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Metadiscourse and metalinguistic talk about script choice in Serbia: Chasms and consequences for criticality

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Abstract

In Serbia, script diversity remains the norm, whereby Serbian is routinely written in both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. This is not free of political contestation. Metadiscourses construct Cyrillic as the authentic script and central to ethnoidentity or, alternatively, as indexing dangerous nationalism, conservatism and Russian-leaning politics. On the flip side, one metadiscourse associates Latin with modernity and progress, but others associate it with unwelcomed Western influence. But how do individuals themselves understand script preferences? This paper takes a folk linguistic approach to investigate whether the metalinguistic talk of Serbian individuals about script preferences is indeed informed by political metadiscourse. The data concern not only the stated preferences of individuals but also, borrowing from theory of mind, metatalk about how people explain the script preferences *of others*. The paper shows that the ideological oppositionality presupposed in metadiscourse tends not to be validated in metalinguistic talk, reminding us to be cognisant of chasms between societal-level metadiscourse and the lived experiences of individuals, and to avoid assumptions about the reach and impact of critical metadiscourse.

Keywords: Serbia; biscriptality; metadiscourse; Cyrillic; metalinguistic talk

Introduction

Bar local linguistic contexts and legislation that requires Cyrillic to be used in official communications, Serbian society oscillates between using Cyrillic and Latin to write in Serbian. This is known as synchronic biscriptality: the concurrent use of two scripts in a language (Jung & Kim, 2023). Preferences for either Cyrillic or Latin in contemporary Serbia remain politicised: one metadiscourse sees using Latin as indexing an affiliation with the West, with politics of European integration and with progress and modernity. For others, Latin indexes all things Croatian, disloyalty to Serbia and an abandonment of Orthodox values (cf. Bugarski, 2021). Cyrillic is therefore constructed as a matter of Slavic tradition and authenticity, of Serbian

identity and of loyalty to nation and church. On the flipside, an opposing metadiscourse also sees using Cyrillic as an expression of dangerous ethnonationalism, conservatism, Euroscepticsm and affinity with Russia (Bugarski, 2004; Jovanović, 2018; Spasich, 2021).

Metadiscourse about Latin, Cyrillic and political affiliation are, however, simplified. They are a pre-packaged heuristic that helps individuals make sense of their linguistic surroundings and are easily rehearsed in a nation undergoing reconciliation with its turbulent modern history. This calls into question the extent to which preferences of Serbian individuals for Latin or Cyrillic are as politically informed as Serbian metadiscourse implies. This study investigated this by seeing orthography as social action whereby scripts host social, non-linguistic meanings (Sebba, 2012), and writing in either Cyrillic or Latin takes place in social, political and historical context. Based on quantitative and qualitative folk linguistic data from a survey of Serbian speakers plus supplementary interviews, the study analysed the motivations of people for preferring Latin or Cyrillic. The analysis also draws on the social tenets of theory of mind to reveal how these same people perceive and rationalise the script preferences of *other* Serbians. This also reveals whether the motivations people hold align or diverge from those that are ascribed to them by others. This combined approach allows for an analysis of the extent to which metalinguistic talk about script preferences – both of the individuals themselves and how they explain the choices of others – are in fact in dialectic relationship to the politics of script in metadiscourse.

Biscriptality in Serbia

Biscriptality in a language community can render orthography a matter of ideological contestation whereby "orthographic norms emerge as a result of the medium's affordances embedded in a given socio-political context" (Ivković, 2013, p. 35). In Serbia, this is indeed the case. In former Yugoslavia, sustained by Tito's commitment to ethnic equality – parallel to his work to avoid Yugoslavia falling into the orbit of global blocs – people, ethnicities, religions and languages were, by and large, equal through a federal system that regulated matters of language locally (Bing, 2016). By extension, both Latin and Cyrillic were recognised in Yugoslavia as formal scripts for the various languages within former Yugoslavia, including, *inter alia*, Croatian, Bosnian, Macedonian, Slovenian and Montenegrin. Slovenian, with its predominantly Catholic population, favours Latin, while Bosnian with its Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic communities, is written in Latin, Cyrillic and even, at times in history, Arabic. Croatian is arguably the same language as Serbian, and the two were once commonly referred to as Serbo-Croatian. It is contemporary language planning in the two states that has delineated them. Croatian was, and continues to be, typically written in Latin, reflecting Croatians' Catholic roots. Meanwhile, Serbo-Croatian written in Cyrillic was favoured by ethnic Serbs and indexed ethnoidentity informed by Orthodoxy. Importantly, the equality of the two scripts for Serbo-Croatian as a single language was codified in Yugoslavia via the Novi Sad agreement of 1954 (Burgarski, 1992).

Despite Tito's policies, lingering ethnic tensions and nationalism would eventually lead to the fall of Yugoslavia. Language and linguistic differences, as markers of identity and politics, took centre stage in discourses of ethnonationalism. Bugarski (2004) explained that language was "readily drawn upon in bolstering up Our cause and satanising Their sides" (p. 29), whereby ethnonationalism framed linguistic debates as much as discourses of diversity framed ethnonationalism. Unsurprisingly, the notion of Serbo-Croatian dually centred on Zagreb and Belgrade lost political currency and was replaced by Serbian and Croatian as distinct languages. Cyrillic and Latin served as obvious and accessible linguistic markers of what is and what is not Serbian and Croatian.

This does not mean that Serbia neatly transitioned to using only Cyrillic. Rather, a diversity of ideological groups emerged. For some, Latin is considered an equally legitimate Serbian script, and biscriptality is enriching. This was especially true for the once active but influential group of status quo Linguists. They saw Serbian as an extension of Serbo-Croatian and were concerned with authenticity rather than a hierarchy of scripts. Neo-Vukovites, another group, were also open to biscriptality, but in the norms promulgated by linguist Vuk Karadžić with his focus on accurate phonetic representation. However, Latin also acquired the semiotics of progress (Bugarski, 2021), not in the least because Cyrillic came to index the opposite, including Euroscepticism; anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transexual rights; conservatism and nationalism. A nationalist ideological group indeed rejects Latin as an authentic script for Serbian and sees Cyrillic as an important cornerstone of Serbian identity (Filipović et al., 2007). As Jovanović (2018) explained, ethnic authenticity in this view includes affiliation with the Orthodox church. Post-Yugoslavian nationhood and the Orthodox church have, in turn, become so tightly interwoven in nationalist ideology that Cyrillic indexes, for the nationalist group, authenticity, tradition and legitimacy as a nation. As Jovanović (2018) explained, the nationalist metadiscourse is ubiquitous and is typically founded on five premises, namely that Cyrillic is being attacked, is central to Serbian ethnoidentity, is more perfect than Latin and is authentic to the Orthodox Church, and that Latin is non-Serbian. Latin is, in turn, constructed not only as indexing all things Catholic and Croatian divorced from Serbia, and as a threat to Serbian heritage and the Serbian sense of self (Greenberg, 2004).

The nationalist ideology typically enjoys government support. The constitution provides that Cyrillic shall be used for official purposes (2006, Article 10 Language and Script) and legislation was passed in 2021 to further protect Cyrillic (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). The focus of the law is to ensure that Cyrillic is also used among non-government actors (Bugarski, 2021), including by public majority-owned entities, by professional bodies, at publicly funded cultural events, in legal transactions, in business names and for information on goods and services. It also provides for tax relief for companies that use Cyrillic and established a government language council to make ongoing recommendations that protect and preserve Cyrillic. However, Latin features predominantly alongside Cyrillic in educational policy. Education for school children commences in Cyrillic, but Latin is introduced in the second grade, from which point, literacy and calligraphy are taught in both scripts (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2008). It remains to be seen if the 2021 law amends this policy. For now, Serbia remains digraphic. Language survey data on script choice are limited, but the most recent research suggested that Cyrillic indeed holds ground in personal and public domains, although research in the early 2000s suggested Latin held ground (Bugarski, 2021). Nonetheless, Latin has begun again to "slowly but steadily gaining ground at the expense of its rival" (Bugarski, 2021, p. 177) because of regional media, technology, culture and people-to-people contact.

