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The Multilingual Balkan Region: Diverification of Languages

Abstract: The paper addresses the problem of language diversification in former Yugoslavia during the 1990's. The civil war, nationalist discourse, and hate speech helped to modify the history, culture, use of language/s, and, most importantly, awareness of the Other. The Serbo-Croatian or Croat-Serbian language was politically and symbolically split into four: Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian/Bosniak, and the forthcoming Montenegrin. The process of diversification gave rise to many paradoxes, problems of realisation, as well as clashes of ideas in the local academic circles, which were fast suppressed. After the 1990's, the language policy began to adjust to the language situation, but problems and confusion about the language/s remain.
Key words: Serbo-Croatian/Croat-Serbian, Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian/Montenegrin, (socio)linguistic (sub)systems, language policy

Večjezična balkanska regija: diverzifikacija jezikov

Izvleček: Članek se ukvarja z vprašanjem diverzifikacije jezikov v bivši Jugoslaviji v 90. Državljanska vojna, širjenje nacionalizma, družbeno-politični dogodki, ki so močno vplivali na govor sovraštva, so spreminjali in instrumentalizirali zgodovino, kulturo, jezik in še najbolj izrazito zavest o drugem. Srbskohrvaški ali hrvaško-srbski jezik se je politično in simbolično razvili oziroma razcepil v štiri jezike: hrvaški, srbski, bosanski/bošnjački in prihodnji črnogorski jezik. Postopek diverzifikacije je spodbudil veliko paradoksov, težav v realizaciji in različne spore v akademskem okolju, ki so hitro utihnili. Po 90. letih 20. stoletja se je takšna jezikovna situacija počasi spreminjala, vendar težave in zmeda glede jezikovnih vprašanj ostajajo prisotni.
Ključne besede: srpskohrvatski/hrvatskosrpski jezik, srpski/hrvatski/bosanski/črnogorski jezik, (socio)lingvistični (sub)sistemi, jezikovna politika

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The Variable Number of Balkan Languages[2]

The most stunning change in the Balkan sociolinguistic situation is the political division of Serbo-Croatian into several languages, which are gaining a new national dimension as symbols of ethnic identification and identity. They are primarily defined as *different*, but also marked as superior and "better" than the other languages. The politics of language-based power distribution are well known to linguists: depending on the political power promoting the changes, dialects or varieties become languages, or *vice versa*. Dealing with the new realities and transitional reversals which took place in the language policy and attitudes after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, linguist Dubravko Škiljan says: "*Napokon, realizacija ciljeva – i opet jednako kao i uvjek – zavisila je o konstelaciji moći i o uspješnosti strategija primijenjenih u uspostavljanju odnosa prema drugima, što ujedno znači da se i jezik kao simbol konstituirao ovisno o tome tko su bili ti Drugi.*"[3] Language is usually regarded as a major distinctive feature of ethnicity/nationality. Nevertheless, an ethnic group may tolerate a high degree of linguistic heterogeneity if it feels bound together by some other feature. On the other hand, even minimal differences in dialect can be represented as proofs of a distinct ethnic character, if the national discourse is aimed in that direction – as in the case of Serbo-Croatian.

The case of former Yugoslavia is considered unique because its disintegration has generated several languages in the linguistic area formerly dominated by the Serbo-Croatian *lingua franca*. Serbo-Croatian had thus a central position in this rich and complicated multilingual area, certainly reflecting some colonising political and cultural features. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that it was not the only official language in former Yugoslavia, except in the Army, where it was the commanding language. Yugoslavia had 16 equally official languages and a normal linguistic situation. The everyday acoustic background coming from the media and the streets (not to mention obligatory institutional use) was multilingual.

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[3] Škiljan, 2002, 283: "The realisation of aims, as always, has depended on the constellation of power and on the success of the strategies employed in developing one's attitude to others. This means that the language-as-symbol has been constituted depending on who was the Other." (my transl.)

The language which was most in use by the majority and represented the second language for minorities was officially called Serbo-Croatian, or Croat-Serbian. From the linguistic and communicative aspects, it is considered as one language, which was politically and symbolically split into three during the Yugoslav war: Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian. The last is referred to by two names: *bosanski* (Bosnian) and *bošnjački* (Bosniak), the difference being quite contextual and linked to the question of the new national identity. Bosnian linguists relate the term *bosanski* to the territory in which the language is spoken, while the term *bošnjački* is predominantly used by Serbian and Croatian linguists, who underline the national/religious identity of the language users. *Bošnjački* would thus be the language of Bosnian Muslims. In other languages, however, the two names are usually translated by a single term, e.g. as *Bosnian* in English, or *Bosniaque* in French.

