

EMERGING LITERARY STANDARDS AND NATIONALISM. THE DISINTEGRATION OF SERBO-CROATIAN

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1. Introduction

In the 1990's, after the fall of communism, the main language of Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croatian, has disintegrated into three or four standards: Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, and an emerging Montenegrin. The disintegration of the common language, although existing in two variants, can thus be considered a parallel to the political disintegration of the Yugoslav federation.

The symbol of a standard language is, in this part of the world, the orthographic manual (*Pravopis*), stating the norms of spelling, pronunciation and punctuation. For 30 years, since 1960, there was one official *Pravopis*. During the last ten years, six new orthographies have been published (3 Serbian, 2 Croatian, 1 Bosnian), and a seventh, a Montenegrin one, is announced in the near future.

It will be argued that this process can partly be interpreted as a "return to diversity", and that the underlying force is nationalist ideology, implying a specific concept of the interconnection between the notions of nation and language.

2. Varieties of one language

In sociolinguistic theory, many criteria have been used in order to categorize linguistic varieties either as languages or varieties of one language (mutual intelligibility, common linguistic properties, common ancestry, a common literary tradition, one single form of writing), but the boundaries are vague (Bartsch, 1987: 234).

The spoken language of Croats, Serbs, Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks) and Montenegrins can be classified as one Slavic language in the linguistic sense (degree of variability, historical development). There is, as in many languages, great dialectal variety, and speakers in border regions towards Slovene and Bulgarian/Macedonian can only be defined in sociolinguistic terms (ethnic affiliation, use of standard language). This language, or *linguistic territory*, between Slovene and Bulgarian/Macedonian, can be called Central South Slavic (in order to avoid the contested term Serbo-Croatian). The term *linguistic*

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territory is more convenient than the term *language*, which is used with different meanings. Within the Central South Slavic linguistic territory there are some dialects which are linguistically quite different from the bulk of the dialects. The Cakavian dialect along the Adriatic coast has got many specific features, almost to the degree of being a specific idiom, but historically it represents a more archaic form of the language than does the main dialectal area, Stokavian. Stokavian is spoken in a large area, stretching from the Adriatic coast to the Hungarian border, comprising Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, most of Serbia and parts of Croatia. Stokavian is divided into Ijekavian, spoken in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and parts of Croatia, and Ekavian, used in Serbia. Stokavian is further divided into progressive and archaic dialects. The Kajkavian dialect in the Zagreb area is close to Slovene, and could, linguistically be classified as a sub-dialect of Slovene. For historical and cultural reasons Kajkavian is considered a Croatian dialect.

The Central South Slavic linguistic area can be compared to the Scandinavian linguistic continuum, spoken by Danes, Norwegians and Swedes. This is also a linguistic territory with great diversity, dialectal borders not necessarily following the borders of the standard languages. Due to the national differentiation between the Scandinavian nations, different standard languages have developed.

3. Standard languages

The existence of different standard languages within one linguistic territory does not depend on the degree of linguistic differentiation. Two standard languages can be closely related, with small linguistic differences, as Norwegian Bokmål and Danish. It has been argued that the differences between the standards within Central South Slavic are too small to speak of different standard languages. Dunatov (1978) argues, however, that the language norms used by Croats and Serbs fulfill the sociolinguistic criteria for separate standard languages, as to: 1) Intrinsic properties: flexible stability and intellectualization; 2) Functions within the culture of the speech community: unifying, separatist, prestige, frame-of-reference; 3) Attitudes of the speech community: language loyalty, pride, awareness of the norm.

The number of standard languages within a linguistic territory may change over time. In the first half of the 19th century, there were two standard languages in Scandinavia (Danish and Swedish), in our century four (in addition two Norwegian standards). At the same time, the beginning of the last century, there were at least six standards (more or less codified) within Central South Slavic, in our century it was officially one.

What are the forces behind standards emerging and disappearing? Byron (1976) gives an account of different theories of language evaluation decisive for the selection of standard languages. Her list does not include, however, the criteria that have been decisive in the Central South Slavic area, i. e. nationalist considerations. The unifying or separatist tendencies are the result of political considerations and different concepts of the relationship between language and nation.