I now shift to focus on the perspectives of Serbian individuals with three core questions. What are the script preferences of individuals and their motivations for this? How do individuals perceive the script choices of other Serbians? Do politics play out in the motivations at the level of the individual, as the metadiscourses would have us believe?

Theory and Methods

This paper sees linguistic choices as backgrounded by social, political and historical processes and contexts (Silverstein, 2003). This includes written language, whereby scripts can hold social meaning (Sebba, 2012). In Serbia, the choice of Cyrillic or Latin is, as shown, backgrounded by a kaleidoscope of political discourses. Therefore, it does not suffice to only stocktake who uses Latin and Cyrillic and when, but to also inquire into the motivations. Seeing language as a social

phenomenon and humans as social beings means that humans will have something to say about the different ways language is used vis-à-vis extralinguistic contexts.

From that perspective, this study examined, through a folk linguistic framework, the extent to which script preferences are politicised in metalinguistic talk, as the metadiscourses presuppose (Preston, 2011). This amounts to soliciting, examining and interpreting what non-linguists claim to know and feel about language topics and how these inform their talk about them. This can include attitudes but also importantly includes what people suppose to be true about language matters. The interest is not on whether this knowledge is empirically reliable. That may be the case, but the reality is that many more people in society talk about and claim truths about language than academically trained linguistics alone. The genesis of such knowledge can be diverse: it may, for example, involve experiences, assumptions, deductive, (mis)interpretations, hear-say or hypotheses. The point is that such knowledge is used at ground level to make sense of sociolinguistic realities.

What counts, therefore, as metalinguistic talk? I do not equate metalinguistic talk with language ideology. Folk linguistic research may indeed yield data that point to the reproduction of ideologies; however, the local (Canagarajah, 2005) and post-humanist (Pennycook, 2018) turns in sociolinguistics remind us that a range of acritical, cognitive and material forces also inform how people engage with language matters. These may or may not necessarily reflect any ideology. As such, this paper focuses on whether political *metadiscourse* about script constructs *metalinguistic talk*. Here, I define *metadiscourse* as dominant societal debates and discussions that are constructed and contested at the level of the collective. These accommodate socially, politically and historically contextualised ideologies that are negotiated through interaction and discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). *Metalinguistic talk,* on the other hand, is the commentary of individuals themselves about language affairs. This commentary is embedded in cognitive reasoning, emotions, beliefs and the breadth of supposed knowledge (e.g. experiential, academic and assumptive knowledge, regardless of its empirical accuracy). In this paper, metalinguistic talk also refers to the commentary of individuals about the script preferences of others. That is to say, Serbians observe other Serbians choosing either Cyrillic or Latin and reason why the other chooses what they choose. This multidirectional talk bridges the sociology of language with theory of mind from psychology (cf. Albury, 2021; Sodian & Kristen, 2010). I advance this because language is a relational and social phenomenon, and language beliefs are socially constructed (Agha, 2006). Accordingly, and as far as language helps organise society, which itself is the product of social relations that include people's perceptions of each other (Kenny, 1994), a sociolinguistic theory of mind more robustly inventorises language beliefs in a community than focusing solely on individuals talking about their own practices.

This analysis is based on the results of a digital survey distributed across Serbia and the diaspora, to which 317 people responded, plus 10 semi-structured interviews held with participants. The survey was sent by my own Serbian friends to their families, colleagues and peers, with an invitation to distribute it further. It was also posted to Facebook, for which I joined online networks with diverse interests and ideologies, including animal shelters, sports groups, local news groups, a Serbian identity and language group, the online community of a gay bar in Belgrade and diaspora groups. It also was distributed via Twitter with the tag #srpskijezik (Serbian language). These different avenues helped me reach an ideologically diverse public with varying political, social and script preferences. The survey was in Serbian, alternating between Latin and Cyrillic. This approach was arrived at after consultation with Serbian friends, who felt that conducting the survey only in one script would appear biased or would prime respondents to use that script, but also felt that distributing two surveys (one in Cyrillic and one in Latin) would be cumbersome and confusing. Alternating between scripts in the survey would instead

accommodate personal script preferences (including those who prefer Cyrillic but use Latin for technological ease) and affirmed that either script or both were welcome. Figure 1 shows how this was executed and the survey questions relevant to this paper. Additionally, the survey collected demographic information from the participants, specifically their age, location, education level and gender, so that responses to the survey questions could be offset against such variables and analysed for trends. In terms of the sociolinguistic questions, participants were asked:

- In what situations do you use Cyrillic for writing in Serbian and why?
- In what situations do you use the Latin script for writing in Serbian and why?
- In your opinion, why do some Serbian people decide to use Cyrillic and some decide to use the Latin alphabet?

This third question, which draws on the social tenets of theory of mind, was framed to concern motivations in general as well as motivations for either script. This allowed the participants to offer the folk linguistic perspectives they already held about any or all parts of the topic, without forcing the articulation of a belief or knowledge they perhaps did not already hold. The survey answers were anonymised and translated by an accredited translation company.

Analysing the responses to the first two questions meant codifying, categorising and then quantifying script use. Responses about which script is used and when were categorised into *liberal use* (including answers such as "always" and "most of the time"), *restricted to domain* (e.g., "only if I have to" or "if I am asked to" and when the participant named specific domains such as "for official forms"), *avoidant* (e.g., "rarely" or "practically never") and *neutral* for those who do not mind or use both equally (e.g., "I use both scripts equally"). Claims of liberal use were understood as a preference. Responses to the *why* questions were analysed and content-oriented folk linguistic talk (Preston, 2011), whereby discourse is constructed from existing (socio)linguistic resources and knowledge to assemble a position (Gill, 2000). Specifically, these were categorised for quantitative representation of the data and for thematic coding (Flick, 2022). The responses were then examined and interpreted critically (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) for the (re)production of political metadiscourse and, secondly, for other forms of cognitive reasoning (Preston, 2011).

In total, 317 people responded. According to their self-identification, they included:

- 134 people in Belgrade, 56 in Niš, 23 in Novi Sad, 75 elsewhere in Serbia and 29 abroad;
- 199 women, 117 men and 1 person who chose no gender;
- 136 people between 18 and 30 years of age, 113 between 31 and 40, 44 between 41 and 50, and 24 over 50;
- 214 who were university-educated, 19 who had undertaken vocational study and 84 whose highest education was high school.

A number of participants agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview in English. The interviewees were selected for having given notably divergent responses in the survey, as this would invite a spectrum of perspectives. Ten interviews were held, involving 11 people between 23 and 42 years of age (8 men and 3 women), who included 4 people who preferred Latin, 3 who preferred Cyrillic and 4 who claimed to use both without preference (location and gender played no role). All interviewees were taking or had undertaken tertiary education and resided

Svakodnevna upotreba ćiriličnog i latiničnog pisma u Srpskom jeziku

[Daily use of the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets in the Serbian language]

Главна питања у мом истраживању су:
- Како се људи у Србији осећају по питању ћириличног и латиничног писма који су у употреби у Српском језику?
- Коју идеолошку релевантност имају ћирилична и латинична писма у Србији?

[The main questions in my research are:

- *How do people in Serbia feel about the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets that are in use in the Serbian language?*
- *What ideological relevance do Cyrillic and Latin letters have in Serbia?]*

.....

У којим ситуацијама користите ћирилицу приликом писања на Српском језику, и зашто? *

[In what situations do you use Cyrillic for writing in Serbian and why?]

U kojim situacijama koristite latinicu prilikom pisanja na Srpskom jeziku, i zašto? *

[In what situations do you use the Cyrillic alphabet when writing in Serbian, and why?]

.....

Po vašem mišljenju, zašto neki srpski narod odluči da koristi ćirilicu i zašto neki ljudi odluče da koriste latinicu? *

[In your opinion, why do some Serbian people decide to use Cyrillic and some decide to use Latin alphabet?]

