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Past and current developments involving pluricentric Serbo-Croatian and its official heirs

Abstract (Serbian)

Na početku rada daje se kratak istorijski pregled razvoja događaja u vezi sa ovim pluricentričnim standardnim jezikom, sve do njegovog administrativnog rastakanja i službenog zamenjivanja sa četiri nacionalna jezika (srpskim, hrvatskim, bosanskim i crnogorskim) usled raspada Jugoslavije tokom 1990-ih godina. Zatim se prikazuje složeno tekuće stanje stvari, gde se može reći da srpskohrvatski još uvek postoji, više ne postoji, ili samo delimično postoji, zavisno od perspektive iz koje se posmatra (lingvističko-komunikacijske, pravno-političke, odnosno socijalnopsihološke). Ova krajnje neobična situacija potom se upoređuje sa drugim evropskim pluricentričnim jezicima, posebno engleskim. Na kraju se skreće pažnja na jedan skorašnji dokument koji je sačinila grupa zabrinutih intelektualaca sa ranijeg srpskohrvatskog govornog područja, pod naslovom “Deklaracija o zajedničkom jeziku”, koji je uzburkao javnost u regionu i inostranstvu.

Abstract (English)

The paper opens with a brief historical overview of developments concerning this pluricentric standard language up until its administrative dissolution and official replacement with four national languages (Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin) as a result of the breakup of Yugoslavia during the 1990s. This is followed by a presentation of the complex current situation, where Serbo-Croatian can be said to still exist, no longer exist or only partly exist, depending on the perspective taken (linguistic/communicative, legal/political and social-psychological respectively). This extraordinary setup is then contrasted with other pluricentric languages in Europe, especially English. Finally, attention is drawn to a recent document drafted by a group of concerned intellectuals from the former Serbo-Croatian speaking region, entitled “The Declaration on the Common Language”, which has stirred up public feelings in the region and abroad.

1. Introduction: the meanings of “Serbo-Croatian”

“The English and the Americans are two nations divided by a common language”. This well-known witticism, attributed to George Bernard Shaw, readily comes to mind when talking about Serbo-Croatian, the difference being that in the latter case the common language divides as many as four nations, not just two! How this strange situation came about is a long and complicated story, which on this occasion must be stripped down to its barest essentials.¹

¹ The author of this contribution is not an EFNIL delegate but an invited speaker at the conference, a professional linguist who presented his views on a unique and intriguing instance of

In order to make any sense of the issue, it will be helpful to start by considering what is actually meant by the linguonym “Serbo-Croatian”, as this can by no means be taken for granted. It must be borne in mind that this is primarily a technical term from philology and linguistics, rather than a colloquial name routinely used by speakers. Traditionally, Serbs have, as a rule, called their language Serbian and Croats Croatian, with only multiethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina widely using the double-barrelled official designation as a popular name as well. This practice persists, with the Bosniaks and Montenegrins, more recently recognised as distinct nations, likewise tending to use national names for their language varieties. Throughout the Serbo-Croatian speaking territory, and especially in diaspora situations where people of different ethnicities live together, neutral designations like *naš jezik* ‘our language’ or the familiar abbreviation *es-ha* ‘S-C’ are frequently preferred in order to avoid unnecessary distinctions which may connote distancing or even cause offence.

But what about the term “Serbo-Croatian” itself? This turns out to have four distinguishable meanings, as follows. (1) The set of dialects (or diasystem) spoken by Serbs and Croats. In this dialectological application, the term was first used by foreign scholars (Jacob Grimm in 1824, Jernej Kopitar in 1836), who were later joined by native philologists.² (2) The literary language of Serbs and Croats, the foundations for which were outlined at a joint meeting of representative scholars and writers in 1850, resulting in a document referred to as “The Vienna Agreement”. The key statement there was that Serbs and Croats, being of the same kin, should have one and the same literature, thus implying a shared literary language. (3) The standard language as the realisation of this goal, codified at the turn of the twentieth century and named “Croatian or Serbian” or “Serbo-Croatian”. (4) The official language of the state of Yugoslavia, for political reasons initially given the improbable name “Serbo-Croato-Slovenian” (which, however, was rarely used outside strictly official contexts). The first three senses may be described as open ended in that, as we shall see, the label “Serbo-Croatian” can still be applied to them, while the fourth is delimited at both ends: 1921-1991 (from the Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes to the break-up of Socialist Yugoslavia and official dissolution of its principal language, with a short break during World War II).³

language-internal variation in Europe. The opinions advanced are personal and not to be taken as representing positions held by the Institute for the Serbian Language in Belgrade or any other institution. Fully aware of the political sensitivity of the issues discussed, the author believes that a sober, dispassionate presentation and exchange of views is always welcome.

