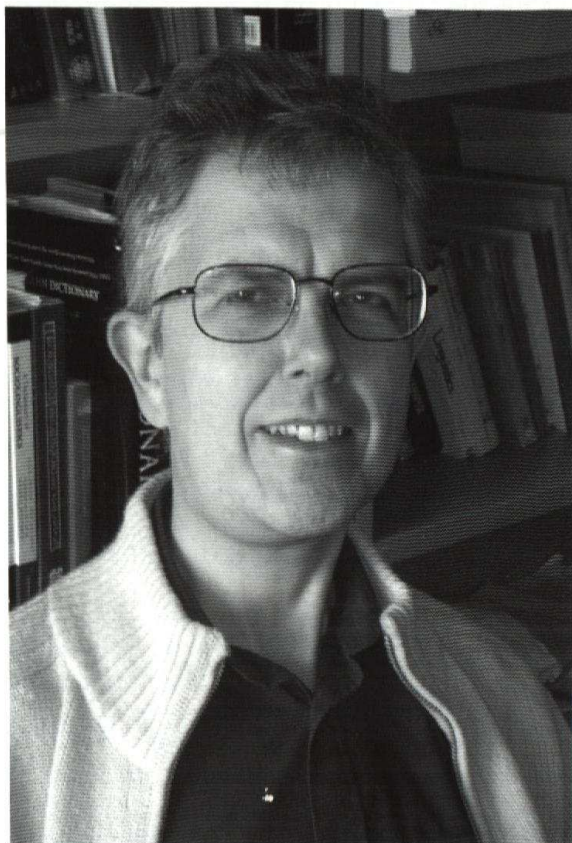


Ana Tominc^{1*}

CELEBRATING SPELLING

An interview with Mark Sebba, a sociolinguist



MARK SEBBA

Currently a reader in Sociolinguistics and Language Contact at the University of Lancaster (UK) he has recently published a new book, *Spelling and Society* (May 2007). In it, Mark Sebba claims that orthography is a social practice rather than just a set of rules which seek to form a correct spelling system: we do orthography as much as we use it, he says. As his approach in many ways touches the still unexplored shores of human symbolism and communication he couldn't really avoid being interviewed! It happened on the 21st December 2007 in his office.

♦ **ANA TOMINC:** LET'S STARTS WITH "WHY": WHY OF ALL PROFESSION IN THE WORLD ONE CHOOSES TO BE A SOCIOLOGUIST? IS THAT A WISH FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD?

MARK SEBBA: There are two parts to that, already when I was a small boy I was fascinated by language, I can't say exactly why that was but I lived in a country which was very multilingual, in

our household we were monolingual but I was aware that my parents had either studied other languages or, in case of my mother, knew other languages and my grandparent were very multilingual. The grandparents in question were dead before I was even born but I knew that they lived in a multilingual environment. So when I was quite young, still at primary school and I was sick at home and my father brought a book from his bookshelf that he thought I might be interested in and that was the *Loom of Language* by Bodmer which is a very interesting book, it is very opiniated on a lot of things that

1 *I thank Signe Schønning for her help with this interview. (All the footnotes with the exception of the first one were added by M. Sebba.)

ZSA FILES COLLOQUIA

- ♦ BUT THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPH IN THE BOOK IS ACTUALLY FROM LANCASTER...

... A bus shelter, yes. That bus shelter has gone... /laugh/. Because in my book I link the idea of spelling to literacy and literacy is something which is pervasive in our society but often there are forms of literacies that we see and we don't see. So when you are standing at the bus shelter you see these things written but you don't think about them. If someone asks you: What have you read today?, you say I read a novel or a newspaper, you don't say I read a graffiti on the bus shelter /laugh/.

People don't see that as an act of reading and yet, it is, and of course the act of writing is an act of writing just like writing a novel is, it's just that it doesn't take as long to write something on a bus shelter, is an act of will and it involves making similar choices, you have to choose how you're going to write something, font style, spelling of it. And these are all choices that I'm interested in because they are socially motivated.

- ♦ WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS THE MAIN MESSAGE OF YOUR BOOK?

