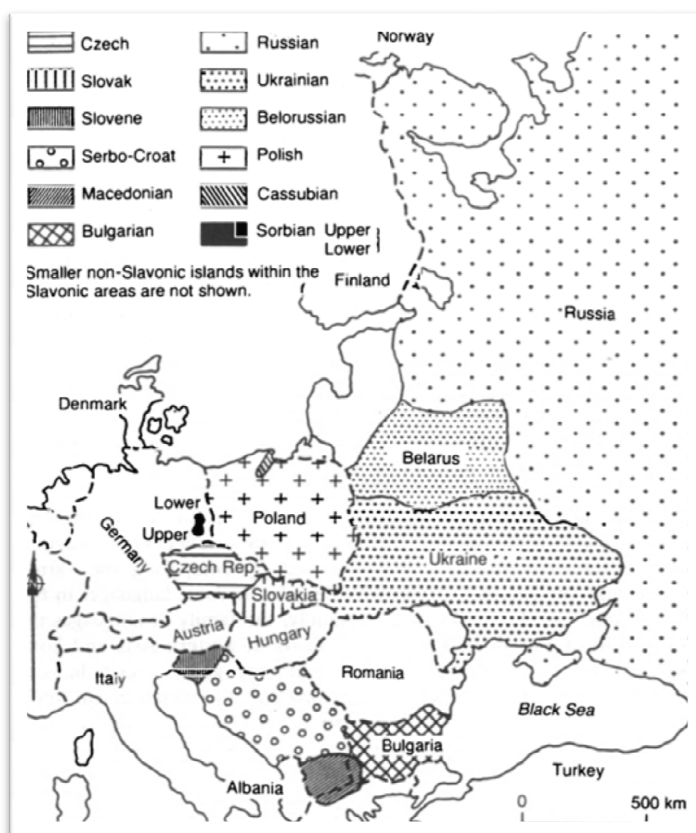


## Mutual Intelligibility of Languages in the Slavic Family



Approximate present-day distribution of Slavonic Languages in Europe

Hvar, Vis, Korčula, Pelješac, the Dalmatian coast at Zadar and Split, and inland at Gacka.

In addition, *Kajkavian Croatian*, spoken in northwest Croatia and similar to Slovenian, is not intelligible with Standard Croatian.

*Molise Croatian* is a Croatian language spoken in a few towns in Italy, such as Acquaviva Collecroce. The Croatians left Croatia and came to Italy around 1300. Molise Croatian is not intelligible with Standard Croatian.

There is much nonsense said about the mutual intelligibility of the various languages in the Slavic family. It's often said that all Slavic languages are mutually intelligible with each other. This is simply not the case.

Let us look first of all at *Serbo-Croatian*, since there is much nonsense floating around about this language. The main dialects of Croatian, Serbian, Montenegrin and Bosnian are apparently mutually intelligible.

However, Croatian has strange dialects that *Standard Croatian (Štokavian)* cannot understand.

For instance, *Čakavian Croatian* is not intelligible with Standard Croatian. It consists of at least two languages, *Ekavian Croatian* spoken on the Istrian Peninsula, and *Ikavian Croatian*, spoken in southwestern Istria, the islands of Brač,

*Burgenland Croatian*, spoken in Austria, is intelligible to Croatian speakers in Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, but it is not intelligible with Croatian spoken in Croatia. Therefore, there are 6 separate Croatian languages: Shtovakian Croatian, Kajkavian Croatian, Istrian or Čakavian Croatian, Brac-Hvar Croatian, Molise Croatian and Burgenland Croatian.

Serbian is made up to two languages. *Shtovakian Serbian* and *Torlak Serbian*. Torlak Serbian is spoken in the south and southwest of Serbia and is transitional to Macedonian. It is not intelligible with Shtovakian.

It's also said that Serbo-Croatian can understand Slovenian, Bulgarian and Macedonian, but this is not true.

Intelligibility in the Slavic languages of the Balkans is much exaggerated.

*Slovenian* finds it hard to understand much of the others.

*Bulgarian* and *Macedonian* can understand each other to a great degree (85%), but not completely. However, the *Ser-Drama-Lagadin-Nevrokop dialect* in northeastern Greece and southern Bulgaria and the *Maleševo-Pirin dialect* in eastern Macedonia and western Bulgarian are transitional between Bulgarian and Macedonian.

Russian has a quite high degree of intelligibility with Bulgarian, possibly on the order of 75%.

*Bosnian*, Croatian and Serbian (Shtokvavian) of course can understand each other.

Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian have poor intelligibility, about 30% intelligibility. Yet there is a dialect continuum between Slovenian and Croatian. The Kajkavian dialect of Croatian, especially the Hrvatsko Zagorje dialect around Zagreb is close to the Shtajerska dialect of Slovene. However, leaving aside that one dialect, Croatians have poor intelligibility of Slovenian.

Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian have about 10% intelligibility, however, there are *transitional Bulgarian dialects* that are transitional with Torlak Serbian.

Serbians in Belgrade have about 25% intelligibility with Macedonian, while Nis Serbians have ~90% intelligibility with Macedonian. Croats say Macedonian is a complete mystery to them. Macedonians are often able to understand Serbo-Croatian due to heavy bilingual learning. In fact, many Macedonians are switching away from the Macedonian language towards Serbo-Croatian.

Czech and Polish are incomprehensible to Serbo-Croatian, but Serbo-Croatian has some limited comprehension of Slovak, on the order of 30% or so.

Serbo-Croatian and Russian have about 5% intelligibility, if that.

Slovenians have a very hard time understanding Poles and Czechs and vice versa.

It's often said that Czechs and Poles can understand each other, *but this is not so*. Czech and Polish have some intelligibility, but it's hard to say how much - possibly on the order of 40%. It's definitely less than Portuguese and Spanish.

The intelligibility of Polish and Russian is very low, maybe on the order of 5-10%.

It is often said that *Ukrainian* and *Russian* are intelligible with each other or even that they are the same language (Russian nationalists). It is *not true at all that Ukrainian and Russian are mutually intelligible*, as Ukrainian and Russian may have 40-70% intelligibility. For example, all Russian shows get subtitles on Ukrainian TV. However, there are dialects *in between* Ukrainian and Russian that are intelligible with both languages.

On the other hand, *Belorussian* has some dialects that are intelligible with some dialects of both Russian and Ukrainian. However, Belorussian is nonetheless a separate language from both Ukrainian and Russian. For instance, *West Palesian* is a transitional Belorussian dialect to Ukrainian. Whether or not West Palesian then qualifies as a separate language is not known.

Nevertheless, Russian has very high intelligibility of Belorussian, possibly on the order of 85%. Intelligibility of Russian with Ukrainian is considerably lower - possibly on the order of 70% - mostly because since independence, the authorities have strove to make the new Ukrainian as far away from Russian as possible. Hence, Russians can understand colloquial Ukrainian spoken in the countryside pretty well but understand the modern standard heard on TV much less. This is because colloquial Ukrainian is closer to the Ukrainian spoken in the Soviet era, which had huge Russian influence.

From some reason, the Hutsul, Lemko, Boiko dialects (small Ukrainian/Rusyn dialects) are much more comprehensible to Russians than Standard Ukrainian is. Intelligibility may be on the order of 85%.

The intelligibility of Czech and Slovak is much exaggerated. It is true that West Slovak dialects can understand Czech, but Central, East and Extraslovakian dialects cannot. Further, *West Slovak* (Bratislava) cannot understand *East Slovak*, so Slovak is actually two different languages.

Much of the claimed intelligibility was simply bilingual learning. Since the breakup, young Czechs and Slovaks understand each other worse and worse since they have less contact with each other.

Intelligibility of Czech and Slovak is around 82%, and varies from 70-95% depending on the dialect. Intelligibility problems are mostly on the Czech end, because they don't bother to learn Slovak, while many Slovaks learn Czech. There is as much Czech literature and media as Slovak literature and media in Slovakia, and many Slovaks study at Czech universities. When there, they have to pass a language test. Czechs hardly ever study at Slovak universities. Czechs see Slovaks as country bumpkins, backwards, folksy but optimistic, outgoing and friendly. Czechs are more urbane. The written languages are much more different than the spoken ones.

The languages really split about 1000 years ago, but written Slovak was based on written Czech and there was a lot of interlingual communication. A Moravian Czech speaker (eastern Czech) and a Bratislavan Slovak (Western Slovak) speaker understand each other very well. In the former Czechoslovakia, everything was 50-50 bilingual, media, literature, etc. Since then, Slovak has been disappearing from the Czech Republic, so the younger people don't understand Slovak so well.

All foreign movies are translated into Czech, not Slovak. Far northeastern Slovak (Saris) near the Polish border is close to Polish and Ukrainian. Southern Slovakia on the Hungarian border has a harder time understanding Polish because they do not hear it much.

Russian has quite poor intelligibility with Slovak (maybe 15%) and basically zero intelligibility with Czech.

*Ruthenian* is an interesting language that few have heard of. It is like a mixture between Polish, Ukrainian and Eastern Slovak. There are many of them living in Eastern Slovakia.

### Sources

**Map:** Bernard Comrie, Greville G. Corbett (Eds.). *Slavonic Languages* (Routledge Language Family Series). Routledge: London and New York, 1993, p. 2.