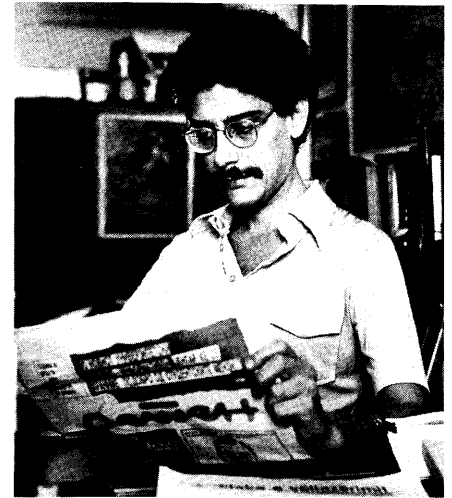


# Pattern and Structure in Balkan Languages



*Victor A. Friedman, professor in the Department of Slavic Languages, examines some of the documents he has collected for his study of Balkan verb forms.*

Building on more than ten years' research, Victor A. Friedman, UNC-CH professor of Slavic languages, is spending this year comparing the use of verbal categories in several Balkan languages. Looking for patterns and structure in the languages, he is asking why the patterns exist and what they mean. A grant from the American Council of Learned Societies has provided him the opportunity for concentrated research and initial work on a comparative grammar.

The Balkan languages as a group are particularly interesting to study, Friedman says, because they are only distantly related; yet, through linguistic contact and influence, they have developed shared categories that are more complex than those of most other European languages. Also, because the area is one of multilingual contact, the Balkan languages help answer more general questions about how language is used. "The study of individual languages leads to an understanding of how Language with a capital *L* works," Friedman comments. "You study specifics to make generalizations."

Friedman also has a more personal interest in studying these languages. Understanding better how a language works, he says, helps him learn and teach the language more effectively. One of the few professors in the country to teach languages of the Balkans and Caucasus, Friedman offers courses in Albanian, Bulgarian, Georgian, Lak, Macedonian, and Turkish on a rotating basis. Georgian, for example, currently is taught at only one other university in the United States.

Friedman is focusing primarily on the categories of tense, aspect, mood, and voice in what he calls the "canonical Balkan languages": Albanian, Bulgarian, Greek, Macedonian, and Rumanian. Other languages such as Turkish, Arumanian, the South Serbian dialects, and the Balkan dialects of Romani will also be relevant. Over the years Friedman has been able to amass numerous examples of all types of documents in these languages, including humorous journals, newspapers,

textbooks, and literature, and ranging from colloquial to formal in style. Now he is studying the collected data, examining the verb forms in context. From this examination he will form hypotheses about how the various verb forms work and will construct key examples to test his hypotheses.

This step in the research is one feature that sets it apart from many other linguistic studies. Friedman will test the constructions on native speakers, traveling to Bulgaria and several areas of Yugoslavia, including the predominantly Albanian region of Kosovo. "The native speaker is the essential subject of language research," Friedman says, yet often this step is omitted in studies. More testing with native speakers should be done, Friedman adds, but researchers do not always have the necessary manpower and funding.

Another feature that takes Friedman's work a step beyond past studies is that he will be looking at differences among the languages and trying to explain them. Most research since linguists began studying Balkan categories in the 1930s has been aimed at identifying shared categories. Friedman will delve into superficial similarities that on a deeper level reveal differences rather than one-to-one correspondences among the languages. He then will try to establish what accounts for the differences.

An example of one such superficial similarity, Friedman says, is the imperfect tense in Macedonian and Albanian. At face value one would call it a shared structure because both languages use an imperfect tense to denote a repeated or on-going action in the past. But consider the sentence, "The strike lasted three weeks." While the Macedonian speaker would use the imperfect tense, the Albanian speaker would use the aorist, a very different tense denoting a single action occurring in the past. Why? What is the difference in what they mean? The Albanian imperfect denotes duration just as the Macedonian imperfect does, but it does not allow for the concept of bounding a period of duration. The Albanian

speaker must resort to a different tense to express that the duration of the strike was limited.

"All of this is on the grand level," Friedman says, that is, the question of the meanings the speakers assign to the forms. "There is also the picky level, which is style, or what sounds right." Friedman will also be trying to define the boundaries in style by looking at the differences between what sounds right, weird, and unacceptable. "On the way from what sounds good to what sounds bad, there is what sounds weird." The weird-sounding constructions are important, he says, because they can help illuminate what is stylistically right and wrong. A construction sounds weird because the listener cannot resolve what he hears with the context he understands. To make the construction stylistically right, he must seek a new context. The difference in contexts thus helps define meaning assigned to stylistically right forms.

As a result of decreased foreign language requirements in universities over the past two decades, Friedman says, there is a great need for more training in and knowledge of foreign languages. As the country needs to take an increasingly broader perspective on world affairs, foreign languages—especially in a strategic area like the Balkans—become increasingly important tools for keeping up with a rapidly growing and changing international scene. "All studies of national languages are of strategic importance," Friedman observes.

—Diantha J. Pinner