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Languages, Language Choice, and Multilingualism in Pajtim Statovci's Novel *Bolla*

Abstract: *Works by the Finnish author of Kosovar origin, Pajtim Statovci, have become increasingly well-known over the last decade. The present study concerns his third novel, Bolla, originally published in Finland in 2019 and translated into English in 2021. It deals with the illicit love affair between Arsim, an ethnic Albanian, and Miloš, an ethnic Serb, in mid-1990s Pristina. Like Statovci's previous works, the novel deals with weighty topics including war, violence, and ethnic strife, as well as questions of identity, love, and loss, all taking place against a tumultuous backdrop of conflict and migration. With the events of the novel occurring both in Kosovo and in a nameless locale somewhere in northern Europe, the two settings offer interesting material for interdisciplinary analysis from the interrelated perspectives of language and society. Based on a close reading of the work, this article aims to examine how languages, language choice, and multilingualism are depicted in the novel and the consequent role that they play in the narrative. This includes analysing the unique multilingual context of the Balkans, noting how language can commonly act as an important marker of ethnic and cultural identity, as well as some of the specifics of the northern European context, where linguistic aspects can also be key with regard to issues relating to immigration and integration. In focusing on these features, the article contributes to work on the portrayal of languages and multilingualism in twenty-first century literature.*

Keywords: Albanian; Kosovo; identity; migration; Finnish literature.

Introduction

In the historical and modern-day multilingual milieu of the Balkans, the use, status, and even nomenclature of the region's different languages serves manifold purposes beyond mere acts of communication. Indeed, the usage of a specific language or script can be interpreted in many ways – for example, as a marker of identity demonstrating ethnocultural belonging or religious adherence (Safran, 2008). Additionally, in social, political, or cultural terms, the use of a given language (or not) may be considered grounds for advantaging or disadvantaging certain individuals or groups in professional, personal, or institutional settings (e.g., see Angermeyer, 2023; Back & Piekkari, 2024, etc.).

During the period of its existence (from 1946 until the early 1990s), it can be said that socialist Yugoslavia was emblematic of the linguistic diversity which has characterised southeastern Europe at different points in its history. Comprised as a federation of six republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Serbia, with Kosovo and Vojvodina as autonomous provinces within the latter), several additional languages were spoken and had official status in various parts of the country alongside the national language of Serbo-Croatian, thus emphasising the tapestry of ethnicities and religions contained within Yugoslav territory. Yet, as the world knows, following the end of Communism and with the concurrent rise of nationalist ideologies in the 1990s, this political union of different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups was eventually to disintegrate in a series of devastating wars (Allcock & Lampe, 2025; Calic, 2023, pp. 116-121).

The lasting impact of these interethnic conflicts is still apparent even today, and not only in political, social, and cultural terms. The large number of refugees who fled the wars has also resulted in significant diaspora populations with origins in the former Yugoslavia, often residing in western Europe (Bennich-Björkman, Kostić, & Likić-Brborić, 2016, p. 11). Several members of this group – who were perhaps still children at the time of the conflicts – have become recognised for their literary accomplishments. Among their number is Pajtim Statovci, the author of *Bolla*, the work analysed in this study. As will be outlined subsequently, the novel opens in Pristina in 1995. This was a time when relations between the ethnic Albanians and the ethnic Serbs in Kosovo were deteriorating rapidly, a situation which would eventually culminate in armed conflict (Calic, 2022, p. 121). With the novel's main narrative concerning the impact and consequences of a love affair between Arsim, an ethnic Albanian, and Miloš, an ethnic Serb, the usage and depiction of different languages is therefore worthy of analysis and represents the central aim of this article. Prior to presenting and discussing how languages, language choice, and multilingualism are portrayed in *Bolla* and the role that they play in the narrative, this study will first give a short summary about the multilingual situation with regard to Yugoslavia and afterwards, before introducing some relevant details about Statovci and his oeuvre, as well as about the novel itself.

