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Bilingualism and Diglossia in Bulgaria—a New Perspective upon Their Contemporary State

Gueorgui ARMIANOV
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At the beginning of the 20th century, in his *History of Bulgarian Language*, Benyo Tsonev was probably the first to examine the question of the use of two or more languages in daily communication in Bulgaria.¹ Today, works dedicated to bilingualism and diglossia in the country are rather scarce and, with no exception, were written in the last twenty years. Among them, we find only several books: one, published in 2004, analyses mostly the historical aspects of Bulgarian-Turkish and Bulgarian-Greek bilingualism during the period 15th-19th century;² another book examines the problems related to the education of children of Turkish and Roma origin;³ the third discusses a specific case of regional diglossia in a particular town,⁴ and the fourth, written in 2005, is virtually the only work that explores and analyses diglossia in Bulgaria in general and its relationships with bilingualism, and pays special attention to the issues of Bulgarian-Turkish and Bulgarian-Greek bilingualism.⁵ It is necessary to note the publication in France of the work *Turkish*

1. TSONEV, 1919.

2. NIKOLOVA 2004. A serious point of discussion is the author's decision to include in her analysis the Church Slavonic, which is in fact not a foreign language but an archaic and conservative form of liturgical language based on the Old Bulgarian/Old Slavonic, and is used in religious ceremonies and some publications but not in oral communication.

3. KYUCHUKOV, 2007.

4. DIMITROVA, 2004.

5. VIDENOV, 2005.

words in the contemporary Bulgarian language, where the author discusses also the social context of the linguistic contacts between the Bulgarian and the Turkish languages.⁶ In all other works, these topics remain secondary issues to which attention is drawn only occasionally, most often as part of a more general study of the history of language, lexicology and dialectology.⁷ The exceptions are rare and often come from foreign authors.⁸

This article explores some particular forms of diglossia and/or bilingualism in Bulgaria that, to my knowledge, have never been brought to attention. My work focuses on the relationships between the Standard Bulgarian language and the regional dialects as well as the Bulgarian and the Turkish languages on their multiple levels and aspects.⁹ It takes into account the evolution of the Bulgarian society over the last thirty years and the relationships between different varieties of the Bulgarian language and between Bulgarian and Turkish, associated with the political changes or influenced by them.¹⁰

The term diglossia probably appeared for the first time in the early writings of the French Hellenist of Greek origin Jean (Ioánnis) Psichari and was considered by many at that time as a barbarism. Antoine Meillet used the term in 1917 without giving any definition. Then, at the end of the 1920s, in his article *Un pays qui ne veut pas de sa langue*, Psichari explained diglossia as a linguistic configuration in which two varieties of one language are used, but one of the varieties is less valued than the other.¹¹

In 1959, Charles Ferguson examined the linguistic situations in German-speaking Switzerland, in the Arab countries, in Haiti and in Greece, and concluded that there was diglossia when two varieties of the same language were used with different but perfectly complementary socio-cultural functions.¹² Each variety has its own spheres of interaction and fixed functions. One was considered “high” (H) or valued, prestigious and was mainly used in writing (especially in literature and in education) or in formal oral discourse. The other was considered “low,”

6. GADJEVA, 2009.

7. MIRTCHEV, 1952; SPASSOVA, 1966; LILOV, 1980; VIDENOV, 1982; BORISOV, 2009; etc.

8. GRANNES, 1989; RUDIN, 1990.

9. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my colleague Snejana Gadjeva of the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales in Paris, for the information and the suggestions given during our discussions on the contemporary Bulgarian language situation.

10. See also ARMIANOV, 2013, pp. 25-43.

11. PSICHARI, 1928, p. 66.

12. FERGUSON, 1959, p. 325-340.

non-prestigious and was typical for ordinary communication, in daily life. Yet, according to Fergusson, in a situation of a dichotomy “standard *vs* dialect” there were people who naturally spoke the standard (H) variety, while in a diglossic situation nobody used (H) in everyday conversations.

Taking into account the limits of Fergusson’s approach and the development of sociolinguistics, Joshua Fishman extended further the definition of diglossia including the use of unrelated languages or their varieties as high and low forms.¹³ The two varieties could be forms of the same language or could belong to two different languages in contact; they coexist in a given area and, for historical and/or political reasons, have obtained distinct status and social functions.