² See Lencek (1976) and Kordić (2010, 127-129).

³ For a fuller historical account, see Greenberg (2008) and Bugarski (2012, 2013), with further references.

2. Standard Serbo-Croatian

Given this general framework, I shall concentrate on the later phase of sense (4) as the most immediately relevant to our account, that is on standard Serbo-Croatian in post-war, Socialist Yugoslavia and on subsequent developments. This was the principal language of four of the six republics constituting the new federation (with Slovenian and Macedonian enjoying that status in the remaining two), where it bore slightly different official names: Serbo-Croatian in Serbia and Montenegro, Croato-Serbian in Croatia, and Serbo-Croatian/Croato-Serbian in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Never fully unified from the start, it existed in several recognised national or regional variants, the two most important being the Eastern (or Serbian) and the Western (or Croatian), with Belgrade and Zagreb respectively as their centres of standardisation.⁴

This arrangement followed an Agreement proclaimed in 1954 at Novi Sad, reflecting a feeling that the “second” Yugoslavia, conceived as the common home of several South Slavic nations and numerous national minorities, should once again have a common though somewhat differentiated language; in spirit, then, this was a replica of the Vienna Agreement of a hundred years before. Work soon started on producing parallel variant versions of normative handbooks and dictionaries but did not get very far due to negative reactions from Croatia relating to the allegedly privileged treatment of Serbian usage at the expense of Croatian. The Croatian side soon abandoned the enterprise, and in 1967 an influential “Declaration on the name and position of the Croatian literary language” appeared, signed by leaders of the main cultural institutions, which called for the recognition of Croatian as an independent language rather than a variant of Serbo-Croatian.

3. From one to four?

Resolutely rejected by the political establishment, this Declaration turned out to have prefigured the eventual official secession of Croatian in 1991, which started the ball rolling. With the federation disintegrating in the bloodshed of civil war and new states springing up on its territory, Bosnian and, later, also Montenegrin were recognised as distinct languages. Thus Serbo-Croatian was officially no more: it was buried in the same tomb as the federation whose shaky unity it had symbolised and supported. And so we witnessed a belated realisation of the old Romantic and nationalist dream of the “Holy Trinity” of Nation, State and Language.

⁴ As used in Slavic sociolinguistics, the technical term *variant* (*varijanta* in Serbo-Croatian and all its successor languages) denotes varieties occurring on the standard-language level. Thus, while languages generally have dialects, pluricentric standard languages are said to have national or regional variants.

It now became necessary to justify the elevation of the former variants to the status of separate standard languages bearing national names by showing that the “departing” languages were, in fact, different from each other, and especially from Serbian, not just in name but also in linguistic substance and structure. A major challenge arose in carrying out this difficult task, namely how to establish and demonstrate this desired difference. Various routes were followed in answer to it; what they had in common was the strategy of exaggerating any natural differences where they existed and inventing others where they did not. Thus Croatian purged its vocabulary of items perceived as Serbisms, along with international terms also common in Serbian, replacing them with revived archaic or regional words and especially newly coined Croatian-sounding alternatives. Bosnian fell back on its Oriental heritage in word stock and, marginally, phonology, with Montenegrin taking a similar course by introducing elements of dialects and folklore into the standard language. In contrast, Serbian was not subjected to directed changes because of a widespread “Big Brother” feeling that this was the historical core of Serbo-Croatian anyway, so there was no political or psychological pressure to fashion a distinct new profile for it. Yet it became somewhat different in a passive way, simply by staying where it was while its congeners moved away on their chosen paths; and it also underlined its specificity by officially favouring the Cyrillic script over the Latin, alone among the four idioms.⁵

Bearing all this in mind, and recalling the four different applications of a single term noted above, it is easy to see that such a situation opens the door to various misunderstandings, unnecessary polemics and, of course, not a little manipulation. With the intended meaning left unspecified, it has been possible to make all kinds of unsubstantiated, even absurd claims, for example, that Serbo-Croatian was a mere unitarist fiction which never existed in reality, or that Serbian is the only “real” language, whereas the other three are merely its politically created variants, or that the Croats stole the language from the Serbs and renamed it, via Croato-Serbian, as Croatian; or that Serbo-Croatian, having officially disintegrated into several national languages as a result of the destruction of Yugoslavia, therefore no longer exists; and so forth.