Remarks on languages and multilingualism in the western Balkans

As mentioned above, the western Balkans has been marked by strong linguistic diversity in historical and modern times, and as a result a variety of languages are spoken there (Joseph, 1992). Nowadays, in addition to the official languages of the various nation-states (Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Serbian, and Slovenian), these also include a range of minority languages. Though several countries in the region had gained their independence during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was not until after World War One that Ottoman and Habsburg imperial rule ended and the first unified Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) was proclaimed (Calic, 2022, p. 90). Though there were initial attempts to make a common South Slavic language by combining Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian (Kamusella, 2009, pp. 228-229), it was not until after World War Two and the foundation of socialist Yugoslavia that a unified standard Serbo-Croatian language was mooted and adopted (Hoyte-West, 2022, p. 9).

With the general interrelation between language and politics well-attested, following the Novi Sad Agreement of 1954, Serbo-Croatian was considered to be a single language with two variants and two scripts (Cyrillic and Latin) (Požgaj-Hadžić & Balažić Bulc, 2022, pp. 47-50). It was based on Serbian and Croatian, two languages which had been standardised independently during the nineteenth century, albeit with notable collaboration between the pioneering linguistic experts (Požgaj-Hadžić & Balažić Bulc, 2022, pp. 25-38).

Yet the fall of Yugoslavia also meant the end of the Serbo-Croatian language, leading to the development and recognition of the four standards of Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian, joined most recently by Montenegrin (Hoyte-West, 2022, p. 9). Each exhibits divergences in lexis and script, with implications for national language policies (see Djordjević, 2022) as well as at the supranational level. With reference to the latter, Croatian has been an official language of the European Union (EU) since Croatia acceded to that organisation in 2013, and translation and interpreting provision will have to be made for the incorporation of the other languages should the relevant countries (Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia) accede to the EU in the future (Hoyte-West, 2021; Vušović, 2024, pp. 253-257).

Though additional languages such as Macedonian and Slovenian were spoken within socialist Yugoslavia, the most relevant for the present study is Albanian, spoken in Kosovo. Similarly to multilingual Vojvodina, Kosovo did not have the full status of a Yugoslav republic; rather, it was autonomous within Serbia from the mid-1970s onwards, with implications for the status of Albanian (Kamusella, 2022, p. 131). Unlike the Slavic languages of Macedonian, Slovenian, and Serbo-Croatian, Albanian is a member of an independent branch of Indo-European, with a long literary history and is spoken in two distinctive variants, of which Gheg predominates in Kosovo (see Rugova, 2015; Kamusella, 2009, pp. 240-246).

The high degree of multilingualism in Yugoslavia and its successor states also extended to foreign languages, including the enduring role of English in Kosovo (Bekteshi, 2022; Dauti, 2023) where, in common with elsewhere in Europe (Modiano, 2024), English as a *lingua franca* is seemingly becoming increasingly dominant for commercial and cultural reasons. As Baftiu (2023, p. 137) demonstrates, a range of other major European languages – such as German and French – are also spoken in Kosovo. To these can also be added the role of diaspora languages – for example, the languages of the host countries in western and northern Europe adopted by those leaving the western Balkans and subsequent generations raised abroad.

Pajtim Statovci and *Bolla*

One of Finland's leading contemporary writers, Pajtim Statovci was born in Kosovo in 1990 and came to the Nordic country with his family as a two-year old toddler (Statovci, 2025). A literary scholar as well as a novelist, to date Statovci has written four prize-winning novels which have received considerable acclaim not only in Finland, but also abroad via their many translations (e.g., see Greenwell, 2019; HKW, 2024, Statovci, 2025, etc.). Among the many nominations and awards that his work has received, his first novel, *Kissani Jugoslavia* (2014) [*My Cat Yugoslavia*], was awarded the Helsingin Sanomat Literature Prize and the second, *Tiranan sydän* (2016) [*Crossing*], was awarded the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize in 2020 for its English translation (OCCT, 2025; also Hoyte-West, 2023, p. 86); he also is a three-time nominee for the renowned Dublin Literary Award (2025).

Bolla (2019), Statovci's third novel and the subject of this article, was garlanded with Finland's most prestigious literary award, the Finlandia Prize; his most recent novel, *Lehmä synnyttää yöllä* (2024) [*A*

Cow Gives Birth At Night], has also received this distinction, thus making Statovci a two-time laureate (Suomen Kirjasäätiö, 2025). Statovci's work often revolves around themes relating to LGBT topics and gender identity, including notions of migration and diaspora among ethnic Albanians, and featuring settings involving the Nordic and Balkan regions. In this regard, *Bolla* does not represent an exception.