Accordingly, in diglossia, as well as in a bilingual situation, both languages or varieties are in a relationship of mutual complementarity. The prestigious (H) variety governs the “high” spheres (administration, culture, education) of life, while the “low” (L) is “relegated” to informal use in domestic circles. The “high” (H) variety is usually dominant and serves the major part of communication needs; the “low” (L) is auxiliary and situationally dependent. As a consequence, if the language situation is illustrated by a combination of varieties of the same language (standard, regional dialects, colloquial speech, urbanlects), it can be described as a “classic diglossia” according to Ferguson or a “narrow diglossia” according to Fishman. If it is represented by varieties of two different, unrelated languages, then it should be regarded as “extended diglossia.”¹⁴

To Fishman, in the pure cases of diglossia, there was an opposition H/L and an asymmetry between the varieties used, whereas in the case of bilingualism, there is a symmetry between the two languages H/H or L/L. He also depicted four potential types of relationships concerning diglossia and bilingualism: diglossia without bilingualism, bilingualism without diglossia, both bilingualism and diglossia, and neither bilingualism nor diglossia.¹⁵ In the first three cases, one can observe a kind of diglossic code-switching according to the communication goals, where the transition from (H) to (L) is usually considered as a “solidarity shift” while that from (L) to (H) might be regarded as an attempt to show that the speaker is “one of the people.”¹⁶

It has already been pointed out that Ferguson’s “original formulation of diglossia was not meant to encompass *all* instances of multilingualism or

13. FISHMAN, 1967, p. 30. For example, the French (H variety) and Alsatian (L variety) in France.

14. MEYERS-SCOTTON, 1986, p. 81.

15. FISHMAN, 1967, pp. 30-31.

16. SCHIFFMAN, 2006, p. 11.

functional differentiation of languages.”¹⁷ Thus, without questioning the theories and conclusions of Ferguson and Fischman, one can observe much more complex situations of diglossia and bilingualism,¹⁸ with multilateral and multi-layered interactions between several languages, varieties and vocabularies and constant code-switching. Certainly, in this respect, Bulgaria is not an isolated case.

Classic (narrow) diglossia in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the relationships between the standard language and the regional dialects are quite specific and we can even talk of multiple cases of diglossia since most of the dialects are still very much alive and, at the same time, too different from each other. Some dialects are closer to the standard norms and the diglossia is almost imperceptible or partial (Central Balkan, North, Sub-Balkan dialects). Others are perceived as almost incomprehensible and people have great difficulties understanding their speakers (for instance, dialects of the regions around the towns of Trăn in Western Bulgaria, Razlog, Belitsa and some villages in the Central Rhodope, etc.). In the latter cases, we can observe a situation of strong diglossia with well-established and distinguishable high and low varieties. Accordingly, on the general level, there is a case of classic diglossia with the Standard Bulgarian as a high (H) variety and the multitude of regional dialects as a virtual sum of low (L) varieties which still interacts between them giving each other lexical and grammatical forms and elements (Figure 1).

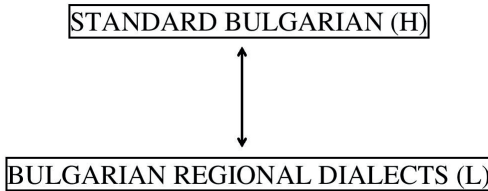


Figure 1
Classic diglossia in Bulgaria

17. SCHIFFMAN, 2017, p. 208.

18. As shown, for example, by Lambert-Félix Prudent (PRUDENT 1981) and Henry Boyer for the French language (BOYER, 2010).

In practical terms, we can talk about many specific examples of diglossia built upon Standard Bulgarian (H) and a particular regional dialect (L). In both these cases, the linguistic differences between the standard and the dialect also have functional roles.