However, three facts remain: first, that the term “Serbo-Croatian” dates back nearly 200 years; second, that a standard language identified by that name, with all its ups and downs, has been around in some form for well over a century; and third, that this language predates the creation of Yugoslavia by a few decades, so there is no intrinsic reason for it to disappear together with this state. These facts require elucidating instead of anxiously taking sides in emotion-ridden political controversies and quarrels. In what follows only some hints can be given.

⁵ In addition to references already cited, see the detailed account in Gröschel (2009), with appended Bibliography.

To begin with, we may ask what looks like a simple enough question: when all is said and done, does Serbo-Croatian still exist? A quick answer that is frequently offered is No, of course not, as everyone knows that it has been replaced by four national standard languages, and that's the end of the story. Such a convenient response relies on sense (4) listed above, which even suggests a precise date for its exit from the scene; but the previous three remain open-ended. The diasystem of sense (1) stays in place, the literary language of sense (2) likewise, being a prelude to the standard language of sense (3), and noting also that the attributes "literary" and "standard" have, in any case, not been consistently delimited until recently. Sense (3) itself is here seen as continuously active, albeit officially disputed; the controversy is about whether it is more appropriate to posit one standard language with four national variants, or four standard languages. All this means that one may still legitimately argue for the continued existence of Serbo-Croatian, although in one of its senses controversially so. In other words, as Sherlock Holmes used to say when offered a simple answer to a mystery, "My dear Watson, the case is *a little more complicated* than that!"

In the present author's view, then, the question of the continued existence or otherwise of Serbo-Croatian cannot be answered with a straight Yes or No, but must be posed on three levels, here ordered by importance. On the level of linguistics and communication, this language clearly still exists: the differences in structure and lexicon among its four official successors are far outweighed by the similarities or identities, a fact reflected by the continued ease of communication among their speakers despite several decades of divergent language planning. In contrast, on the legal and political level Serbo-Croatian definitely no longer exists as this term does not occur in the Constitutions and laws of any of the four successor states of Yugoslavia, where it has been replaced by the terms Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, or Montenegrin. Finally, on the social-psychological level, relating to the ways in which the speakers themselves habitually experience and name their mother tongue, this language lives on in the hearts and minds of a dwindling minority, the growing overall majority now indisputably identifying with one of the four successor languages.⁶ In short, Serbo-Croatian on the one hand, and these four on the other, are not mutually exclusive: they all exist, but on different levels of abstraction: one more general, the other more specific. The situation calls to mind Ferdinand de Saussure's profound observation that in linguistics, as opposed to other sciences, the point of view creates the object of study, not the other way around (De Saussure 1962, 23).

⁶ Incidentally, the minority referred to includes this writer, who jokingly describes himself as a native speaker of a dead language!

4. A comparison

Now, as for a comparison with other European pluricentric languages, the most notable difference is not typological but attitudinal, having to do with native attitudes towards the phenomenon. Pluricentricity is generally regarded as a welcome feature, enabling a language community to maintain and nurture its specificity while at the same time enjoying the obvious advantages of participating in a larger communicative network. Hence it is evaluated positively. “Vier Staaten, eine Sprache” was the motto of the 2017 Belgrade Book Fair, with German as the “guest country” represented by writers from Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. “Eén taal. Dit is wat we delen”, says the little brochure of the Nederlandse Taalunie.⁷ And, of course, the numerous national varieties of English may be regarded primarily as constituent parts of a single global entity or as closely related entities in their own right, as shown by the ongoing English vs. Englishes debate.⁸

But comparing the situation of English with that of Serbo-Croatian most clearly brings to light a major difference in attitudes. Whereas no English-speaking nation feels threatened by sharing both the language and its name with others, the turbulent past of Serbo-Croatian speaking nations, accompanied by fresh memories of armed conflicts, makes for mutual suspicion, mistrust or even hatred.⁹ A natural defensive reaction, whether spontaneous or planned, is to distance oneself from the linguistic next of kin rather than to embrace them, the psychological mechanism of which is insistence on one’s own idiom being quite different from even its closest relatives. Given such a collective frame of mind, the symbolic function of language easily gains the upper hand over its communicative counterpart, and pluricentricity is seen as a menace to be confronted, not a blessing to be taken advantage of.