Both in translation and in the original, Statovci's oeuvre has attracted the attention of scholars, particularly his novels *My Cat Yugoslavia* and *Crossing* (e.g., Bator, 2021; Lama, 2023; van Amelsvoort & Dal Bosco, 2024, etc.). Perhaps because of its recency, *Bolla* has not yet received the same degree of international critical interest, save for a comparative German-language study examining Statovci's first three works from the perspective of "Albanischsein" ("Albanianness") (Qose & Voss, 2021), an analysis of religion and transnationality in contemporary Balkan literature (Voss, 2023), and a study on the propaedeutic value of literary works for Finnish social work students (Heino & Tarkiainen, 2024). Therefore, in exploring the role and significance of languages, language choice, and multilingualism in *Bolla*, the current study can be said to represent a different approach to prior research on the topic. As the author of this article does not possess sufficient reading knowledge of Finnish, the analysis is performed via a close reading of the novel in the 2023 paperback edition of its 2021 prize-winning English translation (Statovci, 2023 [2021]) by David Hackston, a noted literary translator who has also translated Statovci's other works (Brown, 2022).

On language, language choice, and multilingualism in the novel

From the first few pages of the novel, the issue of language plays a defining role. It is April 1995, and amid the growing chaos and deterioration in Albanian-Serb relations in Kosovo, Arsim is mesmerised by a man who sits near him on the terrace of a Pristina café. Though unsure and wary, Arsim feels "compelled" (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 12) to approach the young Serb, greeting him in his own language: "'Zdravo,'" I say in Serbian" (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 12).

After ordering coffee, Arsim notes that the two men "lower our voices, and when I see that his books are in English we switch languages. Though improbable, random even, it feels natural, because by

speaking English we can be different people, we are no longer ourselves, we are free of this place, pages torn from a novel” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 13).

From the outset, therefore, English assumes a role as a *lingua franca*, as a seemingly neutral language in the tense, politically-charged atmosphere. It allows the two men – both in their mid-twenties – to relax, to talk on an equal footing, without the historical, emotional, and ideological baggage of speaking Serbian or Albanian in that context (see Lohaj, 2017). It also serves, amid the upheaval, as a kind of private language between them.

Arsim learns that Miloš is a medical student at the city’s university (which during that tumultuous period had been closed off to ethnic Albanians), and that his interlocutor has good language skills: “In addition to his native language and English he speaks fluent German and even a smattering of Albanian” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 13). Later, Arsim wonders as to why Miloš ended up moving to Pristina for his studies, especially given that he was a “talented linguist” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 31) and would have been able to “study anywhere he liked – abroad, Scandinavia, or central Europe – and get a degree that would open more doors than one from here” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 32).

Arsim, a student at the underground Albanian university, tells Miloš his own tale, noting that his “father taught English and got me interested in languages and that one day I hope to work as a teacher of literature or a proofreader for a newspaper” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 13). Accordingly, English is crucial for both men – it not only provides an instant connection which helps to jumpstart their nascent mutual attraction, it also offers a shared resource, a way of them to transmit their stories, desires, and hopes in an ideologically and linguistically neutral manner.

On returning home after that fateful first meeting with Miloš, Arsim’s wife Ajshe breaks the news that she is pregnant with their firstborn. Arsim reacts with an outburst of violence, hitting his spouse, an act which serves as a foretaste of his behaviour later on in the novel. Yet, despite these changes in Arsim’s personal life and the worsening political and social instability, Arsim and Miloš meet again and grow closer and closer. Despite the danger, the Albanian spends more and more time at his lover’s apartment, and their affair deepens, with the two even going on a short holiday together to Montenegro. Eventually, following the news of the massacre in Srebrenica, the situation becomes

untenable, and Arsim and his family (a son has been born, and Ajshe is pregnant again) leave Kosovo, planning to seek asylum somewhere in western Europe. Thus, he bids farewell not only to his native land, but also to his beloved Miloš.