Figure 1 *Research questions in context and alternating between scripts.*

in Belgrade, Novi Sad or Niš. Participants were shown their survey responses and were asked to reflect on these. The interviews generally lasted 1.5 hours over coffee or a beer, creating a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. This metalinguistic talk also underwent thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

Figure 2 provides the macro-level results about which scripts are used. The data give percentages for categories of how frequently the participants claimed to use each given script[1]. When taking digital technology into account, Latin was the most preferred script. After removing references to the digital environment, more people claimed to prefer Cyrillic than Latin, although a significant portion also volunteered that Cyrillic is indeed mediated by the domain. This would include domains regulated by legislation. Especially notable is that not having an opinion on the matter (i.e., being neutral) was rare, suggesting that where domains do not dictate what script to use, Serbians do indeed have a preference. Only a small minority claimed to avoid one or the other.

Age (Figure 3) and location (Figure 4) played a role, whereas the data when filtered by education level and gender did not show any trends that were different to the whole-of-cohort results. In these tables, preferences are quantified by adding claims about liberally using Cyrillic to claims about avoiding Latin, and vice versa. Numbers of responses, not percentages, are given because the cohorts numbered less than 100. Cyrillic appeared to be preferred by younger respondents (when Latin in technology was excluded). This may be a result of the age group's socialisation directly after the fall of Yugoslavia. At that time, in the early phases of contemporary Serbian nation-building, nationalistic discourses that promoted Cyrillic as indexing Serbian linguistic citizenship were especially pervasive (Mandic, 2017). People between 25 and 44 years gave no strong preference and were more likely to choose a script

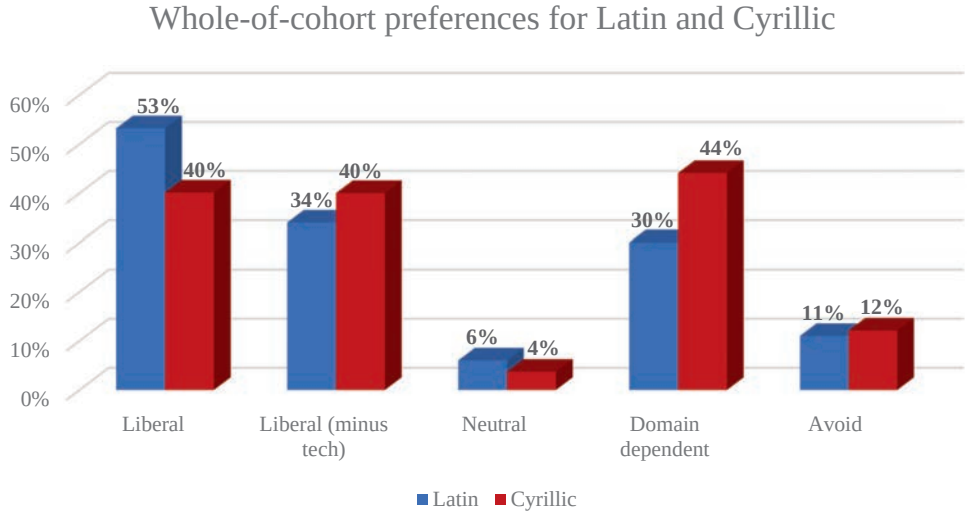

Figure 2 *Whole-of-cohort preferences for Latin and Cyrillic.*

[1] Categories of claimed use amount to 100% per script, whereby for Latin, $N = 389$ and for Cyrillic, $N = 406$. This is more than the total of 317 participants because some participants gave varying answers and descriptions of use (e.g., that script use was domain-dependent and they sought to use a script liberally. All answers per participants were included in the data to avoid determining which answers carried the most weight on the participants' behalf.

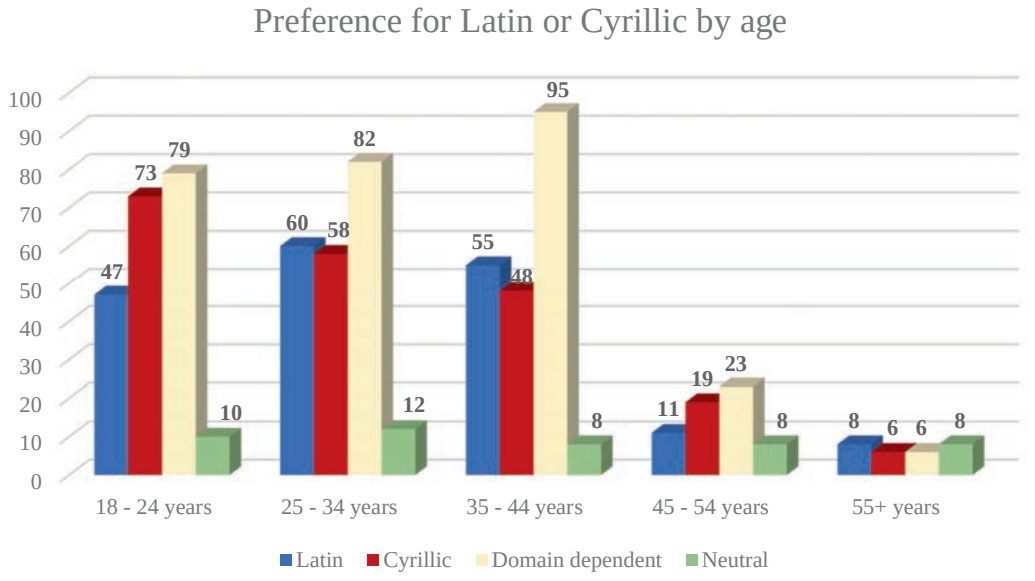

Figure 3 *Preference for Latin or Cyrillic by age.*

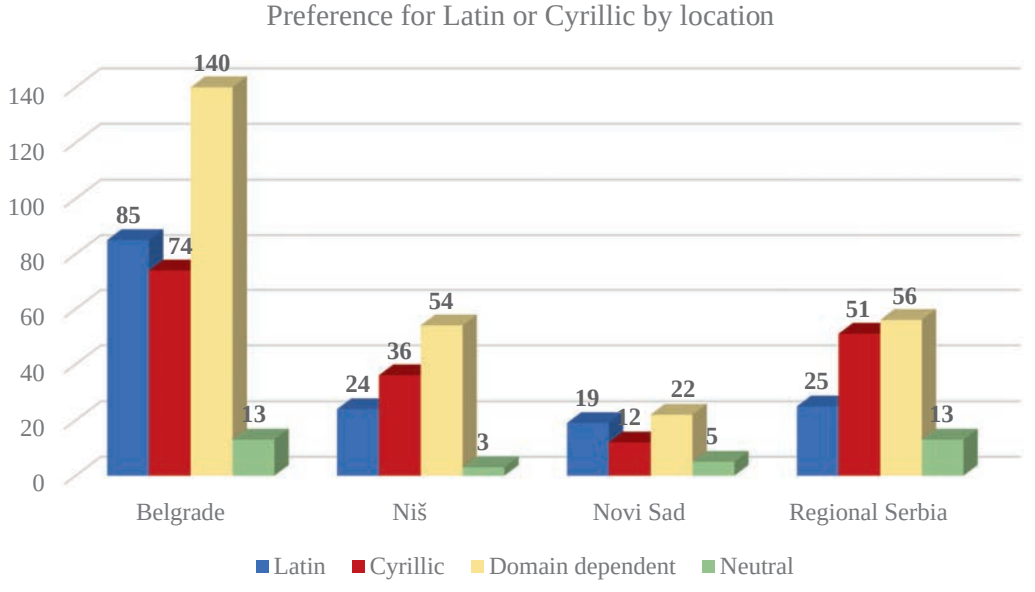

Figure 4 *Preference for Latin or Cyrillic by location.*

depending on the domain. Their synchronic biscriptality has likely fostered this dual affinity, or at least greater proficiency in Cyrillic and greater likelihood to use it compared with the youngest age group. I have avoided interpreting the responses from older participants, given the small number of responses.

