

**INHALT/CONTENT****SEITE/PAGE**

<b>Ranko Bugarski</b> <b>LANGUAGE AND STATE: THE YUGOSLAV</b> <b>EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Tatjana Feinig</b> <b>SLOWENISCH ALS ERST-, ZWEIT-, FREMDSPRACHE?</b> <b>Eine empirische Untersuchung zu Slowenisch an der</b> <b>Sekundarstufe II an zwei Kärntner Schulen</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Patricia Herzberger</b> <b>DEM KANNST ZUEREDEN WIEST WILLST,</b> <b>DER TUT NIX</b> <b>Handlungsaufforderungen in der Altenpflege</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Verena Krausneker</b> <b>GEBÄRDENSPRACHEN, SPRACHENPOLITIK UND</b> <b>DIE EUROPÄISCHE UNION</b>	<b>54</b>

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## **Language and State: the Yugoslav Experience<sup>1</sup>**

The relationship between language and state is a complex one and can be studied under many aspects. On the one hand, as a simple exercise in elementary arithmetic will readily show, today's world is very far indeed from anything approaching the one state – one language formula: dividing some 5,000 languages by approximately 200 states gives a global average of 25 languages per state. The principal "culprits" for such a glaring disproportion, of course, are the many multiethnic and multilingual states, especially but by no means exclusively in the so-called Third world. More generally, it is wise to remember that on the level of linguistic reality – as distinct from official declarations – there are very few monolingual states on our planet.

It is not my purpose here to expound on this state of affairs or to discuss the various demographic, ethnic, historical, political and other factors behind it. Nor do I intend to address the question of how the claim that states should preferably be monolingual as well as mononational should have arisen in the first place. Without embarking on this challenging chapter of the history of European ideas, however, one may make a purely factual observation. The emergence and development of nation states on our continent has indeed tended to go hand in hand with the establishment and affirmation of their national standard languages, these being at the same time instruments and products of nation building. This has generally occurred at the expense of any other idioms that may have been used on the given territory, which have thus been reduced to minority language status in one form or another.

It is this link between modern states and the national languages associated with them that I propose to discuss briefly in this paper, using the unusual life story of Yugoslavia as an example. A sociolinguistic summary of the Yugoslav experience in this context

<sup>1</sup> This is a somewhat tightened-up written version of a lecture presented before the Institute of Linguistics, University of Vienna, and the Vienna Linguistic Society on 9 April 1997. I am indebted to Professors Rudolf de Cillia, Ruth Wodak and Wolfgang U. Dressler for the invitation, and to Mag. Gottfried Wagner of KulturKontakt for sponsoring my visit. The warm reception I was given, as well as the stimulating multilingual discussion following the lecture, will stand out in my memory. An earlier and shorter version of the text was read as a paper at the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea in Klagenfurt, 4-8 September 1996.)

## Abstract

This article discusses the minority language policy of the European Union and studies the position allocated to the sign languages of Europe. From a linguistic point of view, the sign languages of the world are minority languages in the sense of the linguistic minorities. Every country has a 'Deaf community' that uses its national sign language. For definition, sign languages are not considered from a linguistic point of view, but as a cultural form of communication in the EU context. In the context of linguistic minorities, the author argues that the sign languages do not have to be treated among the minority languages, which the author argues, should be the case. A resolution for sign languages passed by the European Parliament in 1996 is reviewed in this article and it is shown that some actions have been taken since then, but the key requests – recognition of sign languages and the corresponding language rights – have not been fulfilled.



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