Emmmm... I think the main *theme* is that spelling involves choices and these choices often have to do with identities, creating identities, with setting oneself apart or a group apart from some other group. The other message, sort of, *moral* of the book, is that spelling involves choice and that we should celebrate the complexity of spelling because it is part of culture, a part of cultural elaboration, and therefore people who are always saying we have to make spelling as simple as possible are in a way misleading themselves, because just like other aspects of language which are complex, elaborate and are representation of people's culture and identity, so is spelling, orthography and so if we try to sort of cut it back to a minimum it won't succeed because after a short time people are going to make it complex again, they are going to insert ways of showing identity, building alliances, showing cultural allegiance.

- ♦ SO THIS IS SOMETHING THAT COULD BE CALLED "A NEW APPROACH"?

I think it's a new approach. I'm not the only person, who has this socio-cultural view of orthography, but there are not too many other people who are working along these lines and most of this work is from approximately the same period as mine, from the last ten years.

- ♦ WHAT ABOUT OTHER SOCIOLINGUISTS, HOW DO THEY REACT TO WHAT YOU SAY?
USUALLY ORTHOGRAPHY IS NOT REALLY A PART OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS.

Well, yeah, first of all, my book hasn't been out long enough to be that widely known yet but I have been talking about this work for about ten years. The people who hear about it all say that it is very interesting and I think that they do see the connection with sociolinguistics, they can see that it's interesting but it takes a long time to get people to accept that it is a part of sociolinguistics so for example, if you look to most of the books on sociolinguistics, you won't find the word orthography in the index...

ZSA FILES COLLOQUIA

♦ ...THAT'S WHY I'M ASKING, I CHECKED SOME...

... oh, you did /laugh/... But this is part of my work, I think, to make people understand that there is a socio-cultural theory of orthography and that it needs to be seen as a part of sociolinguistics and I would be pleased if in another ten years there are some textbooks for undergraduates, for examples, which do have sections on orthography.

♦ WHY IS WRITTEN LANGUAGE SO OVERLOOKED?

Of course one reason is that sociolinguistics still sees itself as mainly concerned with spoken language, there's not much sociolinguistics to deal with language as a whole, with written language. It tends to be covered under other areas of linguistics, textual analysis and so on.

♦ ONE AREA OF YOUR RESEARCH THAT PROBABLY INTERESTS EVERYBODY IS SPELLING REFORMS. OFTEN THERE ARE DEMANDS FOR REFORMS FROM SEVERAL PARTS - PUBLISHERS, USERS AND SO ON. BUT WHY THEY, DESPITE EVERYTHING, RARELY SUCCEED? IN GERMANY, FOR EXAMPLE, WE CAN SEE HOW DIFFICULT IT WAS TO TRY AND REFORM THEIR SPELLING SYSTEM.

Yeah. Well, there are a number of reasons. One reason is that there is sort of cultural conservatism, in a sense that people are very reluctant to let go a system which is familiar and an example for that comes from the Polish attempted orthographic reforms in the thirties. I mentioned research that was carried out by Rothstein, an American academic talking about this reform, a reform which had actually only been in place for about 10 years, when they tried to change that again in the thirties, people wouldn't accept it, they said it was part of their traditional orthography and couldn't be changed. So it only takes a short time. Once something is accepted it is regarded as part of tradition and people won't change it.

Slightly different is an example of the script changes in the former Soviet Union.

♦ ... THAT'S MORE OF SYMBOLIC NATURE...

... well these things always have some kind of symbolism attached to them. In Tatarstan, for example, they have reintroduced the Roman script which was only used to write Tatar for about ten or twenty years, in the twenties and thirties, and it was replaced by Cyrillic. Rejecting Cyrillic recently means rejecting the values of the Soviet period and the change to the Roman script has this symbolic meaning, sort of a change in ideology. Emmm, but it was represented as a change back to something which was already there, back to something. Not as something that is completely new but back to something they already *had*, even though just for a very short time.

- ♦ SIMILARLY ALSO MOLDOVA, RIGHT, THEY REJECTED CYRILLIC SCRIPT IN 1989 AND BECAME INDEPENDENT TWO YEARS AFTER?

Yes. There are slightly different factors in the case of Moldova because they - by embracing Roman script - they also united their language with Romanian language because essentially the standard languages are the same but they were written through different alphabets. But there's also big symbolic value attached to the script change, certainly.

