

**THE POSITION OF THE SLAVONIC
LANGUAGES AT THE PRESENT DAY;
AN INAUGURAL LECTURE
DELIVERED BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY
OF OXFORD, NOVEMBER 29, 1910**

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NEVILL FORBES

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NOTE

AIDS TO THE PRONUNCIATION OF SLAVONIC WORDS

- š, sz = English *sh* in e. g. shall
- č, cz = English *ch* in e. g. church
- ž = French *j* in e. g. jour
- dž = English *j* in e. g. James
- ć = English *ty* in e. g. Lutyens
- c = English *ts* in e. g. its
- w = English *v* in e. g. vain
- j = English *y* in e. g. you

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THE POSITION OF THE SLAVONIC
LANGUAGES AT THE PRESENT
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It would be impossible for me to begin this Lecture without paying a tribute, no less earnest because it is necessarily short, to the memory of the man, who, I may say, inspired it. Nothing I might here say could express the debt I owe to my predecessor, the late Professor Morfill; his genuine and generous enthusiasm for the subject in which we were both so deeply interested encouraged me to emulation, while his brilliant wit and amazing memory left me in no doubt of the desperate nature of the attempt. Those who remember his wonderful gifts, who delighted in them, and must delight in the remembrance of them, may draw on their memories to supplement those qualities which will be found lacking, while those who did not know him will have the misfortune to realize what it is they have lost.

Professor Morfill was the first official representative of Slavonic philology in England; his attainments and publications in his special field of study attracted the admiration and gratitude of the whole Slavonic world, which often expressed its appreciation of his efforts in the concrete terms of the conferment of academic distinctions.

But besides his interest in the Slavonic languages, of the five principal of which he wrote grammars, and in the history of the Slav nations, to which he devoted several volumes, Professor Morfill was master of the languages and the literatures of Greece and Rome. His quotations from Homer were as inexhaustible as those from Puškin, while he seemed to carry the whole of English, French, and German literature in his head. He was well

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acquainted with all the other European languages philologically, as well as with some of those of Asia and Africa. There was scarcely a language one could mention so remote but that he would shyly confess to having at some time or other inquired into its structure. Nevertheless, with all these languages and literatures at his command, he would always unhesitatingly asseverate his preference for those of the Slavonic peoples, which appealed to him by their vigour and wealth of sound, no less than by their freshness and originality of expression.

Once fascinated by this field of study, his plight resembled that of a bee distracted by the rival claims on her attention of many beautiful flowers; and if asked which of the Slavonic languages he preferred, would always find it difficult to give a single and decisive answer. Professor Morfill, with unerring taste and instinct, accumulated the vastest and most valuable library of Slavonic books and of works on Slavonic subjects ever made by a private individual in this country, and fortunately for Oxford this inestimable collection is preserved intact at Queen's College. But the benefit of his bibliophile activity which resulted in the formation of a unique private library was shared by this Institution, of which he was long a prominent and energetic administrator.

He used to relate how when he first visited the Taylorian library, he found it in the possession of a single Russian volume, which was languishing in the obscurity of the shelves devoted to 'Oriental and other' languages; upon closer examination the identity of this unique and dusty specimen of Slavonic literature was exposed—it turned out to be a translation of a novel by Paul de Kock masquerading as a Russian classic. Thanks to the indignation which this tragi-comic discovery provoked in him, Professor Morfill soon improved matters, and to-day the Taylorian possesses a very fairly comprehensive library of Slavonic literature. In case any misapprehension still exists as to where and by whom the Slavonic languages are spoken, it seems not out of

place to take this opportunity of indicating the extent of the area over which these tongues are current to-day.

