

# Is Yugoslav President Tito Really a Yugoslav?

The Yugoslav President, Josip Tito, appears to speak Serbo-Croatian, allegedly his native language, with a foreign accent. This article will analyze certain phonological<sup>1</sup> and morphological<sup>2</sup> features in his speech<sup>3</sup> which point to that conclusion and which cannot be explained by his advanced age and the consequent possible loss of faculties.

First of all, it may be useful to define what exactly is meant by a "foreign accent." While most everyone can recognize this phenomenon upon encountering it, most of us are usually hard pressed to define it beyond a general impressionistic statement, such as "he talks funny." What that means, of course, is that the person has failed to fully master the phonology of the target language.

In general, linguists maintain that each language has its unique phonology, a finite number of phonemes<sup>4</sup> selected from the theoretically infinite number of sounds that the human vocal apparatus is capable of producing. What this means is that a sound which is articulated in exactly the same way in two or more languages is not as common as we may think. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point. In English, the voiceless stops (*p*, *t* and *k*) are aspirated (followed by an audible puff of air) in word initial position. Elsewhere, they are not. This, of course, is an allophonic alternation and as such goes largely unperceived by the speakers. However, when a native speaker of a

language which does not have this phenomenon attempts to speak English, he will frequently fail to aspirate his word initial voiceless stops. This will be one of the numerous features which will characterize that speaker as having a "foreign accent." A similar situation exists in the case of dental vs. alveolar stops<sup>5</sup> (orthographically represented as *t* and *d*). Native speakers of English articulate them at the alveolar ridge<sup>6</sup>. Native speakers of Russian articulate them at the back of the upper incisors. While the difference is minute, it is nonetheless perceptible and constitutes yet another feature of the foreign accent.<sup>7</sup> In view of the above, a foreign accent may be defined as an attempt to substitute the phonology of one's native language for that of the target language or, to put it another way, as the presence of features which normally do not appear in the pronunciation of native speakers.

It would be outside the scope of this article to present a complete outline of Serbo-Croatian phonology. However, a brief discussion of certain of its phonological rules, and its relation to certain other Slavic languages, are necessary to justify the assertion that Tito does not speak Serbo-Croatian like a native.

A number of Slavic languages have a feature called

<sup>1</sup> Phonology is the study of sounds produced by the human vocal apparatus for linguistic purposes; also, the sum total of the speech sounds (phonemes) of a given language at a point in time.

<sup>2</sup> Morphology is the study and description of word formation in a language including inflection, derivation, and compounding.

<sup>3</sup> All of the data come from a recording of a public speech given by Tito in the fall of 1977.

<sup>4</sup> The smallest unit of speech to carry a difference in meaning; for example, the English words *pot* and *tot* have different word initial phonemes.

<sup>5</sup> Phonemes are classified according to the place and manner of articulation. A stop is a complete occlusion of the vocal tract which may take place at the lips (a labial stop), at the teeth (a dental stop), at the bony ridge behind the upper incisors (an alveolar stop) or even at the back of the mouth, where the soft palate is (a velar stop). A labial stop is performed by pressing the lips together, while the others are done by pressing the tongue against the appropriate area.

<sup>6</sup> The bony ridge behind the upper incisors.

<sup>7</sup> For the sake of brevity and clarity, this article deals only with the segmental phonemes. A discussion of Serbo-Croatian suprasegmentals would be far too cumbersome.

palatalization,<sup>8</sup> a term used to describe the "soft" consonants in languages like Russian and Polish. When such a consonant is articulated, a portion of the tongue is raised toward the hard palate to produce a concurrent yod-like sound, similar to the initial glide in the English word *yet*. Historically, the consonants were palatalized when followed by front vowels, although synchronically this is no longer the case. When speakers of heavily palatalized languages learn a foreign language which has no palatalization, they still have a tendency to palatalize at least some of the consonants which occur before front vowels. Shevelov<sup>9</sup> divides the Slavic languages into three groups, according to the degree of palatalization:

- A. Languages with active palatalization
  - 1. Russian
  - 2. Byelorussian
  - 3. Polish
  - 4. Lower Sorbian (Lower Lusatian)
  - 5. Upper Sorbian (Upper Lusatian)
  - 6. Eastern dialects of Bulgarian
- B. Languages losing palatalization<sup>10</sup>
  - 1. Ukrainian
  - 2. Czech
  - 3. Slovak
  - 4. Bulgarian (except the eastern dialects)
- C. Languages with no palatalization
  - 1. Serbo-Croatian
  - 2. Slovenian
  - 3. Macedonian

It must be kept in mind that palatalizing languages are those which maintain an almost complete opposition between the palatalized and non-palatalized consonants.<sup>11</sup> The palatalized consonants influence the following vowels, which are "narrowed down" to harmonize."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the native speaker of such a language automatically palatalizes the consonants occurring before "narrow" vowels, i.e. high and mid

<sup>8</sup> Palatalization is the articulation of a yod-like sound concurrently with a consonant. This has the effect of imparting a yod-like quality to the consonant without destroying its basic quality. In the Slavic languages, the palatalized consonants are phonemically different from consonants which are not palatalized. Palatalized consonants are also called "soft" consonants.

<sup>9</sup> George Y. Shevelov, *A Prehistory of Slavic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 489-497.

<sup>10</sup> Shevelov also includes Polabian, a dead West Slavic language, in this group. For our purposes, dead languages are irrelevant.

<sup>11</sup> The opposition is not complete due to the presence of common Slavic palatals (sometimes called ex-palatals).

<sup>12</sup> R.G.A. deBray, *Guide to the Slavonic Languages* (London and New York: Dent and Dutton, 1969), p. 29.

front vowels. As was mentioned earlier, these speakers tend to carry over this association into languages which have no palatalization. In other words, there is a strong principle of intrasyllabic harmony at work in the palatalizing languages. The palatalized consonants condition the following vowels, and certain types of vowels are always associated with palatalized consonants.

Serbo-Croatian falls into the category of languages which do not have the palatalized/non-palatalized consonant opposition. There are four true soft palatals<sup>13</sup>, which are orthographically represented as follows: *ć df nj lj*. The consonantal and vocalic phonemes are in free distribution in regard to one another, and there is no principle of intrasyllabic harmony. With the exception of the true palatals, none of the consonants are palatalized. Consequently, the following minimal pair, which would be impossible in a language like Russian (we are talking of phonological, not lexical, differences), can and does occur:

*mani* 'disregard it' (imperative of *manuti*)  
*manji* 'smaller'

Here the vowel quality of *i* is exactly the same after the palatal and non-palatal consonants. On the other hand, a native speaker of Russian (or Polish) would probably pronounce both words with a palatalized *n*, because he would automatically associate a palatalized consonant with a high front vowel. This is Tito's pronunciation of Serbo-Croatian, and it is best described as a foreign accent.

Tito's patterns of palatalization are as follows<sup>14</sup>:

#### A. Before *i*

1. *l* is palatalized consistently, in both word initial and word middle positions:

- a) *ličnost*<sup>15</sup> 'personality'
- b) *u republ'ici* 'in the republic'

2. *n* is frequently palatalized in the word middle position:

a) *o mnogim aktueln'im pitanjima* 'concerning many current questions'

- b) *gradjan'ima* 'to the citizens'

3. Other consonants are palatalized sporadically in the word middle position:

a) *naju'šim rukovodiocima* 'to the highest managers'

- b) *prošle god'ine* 'last year'

<sup>13</sup> True palatals are defined as having a more palatal articulation than palatalized consonants.

<sup>14</sup> For the sake of brevity, representative examples, rather than a transcript of the entire speech, are given.

<sup>15</sup> ' indicates that the preceding consonant is palatalized.