To come back to your question of why the orthographic reforms often don't succeed. There are often entrenched economic interests which work against it, particularly the producers of reference books and large publishers, they have an interest in not changing anything. You see this especially in Germany where some of the presses, I think it was Axel Springer and also Spiegel presses, which after three or four years of implementing the reforms in spelling they simply announced that they were going back to the old system, in 2004, I think. And they have enormous power because they produce a large proportion of everything published in Germany and the German speaking world. And also the dictionary makers have a big interest in not having spelling reforms because that is a chance for new dictionaries to break into the market. So very often it is a matter of economics.

- ♦ WE LIVE IN A WORLD, DRIVEN BY MONEY, AFTER ALL...

... yes, yes...

- ♦ IF WE LOOK AT THE ENGLISH SPELLING SYSTEM, A CERTAIN MYTH GOES THAT THE SPELLING IN ENGLISH IS JUST HORRIBLE AND DISORGANISED, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE WHO LEARN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. DO YOU THINK A REFORM IS LIKELY TO HAPPEN?

English is one of the languages which has the worst track record for orthographic reforms, no one has ever made any progress in trying to change the English spelling at all! And many people have tried, George Bernard Shaw was famous for wanting improvements in English spelling and even leaving a lot of money for the purpose in his will. But English has a very long spelling tradition and very complicated spelling tradition which involves earlier spelling traditions, Anglo-Saxon one, Latin one, French one. And also English has no regulatory body so it is actually impossible to impose a spelling reform on English at the moment.

As to the question whether the spelling is very difficult, well, clearly, some people, some native speakers of English, do have difficulties with spelling, the majority seem to cope quite well, although spelling is a big problem for some people and a small problem for many people, most seem to manage okay. For foreigners I'm sure it is very difficult, they have a number of extra barriers to cross. By foreigners I mean the people who are not speakers of English as a first language...

♦ ...OF COURSE...

...they have a problem of acquiring the language and the spelling system at the same time, the spelling conventions may be different in their own language and of course, the English conventions *are* extremely complicated... Emmm, but of course, the English spelling system is not designed for foreign learners of English, it's designed *primarily* for those who are the first language speakers. You might say and you might have increasingly good reason to say that English is no longer the property of just the first language users. It has become in some sense the language which is owned by the whole world. And therefore it would be reasonable to have a spelling system which is more accessible...

♦ ... LIKE AMERICAN, IN A WAY?

Do you think their system is more accessible?

♦ A BIT MORE.

It's not really different. There are very very small differences between American and British spelling.

♦ THERE'S NO *u* IN, FOR EXAMPLE, COLOUR.

Yeah, there are things like that. But we only need to learn one thing to spell the British version correctly, almost any word that ends *-or* in American English becomes *-our* in British English. So those correspondences are easy enough to learn if you want to but the spelling systems on a whole are almost identical.

♦ ...SO WE'LL HAVE TO READ THIS INTERVIEW IN AN OLD SPELLING...

/laugh/ I think the chances for any substantial spelling reforms before the end of January 2008 are extremely small... Possibly if we have a world government which uses English as their working language, that might increase a possibility for a spelling reform but otherwise, not very likely.

♦ BUT ON THE OTHER HAND, AS AN OPPOSITION TO THE SPELLING CONVENTIONS, PEOPLE ARE BREAKING THESE CONVENTIONS INTENTIONALLY, FOR EXAMPLE IN TEXT MESSAGES OR IN E-MAILS, EVEN IN YOUR E-MAIL, AT THE END, IT SAYS: I AM NOT GOING TO USE APOSTROPHES FROM JANUARY 2007! WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF HAVING A SPELLING SYSTEM IF PEOPLE ARE BREAKING IT EVERY DAY?