5. A declaration

The ambiguous, unsettled state of affairs which I have depicted has serious consequences for the lives of citizens across the region, due to the evident contrast between language policy and linguistic reality in all the four states. On the one hand, the nationalist political elites, whose power and privileges depend on building walls instead of bridges, pursue openly separatist policies in all relevant spheres of life, markedly including languages. (A wiser regime might aim for some kind

⁷ We may recall that the Yugoslav federation exhibited a relationship of four republics to one language whereas the current official setup is, symmetrically, four states to four languages. For an example of a successful language policy with a pluricentric language in three states, see Bennis/Van Hoorde (2018).

⁸ On this controversy, see e.g. McArthur (1998).

⁹ Bugarski (2004) offers a more detailed comparison of Serbo-Croatian and English as pluricentric languages.

of symbolic balance between standard variants with national names for identity, and a common standard language for wider interethnic communication, all of them at least tacitly recognised in their various functions, instead of simply driving out the latter). Yet on the other hand, the masses of ordinary folk are aware that they all still speak pretty much alike and have no trouble at all communicating in their variously named languages. Consequently, they seem increasingly reluctant to accept the power holders' doctrine that their neighbouring nations, brethren of yesteryear, are now so estranged, linguistically and in other ways, as to constitute a serious threat to their own identity, or possibly even existence.

We are thus witnessing a growing dissatisfaction with this uneasy and potentially dangerous state of affairs. A major recent indicator of this was a regional project entitled "Languages and nationalisms", inspired by an influential book on the subject (Kordić 2010) and launched by a Belgrade-based writers' association in collaboration with cultural NGOs from the other three states. Within this project a series of four conferences was organised in the course of 2016, in Podgorica, Split, Belgrade and Sarajevo, each featuring a mixed panel of invited speakers (noted linguists, writers, journalists, critics, translators, etc.) broaching and discussing among themselves and with the lively audiences a large variety of topics relating to linguistic issues and problems. All of the conferences were well attended and enjoyed adequate media coverage, which showed that there was indeed considerable public interest in the actual linguistic life of living people, in contrast to official propaganda.

The project ended with the public presentation, on 30 March 2017 in Sarajevo, of a document summing up the main points and recommendations made, entitled "The Declaration on the common language". Conceived as a grass-roots, bottom-up initiative by a representative group of concerned intellectuals, and supported by an initial 225 signatures of well-known personalities on its presentation, it immediately attracted wide public attention. Indeed, it can safely be claimed that this document constitutes the only major development concerning Serbo-Croatian since its formal demise.

The text opens with the tone-setting statement, which instantly sparked off heated controversies, that a common language of the pluricentric type is used in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia. It then points out that the use of four national names for the standard variants does not imply that these are four different languages. Furthermore, the rigid separation of these variants by insisting on small differences while ignoring the overwhelming similarities has numerous negative consequences, the most regrettable ones of which are briefly noted. Among them are the notorious segregation and discrimination of school-children, based allegedly on their different mother tongues but in fact on ethnicity, thus presenting a unique case of apartheid in twenty-first century Europe. Or wasting huge amounts of money on completely superfluous translation and interpretation among the four official languages in administration, legislative proce-

dures, culture and media; and imposing linguistic expression as a mark of national affiliation and political loyalty, accompanied by censorship.

The second part of the Declaration upholds the individual right to express belonging to different nations or states, as well as the collective right of these to codify and name their own variants of the common language. These variants, all of which enjoy equal status, jointly contribute to the great richness of the language. In its last part, the document calls for abolishing linguistic segregation and discrimination, terminating repressive measures in separate language standardisation and avoiding unnecessary “translations”. It advocates respect for linguistic diversity and freedom of individual choice, including dialectal and regional use, and the mutually beneficial free interplay of different forms of the common language. Taken as a whole, these public pronouncements are unprecedented in reaffirming, despite the fundamentally different circumstances, some largely neglected values of the common linguistic heritage of a country which no longer exists, as opposed to further severing the remaining links among its successor states and their populations.¹⁰