The process of diversification continued after the 1990's as well. Lately, the political situation of Montenegro has been reflected in a new language policy, probably with a fourth language waiting in the wings. For the last few years, the Montenegrins have spoken two languages: the official Serbian and the unofficial Montenegrin. Due to the new political relations between Serbia and Montenegro, the period from the year 2003 onwards has been marked by the Montenegrin search for a language compromise. After much discussion, the official language of Montenegro has been named the mother tongue, to satisfy all spoken languages and avoid the term Serbian language in public. The dilemma about the name reflects a sex/gender aspect, which has been evident in the wider discourse about this change as well: father tongue, a term firmly rooted in the patriarchal narratives of the founding fathers' languages, has been replaced with mother tongue. The latter appears as a less valuable, secondary concept, sometimes even with an undertone of depreciation when referring to nationally mixed families.[4] The process of language naturalisation in Montenegro has been temporarily stopped by the decision on the common language name, but it is obviously not finished yet.

Establishing the differences that were repressed by the old regime has become a highly praised patriotic endeavour, materialising in specialised dictionaries of differences, which are published mainly to introduce the new rules in the media. The new situation has opened new business and communication possibili-

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[4] Iveković, 1995.

ties: official translators have effortlessly expanded their services by three new languages, while common people have suddenly become polyglots: "*Tako se srp-sko-hrvatski u svim svojim varijantama, kao zajednički jezik nekih jugoslovenskih na-roda, pridružio 'mrtvim' jezicima, kao što su starogrčki, latinski, staroslovenski. Građani novostvorenih država bivše Jugoslavije našli su se u čudu: govore jedan 'mr-tvi' jezik, a postali su poligloti. Mogu jednostavno i lako da se sporazumevaju na četi-ri jezika: srpskom, hrvatskom, bosanskom i crnogorskom.*"[5]

This new language cluster, today usually referred to as BSC (Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian), emerged during the first years of war and Croatia's independence, with the Bosnian development lagging behind because of the war situation, and the Serbian efforts concentrated mainly on the promotion of the Cyrillic alphabet, considered more Serbian than its Latin counterpart. At the same time, dialectal diversity inside the new states was subjected to unification on the one hand, and to inevitable restriction and localisation on the other. The names of the new languages, which proved crucial to this kind of language diversification, escaped all linguistic analysis, in order to signal a new representation of language, or rather a new code of language use. According to linguist Ranko Bugarski, the situation could be described by the following definition: "*Standardni srpsko-hrvatski predstavlja jedan globalan lingvistički sistem čiji sociolingvistički podsistemi politički funkcionišu kao odeliti standardni jezici pod jednočlanom nacionalno-terito-rijalnim imenima u novim državama na teritoriji toga jezika.*"[6] In such circumstances, social psychology (attitudes towards language/s, self-perception through language, and perception through ethnic stereotypes) plays a very important role. Therefore the question of language identity demands a multilevel explanation, according to which the top level of language identification depends on "*opšte i*

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[5] Jakšić, 1997, 41: "This is how Serbo-Croatian in all its variants, as the *lingua franca* of some Yugoslav nations, joined 'dead' languages such as Ancient Greek, Latin, or Old Church Slavonic. The citizens of the new states in the territory of former Yugoslavia have found themselves in an amazing situation: speaking one single 'dead' language, they have become polyglots overnight. They can simply and easily communicate in four languages: Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin." (my transl.)

[6] Bugarski, 2002, 16: "Standard Serbo-Croatian represents a global linguistic system whose sociolinguistic subsystems have the political function of separate standard languages, with one-member national and territorial names, in the new states composing the territory of that language." (my transl.)

jezičke politike date zajednice, a što se tiče pojedinaca, od činilaca kao što su, nacionalno osećanje, politička shvatanja, profesija, porodična i lična istorija i drugi."[7]

USES AND ABUSES OF ONE LANGUAGE VS. OTHERS

Language confusion is common in a multiethnic speech community[8] which consists of mutually comprehensible native speakers of three or four separate languages, lately defined by new national borders. A recent example is the broadcasting of Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* on the Croatian national television (to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi Auschwitz) with Serbo-Croatian subtitles, which provoked very negative reactions in the audience. The perfectly comprehensible but politically incorrect translation, interspersed with many Serbian words, was in fact the consequence of Spielberg's distributional policy, which permits broadcasting only with the distributor's own, bundled subtitles. Still, the public found it insulting and inexcusable to be offered the film with such subtitles without previous warning and apology. Generally speaking, such examples of "wrong" translation in the media and in public were more frequent during the 1990's.

The process of language purification and differentiation has taken an arbitrary turn, as in the absurd use of Croatian subtitles for Serbian movies or numerous examples from administrative procedures (court interpreters for the Serbian language, obligatory translation of every document from Serbian into Croatian) or the educational system (a dictionary of new Croatian words, guidebooks for easy differentiation between the two languages, and similar). The tendency to draw the symbolic border between two languages along their communicative border, i.e. where they cease to be mutually comprehensible, has mostly disappeared.