This is an interesting question and it is a question that never actually gets asked: why do we need standardised spelling. If you read various experts like Gunter Kress and the Milroys they agree that spelling is one of the areas where there is the least flexibility, in English at least. I think Kress said something like: The lid is most tightly screwed down around

spelling or something along those lines², that's his view of spelling although there is some tolerance of variation and pronunciation and grammar but tolerance for variation in spelling is very small. You can actually argue the opposite: Stubbs has argued that there is actually quite a lot of flexibility in English spelling. Let's stick with the idea that spelling is actually very inflexible in English, sort of tightly controlled. What purpose does that serve? What's the value of that? Because spelling in early English was not standardised and actually until the late 1700s people spelt for their own personal use the way they liked, there was no attempt to standardise. And really, this is something that people don't question. When the idea was put forward for the spelling reform the proposal is always that we should spell it in this way or in this way which is a more flexible spelling because it reflects the pronunciation better. Nobody ever says: well let's let people spell however they want to spell. And to me it's not very clear why it is necessary to standardise spelling to the extent that it is standardised. I think it's interesting to open that whole question, not whether we should or shouldn't standardise spelling but of why people feel need for standardisation of spelling. Why it is actually never being debated or questioned why it is so important. And I think the answer to that is the question of identity because the symbolic importance of spelling system is so strong. If we don't have a standardised spelling we can't so easily differentiate our language and its orthographic conventions from other language. If there are no orthographic conventions we lose that possibility for drawing a clear boundary.

- ♦ WE CAN SEE THAT IN BOSNIAN/CROATIAN/SERBIAN LANGUAGE, THEY USE DIFFERENT...
...script. Yeah. There's a huge symbolic load on the script, in fact, again, you could argue it's much more sensible to have just one writing system for these languages and we'll all be able to read whatever we write and it would save us a lot of money.
- ♦ SLOVENIANS FEEL VERY AT HOME WHEN WE GO TO CZECH REPUBLIC OR TO CROATIA BECAUSE THEY ALSO HAVE THESE DIACRITICS (č, š, ž), SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU KNOW HOW TO READ THEM...

Small thing like that, like diacritics, which acquire a lot of symbolic power, we see this also in Galicia where the choice of how you write Galician which is not fully standardised just down to the small diacritic reflects you language ideology with respect to Galician, whether it is or it isn't a variety of Portuguese. I remember reading but I haven't been able to verify it, that when the conventions for Polish were established they were established so as to be different from Czech and not to use the hachek symbols. Because that would make it look too much like Czech and it wouldn't differentiate the identity and keep the languages apart³. Because the sounds are very similar ...

2 Actually he said: »Spelling is that bit of linguistic practice where issues of authority, of control, of conformity can be most sharply focused. Spelling is the domain par excellence - no matter how tiny it may seem - where the politics of conformity can be sheeted home« (2000: x).

3 Actually this is reported by Rothstein as follows: »Under the influence of German and especially pre-Hussite Czech

- ♦ ... OH YOU SHOULDN'T SAY THAT TO THE POLISH AND THE CZECHS...

/laugh/ That is exactly the point. If you write the sounds in the same way you are in fact saying that these are the same sounds. But from a phonemic point of view, from the point of view of comparative phonology they may well be same sound and the same function in the system and they occur in exactly the same position in words and so on. But if you want to maintain the claim that these are separate languages then the first step is to make sure that they are written differently.

This seems to be an active part of Soviet language planning. According to the research when the Turkic languages were transferred from the Roman alphabet to the Cyrillic alphabet there was a conscious effort made to make the language look different by using different set of conventions. So what is pronounced the same in two fairly similar languages is written in a different way.

- ♦ OBVIOUSLY, WE ARE NOT GOING TO CHANGE MUCH IN THE EXISTING SPELLING SYSTEMS. THERE ARE ALSO NEW SPELLING SYSTEMS, AND INVENTING THEM SEEMS AN EASIER TASK, BUT IT'S NOT REALLY.

By new ones you mean systems which have been devised for language which didn't have the spelling systems before?

- ♦ YES, YOU WRITE THAT IN SOUTH AMERICA FOR EXAMPLE, A GROUP OF EXPERTS WAS NEEDED – LINGUISTS, PSYCHOLOGISTS AND SOCIOLOGISTS – TO MAKE A NEW SYSTEM. AND AFTER ALL THE EFFORT, PEOPLE MAY REJECT IT.