4. One nation – (only) one language

The notion of “one nation, one language” stems from the German romantic movement. Herder stated: “Without its own language a people is an absurdity”.

In Scandinavia, this notion made the one nation without its own language, the Norwegians, create a Norwegian standard, from the 1850’s, when the national movement was evolving (Haugen, 1966b). Even two standards emerged, one (*Landsmål*) considered more Norwegian by its adherents than the Danish-based one (*Riksmål*). Both trends were, however, triggered by the same idea, that a nation should have its own language. For all practical reasons, the Norwegians could have kept using the Danish standard.

This romantic slogan was further interpreted: One nation should have only one standard language. During the Croat national movement of the 1830’s, this idea served as a unifying force. The Croats, dispersed in several political units, with different regional cultural traditions and using three very different dialects (*Kajkavian*, *Cakavian* and *Stokavian*), chose one of their literary traditions as the common one. This common language was termed “Illyrian”, meaning partly “Croatian”, partly “South Slavic”, due to a romantic pan-South Slavic movement which was strong among Croatian intellectuals at the time.

In Serbia, in the first half of the 19th century, the notion of “one nation – one language” led to a struggle between two competing standards. The traditional one (Church Slavonic and Russian inspired) had its basis among the urban Serbian population in Southern Hungary. The radical, new standard was created by Vuk Karadzic, based on the vernacular of illiterate smallholders until recently under Turkish rule. The notion of “one nation – one language” was a strong motivation for the Serbs choosing one standard, Vuk Karadzic’s new language based on his own dialect (*progressive Stokavian*), although also other motives were present: social (folk culture vs. the urban and clerical culture) and political (the emerging Serbian principality south of the Danube).

The unifying tendencies in Norway in the first half of the 20th century, when language planning aimed at a rapprochement of *Landsmål* (*Nynorsk*) and *Riksmål* (*Bokmål*), could

perhaps also be interpreted as an attempt to achieve the goal “one nation – one language”, although other motives were probably stronger (social and practical ones).

5. Linguistic nationalism

The application of the notion “one nation – one language” rests on the definition of “nation”. As is well known from social sciences, there is no universally agreed definition of “nation”. It is mostly considered a subjective feeling of ethnicity (“we against the others”), but is difficult to define as opposed to other kinds of ethnicity.

In Eastern Europe, the notion of “nation” became closely connected to cultural unity (common language, common traditions, common religion, common history). Since Eastern Europe, including the Balkans, consisted of multinational empires (The Hapsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires), nationalism became primarily cultural and only later political (aiming at independent states). For this culturally based nationalism, the linguistic question was considered crucial.

Over time, the identification of nationality may change within a given linguistic territory. During the last one and a half centuries, the estimations of the number of nations within Central South Slavic has varied from one to four. Depending on time and place, those defining all as one nation have used different concepts: “Slavs”, “Illyrians”, “Serbs”, “Croats” or “Yugoslavs”.

For the Croat national “revivers” in the 1830’s, the task was first of all to create a common national feeling among the Croats. In order to achieve this, the leader of the national movement, the linguist Ljudevit Gaj, had to select one standard. He did not choose the idiom based on his own dialect, and of the cultural centre Zagreb (*Kajkavian*), but the one with the most brilliant literary tradition, that of Dubrovnik. This dialectal basis (*Stokavian Ekavian*) was more or less the same as the one chosen for the new literary standard in Serbia, advocated by Vuk Karadzic. The idea of uniting Croats and Serbs, and broader, all South Slavs (“Illyrians”), was a strong motive in the Illyrian movement.

For the Serbian linguistic reformer, Vuk Karadzic, all speakers of the *Stokavian* dialect, regardless of religion, were Serbs. This “linguistic Serbianism” (Banac, 1984: 80) was conceived by many Croats as assimilating and a threat to the Croats’ national identity.