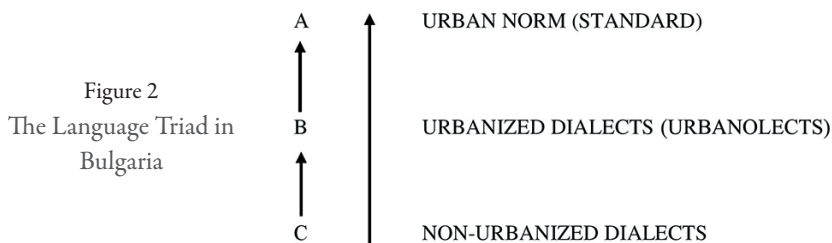
However, since the beginning of the industrial revolution in Bulgaria in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the following migration of the workforce from the villages to the cities, linguists started observing a fairly constant process of destabilization of regional dialects and the narrowing of their functional spectre and field of communication. In parallel, upon their arrival in the city, people were trying to integrate as quickly as possible into the new urban environment and to learn the predominant language variety in order to avoid possible communication problems or simply not to be laughed at. As it was pointed out by M. Videnov: “The low prestige of dialects compared to the standard type of speech is the main driving force in the disappearance of regional dialects.”¹⁹ During this process, the number of speakers of regional dialects was diminishing slowly but steadily and today Bulgarian society is mostly urban with still noticeable traits and links to the provincial style of life and dialectal communication.

To illustrate this process, M. Videnov (2005) speaks of a language triad in Bulgaria consisting of:

- . *A-varieties*—the urban language norm typical for the highly-educated social strata;
- . *B-varieties*—the urbanized regional dialects, often called urbanolects, which combine specific and heterogeneous features of several dialects with elements typical for the A-formation, for some professional and corporate sociolects and colloquial speech;
- . *C-varieties*—non-urbanized or barely urbanized regional dialects.

These elements are closely related and it is difficult to trace a clear borderline between the three levels (see Figure 2). Moreover, in this scheme, we can include colloquial speech and some modern sociolects as they too play an important role in the establishment of modern-day Bulgarian cases of diglossia by adding new lexical elements to the language situation.

19. VIDENOV, 2005, p. 178.



Therefore, we discover a considerable gradual disappearance of regional dialects and their systematic replacement by the standard language and/or by other substandard varieties such as colloquial speech, urbanolects or social dialects. Key roles in this process play modern media and international contacts, especially during the last 30 years. As a result of this evolution which takes place before our eyes, we can observe the transformation of one of the constitutive elements of the traditional bipolar Bulgarian diglossia composed of a highly codified standard language *versus* widely used regional dialects. According to the social roles of the communicants and the sphere of communication, the low language variety, *i. e.* the regional dialect, is being replaced by another substandard form which in the majority of the cases is positioned at the same or a higher stratification level.

Bilingual (extended) diglossia in Bulgaria and bilingualism

The most visible example of bilingual diglossia (or diglossia with bilingualism) is that of Bulgarian and Turkish and their respective dialects spoken on Bulgarian territory. The question of Bulgarian-Turkish bilingualism has already been discussed to some point in several works of Kiril Mirtchev from the 1950s and 1960s, and by Alf Grannes in the 1980s, but to my knowledge never to the point of putting into perspective not only the standard languages but also their regional and/or social dialects. For this purpose, we need to find out what is the specific language situation regarding diglossia, bilingualism, standard languages and dialects in the regions with a mixed population and what are the relationships between the different forms of Bulgarian and Turkish in particular.

Bulgaria was conquered by the Ottoman Turks in the late 14th century and only a small number of literary works from that time still exist. That is why it is almost impossible today to clearly define what was the percentage of the Turkish population at the moment of the conquest of Bulgarian lands. We may only confirm that it was and still is very unequally distributed throughout. For example, in 1433 in his

notes de voyage, the French traveller Bertrandon de la Broquière wrote about Sofia and the surrounding area that “The majority of the population of the town and the villages is Bulgarian. There are only a few Turks.”²⁰ A century later, between 1553 and 1555, Hans Dernschwamm, a German merchant and a member of a delegation of King Ferdinand I to Sultan Süleyman I, observed that “In all villages (people) speak Bulgarian,” that there were villages where “live Turks and Bulgarians,” but there were also those “where there is not a single Turk.”²¹ In 1835, the French author and politician Alphonse de Lamartine, who crossed Bulgaria on his way to Constantinople, also conveyed that “in Serbia and Bulgaria there is barely one Turk per village.”²²