The activity of new orthography creation for languages which don't have a written tradition in the 20th Century became almost exclusively the preserve of phonologists, seen as something to do with the sound system of the language and the job was considered a fairly mechanical task, to 'reduce the language to writing'⁴. Many people and especially missionaries received training in doing that and were seen as being their job just to create a writing system of phonemic principles. Well, part of my message is that this is not always successful because people may reject the writing system and there are various reasons, but they are nearly always connected with identity. It may be that the phonemic representation isn't very good. But people would rather accept the system which is not very good from a phonemic point of view like English for example for identity reasons and reject one which is 100% efficient according to the linguists.

orthography Polish writers gradually developed a tradition of using digraphs [...] to spell certain Polish sounds. By the late sixteenth century many of the details of present-day Polish orthography and graphics had been adopted by the printers of Cracow». By that stage Jan Hus and the Bohemian Brethren had introduced diacritics to Czech, so that these were rejected by the Poles because »it would not do to accept ideas (even outside of the religious sphere) from such a source« (1977: 225). So maybe it was more to do with maintaining a religious divide than a separate language, though I think the issue can't be resolved without more information about this period.

4 This is how Pike referred to it in the title of his famous book on the subject.

So one of the things is that linguists need to get a better understanding of these processes. Many people seem to have come to an understanding after going through a process of trying to persuade people to use the orthography which they've devised and gradually understanding why people are not happy with it. Paul Garvin's orthography for Ponopean was, in the middle of the 20th c. rejected by the Ponopean, and he says: what seemed to be sort of mechanical process turned out to be really something that has to do with culture and society⁵.

And, I am hoping if people read my book, if linguists read it that they will not have to go through that, sort of painful process of devising orthography and then finding that people reject it, that they'll be able to understand why it is that people are attached sometimes to orthographies which from a linguistic point of view are bizarre or absurd, English might be an example. In a sense these become cultural objects which we become much attached to and very fond of.

- ♦ IN SOUTH AMERICA PEOPLE RATHER ACCEPTED THE SPANISH WAY OF SPELLING EVEN THOUGH IT WAS A SPELLING SYSTEM OF SOMEONE THAT CONQUERED THEM.

People may feel that their orthography gains prestige by resembling the orthography of a prestigious language. There's no doubt that Spanish globally has more prestige than Quechua for example. And then it becomes a matter of ideology. The ideological nature may not be made explicit so people may say that they be arguing about easier spelling or learnability. But ultimately you have ideological debates which are about representation and identity. That's what you find in Haiti case which was well documented by Schieffelin and Doucet⁶. You have a group of people who say that they want to spell Haitian Creole like French and another group of people who say we want to spell it in a very different way from French. And they'd claim that spelling in a French way makes it easier for people who are going on to read in French, in higher education or literature. And the spelling closer to International Phonetic Alphabet will enable more basic level learning and facilitate adult literacy.

- ♦ SO THERE SEEMS TO BE A VALUE IN BEING AN APPLIED LINGUIST. NOWADAYS SO MANY PEOPLE SAY THAT HUMANITIES ARE USELESS, USUALLY WHEN COMPARED TO TECHNICAL SCIENCES.

/laugh/ yes... I hope linguistic knowledge is not completely useless. I think linguistic or sociolinguistic approach to orthographies can help us understand why particular orthographies are more successful than others. And why some reforms have been successful while most of them not. So it does shed light on what actually is happening historically.

5 »The problem of devising an acceptable spelling system, which initially might have appeared purely, or at least primarily, a linguistic matter, upon closer inspection thus turned out to be a language and culture problem par excellence« (1954: 129).

6 Schieffelin and Doucet (1994): The 'Real' Haitian Creole: Ideology, Metalinguistics and Orthographic Choice. *American Ethnologist* 21, 1.

But mainly our role as linguists is to look at people's practices and try to understand what it is that they are doing. I don't think we should, on a whole, intervene and try to make people behave differently, except in case when they are actually harming themselves.

- ♦ BUT THEN AGAIN, THAT'S JUST OUR POINT OF VIEW...

...yeah, it's subjective.

- ♦ LET'S NOW TURN TO CREOLES WHICH SEEM TO BE YOUR BIG LOVE...

...aha...

- ♦ ...THEY ARE INVENTING THEIR OWN NON-STANDARDISED ORTHOGRAPHIES...

The English based Creoles, yes.