The second section of the novel moves forward to 2003, where Arsim and Ajshe now “live in a district of high-rise apartment towers about ten kilometers from downtown in a city of millions” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 82). They are now a family of five with two sons, Driton and Endrit, and a daughter, Drita. The country appears not to be named in the novel, though in an interview (Brown, 2022), Statovci notes that it is in fact Finland. Though Ajshe appears to be settled there with a job in a supermarket, Arsim still mourns his lost relationship with Miloš and finds it hard to adjust to their new abode, later recalling that the “language they spoke there was as foreign to me as to our baby” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 206). The two sons are having problems at school, and Arsim highlights the stereotyping that his children face from their teachers simply because they are from Kosovo:

“It’s a difficult situation for a young child, [the teachers] explain. Living between two languages, two cultures and religions can cause an identity crisis, and the children no longer know who they are, because their entire world is formed from such conflicting customs and practices, they tell us flatly, as though informing us of an upcoming renovation” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 87).

He adds about how he and Ajshe feel about such crude and facile oversimplifications, noting how offended it makes them:

“It irritates and riles us, because their words imply that our children’s lives are somehow incomplete or lacking in some respect, that because of us their lives aren’t healthy and full, because we moved here to escape the war. To their minds, the fact that our children speak several languages fluently, that they are acquainted with different customs and beliefs apparently doesn’t enrich our sons’ lives; on the contrary, they see it as a strain. Their teachers think that our children don’t need Albanian as much as the languages spoken and taught at school” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 87).

This notion of an unwritten linguistic and cultural hierarchy in educational environments is mentioned not only in the academic literature (e.g., see Skutnabb-Kangas, 1989; Sierens & van Avermaet, 2013, etc.) but also by Statovci himself in an interview, where he states that in the particular context of Finland, “when you come from outside the Western world you are not seen as an equal immigrant as if you moved from the US, France, or Germany, for those countries don’t have the same reputation of violence, or the same history of war or conflict or

restlessness, that Kosovo has” (Brown, 2022). In citing his own experiences at school, Statovci highlights that his ethnic origins were viewed “as a restraint of sorts, but my Swedish or German peers didn’t suffer from the same problem” (Brown, 2022). In an earlier interview, he remarks that during his schooldays his “life wasn’t a pressure cooker of cultures, languages, and religions, but full and whole and beautiful as such, with all its cultures and languages” (Yliopisto, 2018).

Yet the notion of a restrictive background is alluded to in the novel via Ajshe’s struggles to explain to the school that the fact her sons “are constantly being reminded [by the teachers] of the war, of the fact that they are Kosovans, though nowadays they speak another language far better than they will ever speak Albanian” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 87) is also a major contributing factor to the children’s perceived behavioural issues.

Unfortunately, her efforts appear to bring little reward. Ultimately, the school labours under the discredited and retrograde belief that the “children’s lack of success is down to being bilingual” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 88). This conclusion motivates Ajshe, “using a professional interpreter”, to attempt “to explain to [the teachers] that we considered the school to be racist” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 88). In once again noting the perceived hierarchisation of languages by her sons’ educators and echoing Statovci’s own experiences, Ajshe wonders if “the teachers [would] say the boys aren’t getting on at school just because they’re bilingual if their mother tongue was something else?” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 88) – in other words, that Albanian is not to be considered as a prestigious or literary language compared to certain western European languages.

Notably, Arsim does not seem to contribute to these important discussions about his children’s education and their unjust treatment at school. This is despite that, even if his skills in the language of the country may not have been adequate, it is to be presumed that the teachers at the school would be able to speak English, a language which he – of course – speaks fluently. In forcing his wife to avail of the services of a professional interpreter, this episode further demonstrates Arsim’s isolation and alienation. He does reflect, though, on looking through his sons’ school textbooks, that “there isn’t any mention of Kosovo, not a single word about Yugoslavia, of the grand, glittering life of affluence that people once enjoyed there” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 87), thus highlighting the quality and high standard of living that characterised the region before the outbreak of the devastating wars.

As the novel progresses, Arsim continues to become even more unhappy, difficult, and violent, and starts behaving increasingly irrationally and recklessly, a downward spiral that leads him to prison. Once imprisoned, he tries to maintain a low profile, even feigning “to speak their language worse” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 133) than he actually can. Though incarcerated, he still holds onto the long-held dream of becoming a writer. Yet he is faced with a lack of reading material – he notes that he cannot “understand this language well enough to get anything out of reading their books” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 133) – and therefore lacks any inspiration to write. After he “complain[s] that the only books in English in the prison library are thrillers and romances” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 133), the warden, a literature student *manqué*, brings Arsim the canonical works of English, American, and world literature that he requests, including specific novels like Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Once again, this serves to underline the importance of the English language to the narrative. In this instance, Arsim’s skills in the language allow him to access classic works of literature on topics relevant to him and his identity; the very presence of these English books also harks back to the circumstances of his very first meeting with Miloš in a Pristina café. Therefore, by extension, it offers Arsim the opportunity to somehow reconnect with his past and with his lost lover.