It appears Latin rivals Cyrillic more strongly in Belgrade, the capital, and in Novi Sad. The difference between Belgrade and regional Serbia aligns with the sociology of urban

cosmopolitanism and regional conservatism, whereby cities tend to have a more international gaze and are more welcoming of diversity, whereas nationalist sentiments hold more ground in rural areas (Warf, 2015). Also striking about Belgrade is that the participants were more likely to oscillate between scripts depending on the domain than to have a stark preference. This, too, may reflect urban cosmopolitanism, whereby this oscillation amounts to adaptive urban language practices or performances of urban sophistication (Creese & Blackledge, 2010), whereby choices between this and that (in this case, Cyrillic or Latin) are not necessarily oppositional (May, 2005). Although the small number of responses in Novi Sad limits robust interpretation, the results do not surprise. Novi Sad is the capital of the autonomous province of Vojvodina. It hosts sizeable Hungarian, Slovak and Croatian communities, and looks as much to the north and west as it does to Belgrade (Hagan, 2009). This has forged a linguistic culture that gives a stronger place to Latin outside the official national domains. Regional Serbia, on the other hand, appears to prefer Cyrillic. Niš, as an urban regional centre, appears to sit between the extremes.

What Motivates Preferences for Latin?

In the cohort that preferred Latin (those having claimed to use it liberally), preferences were barely motivated, at least not consciously, by the language politics of the metadiscourse. Figure 5 categorises the motivations, showing that most claimed that their preference is simply a habit. This includes explanations that the participants are used to using Latin, such as "Latin out of habit and I use it all the time" and "I write in the Latin alphabet without thinking". This pragmatism and absence of criticality held also for those who preferred Latin because they are better at it or write it faster, or because it is the script they were taught in. These people gave explanations such as "I use the Latin script in everyday situations because I can write faster and

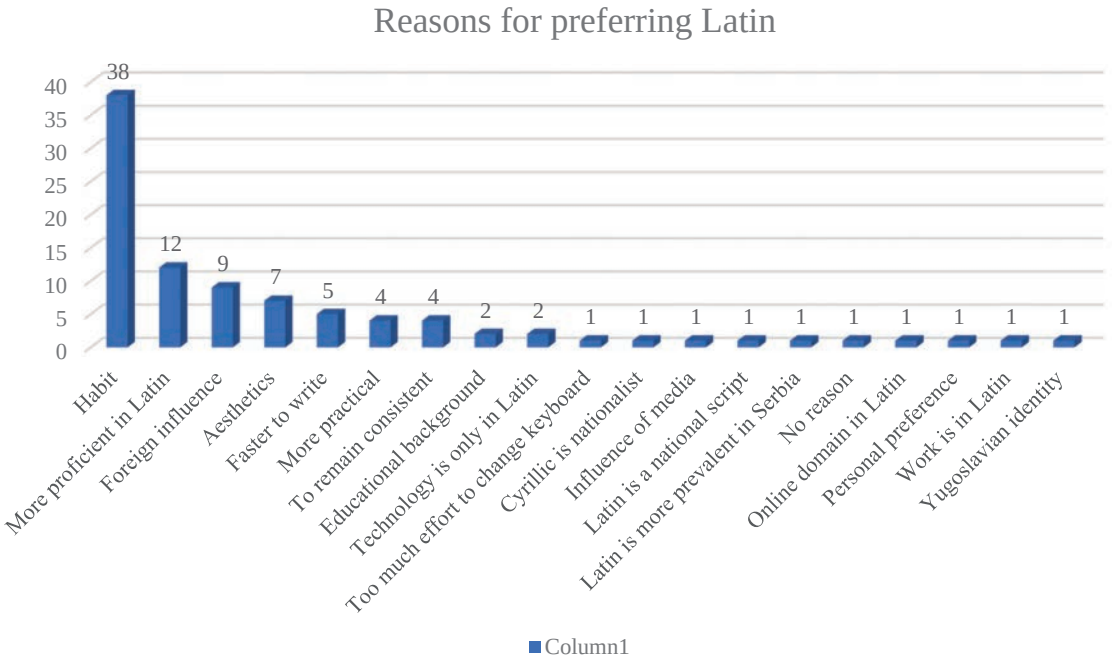

Figure 5 *Reasons for preferring Latin.*

I have a characteristic handwriting" and "I have used Latin ever since elementary school". The interviewees added that Cyrillic takes up too much space, meaning that Latin is more practical. They also explained that Cyrillic lends itself to cursive writing which, while attractive, is time-consuming: "When you look at sentence written in Latin and Cyrillic, Cyrillic it would take much more space". This appears to be related to several comments that Latin is aesthetically more pleasing than Cyrillic, given that most comments nuanced this by saying, for example, "my handwriting looks nicer when I write Latin".

Social and political contexts can nonetheless implicitly background habits and pragmatism, whereby these are ultimately not void of ideology. Using Latin out of habit may result from a hegemony of the script in popular culture and especially technology. While not articulated this way, the predominance of Latin in technology was raised three times in the interview data. An interviewee noted that she uses Latin out of habit because "no one types in Cyrillic, it seems". Another explained:

> You see everywhere Latin, you see [it] on the TV: we don't have voiceovers, we have the subtitles, so this is where you first start to read… then computers again, internet, everything is in Latin, so this is where you start.

Of note, the metalinguistic talk generally could not be associated with metadiscourse that promotes Latin. That is to say, few comments were made that Latin is a preference because of foreign influences, but included, for example, "…what matters is the closeness of the alphabet to [the] English language". Even fewer explained Latin as facilitating inter-Balkan communication across related languages, with comments such as "I have many business partners and friends in the region who are more comfortable reading Latin". In no case was Latin presented as the language of modernity or of Western political affiliation per se. One participant even actively refuted such metadiscourse, saying "It has nothing to do with being modern" and all interviewees who claimed to use Latin liberally sought to dismantle any perceived politics of Latin, claiming, "It is idiotic…it's just a fucking type face" and "I think there is no need to be so explosive".

The notable apolitical pragmatism, absent of reflection on the imbalances that have led to or sustain Latin being used habitually, is striking. Using Latin may, for these people, be so unmarked that the ideological aspects of the metadiscourse did not feature in their reflections. This, however, seems doubtful, given that the metadiscourse is ubiquitous. Also, as discussed below, these people later showed abundant critical awareness of the metadiscourse when they discussed the motivations of Cyrillic users. Participants may have avoided entering into political dialogue and being inadvertently seen (and not really knowing who would ultimately interpret the survey responses) as sitting on the wrong side of orthographic history. Alternatively, as a group whose script choices were not motivated by but are instead criticised in the vocal language politics of pro-Cyrillic activists, they may have silently protested against the politicisation of script. By circumventing the metadiscourse, presenting their preferences as unmarked and emphasising the practicality – and not the politics – of Latin, they disempowered that metadiscourse and created, in their minds, a safe space for their preferences.

Theory of Mind (Latin users talking about the script preferences of others)

When talking about others, only a minority of Latin users (totalling 92 comments; see Figure 6) referred to motivations in the community in general, compared with 133 comments made specifically about Cyrillic users (see Figure 7). In the smaller group, people explained that