The diversification of Serbo-Croatian resulted in the breakdown of a shared intellectual and cultural space, particularly in publishing (except for a handful of readers who consider the content more important than the name of the language of publication). Virtually every act of book importation/exportation was bound to break some of the numerous restrictive laws and customs regulations – such as the Serbian regulation that a copy of each imported book should be

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[7] Bugarski, 2002, 18–19: "The general and linguistic policies of a given community, and, in the case of the individual, on such factors as his national feelings, political views, profession, personal and family history, and others." (my transl.)

[8] The speech community as defined by Dubravko Škiljan, 1998.

sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs for approval. Very soon, local publishers became obsessed with publications about the national history and patriarchal tradition, deeply rooted in the "great" national language/s.

The new language distribution, reflecting the sometimes violent changes in ideology, social relations, political situation, national mapping, and cultural negotiations, has prompted some hesitant academic reflections: reflections on the implicit political/national pressure on the academic population, and the (till recently) prevailing mentality of accepting ideological and political recommendations without demur. At the same time, of course, an obvious niche of opportunity has opened for the academics ready to express acceptable views: these are granted certain media attention, privileges inside the state apparatus, and possible non-transparent gain. On the other hand, those stubborn enough to present views (or even research results) clashing with the national criteria run the risk of being labelled as traitors (like the linguists quoted above) or simply suppressed in the vast process of forming a "national science". In this context, a very interesting and paradoxical case should be mentioned. This is the *Dictionary of the Serbo-Croatian Literary and Vernacular Language* (the first volume was published in 1959), a huge lexicographical project of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, which has *not* been renamed as a *Dictionary of the Serbian Language*. The editorial board has decided to exclude all illustrative examples from recent Croatian and partly from Bosnian literature after 1990, considering the literature produced before that year as "our literature", written in "a stolen dialect of Serbian" – in other words, in "our language". This is why the name of the officially nonexistent Serbo-Croatian has been preserved in the dictionary title. Such topics are still very sensitive, and any change in the established discourse could mean a high risk for the local academia.

In former Bosnia and Herzegovina (now divided into the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), such language policies and practices have almost violently influenced and changed the speech of the native speakers of Serbo-Croatian. In the Republika Srpska, the *ijekavica* speech was replaced with *ekavica* in the media, the educational system, and in public use, in order to attain nationalist unity with Serbia. The constitutions of the Republika Srpska from that period granted official status to both pronunciations of Serbian, *ijekavica* and *ekavica*, and allowed the use of both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. In practice, however, all media adopted the *ekavica* pronunciation and the

Cyrillic alphabet under threat of punishment.[9] This aggressive language policy was changed in 1998 by the new constitution. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the processes of language purification and engineering have set at variance Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian. Instant language-makers have provided differences by forming new rules and inventing or renewing words almost incomprehensible to the audience. The letter h, considered as a mark of specific pronunciation, has received an important role in the differentiation of Bosnian, as has an archaic lexicon mostly derived from Turkish.

During the first years of language diversification, the changed language names were institutionalised by almost all countries outside the former Yugoslav region. The most obvious changes could be observed in the administrative use of these names. They are evidenced in the documentation and application forms of humanitarian and non-governmental organisations, as well as of various peace-keeper formations, particularly those settled in Bosnia and Kosovo. Under the very common question of language skills, it was possible to mark the levels of knowledge of Serbian, Bosnian, and Croatian. The answers, however, were mostly confusing. The knowledge of one language vs. others generally depends on extralinguistic factors, such as the political and social circumstances, business opportunities, the public opinion created by official propaganda, etc. The multilingual communication in trade, on the other hand, has developed its own language policy. The usual practice is to furnish commercial products with a separate text for each country/language abbreviation or code, such as CRO/SCG (YU)/BIH, but the wording is usually almost identical. Generally speaking, the language issue, problematic and expensive, soon gave rise to different practices for different purposes, combining two language names with two texts, three language names with one text, or a new language name with one text (a case in point is the BSC language introduced for the purpose of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague).

NEW LANGUAGE MINORITIES

Finally, the national ideologies, identifying language with ethnicity and territory, have led to the problems of new ethnic and language minorities, such as Serbs (the speakers of Serbian) and Bosnians/Bosniaks (the speakers of Bosnian/Bo-

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[9] Šipka, 2001.

sniak) in Croatia, or Croats (the speakers of Croatian) and Bosnians/Bosniaks in Serbia and Montenegro. Trying to address this issue, the government of the Province of Vojvodina (Serbia and Montenegro) has recently recognised Croatian as a minority language in this area. The most complex situation is that of former Bosnia and Herzegovina, where all three ethnicities are present in both new entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. In the two remaining states of former Yugoslavia, Slovenia and Macedonia, Serbo-Croatian was the official, but not the majority language.