✓ There are several reasons which might account for such misapprehension, but the most likely would seem to be the apparent remoteness of these countries and languages from our own, and the number of strange and complex names with which they are associated. It is as difficult for the English ear to assimilate these names as it is to differentiate between them. What makes it worse for foreigners is that each of the Slavonic languages has an orthography of its own, the peculiarities of which are reflected in its nomenclature of all the other Slavonic nationalities; and in this connexion it is at any rate comforting to know that Slavs themselves find it difficult to make clear the distinctions in the names by which, in their several languages, some of their nationalities are designated. There will be occasion later to give examples of this terminological confusion. But it is to be recalled that in other groups of cognate languages, too, each has its own orthography, its own method of transcribing the same word; for instance, the word *Esраѣа* is transcribed differently in each of the Romance languages, in Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, and Rumanian.

But here geography comes to our help. It is easy to remember that Spanish, for instance, is spoken in Spain, and Italian in Italy, &c., where the political, geographical, and linguistic boundaries all more or less correspond. In Eastern Europe the conditions are different. To begin with, there are many fewer impressive natural boundaries than in the western half of the continent, such as the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and even when they do occur, they seldom correspond to the political, still more rarely to the linguistic divisions. Only three out of the seven principal Slavonic languages happen at the present day to be the state language in the respective political divisions where they are current, and to remember where the other four are spoken requires

a more intimate knowledge of the history and geography of Eastern Europe than can be gained from familiarity with a purely political map of that half of the continent.

History and geography tell us that the Slavonic languages on the whole are spoken to-day over a far greater area than they were 1000 years ago, but also that the general position and shape of that area have considerably changed. Some of the Slavonic languages have waxed, others have waned; some are moribund, others are obsolete. A language is like any other organism, it cannot remain passive; stagnation means death, it must either grow or decay, expand or recede, and the history of the Slavonic languages furnishes instructive proof of this inevitable law.

The principal difference between the position which the Slavonic languages held in the ninth century, and that which they occupy to-day, is the following: The limits reached by the Slav tribes in the ninth century at the close of the era of wholesale migrations show that the direction of their expansion up to that time had been centrifugal; they had radiated west, south, and east from a common centre, the Carpathians and the plains to the north and south of them. The positions held by them at the present day show that their expansion eastwards has continued uninterruptedly; but on the west and south they have either remained stationary, in some places protected from the retaliation of evicted tenants by mountains, in others obstructed from further progress by the sea, or they have receded before nations they had themselves displaced, now claiming to redeem what had once been their own.

But before examining the vicissitudes of the Slavonic languages, it is necessary to make a digression in order to mention a subsidiary but important group of languages whose fate has always been intimately connected with that of its Slavonic neighbours. It is customary in comparative philology, when tabulating the Indo-European family of languages, to speak of them as the Baltic group.

Now although it is not reasonable or satisfactory to call a group of languages merely by the name of the ocean in the vicinity of which the people speaking them happen to dwell, still, for want of a better, Baltic serves the purpose, and is at least elastic. The word itself is one of the few Lithuanian words that have been assimilated by other European languages; 'baltas' in Lithuanian means 'white'. Now this group is always coupled with that of the Slavonic languages as the Baltic-Slavonic division of the Indo-European family. The reason is that a closer affinity exists between these two groups than between either of them and any other of the main divisions of the Indo-European family, and so, although it is out of the question to postulate a single prehistoric Baltic-Slavonic language, still it is scientifically permissible to treat them as one main division of the Indo-European family, and therefore to include also the Baltic in any tabulation of the Slavonic languages.

It is advisable to prepose the Baltic to the Slavonic languages for more reasons than one. In the first place, they are in many ways more antique than the Slavonic languages, already themselves remarkable for their wealth of morphological and accidental survivals from an earlier epoch, compared with other Indo-European languages. Again, they cover such a relatively small and remote area, and the claims on our interest of their literatures are so modest, that they are apt to be neglected by all but specialists in Indo-European comparative philology. Yet these languages are so interesting in themselves, and so important in the light they throw on the historical development of the cognate Slavonic group, that they deserve the former place in any catalogue of this linguistic division.

The so-called Baltic group includes three languages: Prussian, Lithuanian, and Lettish. Prussian was the language spoken by the people who in the ninth century inhabited the lands between the Vistula and the Niemen rivers, bounded on the north by the sea and roughly corresponding to the limits of the present German province