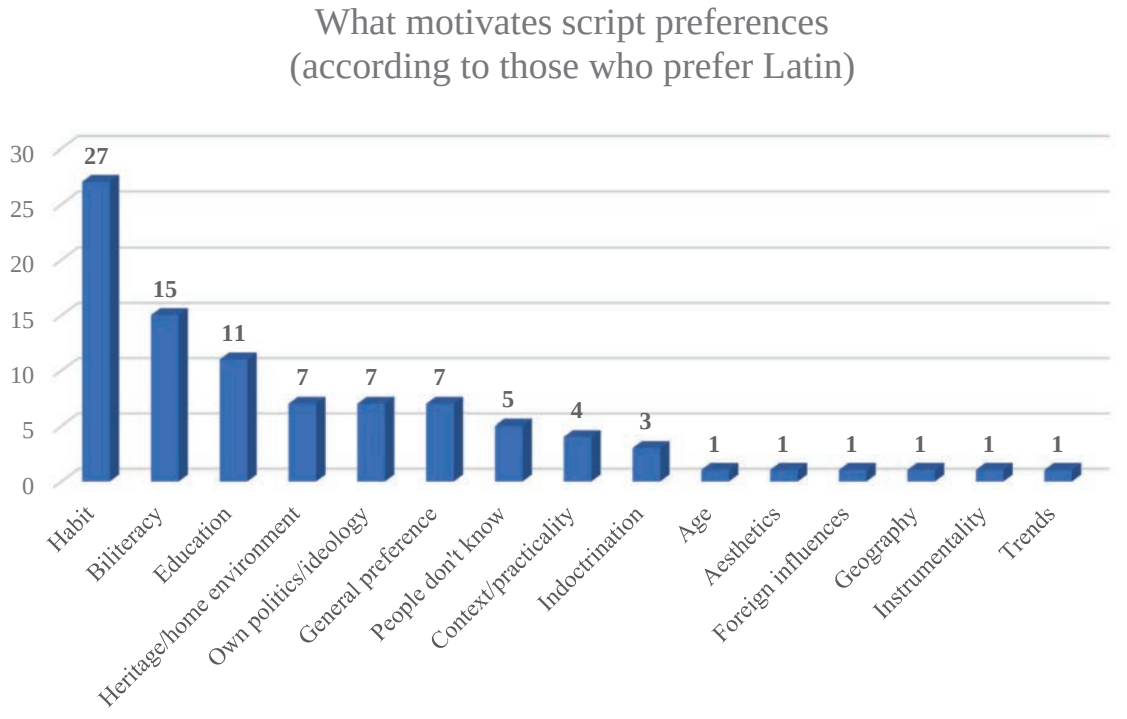

Figure 6 *What motivates script preferences (according to those who prefer Latin).*

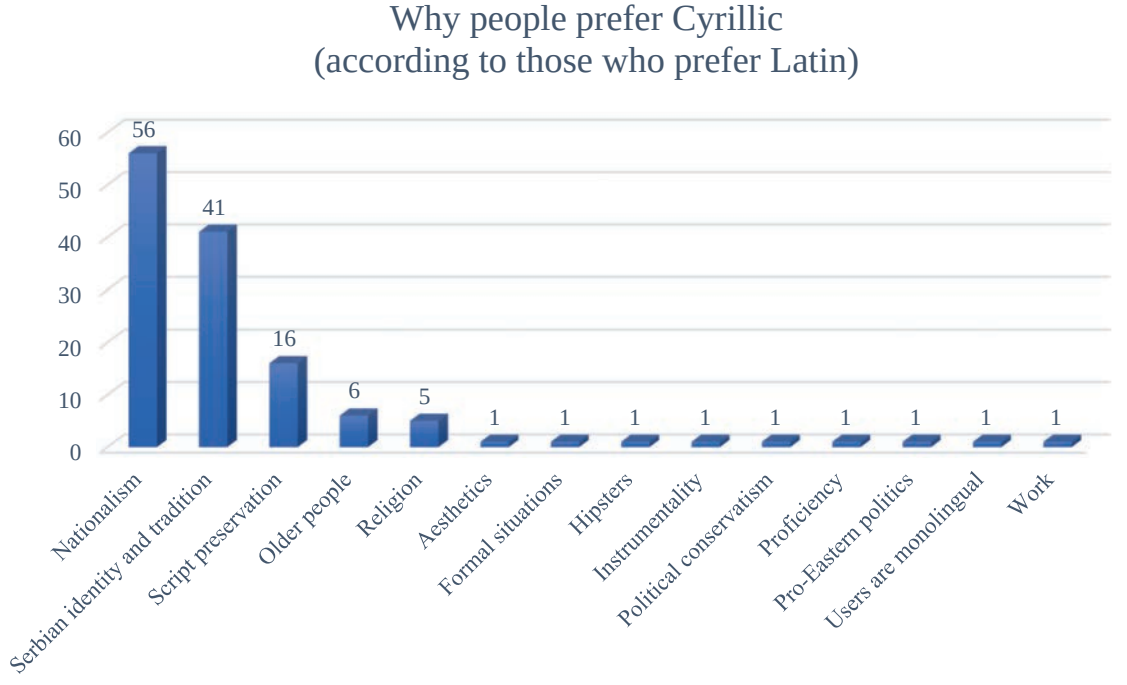

Figure 7 *Why people prefer Cyrillic (according to those who prefer Latin).*

personal habits, educational background and one's own heritage or home environment mediate preferences and that biliteracy is normative. They argued that people prefer a script "out of a habit and it depends greatly on national awareness and the environment in which one grows up" and "I think it is a matter of a habit acquired in school and not a decision someone makes". Others added that preferences are explained by proficiency, noting that "for some, one alphabet or the other is easier". Only two pro-Latin interviewees touched on motivations behind script choices in general. One specifically related preferences to age, whereby Latin is more common among younger Serbians and Cyrillic among older Serbians, saying, "It's an age thing". The other explained preferences by generalising the preferences of his own parents, suggesting it is about both age and personal circumstances:

> If I can remember correctly, my father used Cyrillic, my mother used Latin… my guess is that she used it because she used to work as a medical worker and [was] constantly writing prescriptions down; my guess is that they were half the time in Latin… but Father used Cyrillic… I think it was part of his education. Schools in Serbia or in Belgrade immediately after World War Two, maybe they didn't learn the Latin script as kids; it's mostly what you learn up to, I don't know, until you finish your primary education.

Only a minority suggested that script choices are motivated in terms of political ideology reminiscent of the metadiscourse. They argued, for example, it is "often because of political reasons" and "alphabet usage can be a matter of political orientation". Three participants went so far as to lament that preferences result from indoctrination through the metadiscourse and by authorities, regardless of which script was favoured, arguing, for example, that it depends on "what you were told to use" and "It is in the domain of manipulation and demagogy".

However, most comments specifically concerned their perceptions of what motivates Cyrillic users. These motivations were political, critical and frustrated. The typology of motivations from the survey is given in Figure 7. This created an inconsistency in the metalinguistic talk of Latin users: whereas talk about their own preferences was apolitical and pragmatic, similar to their comments about script preferences in general, most had something critical to say about Cyrillic users and attributed to them political and ideological motivations that they themselves oppose. This is exemplified in a summary offered by one participant:

> I believe that many through using Cyrillic want to emphasise their traditional and patriot side (even though they do it in the wrong way). On the other side… using Latin alphabet is not ideologically coloured, but a matter of habit.

Especially evident is that the motivations attributed to Cyrillic users are reminiscent of the metadiscourse against Cyrillic. This included criticism of seeing Cyrillic as central to Serbian identity and the supposition that Cyrillic users are nationalists and traditionalists. They claimed that "there is nationalism and patriotism for sure", that some use Cyrillic "just to be bigger Serbs", "because of the mentality: 'Croats use Latin; we will use Cyrillic!'" and

> I expect that Serbs who wish to keep themselves separate from the other "nations" of the former Yugoslavia make a statement in some way by using Cyrillic. Those that have a less nationalistic stance and believe in the global realities of today would not feel so strongly about it.

Others claimed that people who prefer Cyrillic are nostalgic about tradition. For example: "I believe people who use Cyrillic only are traditionalists, conservative and fighters for old values and so-called keeping of tradition" and "[those] who care about tradition will use Cyrillic predominately, while others that value productivity don't have that much time to care about tradition so they write in Latin alphabet". In turn, some then criticised seeing Cyrillic as the single legitimate script, saying "it is a myth that Cyrillic is 'more Serbian than [the] Latin alphabet'" and "so-called nationalistic feelings of belonging to the Serbian people that implicate Cyrillic usage is a nonsense of a reason".