The new situation has raised many absurd questions, such as: which language should be considered as the mother tongue of a Croat born in Serbia? In Slovenia, the ex-Yugoslav citizens (about 155,000 former Serbo-Croatian speakers) are not considered as members of minorities but as immigrants or refugees, and are thus granted no collective but only individual rights.[10] Many have already obtained Slovenian citizenship, and their children consider themselves native speakers of Slovenian. In other words, the languages that have emerged from Serbo-Croatian are not officially recognised in Slovenia. They function on the everyday communication level, mostly as crypto-languages of a population pejoratively referred to as "južnjaci".

A Case of Language Unification

In the context of minority issues, I would like to outline the illustrative case of the widespread Romani community. An examination of the situation of the nomadic Romani minority, caught between the growing national identities constructed by the symbolic dominant languages and national policies, presents a significant sociolinguistic contribution to the question of multilingualism. Since many Balkan Romani dialects are mutually incomprehensible (shaped under the influence of the surrounding languages, Slav and non-Slav), Serbo-Croatian is used as a *lingua franca* among all Romani groups in former Yugoslavia. During the war years, however, the Romani language was manipulated in various ways by the dominant ethnic communities, in order to prove the identity of language with ethnicity, to change the current *lingua franca*, and, finally, to heighten language tolerance. The forced standardisation of the unique Romani language caused many misunderstandings; an example is the official translation of the Decla-

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[10] Nećak-Lük, 1997.

ration of Children's Rights into "standardised" Romani. The Romani children (refugees from Kosovo) to whom the declaration was read expected further translation into Serbo-Croatian, because they thought that it was written in English. This manner of adopting Otherness in public discourse through language performance is reminiscent of the concept of Bakhtin's carnivalesque language, which functions as an affirmative and subversive act, simultaneously parodying and revealing.[11] The case of Romani, reflecting the absurdity of language changes imposed by the current state policy, illustrates the other linguistic extreme in the region: the process of unification.

WHO ARE THE SPEAKERS OF SERBO-CROATIAN TODAY? BSC AS A *LINGUA FRANCA*

From the aspect of the communicative function of language, there is no denying the fact that Serbo-Croatian, or the BSC language, is used as a *lingua franca* by ex-Yugoslav citizens, particularly in the IC technology and communication, trade and tourism. The most widespread is the virtual ex-Yu language community formed by chat groups, discussion forums, and similar electronic connections. In this context, the term "Serbo-Croatian" is frequently used alongside new, alternative names, such as the "South Slavic language" (the Wikipedia Project) or the already mentioned "BSC language". Holiday migration from one successor state to another has become very common lately, and Serbo-Croatian has gained a symbolic dimension like the other ex-Yugoslav symbols, probably as a response to the nationalist policies from the 1990's. The commercialisation of the past and its parody, or rather trivialisation, have opened tentative new possibilities, but also produced fully realised projects. Examples of the latter are the publication of *Yu-Mythology*, a very popular book composed by a number of contributors from all ex-Yugoslav states and written in Serbo-Croatian, or the mass media project *The Reality Show*, made by the younger post-Yugoslav generation, gathered around the global, or rather regional, media culture. The "users" of Serbo-Croatian as a *lingua franca* in conversation, as well as in the mass media and virtual space, are at the same time native speakers of Slovenian, Macedonian, Albanian, Hungarian, Rumanian, and other official languages of former Yugoslavia, who have survived its dissolution without any language change, thanks to the corres-

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[11] Bakhtin, 1978.

pondence between the communicative/linguistic and symbolic/political functions of their languages.

Citizens of a Multilingual World

There are certain rules about what a multilingual world should be like. First of all, a multiethnic community or state should develop a strong multilingual and multicultural identity in accordance with the EU standards. Unfortunately, given the legacy of the past and the current language policy, this is Utopia rather than reality. The Balkan region, as well as other multilingual European areas, is proof that the political and symbolic functions of languages blatantly override the linguistic and communicative reality. The 1950's and 60's in America and Europe saw the development of (socio)linguistic disciplines such as language policy and planning, which coincided with the appearance of new technologies (cybernetics, robotics) and knowledge about control and management. This marked the beginning of new communication channels, such as the Internet, cable television, and other means of virtual communication. Language as a means of communication and connection is also recognised as a key to political power, influence on the public opinion, propaganda, commercial benefit, and, of course, globalisation. A number of seminal linguistic – or rather humanistic – works reflect certain issues of language ideology, which presents very shaky ground for any reflection on a multilingual world and its language distribution. The Balkan experience and the diversification of Balkan languages, which is clearly directed by official policy, confirm that every language is a political as well as a linguistic phenomenon: not as an initiator of wars (the Balkan case) or of social changes (the EU), but as their product, or rather instrument.

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