- ♦ AND YOU STUDIED THE ALI G'S WEBSITE AND THAT'S AN INTERESTING THING BECAUSE WE DO NOT EXPECT TO FIND STUDIES OF WEBSITES THAT WE ACCESS IN OUR FREE TIME IN A SERIOUS SCIENTIFIC STUDY. WHY WAS THAT NECESSARY?

/laugh/ Again, I was looking at people's practices, I quite enjoy Ali G, I think he is funny. Most of the websites are actually full of nonsense but there are many interesting things going on there in terms of people's practices. Most of the people that use his website are probably not black, they are white teenagers who put on, I was trying to say an accent, who are trying to write Ali G language, using conventions which are developed and I think there are lots of interesting things going on. First of all they do code switching which is very similar to the way people speak.

- ♦ YOU MEAN CODE SWITCHING BETWEEN ORTHOGRAPHY OF STANDARDISED ENGLISH AND CREOLE?

Yes, you can identify that in some posts people use unconventional orthographies to mark some parts and use standard orthography for other parts and that standard orthography usually contextualises the messages being more serious and non standardise orthography show parts which are more joky or may contain threats though they are not real threats. That also does an identity work, which shows that this person is a part of Ali G's fantasy world. And of course all of this is happening spontaneously; I don't think any of those participants really thought through what they were trying to do. So you have a language variety which is largely being distinguished by orthography, there are grammatical things as well and to an extent also graphics. This has developed spontaneously over a very short period of time. Ali G only made an appearance in 1999 I think, already in 2001 this made up variety of language was being used in the websites.

And other conventions, for text messaging for example, also developed very quickly but possibly drew on an older tradition which you would find in graffiti for example. I don't

ZSA FILES COLLOQUIA

have a collection of graffiti going back to the 1990's but I have a few examples of graffiti from the late 1990's. It would be interesting to find out what conventions were being used for adolescent graffiti just before text messaging came in, just before younger people started using e-mail. Some conventions that were used in computer media communication were actually there.

- ♦ WOULD YOU SAY THAT IN THIS CASE SPELLING IS A KING OF A GAME FOR ADULTS, WE PUT NUMBERS IN, CODE IT A BIT, HAVE SPECIAL RULES FOR INSIDERS ETC.?

It certainly works at a level of fairly complex symbolism and there's an example of some graffiti, I am using the example of graffiti because I think this complexity is definitely not confined just to e-mail but can be found where people have the freedom to play with spelling. But in the example there's number one as part of a word in a piece of Italian graffiti. If you read it in Italian it would be *uno* but that's not the reading you have to give to this one. You have to read it as the English one written out as o-n-e and then you give it an Italian pronunciation. Something like NAS1, and you would read that as Nasone and not as Nasuno. So there's a very complex play going on. You have to be in to the secret in order to be able to read it properly, and in that sense, it is a complicated game because people reading it as *Peruno* wouldn't have a correct reading, only those who understand the rules can read it correctly, as *Perone*.

- ♦ WHAT ABOUT BE4, READ AS BEFORE, BUT THAT YOU HAVE TO READ IN THE SAME LANGUAGE, YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHICH LANGUAGE IT IS.

That's right. Though that can also have a sort of symbolic life of their own. I was told by the student from Cyprus that people use 4 to mean *for* in Greek text messages even though it's not pronounced the same way as the word *for*. There's a transfer of the English convention directly to Greek.

- ♦ NOW I HAVE A RATHER DIFFERENT QUESTION. USUALLY PEOPLE ARE NOT VERY HAPPY WHEN YOU RESPELL THEIR NAME. BUT IF YOUR SPELLING SYSTEM IS PHONE-MIC THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENS...

...in Latvian for example...

- ♦ ...OR SERBIAN. THERE, NIETZSCHE WOULD BE COMPLETELY RESPelt, AS NiČE. WOULD YOU SAY THAT IN SUCH CASES ORTHOGRAPHIC RULES OF A CERTAIN LANGUAGE CLASH WITH THE RIGHT OF A PERSON TO HAVE A CERTAIN SPELLING, OR TO PUT IT DIFFERENTLY, WITH THE RIGHT TO THE SAME LINGUISTIC, SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF A NAME INDEPENDENTLY OF A LANGUAGE CONTEXT?