Some who described Cyrillic as preferred by nationalists and traditionalists overtly juxtaposed this with Latin users being cosmopolitan, progressive and Western, although this ideological premise had not featured in their talk about themselves. They claimed that "Cyrillic [is] mostly [preferred] for nationalistic reasons, while [the] Latin alphabet is used by broad-minded people who are open to the world", and "Cyrillic is used by people who feel like patriots and those who love beautiful Serbian language, while [the] Latin alphabet is used by pro-West oriented people". This was reiterated by the pro-Latin interviewees who all described using Cyrillic as an expression of nationalism. However, unlike the survey data, they added that this is coloured by Russian-leaning politics, Orthodoxy and the political and social conservatism these encompass. They explained that the Cyrillic user "is pro-Russian, anti-LGBTQ+, um, probably wants his wife to be in the kitchen…", "grew up in some traditional family and inherited that inclination more to Russia than to West". In one case, countering a discourse that nationalism is a result of good Serbian education, one interviewee stated that

> people writing exclusively in Cyrillic for me, that means they are pro-Russia; they are sort of nationalists in a way… This is completely correlated with education… but being educated doesn't mean you are, you have read all the Russian literature, but that you are aware of the world. And I tend to think that those people writing in Cyrillic are more narrow-minded than those that are writing in Latin, honestly.

Three survey participants argued that, unlike Cyrillic users, Latin users have not fallen victim to political rhetoric that ties Cyrillic to ethnic authenticity. They claimed, for example, that "most 'Cyrillic lovers' were suckled on nationalism; they are xenophobic and blindly religious (with rare exceptions), while 'Latin alphabet lovers' don't fit into that setting". Although this rejection of rhetoric was offered overtly by a small minority of Latin users, it may have underpinned their views that see using Cyrillic as a performance of political ideology and Latin as simply pragmatic. After all, political discourse about script is so omnipresent in Serbia that is hard to believe it had not featured in self-reflections on their own preference for Latin. My view is that rejecting political rhetoric by explaining one's own choices in instrumental terms devalues the metadiscourse and its politicisation of script, and avoids participation in it. This would explain the silent protest of Latin users against the metadiscourse when talking about their own preferences but drawing on the metadiscourse to criticise Cyrillic users.

A recurring theme in the survey data and especially in the interviews was one of fear. Firstly, this was a fear of aggressive nationalism that manifests as pro-Cyrillic linguistic policing. Interviewees explained "they became very powerful and then, like, very aggressive. Probably more than [the] last ten years. And then, like, pushing everything too much to be Cyrillic", and "50 years ago, you could, like, prefer Russia and write something in Latin, and nobody noticed. But now it's like, 'urgh!'. It's like Cyrillic police, you know." Secondly, this was a fear that linguistic policing and the ongoing politicisation of Cyrillic will harm Serbia's sociolinguistic

future. Specifically, these people lamented the indexicality it has acquired from nationalists. For example, the survey participants argued, "Cyrillic is our cultural heritage that we should cherish, no doubt. But sometimes that becomes a fanaticism," and "I am afraid of nationalists 'kidnapping' it". An interviewee explained that "It should be separated from Russia and nationalism. Then for me, it would make sense, and I would be very happy to be involved in preserving it." This revealed that the cohort of Latin users was by no means ideologically or uniformly opposed to Cyrillic, but specifically opposed the politicisation of script in the current metadiscourse.

Such thinking led to suggestions that the population of people who prefer Cyrillic is diversifying, whereby Cyrillic is no longer favoured just by, nor should be indexically linked to, traditionalists and nationalists. A survey participant and two pro-Latin interviewees specifically explained that Cyrillic is being reappropriated by leftist, Western-leaning, cosmopolitan urbanites who have become tired of language politics, whereby the semiotics of Cyrillic as conservative and backward is being transformed. Interviewees noted that "even the pro-West, very Western, very modern, like, political parties; they're using Cyrillic". However, more commonly, they explained that the appropriation of Cyrillic by the left is taking place in hipster culture, noting "[Cyrillic] is an opportunity to make it more fun and interesting, hipster-like… a little homage to Yugoslavia", "in the last years, among young people (especially 'hipsters'), love for Cyrillic is renewed, so it is more used" and "in the modern part of city is… there is hipster café where all Belgrade's gay people come, you know; people with progressive [ideas], you know, and that café, its name is in Cyrillic." The notion is that urban hipsters are attaching a vintage Yugoslavian aesthetic to Cyrillic along with a left-leaning political persuasion. Disarming Cyrillic's nationalist indexicality in this way reflects the emerging semiotics of Communist artefacts as trendy nostalgia in Eastern Europe more broadly (Condrache, 2021). This opens a fascinating line of inquiry: is this reappropriation of Cyrillic gaining widespread currency in contemporary Serbia? If so, then are the semiotics of Cyrillic – and the metadiscourse about it – undergoing profound reconstruction? Further research might reveal whether perceptions of Cyrillic as indexing political conservatism are breaking down as the left claims legitimacy to use it in their own sociopolitical interests.

What Motivates Preferences for Cyrillic?

The metalinguistic talk of the people who preferred Cyrillic (those who claimed to use it liberally) was also largely apolitical, though it did reproduce the metadiscourse more frequently than that of Latin users. While they mostly reasoned their preferences vis-à-vis habits, proficiency, educational background, personal choice and domains, they differed from the Latin group in that a large minority (49 of 109 comments) assumed overtly ideological orientations, albeit typically less political than the metadiscourse. The motivations are shown in Figure 8. In particular, 22 comments referred to preferring Cyrillic to help preserve it and counter the omnipresence of Latin online. Some combined this with nationalist sentiment to arrive at the anxious commentary that Cyrillic is endangered by Latin to the jeopardy of Serbian identity, claiming "I think Cyrillic is sadly neglected; a script is an integral part of the identity of a nation and it shouldn't be neglected" and "there is a risk that we won't have a country and Serbian people", whereby Cyrillic is essential to Serbian nationhood. Interestingly, two responses specifically emphasised a discourse of endangerment: not of Cyrillic but of the survival of digraphia in Serbia. They validated a preference for Cyrillic as a matter of linguistic balance. They explained "I use Latin only when I can't use the Cyrillic script (e.g., for technology reasons)… purely for the sake of balance" and "I write in Cyrillic whenever I can because I use Latin all the time since I'm learning and teaching another foreign language which both use the Latin script".

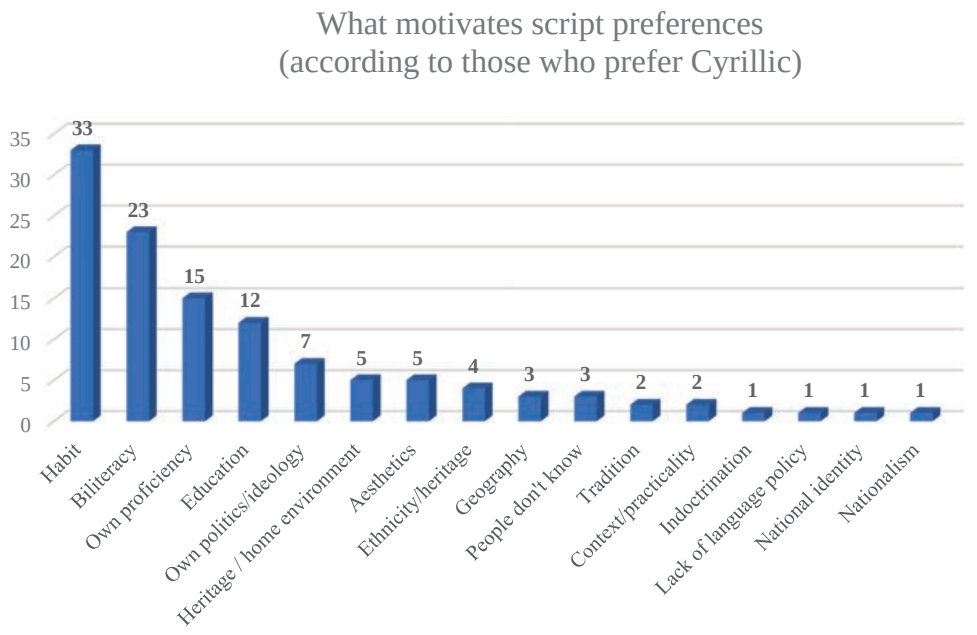

Figure 8 *Reasons for preferring Cyrillic.*

Another 23 participants echoed a notably political metadiscourse of Cyrillic as a matter of Serbian identity and the single bona fide script. These people argued that "I consider it the official script", "It's the script of my mother tongue" and "I consider it to be one of the identities of our language and thus an important attribute of our country". In one case, a participant constructed Latin as decidedly foreign and therefore not relevant to contemporary Serbia, arguing that "the Latin script is intended to be used only in foreign languages". Another positioned Cyrillic as necessarily interwoven with Serbian identity derived from the Orthodox Church, explaining that "I think all Serbs should use Cyrillic because it's Serbian Orthodox script". An interviewee extrapolated on this, emphasising Cyrillic as an historical treasure to embody Serbian faith and nationhood:

> It's all about the feeling, its history. Cyrillic was brought to us by or brothers, brother monks… because the Emperor realised there was a need for this nation, that we're Orthodox, at a time to resist Western intentions of the Roman and Catholic church and to have its own script… to be aware of their nation and everything.