That the standard languages of Croats and Serbs were based on the same dialectal area, the central one with dialects used by both Serbs and (some) Croats, did not mean, however, that the two standards became identical. But with a common dialectal core, the possibilities for rapprochement became greater.

6. Integration vs. diversity

In the period 1850-1950 there were two competing tendencies in the Central South Slavic area: unifying vs. diverging (separatist). The controversy was not so much over language as over nation. However, since language played an important role in defining a nation, the linguistic disputes always became more than purely linguistic ones.

In general, the unifying tendency prevailed in this period (mid 19th to mid 20th century). The first important step towards unification, although mostly on a declarative level, was made in 1850, when 8 leading linguists and writers from Serbia and Croatia met in Vienna, issuing a declaration on language unity. The underlying concept is evident from the first sentence of the declaration:

“The signers of this declaration, knowing that one nation should have one literature, and seeing with sorrow how our literature is disunited, not only in alphabet, but also in language and orthography, have come together these days in order to discuss how we could agree and unite our literature, as much as possible”.

In Croatia, the prevailing tendency during the 19th century was to choose a standard based on Stokavian, but with several archaic features that distinguished it from Serbian. There was, however, no unity among the Croats as to the details of this standard. After 70 years of struggle between competing “linguistic schools”, a standard language prevailed, in the second part of the 1890’s, that was very close to the one in Serbia. Under the slogan “national unity”, Yugoslav oriented Croats took the lead in the first decade of this century. The pro-Serbian standard meant in many respects a break with the Croatian literary tradition. Although not completely identical, Croatian and Serbian standards were close enough as for some to claim that it was one standard language.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, occupied by Austria-Hungary in 1878, the official language policy was to achieve linguistic unification within the province. The Austrian-Hungarian authorities tried to create a common “Bosnian” language (with two alphabets, Latin and Cyrillic). In 1890 a *Grammar of the Bosnian language* was published, under the auspices of the Austro-Hungarian authorities. Later, in 1907, the official name was changed to “Serbo-Croatian”, due to Serbian and Croatian opposition to the “Bosnian” solution. The term “Serbo-Croatian” was thus coined by the Austrians, and their language policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1878-1914) contributed to the concept that Serbian and Croatian was one language.

The idea that the Yugoslavs were one nation, was used as an argument for an independent South Slavic state towards the end of 1st World War. President Wilson seems to have adopted this view, which was not based on reality.

7. One state – one language?

In the inter-war period, the unification tendencies were strong, in a South Slavic kingdom dominated by the Serbs. Officially, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were considered “three tribes of the same people”. In order to achieve unity, a proposal was made that the Serbs should abandon the Cyrillic alphabet and the Croats their most distinctive orthographic feature (*Ijekavian*). This “compromise” was, however, never imposed by the authorities, and adopted only by Yugoslav oriented enthusiasts. The Croats and Serbs continued to have different orthographies in the inter-war period, although with very small differences.

Under the Nazi regime during 2nd World War, official Croatian policy was a return to pre 1900’s tradition, adopting an orthography reflecting the etymological principle, instead of the phonological one introduced by Karadzic for Serbian, and, reluctantly, adopted by the Croats. For decades to come, Croat separatist linguistic tendencies could be associated, by its opponents, with fascism. During the after-war period, only extreme nationalists among the Croats, mostly in diaspora, advocated a return to a standard like the one used during 2nd World War, i. e. more like the one used in the 19th century. Some Croatian linguists advocated the reintroduction of the etymological orthographical principle. In 1992 the *Croatian Etymological Orthography* of 1944 was reprinted, but not taken into official use.

In communist Yugoslavia, the unifying tendencies once again became strong. The Communist Party, although admitting the existence of different nations, had as its ideological base that the differences were insignificant and could be overcome. “Yugoslavism” became the slogan in the 1950’s, and a language policy in accordance with this was adopted. In 1954 a joint declaration (“The Novi Sad agreement”) on the unity of the Serbo-Croatian language was adopted by 25 leading linguists, under strong communist surveillance. As a result of this “agreement”, the first common orthography was published in 1960, although in two versions, in Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, and with minimal concessions to the differences between Serbian and Croatian.