After completing his prison sentence, Arsim is deported back to Kosovo in 2004. Disgraced and unwanted by Ajshe and his children, he struggles to adapt to the new post-war reality as he attempts to rebuild a life for himself, writing to his estranged wife of the differences in “the Albanian they now speak here” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 156). In trying to find his feet, Arsim searches for – and eventually finds – the emaciated Miloš in a gruesome psychiatric hospital. Yet, though Arsim rescues him from the dilapidated institution, there is to be no happy reunion between the two men – Miloš’s mind, body, and soul have been irrevocably broken by the traumas of war.

Finally, after much instability in his circumstances, Arsim finds accommodation in a self-contained unit in a house situated way out of the city. Eager to avoid more problems, Arsim pretends to his future landlord – a member of the diaspora now resident in Sweden – that he spent time abroad in France, rather than telling his real story. The property is in fact part of the landlord’s holiday house in Kosovo, and in

excusing the lack of furnishings, the man says that they live in Stockholm, “in a district where the children go to good schools, learn Swedish and other foreign languages, English, French, German, whatever they choose” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 203). In fact, to Arsim’s alarm, the landlord asks his daughter to speak to the newcomer in French, a request the child shyly declines.

Over time, Arsim slowly manages to rebuild his life, re-enrolling at the University of Pristina and subsequently getting a job publishing content for the postal service. He is also able to realise his dream of being an author when, at long last, one of his stories appears in print. He remains living at the property, observing that the landlord and his family return to Kosovo less and less frequently, “with the children speaking Swedish to one another” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 214) and observing that the level of their “Albanian deteriorates” (Statovci, 2023 [2021], p. 214), thus offering a clear example of language shift among the second generation (Gogonas, 2009).

In this regard, this hierarchical approach to language knowledge can be said to exhibit some similarities to the attitudes displayed in the novel by the schoolteachers in northern Europe – i.e. the perceived ‘high’ status of European languages such as German, French, and Swedish as compared to Albanian. Yet in this instance, these perspectives come from Kosovars themselves, with the children’s linguistic attrition representing not only a loss of language skills, but also an attenuation of their ancestral identity (see Cho & Krashen, 1998). In observing this, this episode in the novel illustrates that this fate may be shared by other members of Kosovo’s diaspora as the Albanian language – a key part of their linguistic and ethnocultural heritage – is slowly replaced by those ostensibly ‘prestigious’ languages used in the western European countries which have now become their homes.

Conclusion

In aiming to explore how languages, language choice, and multilingualism are depicted in *Bolla*, a number of salient features have been identified in this study. Given the complex interrelation of language and identity in the Balkan context, and particularly in Kosovo at the time the novel is set, it is unsurprising that these aspects feature prominently. In the first instance, Arsim and Miloš’s use of English serves not only as their own private language of communication, but as a neutral means of avoiding usage of a local language at a time of political instability and conflict. Knowledge of English, too, is fundamental later in the

novel, when Arsim is imprisoned and is able to utilise his skills in the language to access important literary works which help him to understand his own identity and thus himself as an individual and human being.

Additionally, language also plays an important role when Arsim, Ajshe, and the children emigrate to northern Europe, where the fact that they speak Albanian and are from Kosovo causes difficulties with the children's teachers, owing to their erroneous negative stereotypes about multilingualism and, by extension, the perceived 'low' status of Albanian compared to western European languages. This ostensible prestige of these western European languages is highlighted by Arsim's landlord in postwar Pristina, proudly boasting of his children's linguistic capabilities in these tongues whilst simultaneously losing their skills in their ancestral language. In sum, these aspects demonstrate the complex role that language, language choice, and multilingualism play in the tumultuous and tragic events of the novel as a whole, thus opening the door for broader research on these topics in Statovci's wider literary oeuvre.

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