At the time of the Bulgarian Liberation in 1878, the Turkish population in Bulgaria was about 445 000 people, *i. e.* approximately 10%. During the years, the absolute number always stayed around half a million but the percentage slightly decreased from 12.75% in 1905²³ to 8.8% (or 588 318 people), according to the data from the last census in 2011.²⁴ There are two regions with compact Turkish population (see the Figure 3 below²⁵): North-eastern Bulgaria (around the towns of Razgrad where the Turkish population is approximately 52%, Targovishte, Shumen, Dobrich, Omourtag, Silistra, and to a lesser extent, Rousse and Varna) and South-eastern Bulgaria (around the towns of Kardzhali with a 56% Turkish population, Haskovo and Smolyan). In the mid-19th century, the French-Austrian traveller Ami Boué noted also the region around the towns of Lovech and Sevlievo in Central Bulgaria where today the Turkish population is very limited.²⁶ In comparison, in the capital of Sofia the Turkish population is around 0.55% and in the town of Plovdiv it is approximately 5.2%.²⁷

20. BROQUIÈRE, 1975, p. 55.

21. DERNSCHWAM, 1979, pp. 260-262.

22. LAMARTINE, 1981, p. 232.

23. SGBC, 1909, p. 39.

24. NSI, 2011a; NSI, 2011b.

25. The percentage of the Turkish population to the total local population in every province of Bulgaria (Wikipedia, 2019).

26. BOUÉ, 2010, p. 590.

27. NSI, 2011b.



Figure 3
The Turkish population in Bulgaria
© Wikipedia, 2019

However, it is quite difficult to establish the exact number of the Turkish population in place because, according to personal observations and to some recent publications, it is very likely that for practical reasons, like ease of travelling or prestige, some Roma, Tatars, Gagauz or Circassians may have identified themselves as Turks in the recent census of the population.²⁸ This process of “social Turkification” is virtually non-existent among the members of the Bulgarian Muslim community (known also as Pomaks), living compactly in the Rhodope Mountains and in some villages around Lovech, where people speak mostly their regional dialect or Standard Bulgarian language and practically do not know Turkish language.²⁹

After the Ottoman conquest, the Bulgarian State with all its power, cultural, religious and educational institutions ceased to exist. The Old Bulgarian

28. See also VOLGYI, 2007.

29. During the late 1970s, I spent almost two years in a region between the Rhodope and the Pirin mountains where there is a significant Bulgarian Muslim population. At that time, none of my friends and acquaintances knew any Turkish. Now, visiting very often the same region, I can see no significant difference compared to the situation before.

standard language died out and the regional dialects assumed the role of a quite heterogeneous communication system. Nevertheless, contact between Bulgarians and Turks was not rare, with time it became even routine and the rapprochement and exchange occurred on almost all levels—communal, cultural, social and, not least, linguistic. In fact, the confrontation with the language of the conquerors was a meeting of two typologically different grammatical systems whose speakers were forced by circumstances to understand and learn each other's languages. Naturally, this was much more true of the conquered population, Bulgarians and any other ethnic group or people, who were obliged to learn and use the language of the conqueror for their everyday contact with officials and the administration. Moreover, as it has been pointed out, "Turkish linguistic influence was particularly strong on the colloquial language in the cities."³⁰ especially in the eastern part of the country where the presence of a Turkish population was higher than in other parts of the territory.

However, some parts of the Turkish population, mostly men and especially ordinary people in the villages and in the areas where they were a minority, were also compelled to learn some Bulgarian.³¹ Simultaneously, communication inside the Turkish-speaking population was held in Turkish dialects which differed significantly from the standard Ottoman-Turkish language (Osmanlı) of the ruling class and the Sultan's Court. Over time, this Turkish dialect(s) in Bulgaria started to slowly drift away from the standard and in some cases even changed certain forms and patterns under the influence of the regionally and numerically predominant Bulgarian.

In the Ottoman Empire, including in Bulgarian lands, the linguistic situation was one of specific diglossia: the official language of the administration was Osmanlı, or Ottoman Turkish, which was a hybrid that combined structural, grammatical and lexical elements of three typologically different languages: Turkish, Arabic and Persian. It was used primarily in administration and in the court of the Ottoman Empire while the ordinary population spoke one or several Turkish dialects. The difference became evident throughout the centuries, leading to a hybrid of classic and bilingual diglossia with a "high", prestigious form (Osmanlı) and a "low" form, based on the Turkish regional dialects that served the everyday contacts.