8. Language as a nationalistic weapon

As a result of the political liberalization in the second half of the 1960’s, the Croatian nationalism could once more get an impetus. In 1967 a group of 140 Croatian writers and

linguists issued a “Declaration on the name and position of the Croatian literary language”. In the following years, the language dispute was used by the Croats as a weapon in their political struggle against centralism. In 1971 the Croats abolished the Novi Sad agreement, and a *Croatian orthography* was printed, in 40.000 copies. But when Tito put down the Croat nationalist movement later the same year, the orthography was banned and destroyed. (This is the one that became official in the 1990’s).

Although politically suppressed, the Croats had partly won a linguistic victory. In the Constitution of 1974, the language in Croatia was termed “the Croatian literary language”, but it was still prohibited to speak of “Croatian language”, without the epithet “literary!”. It was more or less officially accepted that Serbo-Croatian existed in two “variants”, but it was impossible to publish words lists stating the differences. The status of the concept “variant of the literary language” remained unclear and politically dubious.

The Serbs stuck to the term “Serbo-Croatian”, since this was in their national interest, many Serbs living outside Serbia proper, in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The insistence on a “Serbo-Croatian” language was connected to Yugoslavism on the political level, by their opponents characterized as a disguised Great Serbianism. When prof. Pavle Ivic, the most prominent Serbian linguist (and nationalist), published a book in 1971, he could not use the term “Serbian language”, but had to call the book *The Serbian nation and its language*.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the “Muslims” were recognized as a nation from the end of the 60’s, a specific language policy was formed by Bosnian linguists in the 1970’s. Their principle was “linguistic tolerance”, which implied the free coexistence of the two variants in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In reality, a more specific Bosnian-Herzegovinian variety developed, consisting of a choice between Serbian and Croatian lexical units (with Serbian ones prevailing). The official name of the language, as stated in the 1974 Constitution, was Serbocroatian-Croatoserbian. Often was added “as used in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, and the term “B-H-expression” was also frequently used by local linguists. The term “Bosnian language” could never be used under communism. What especially distinguishes the Bosnian standard from the Serbian and Croatian ones, is the extensive use of words of oriental origin. In Serbian and Croatian dictionaries many of these words were considered “regional” or “dialectal”. Although not officially approved as a “variant”, the Bosnian standard became more established in the 1970’s and 80’s and was elaborated in literary and scientific works based on the specific Bosnian cultural heritage.

9. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and of Serbo-Croatian

Although the Croats won a partly victory in the seventies, it was not until the political disintegration of Yugoslavia that the latent nationalistic language policy could be carried out. Now the linguistic development followed the political one. After the declaration of independence in 1991, the Croatian standardization became more nationalistic than before. Now the term “Croatian language” was not only accepted, but became the only one.

When the political disintegration was a fact, after the fall of communism in 1990 and the break up of Yugoslavia in 1991, the term “Serbian language” was adopted in Serbia, without discussion.

The tendency was quickly for the gap between the standards to become widening. In Croatia, many archaic Croatian words were taken up, some would say in order to make the difference towards Serbian as large as possible. Moderate Croatian linguists see the present politization of the literary language as an exaggeration, the main concern being to speak “politically correct”. For many Croats it is seen as a return to their tradition. Croatian had always a more puristic tradition than Serbian, coining new words or using calques. Since the standard language is not close to the bulk of dialects spoken in Croatia, the attitude towards the literary language differs from the one in Serbia, where Karadzic’s slogan “Write as you speak” is still believed to be valid. Because of the gap between the spoken language and the written one, most Croats have to learn how to use the standard language correctly. The Croats were used to consider the literary language to be “above” the dialects. The introduction of a somewhat more archaic and puristic standard was therefore easy to achieve.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, a new standard has developed in the 1990’s. The leading personality is the linguist Senahid Halilovic, who in 1991 published the book *Bosanski jezik* (“The Bosnian language”) and in 1996 *Bosanski pravopis* (“Bosnian orthography”). In Bosnian, many words of oriental origin, earlier considered “regional” or “obsolete”, are now taken into the standard language. Both in the Croatian and the Bosnian case it is partly a revival of older forms that were not permitted during the period when the unifying policy prevailed.