Bearing all this in mind, it is hardly surprising that the Declaration should have met with a mixed reception. It was at best ignored and at worst viciously attacked on various grounds by the nationalist political and/or cultural establishments of the four states, to varying degrees. The attacks were particularly violent in Croatia, which had been the first to depart from both Serbo-Croatian and Yugoslavia and, hence, perceived the mere notion of a common language as undermining its independence. In sharp contrast, numerous members of the intellectual elites of the region, as well as large numbers of so-called ordinary speakers, were quick in supporting the document: within a week of its presentation, the number of signatures went into the thousands, and by early 2019 it had passed the 9,000 mark. Signatories came from the whole region, diaspora and the world at large, representing a wide range of nationalities, ages and professions, and including eminent scholars such as Noam Chomsky and Peter Trudgill in linguistics or Florian Bieber in Balkan studies. The response would certainly have been even more impressive if the Declaration, initially meant for home use only and hence published in Serbo-Croatian, had already been placed on the Internet in English as well. The pros and cons of the reception cannot even be summarised here as there is room for only a few additional explanatory remarks.¹¹

¹⁰ The full text of the Declaration, translated into English by the present writer (himself a consultant in the drafting process), which had previously been prepared for limited circulation, can, as of May 2019, be found at www.krokodil.rs/eng/text-of-the-declaration-on-common-language-in-english. There is also a German translation at https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deklaration_zur_gemeinsamen_Sprache (last accessed 27.11.2018).

¹¹ A complete overview of the motives, origin, reception and effects of the Declaration, including the main objections and the author’s answers to them, as well as an illustrative list of 180 noted signatories from the region and abroad, can be found in Bugarski (2018). Those inter-

The Declaration was motivated by a growing feeling that the engineered differentiation of languages in pursuing separatist language and identity policies in the interest of the ruling circles had gone too far, causing numerous practical problems and disturbing the normal everyday life of the people. Yet the substantive issues noted above were completely ignored in the negative reactions to the Declaration, which mostly contained irresponsible and slanderous accusations against its drafters, in an attempt to unveil their “real” destructive schemes against this or that language, nation or state.

A main objection was that “this supposed common language” was left nameless; however, this was done on purpose because it was obvious that no name, existing or invented, would be acceptable to all parties. Besides, it is clear from the context that what was meant is nothing other than the old Serbo-Croatian, but without imposing that particular, historically somewhat discredited designation. Therefore, according to the Declaration every state, nation and individual may name their language as they wish, which implicitly acknowledges the present reality of the four official names but does not exclude the “parent” name either. This makes the important point that the name, traditionally controversial anyway, matters less than the awareness that we all share the advantages of a common language, whatever we call it. Hence the Declaration does not plead for a restoration of the past, with only one recognised official language instead of four, but merely for a flexible approach, adapting the heritage of that past to the current political circumstances rather than simply deleting it.

Lastly, a word about the Declaration’s effects. This well-intended plea, addressed primarily to the authorities in the four states but also to the general public, by a self-organised assembly of language professionals without any political backing or executive power, was never meant to have any immediate effects by way of a hasty softening of the hardline official approaches to language policy. To expect this would have been wholly unrealistic under the present conditions, not only in the region but also in a Europe increasingly infected by rampant nationalism. The creators and supporters of the Declaration could only count on a long-term influence, hopefully along with future initiatives of a similar nature, on the way the younger generations think about issues of language and communication.

Put differently, it is hoped that such moves might, in a more responsive intellectual climate, initiate some gradual changes in language policy and planning, bringing them closer to the realities and potentials of linguistic life on the ground. The spontaneous regional and international publicity the Declaration has gained, and the controversies it has triggered, through a host of media presentations and social networks, round table debates and scholarly conferences, hold some promise in this respect. It remains to be seen how things will turn out in the future, but for

ested enough but lacking a reading knowledge of “the common language” may consult a condensed English version: Bugarski (to appear 2019).

the present it is fair to say that the Declaration has made quite a splash and stirred up large sections of the public in unexpected ways, showing that a warning of this kind was indeed timely. And if nothing else, a respectable group of intellectuals from the region have raised their collective voice in protest against the persistent state-sponsored linguistic manipulation in the name of preserving the allegedly threatened identity and independence of the newly established states and their national languages. This in itself is an achievement worthy of being recorded.

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