This metalinguistic talk about preserving Cyrillic, plus Cyrillic as being central to nationhood, revealed two interrelated phenomena. Firstly, these participants, although a minority, more frequently applied a critical lens to their own preferences than did the participants who preferred Latin. They did so in terms that framed Latin not as threatening and jeopardising a Serbian (linguistic) identity. Secondly, and putting the empirical reliability of their reasoning aside, the breadth and assertiveness of their metalinguistic talk means the participants had previously deliberated on these specific matters to a reasonable degree. This was also unlike the Latin preferers, whose talk about their own preferences was framed in unmarked, non-critical terms.

Theory of Mind (Cyrillic users talking about the preferences of others)

When asked why people choose the script they do, those who had shown a preference for Cyrillic produced a complex heuristic of critical and non-critical reasoning. Firstly, a total of 188 responses related to motivations at play in general, separate to motivations for Latin. Again, these were largely apolitical. Just as the Latin users described their choices as a matter of habit, proficiency, educational background and aesthetics in non-critical terms, so, too, did the Cyrillic users vis-à-vis script choices of others in general. This is shown in Figure 9.

A significant minority supplemented this with assertions that biscriptality is normative and challenged the metadiscourse that opposes this. They explained "in principle, I think that is not important… everyone writes as they please" and "it is a matter of choice". Pro-Cyrillic interviewees agreed, adding "It's our culture to have two. We learned them, it's cool… I don't see any reason not to use both of them". Others explained script preferences as a matter of heritage, geography and tradition, reproducing the Yugoslavian sociolinguistic ideal of script equality. They noted, for example, that "it depends on the area where one lives" and on "where our people came from – Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia – and the schools they attended".

Only a minority suggested that ideology matters. They particularly claimed that one's own political persuasions, sense of nationalism or ethnoidentity mediates choices. This was neatly paraphrased by an interviewee, who explained it as follows:

> [T]he reasons why people write in Latin or in Cyrillic is because of insignias. The other side, the West side is telling us the East side is bad, and the East side is telling us that the West is bad. If you looked at it normally, you would disregard all those influences.

In contrast to their Latin-preferring peers talking about Cyrillic, only a minority (73 comments) were made about what motivates people to choose Latin in particular. Here, the single largest

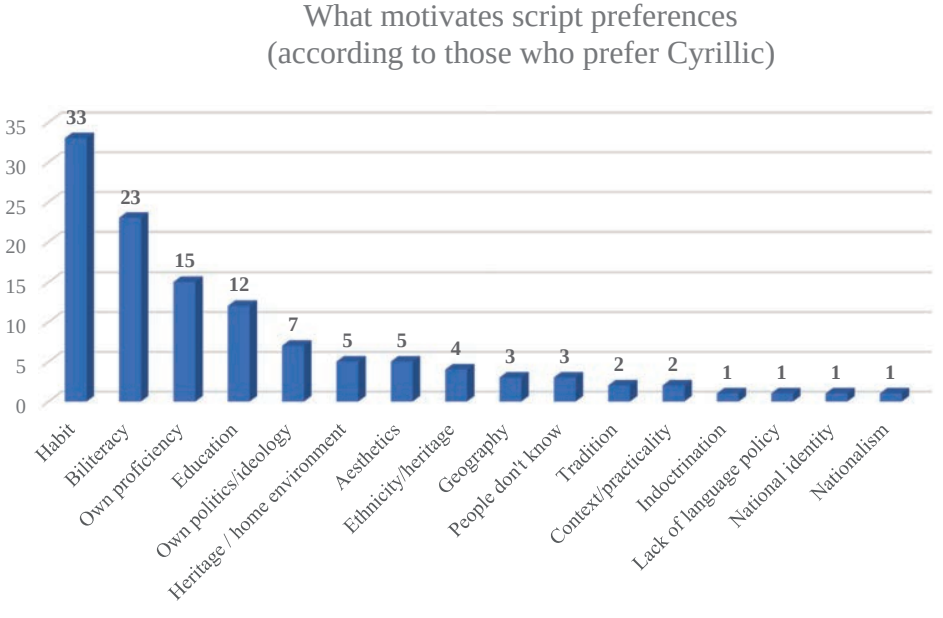

Figure 9 *What motivates script preferences (according to those who prefer Cyrillic).*

reasoning was apolitical, specifically that the ubiquity of Latin in technology prompts a general preference for it. This, plus explanations that Latin is sometimes more practical or easier for an individual, mirrors the views expressed by Latin users about themselves. However, a minority attributed ideological or political motivations to Latin users, reproducing the oppositional metadiscourse that criticises preferences for Latin. This is shown in Figure 10.

Some explained preferences for Latin as resulting from unwelcome foreign influences and misconceptions of Latin as indexing modernity. They argued it is because of "music and movies, culture from the rest of Europe and America" and "90% of subtitles on television are also in Latin, so we are 'bombed' with it" (with this last comment invoking interdiscursive imagery of the NATO-led bombings of Serbia in the 1990s that frame collective Serbian memory). An interviewee offered the similar view that preferences for Latin arose regrettably – but intrinsically – from Western attacks on Serbia:

> [T]hey banned Cyrillic letters… actually they bombed for days and months Belgrade from all these sides here and, you know that in the first world war, Serbia was one of biggest victims of war. We lost a third of our male population. That was first time Latin letters were imposed.

Interestingly, all pro-Cyrillic interviewees argued that people prefer Latin because of an incorrect assumption that it represents progress. Specifically, they offered counter-discourses that gave currency to Cyrillic within the modernisation of Serbia, explaining "we have had [a] long time when Latin was considered a modern, progressive language, and Cyrillic not; [that's] for rural people. But it is certainly becoming modern to write Cyrillic".

Others lamented that preferences for Latin arise from Western political biases, from people lacking or not supporting national identity and even from anti-Serbian sentiment. They explained that "Latin is more common due to 'Westernisation' of the society", "[the] Latin

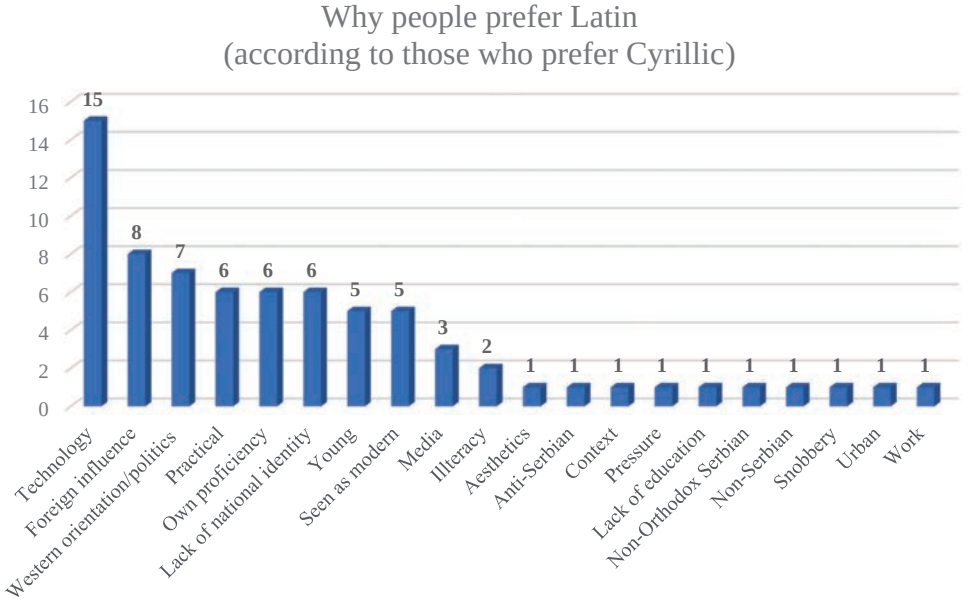

Figure 10 *Why people prefer Latin (according to those who prefer Cyrillic).*

alphabet is used by pro-West oriented people" and "it's Serbophobia". Two interviewees also discussed Serbophobia, suggesting that some Latin users see themselves "not as Serbians" in reaction to being "embarrassed" about Serbia's modern history. Preferring Latin was seen as distancing oneself from Serbia's complicated modern history. The other added that this embarrassment is exacerbated by Serbia being a small nation within a larger, Russian-centric Slavic community, whereby preferring Latin is about removing oneself from Russia's influence.

