in many areas, such as public administration, education, healthcare and media. This has improved the opportunities for social inclusion of ethnic groups, giving them the opportunity to participate in public life and contribute to the development of the country on an equal footing. However, the use of languages in North Macedonia still faces several challenges. While Albanian has gained a higher status in some areas, disparities still remain in some aspects of social and professional life. In many cases, Albanian citizens and those of other ethnicities still face difficulties in using their language in public administration and higher education, where Macedonian remains the main dominant language. This has caused tensions and perceptions of inequality, especially when it comes to opportunities for professional and educational advancement. To minimize these differences, it is necessary for the government to invest more in providing equal opportunities for all its citizens, ensuring that the use of languages does not become an obstacle to the integration and personal and professional development of individuals.

Another aspect that has an important impact is the use of languages in the media. The media has a powerful role in shaping social opinions and attitudes. The use of multiple languages in the media has contributed to the dissemination of information and the promotion of dialogue between ethnic groups. However, the media has often played a divisive role, reinforcing stereotypes and negative perceptions about different groups. The use of language in the media should be careful and promote inter-ethnic understanding rather than division. (Cakaj, 2020a)

Furthermore, one of the main challenges is to create a more integrated and equitable society, where all ethnic groups feel represented and equal. This integration requires more than just the use of languages in administration and public education; it requires a profound change in mentalities and social attitudes towards the rights and opportunities of ethnic groups. Language, as an important element of identity, should be used as a tool to create opportunities for cooperation and to help transcend ethnic and cultural differences, thus strengthening coexistence and social cohesion. In conclusion, the use of languages in North Macedonia is a key aspect for inter-ethnic development and understanding in this rich and diverse society. This issue is complex and requires a balanced approach, where respect for the linguistic rights of different ethnic groups is essential for building a just and equal society.

While the country has made significant progress in this area, it is necessary to continue investing in multilingual education, administration and media, as well as in changing social attitudes to ensure a fuller integration of all ethnic groups.

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