The official Bosnian (Sarajevo-based) language policy is to term the language “Bosnian”, admitting also “Croatian” and “Serbian” to be used in schools. In the Croatian controlled parts of the Federation, only the Zagreb norm of Croatian is used, and in the Serbian Republic, only the Belgrade norm of Serbian, based on the Ekavian norm which is totally strange to Bosnian dialects. Thus, due to the present political division of Bosnia and Herzegovina, three different standards are used.

In Montenegro, a variant of Serbian, somewhat different from the Belgrade norm, is used, officially called “Serbian”. Recently, some Montenegrin nationalists have proposed a much more diverging Montenegrin standard, based on the dialects of Central and Eastern Montenegro, which differ in some essential features from the traditional standard language. The main protagonist of this new “Montenegrin language” is Vojislav Nikcevic, professor at the University of Niksic, who published the book *Crnogorski jezik* (“The Montenegrin language”) in 1993. A Montenegrin orthography is announced for publication in the near future, probably in 1998. Whether his radical break with the tradition will succeed, depends on the political development. As the separatists seem to win the political struggle, breaking with Belgrade, a specific Montenegrin standard will probably be introduced. The struggle for a separate Montenegrin language has a parallel in the controversy within the Orthodox church, where a Montenegrin breakaway church is opposing the Serbian Orthodox Church based in Belgrade. According to nationalistic thought, the Montenegrin should, if they are a separate nation, have their own church and language. Moreover, without it, they are not to be considered a nation.

10. Language and religion

The Central South Slavic linguistic territory is divided by three religions, Catholics, Ortodox and Muslims speaking the same dialects. The alphabets are but a visible difference stemming from the thousand years old religious division in the Balkans. During the last centuries, also other alphabets have been used. The Bosnian Muslims used the Arabic alphabet, along with the more and more common Latin one, until the beginning of our century. Today the Bosnian Muslims use exclusively the Latin alphabet. Specific alphabets were used by the Bosnian Sephardic Jews, and the Croats along the Adriatic coast stuck to the old Slavic Glagolitic alphabet during the centuries. Even the Cyrillic alphabet developed a specific form in Bosnia, called the Bosancica.

Religion plays a great role in codifying a literary standard, religious terminology being deeply interwoven in the texture of any literary language. Many religious terms belong to the common vocabulary, and names and expressions are taken from the Bible or the Koran.

In the Central South Slavic territory, religion became, from the second half of the 19th century, the defining criterion of nationhood. The interconnection between religion and nationality has therefore inevitably linguistic implications.

The religious-linguistic division of Central South Slavic can be compared to the one between Hindi and Urdu, two standards based on one language, but differentiated according

to religious affiliation. Such differentiation entails differences in alphabets and vocabulary, especially religious vocabulary.

11. Conclusion: From linguistic nationalism to language planning

Once the political pressure for unification was abandoned, the old idea of “one nation, one language” got a new impetus. This has led to a widening of the differences between the standard languages.

When the nationalist euphoria calms down, due to political normalization, the linguistic nationalism witnessed during the 1990’s will probably give way to a more natural language planning, like the one found in other societies. In the future, the different standard languages within Central South Slavic will be codified totally independently of each other, which means that the diverging tendencies will continue. Like in Scandinavia, the separate national standards will be codified independently, notwithstanding the practical considerations that would be in favour of coordination.

In a historical perspective, the “Serbo-Croatian” period will be considered an interregnum during the 20th century. Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian have century-old literary traditions with practically no contacts between them. In the future, these traditions will probably be reinforced. The disintegration of Serbo-Croatian was an inevitable development in societies where national and linguistic identity are considered closely interconnected. The strengthening of separate standards after the fall of communism in Yugoslavia and the dissolution of the federal state, can thus be interpreted as a return to a linguistic diversity that existed earlier, until the unifying process prevailed in our century.

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