Conclusions

The data from this study do not amount to a language use survey representative of the entire Serbian-speaking community, but has led to a heuristic of the motivations that speakers of Serbian have provided, from a folk linguistic perspective, for their script preferences and of those ascribed to them by others. We can therefore now draw conclusions regarding the three central questions of this paper, namely the script preferences of individuals and their motivations, how individuals perceive the script choices of other Serbians, and whether the politics of metadiscourse feature in these motivations. To begin, context-dependent synchronic biscriptality remains the norm for these participants The omnipresence of the Latin script in the digital arena means that Latin generally tends to be more preferred than Cyrillic, but this did not hold true outside the digital arena. Here, demographic factors were important: younger Serbians leaned towards Cyrillic, likely given their socialisation in Cyrillic directly after the fall of Yugoslavia when Cyrillic-promoting nationalistic discourses were rife. Urban–rural differences also played a role: cosmopolitan Belgrade tended, along with ethnically diverse Novi Sad, to prefer Cyrillic less.

The key findings, however, concern the extent to which the political metadiscourse featured in the stated script preferences. Notably, Latin and Cyrillic users were more similar in their motivations about themselves and each other than the metadiscourse would suggest, and their motivations were largely apolitical. Reasons for one's own preferences, and about preferences in the community in general, were largely pragmatic, referring to habit, practicality or proficiency. This was especially true for those who preferred Latin, as political or ideological reasons to prefer Latin were largely absent. Some who preferred Cyrillic couched their preferences, and the general preferences of the community, in political terms akin to ethnonationalism; however, this was a minority and Cyrillic was more frequently described as a matter of heritage. Identifiably nationalist anti-Latin views were a small minority.

However, the picture is complex. The near absolute absence of critical reflection amongst Latin users vis-a-vis their own preferences or those of the community in general is unlikely to be a matter of ignorance. Unless the participants were apprehensive about entering into ideological debate – making it simply easier to explain one's preferences in apolitical terms – a deeper protest was at play. I suggest that the data revealed that Latin users were experiencing fatigue about what Jovanović (2018) calls an assertive metadiscourse accented by nationalism about Cyrillic as the single authentic script underpinning Serbian identity and needing protection. They were tired of the politicisation of their preference for Latin and of the weaponisation of Cyrillic for national identity. This explains why their metalinguistic talk about themselves, and others in general, was unframed by the metadiscourse: this disrupted the reproduction of that metadiscourse. This disruption may also be at play in urban Serbia, where the reappropriation of Cyrillic by the (Latin-leaning) left may yet reconfigure the semiotics of script choice. This would also explain why the majority of Latin users commented specifically on the motivations of Cyrillic users, in contrast to only a minority of Cyrillic users commenting on the motivations of Latin users. Here, Latin users especially harnessed, reproduced and applied the political

metadiscourse that argued against Cyrillic, its conversative and nationalist semiotics, and its users subscribing to such politics.

What is more, the minority of people who attributed political and other ideological motivations to the other, did not describe the other in the way the other had described themselves. This in itself is not revolutionary: it was never expected that Latin users would enthusiastically claim to hold a misguided view of linguistic modernity or that a Cyrillic users would profile themselves as conservative nationalists. It was, however, feasible that non-oppositional versions of such a metadiscourse could frame self-reflections, such as Latin users describing their preferences vis-à-vis international instrumentality and integration, or Cyrillic users describing their preferences as advancing Serbian language policy. In most cases, this did not happen. This is good news, as anxious perceptions of the other, where they did arise, were not reflected in self-reflections of those people: the metalinguistic talk of Cyrillic users offered little evidence to justify the lamentations of Latin users about Cyrillic users being conservative, Russian-leaning nationalists. Such people no doubt exist in Serbia, but in the current dataset, Cyrillic-users were sooner concerned with using the script they are most proficient in or are used to, and to a lesser degree with validating Serbia's place in contemporary Europe with a unique linguistic identity. Similarly, many Cyrillic users welcomed biscriptality and emphasised its normativity. For them, personal interventions to use Cyrillic in the face of the omnipresence of Latin online and in popular culture were simply a way to sustain Cyrillic, not suppress Latin, in an ideology that is much less nationalist than the Latin users described. Cyrillic users could take heart, too: it generally appeared that Latin users were not opposed to Cyrillic and welcomed biscriptality, but offered metalinguistic talk framed by a frustration that Cyrillic – a script they too would use – had been weaponised in nationalist and conservative politics. Their notably uncritical descriptions of themselves, political descriptions of Cyrillic users and explanations that a reappropriation of Cyrillic by the left was underway indicated that frustration.

Nonetheless, it remains to be seen how metadiscourses evolves in light of the war in Ukraine and the political emotions it ignites in Serbia. The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine is commonly understood in the public arena as a pro-West–pro-Russia ideological divide that is not dissimilar to the geopolitical semiotics of script choice that already exist in metadiscourse. Indeed, pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian opinions both currently feature in Serbia's media and public discourse (Ramet & Zdravkovski, 2022). This makes the conjecture of current geopolitics and script ideology potentially fragile. After all, language ideologies evolve in dialectic relationship to societal transformations. For Serbia, script choice – and talk about it – could become a matter of geopolitical performativity more than it appears to be in this paper. It could be the case, for example, that a preference for Latin may increase among Serbians if public opinion about the war in Ukraine moves against Russia. On the other hand, insights from this paper also suggest that, in this situation, the left may seek to further reappropriate Cyrillic from its pro-Russian associations and, in doing so, disrupt metadiscourse about script and geopolitics. Of course, this is currently only speculation.

What do these findings means for language research? They show us that metadiscourses and lived experiences need not align and that we must remain attune to chasms and messy ideological spaces that can exist in parallel to – and even in spite of – neatly packaged metadiscourses. Without a doubt, routinised behaviours, such as those solicited for this paper, do not exist in a vacuum but are outcomes of social and political processes. Nonetheless, the notable absence of metalinguistic talk that reflected metadiscourse is thought-provoking fodder for critical sociolinguistics and the view of script as social action (Sebba, 2012). It reminds us to avoid assumptions about how impactful metadiscourses at the societal level are on reasoning and practices at the individual level. Taking this further, and in as far as metadiscourse is ideological and

therefore power-laden in critical terms, we ought also to be critical of criticality itself: we need not assume that power necessarily or always orients language practices or perceptions, at least not overtly from the user's own conscious perspective. Instead, as this paper has shown, other material (and immaterial) affordances – such as skill sets, educational background, access to technology and the networks we encounter – can also mediate sociolinguistic lives in impactful ways beyond the scope of power relations (Pennycook, 2018). What is more, applying a sociolinguistic theory of mind to analyse multidirectional discourses about language topics has helped to identify and nuance misunderstandings born from political metadiscourses and not specifically from the motivations of language users themselves. In as far as a sociolinguistic theory of mind helps to identify and dismantle assumptions about differences that adversely affect person–to–person relationships, then this only good for the communities who inform our research.

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