In most cases, people, how should I put it, take their name in the language whatever they happen to be in. So, my family are originally from Latvia and I would find it a little bit strange if people in Latvia started spelling my name S-e-b-a or Z-e-b-a. Originally, it was pronounced /zeba/ and if you look in the telephone directory you'd still find surnames spelt Zeba.

- ♦ BUT IN SERBIA, GEORGE BUSH IS SPELT LIKE ĐORĐ BUŠ. THAT'S SYMBOLICALLY COMPLETELY ANOTHER PERSON...

You have to put it in a context. So in Serbia there is no way of escaping having your name treated in a different way. But it is a little ... I see you point, that it is a sort of a denial of personal individuality.

- ♦ YES, NOWADAYS IT IS "IN" TO RESPECT DIFFERENT RIGHTS, THE RIGHT OF AN INDIVIDUAL TO BELIEVE WHATEVER HE OR SHE WANTS, TO DRESS OR TO BE EDUCATED IN A WAY ONE LIKES, AS LONG AS NO ONE IMPOSES ANYTHING TO ANYONE. AND HERE WE FIND A SPELLING SYSTEM WHICH MAKES YOU CHANGE WHAT IS A PART OF YOU.

No, you have to compare it with what happens in other situations. If your name is being used in a sentence of Russian for example, it will be transliterated into Russian. This is in itself a convention because they could just keep your name in a Roman script. But then, not all readers of Russian would be able to make any sense of it. And obviously, this is how the Serbian convention works. It makes sure that the Serbian reader can pronounce, can make sense of what is being written, it tries to represent the sound rather than the usual name.

But what does it say about identity? My identity won't change if I go to Serbia but I will have to live with this sort of alternative spelling.

- ♦ SOMETHING LIKE A WRITTEN NICKNAME.

Yes and no. In Ireland, for example, some people have English and Irish version of their name and the former president of Ireland, Mary Robinson – I once saw a reproduction of the letter that came from her office – it was bilingual, from the right side it said: From the office of the President of the Republic of Ireland, Mary Robinson, on the other side, it had the same in Irish and then below it, the Irish version of her name, which is Máire Mhic Róibín, Máire, the daughter of Robin. So at least in some places people are comfortable with the idea of two identities depending of the language they are using.

- ♦ BUT THEY ARE ALSO IN A BILINGUAL COUNTRY, AT LEAST OFFICIALLY. THERE YOU ARE KIND OF BORN WITH TWO NAMES.

That's true. Or they acquire another spelling through a process. And in this case her Irish version represents one part of her identity.

- ♦ FINAL QUESTION: YOU SEEM VERY BUSY. WE HARDLY FOUND A DATE FOR THIS INTERVIEW. WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?

Well, when I finished preparing all my lectures and marking all my assignments and so on, the main area in which I want to do research now and I want to develop has still to do with written language and it has sort of developed out of interest in orthography but it's not to do with it but with multilingualism in writing. So recently it has become more

ZSA FILES COLLOQUIA

possible than ever before to produce a written text which incorporates several languages. If you look at some websites which typically come from countries which have communities which are highly bilingual you can find websites with a mixture of languages and it's not the case that items are translated from one language to the other, they are just there in whatever language they've been created in. To read these websites fully you have to be bilingual. And this is an area which hasn't really been studied very much.

- ♦ **IS YOUR WORKSHOP AT THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONFERENCE IN AMSTERDAM IN APRIL 2008 GOING TO BE ABOUT THIS?**

Yeah, the workshop is about new approaches to looking to multilingual texts. Some of the people there will be talking more about traditional notions of code switching, like single text code switching, I will be talking about my focus of interest which is the code switching and texts composed of different languages, not just websites, also newspapers and media, though websites seem to offer a lot in terms of development. There are also things like bilingual blogs for example.

- ♦ **ARE YOU BILINGUAL YOURSELF?**

/laugh/ Yes, because I grew up in South Africa I became a sort of fairly efficient second language user of Afrikaans but it's not a language that I use in everyday life. I have been looking at South African bilingual blogs for example and it's easier for me to understand them than English-Slovenian bilingual blogs, for example!