The process intensified particularly after the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878, when important compact masses of the Turkish population remained to live in the new Bulgarian State and lost their direct contact with the Turkish State and

30. GRANNES, 1996, p. 5.

31. See also RUDIN, 1990, p. 149.

language. “Turkish influence came to an end, but the influence of Bulgarian on local Turkish dialects increased. The change in the status of the two languages reversed the direction of linguistic influence.”³² Gradually, these extraterritorial Turkish dialects (including Gagauz and Tatar dialects) became isolated from the evolution of the Standard Turkish, especially after the profound linguistic reform that took place following the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

In the meantime, contemporary Standard Bulgarian was created in the late 19th century on the basis of several central dialects, which could not be described at that time as high or prestigious since they were employed equally to all others. They were chosen simply because they were used in a region with a higher concentration of schools and economic facilities, but other dialects also participated in the creation of the Standard and gave important elements in its construction, so that the new Standard became a national and a supradialectal entity.

After the Bulgarian Liberation in 1878 and until the Second World War, a progressive concentration of population in the cities and a gradual increase in the educational level took place. Yet, the regional Bulgarian dialects remained in wide use and there was still a genuine situation of classic diglossia. Minority languages were never officially banned, but some of them were not positively regarded, particularly Turkish, as being historically associated with times of national struggle and suffering. It should be also pointed out that, according to some studies “the most recent policy (during the 1970s-1980s—G.A.) shifts have led to increased Turkish nationalism and perhaps to a resurgence of literacy in Turkish.”³³

Since the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, after years of restrictions and even prohibition, minority languages in Bulgaria may be freely learned and practised again and thus they enter into a more complex relationship of bilingualism with standard language and Bulgarian regional dialects. This mostly concerns Turkish which is spoken by the largest minority group.³⁴

As a result of all these movements and transformations over the years, the Turkish population in Bulgaria found itself in a particularly versatile language environment. Firstly, in their daily contacts, both groups—Bulgarians and Turks alike—spoke a low, non-prestigious dialect form. In their relations with the government and the administration, both were required to learn and use the standard form, though the Bulgarian population regularly used its regional dialect for it was largely

32. GRANNES, 1996, p. 5.

33. RUDIN, 1990, p. 149.

34. To these two languages, we can add the Greek and the Roma (called traditionally *цигански* “Gypsy”) languages because they represent interesting and specific cases of bilingualism, combined with diglossia, but it will be the topic of another article.

understood. In other words, the majority of the Bulgarian population lived in a form of “classic” diglossia (endo-diglossia) while the Turkish minority lived in a situation of a complex double or even triple diglossia with bilingualism, where the prestigious (H) form was Standard Bulgarian and in which Turkish and Bulgarian dialects were simultaneously regarded as low language varieties (Figure 4).

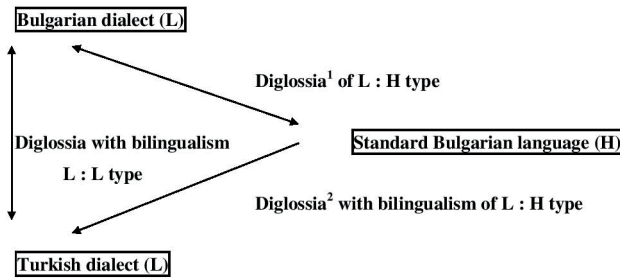


Figure 4
 Bilingualism and diglossia in Bulgaria

In this complex process of language contacts and fusion, every element has its specific place and role. Standard Bulgarian as a prestigious (H) variety plays its normative role and continuously gives lexical and grammatical elements to the other two varieties spoken on the territory—Bulgarian and Turkish dialects. In their turn, Bulgarian dialects still provide the Standard with some words and phrases, though the process has declined considerably, especially after the mid-20th century. These two elements form the classic diglossia in Bulgaria.

On the other hand, it is important to point out that the use of Turkish dialects depends very much on the level of education and the sphere of communication. While the older generations still keep in line with their old traditional dialects, use them widely and have a very limited command of the Standard, the younger generations prefer using Standard Bulgarian and prefer using it in their everyday contacts, even though they have a pretty good knowledge of Turkish dialects. In both cases, this traditional bilingualism in its group type remains strong to this day, though “in its social form is not typical for Bulgarians but only for the Turkish minority in Bulgaria.”³⁵

35. NIKOLOVA, 2004, p. 18.

It is worth noting that during the time of the Communist regime, members of the Turkish minority who had a high level of education and social status, such as writers, scientists, journalists, often used Turkish Standard. Since the fall of the Regime and the newly obtained freedom to learn at school and to use their mother tongue, great parts of the Turkish population can listen to the official Turkish radio stations and watch Turkish channels on TV. This gives them the opportunity to acquire more easily the established Standard Turkish language and to switch or even replace the non-prestigious dialect forms.

