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Towards Understanding the Balkan Linguistic Area

The Balkan *Sprachbund*, or the Balkan linguistic area, covers several languages of South East Europe which exhibit an unusually high degree of structural convergence. The area does not fully coincide with the geographical or political boundaries of the Balkans. The languages or language groups of the Sprachbund are Greek, Albanian, Balkan Slavic, Balkan Romance, and Balkan Romani; there are also languages, such as Turkish, Gagauz, or Ladino, that are spoken in the Balkans but are not members of the Sprachbund.

The most interesting common features of the Balkan languages, or Balkanisms, are their shared grammatical innovations. Some of them, such as the use of enclitic articles (traditionally: postpositive articles) or object reduplication, pertain to the argument marking in sentences, whereas other, such as finite complementation (traditionally: the loss of the infinitive) are features of the verb system.

In such shared innovations of the Balkan languages, there is no clear distinction between source languages and borrowing languages, or between language-internal changes and contact-induced changes. What unites most grammatical Balkanisms is the explicit marking of grammatical functions with particles, prepositions, and other uninflected function words that are identifiable across the languages.

The Balkan linguistic area arose before the era of nation states, in the special sociolinguistic situation of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. The crucial formation period seems to have been the late Middle Ages after the arrival of the Roma, but before the arrival of the Sephardic Jews. The selection pressure towards convergence and analytic sentence structure was strongest in the varieties in the middle of the prestige scale, in those having both a relatively great number of L2 speakers and such L1 speakers who regularly used another Balkan language as their L2.

The Balkans were the meeting point of several linguistic waves – the Romance (perhaps Standard Average European) and Ottoman drifts, as well as the influence of the Greek superstrate and the old Balkan substrate, as preserved in Albanian. The regulating principle in the middle of all these was the selection pressure towards analytism.