## B. Before e

1. *l* is palatalized frequently in word initial position and consistently in word middle position:

- a) *gl'edišta* 'viewpoints'
- b) *da svoje pogl'ede* 'to have one's own views'

2. *n* is palatalized frequently in word initial and word middle positions:

- a) *naše n'esvrstane pol'itike* 'of our non-aligned policy'
- b) *pedest pete godin'e* 'in 1955'

3. Other consonants are palatalized sporadically in word middle positions:

- a) *sm'etnja* 'bother'
- b) *kr'etanje* 'movement'

As was pointed out above, this type of palatalization is completely alien to Serbo-Croatian, but is quite common among speakers of Russian and Polish who have learned Serbo-Croatian as a foreign language. In conjunction with this, it is interesting to note that Dragoljub (Draž) Mihailović, the Serbian World War II guerrilla leader, was convinced that Tito was a Russian after meeting him on 19 September 1941.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to his (for a native) idiosyncratic pronunciation, Tito is prone to morphological errors as well. During the speech in question, the following mistakes were observed:

## A. Inflection

## 1. Declension

- a) *sa domaćinama* instead of *sa domaćinima* 'with the hosts'
- b) *između dvije zemalja* instead of *između dvije zemlje* 'between two countries'
- c) *u razgovorim* instead of *u razgovorima* 'in conversations'

## 2. Conjugation

- a) *došlo su do izražaja podudarna gledišta* instead of *došla su do izražaja podudarna gledišta* 'coinciding views were emphasized'

## B. Derivation

- 1. *moćno* instead of *moće* 'possible'
- 2. *nebezbednost* instead of *bezbednost* 'security'

If, as his pronunciation suggests, Tito is not a Yugoslav, who is he? According to the official biog-

raphy,<sup>17</sup> Josip Broz (Tito is his party name) was born in Kumrovec, near the Croatian capital of Zagreb, on 25 May 1892. He was trained as a locksmith and held jobs as a metal worker in Zagreb, Slovenia, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Germany. During World War I he fought with the Austro-Hungarian army on the Carpathian front, where he was wounded and captured by the Russians in the spring of 1915. In 1917 he was freed from a prisoner of war camp by the revolutionaries, and he joined and fought with the Red Guards. He returned to Yugoslavia in 1920 and immediately joined the Communist party. Broz continued to pursue his trade as a mechanic, but his revolutionary activities brought him into frequent conflict with the authorities and he was jailed several times. In 1928, he was sentenced to a five-year prison term which he served in Maribor and Lepoglava. In 1934, shortly after his release, Broz went underground and at that time he began to use the pseudonym Tito. He became very active in the Communist party and in 1935 attended the 7th Comintern Congress as a member of the Yugoslav delegation. He returned to Yugoslavia illegally in 1936 and in 1937 was appointed the Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Communist party of Yugoslavia (later the League of Communists of Yugoslavia). Under his leadership, the Communist party of Yugoslavia was consolidated, which enabled it to lead the struggle against the occupying forces during World War II. On 4 July 1941 the decision was reached to start the uprising. Tito led the struggle, and on 29 November 1943 was elected president of the National Committee for the Liberation of Yugoslavia and Marshal of Yugoslavia. After the war, Tito continued to lead the country as the President of Yugoslavia and the League of Communists of Yugoslavia; he holds those positions to this day.

In view of the above, a logical way to account for Tito's speech would be to assume that a non-Yugoslav, perhaps a Russian or a Pole, assumed Josip Broz's identity. The substitution would have taken place before World War II, because already in 1941 Mihailović noticed Tito's pronunciation. The most likely time for this substitution would have been the late 1930s, when Tito was leading a clandestine life and was still relatively unknown. Even if the present Tito is not the original Josip Broz, it does not matter a great deal. All of Tito's major accomplishments, from his successful struggle against the Germans to his rise

<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Auty, *Tito* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> *Jugoslavenski savremenici: ko je ko u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade: Hronometar, 1970), pp. 126-128.

to world prominence as a leader in the non-aligned movement, have taken place after 1941. Thus, it is doubtful whether a further inquiry concerning his real identity would serve more than a purely academic purpose, because he gives every indication of intending to go down in history as Josip Broz, the Yugoslav.

On the other hand, the simple fact that Tito is probably not the real Josip Broz who was born in 1892 does have some real significance. Firstly, Tito may very well be a much younger man. A second, and perhaps more important, point is that Tito's non-Yugoslav origin may explain his impartiality, and consequent success, in dealing with the various ethnic groups in Yugoslavia. It remains to be seen whether those who follow him will enjoy the same success.



Non - Responsive