As a consequence, in recent years we can observe that Standard Turkish may obtain a similar prestigious role in the rare cases of formal communication between some highly educated members of the Bulgarian Turkish community and the official representatives of the Turkish State. Yet, when these same members ought to speak to their parents, friends or neighbours, they often move “down” to Turkish dialect, make a “solidarity shift” in order to be fully understood, since the proportion of the Bulgarian Turkish population that still lives in villages and small towns and largely uses some form of a Turkish dialect is still quite significant. This situation may be regarded as an example of the idea that “bilingualism is essentially a characterization of individual linguistic behaviour whereas diglossia is a characterization of linguistic organization at the socio-cultural level.”³⁶

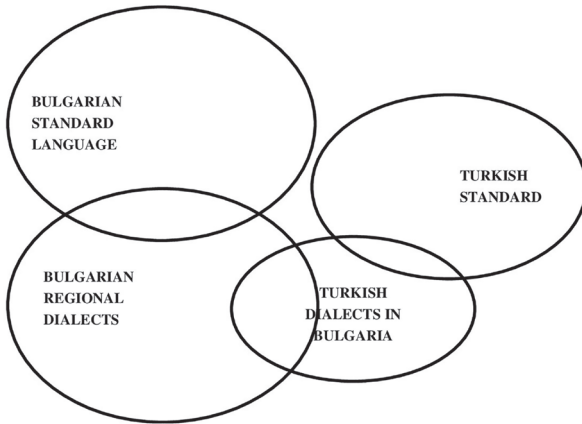


Figure 5
Relations between
Bulgarian and Turkish
and their dialects

36. FISHMAN, 1967, p. 33.

In other words, among the Turkish population in Bulgaria today, we can witness a very complex state of bipolar situational bilingualism with double diglossia where Standard Bulgarian still plays the core role of a prestigious (H) variety.

It is also evident from the figure above that while there is still a close link between the Standard Bulgarian and the Bulgarian regional dialects or to a certain degree between the Bulgarian and the Turkish dialects, there are no direct relations whatsoever between the two standard languages, the Turkish dialects and the Standard Bulgarian or the Bulgarian regional dialects and the Standard Turkish.

As a conclusion, we can point out that in both cases of classic Bulgarian diglossia and that of Bulgarian-Turkish diglossia with bilingualism regional dialects tend to steadily recede and give place to other modern language varieties such as new urbanolects, sociolects or colloquial speech. The rise of the educational level further intensifies and consolidates the process. Nevertheless, the complex situation of bilingualism with diglossia in Bulgaria and among the Turkish population, in my opinion, is to remain for some more generations.

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Abstract: The article examines some particular forms of diglossia and bilingualism in Bulgaria. It takes into account the evolution of Bulgarian society over the last thirty years and the processes of language interference associated with the political changes, or influenced by them. The analysis is directed mainly at the slow disappearance of the regional dialects and their gradual and systematic replacement by other substandard forms such as colloquial speech, urbanolects or to some extent social dialects. Special attention is paid to the Turkish language in Bulgaria which enters into more complex relationships with the standard language and represents a specific and very interesting case of bilingualism, combined with diglossia.

Keywords: linguistics, diglossia, bilingualism, Standard language, regional dialects, urbanolects, Bulgarian, Turkish.

*Bilinguisme et diglossie en Bulgarie — une nouvelle
perspective sur leur état contemporain*

Résumé : Cet article examine certaines formes particulières de diglossie et de bilinguisme en Bulgarie. Il prend en compte l'évolution de la société bulgare au cours des trente dernières années et les processus d'interférence linguistique associés aux changements politiques ou influencés par ceux-ci. L'analyse porte principalement sur la disparition progressive des dialectes régionaux et sur leur remplacement progressif et systématique par d'autres formes substandards, telles que le langage familier, le langage populaire, les urbanolectes ou les dialectes sociaux. Une attention particulière est accordée à la langue turque en Bulgarie, qui entretient des relations plus complexes avec la langue standard et représente un cas spécifique et très intéressant de bilinguisme, associé à la diglossie.

Mots-clés : linguistique, diglossie, bilinguisme, langue standard, dialectes régionaux, urbanolectes, langue bulgare, langue turque.