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South Slavic Languages

Speakers of South Slavic languages, the Slavic subgroup located originally in the Balkan peninsula of Southeast Europe, constituted a major source of Slavic immigration to the Midwest. The languages present problems of enumeration, owing to political and social developments in the late twentieth century that redefined language boundaries. Whereas in the mid-twentieth century, one had only to count Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, and Macedonian as South Slavic languages, the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, beginning with Slovenian independence in 1991, has led to claims for separate language status for Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian, largely for political and national reasons and not strictly on linguistic grounds.

Moreover, despite significant differences between Macedonian and Bulgarian, widespread and official recognition of a separate Macedonian language occurred only in the first half of the 20th century, and, in any case, careful distinctions among these languages and their speakers have not always been made by immigration officials. Nonetheless, characterizing the languages by the pre-independence four-fold division provides a useful point of reference, though recent US Censuses have recognized Croatian ethnicity as distinct from Serbian, while also having a general "Yugoslavian" label.

All these languages are represented in the Midwest, and Croatians, Slovenes, and Serbs, in that order, constitute the most numerous. Immigration began in the mid-nineteenth century and was most intense later that century and into the early twentieth century. A significant portion of South Slavic immigrants, as with all Slavic groups, gravitated to rural mining and urban industrialized areas, so that the Midwest, with its various mining concerns (Ohio coal, Michigan copper, and Minnesota iron) and manufacturing centers drew large numbers. Chicago

had the largest population of Serbo-Croatian-speaking immigrants, Cleveland the greatest number of Slovenes, and Detroit the highest number of Bulgarians (of whom some might now be called Macedonians). 1990 census figures reveal that nearly 40% of Americans of South Slavic descent live in the Midwest, with the highest concentrations in Illinois and Ohio.

Relatively little linguistic research exists on the effects of contact with English on South Slavic languages in the US, but familiar patterns of borrowing, code-switching, and ultimately, language loss occur with South Slavic as well. Of those South Slavic Americans in the Midwest now, only a small percentage has maintained the homeland language, and the classic pattern of language loss in the third generation is evident throughout the region.

Religion played an important role at first in the preservation of the languages: in the early years of immigration, Slovene and Croatian communities held Catholic masses in the respective languages, and Serbian settlements regularly had Orthodox services in Serbian, though eventually English began to prevail. Similarly, ethnic clubs and other social organizations were, and still are, important fixtures in the various communities, and provided an avenue for the perpetuation of the language, especially among older speakers. Ethnic language newspapers were common in the late nineteenth century and into even the mid-twentieth century, but most have now ceased publication. Cleveland is home still to an on-going Slovene newspaper, and the official News Digest of the Serbian Orthodox Church of America and Canada is published in South Holland, Illinois. There are some indications of revival of interest in South Slavic linguistic heritage among Americans of South Slavic descent, but the languages' future is not bright.

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