

Tanja Petrović



Serbo-Croatian Language



How do you analyze the present state of the Serbo-Croatian language?

When Yugoslavia collapsed in the beginning of 1990s, it was not just a country that was torn apart: the Serbo-Croatian language (also called Croato-Serbian, Serbian or Croatian, Croatian or Serbian) also disintegrated. This language was spoken in four Yugoslav republics (Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia) and by the largest part of the population: 73 % of citizens of Yugoslavia spoke Serbo-Croatian as their mother tongue.

At the present, there are four standard language-successors of Serbo-Croatian: Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. With the most recent official proclamation of the Montenegrin language, the equation between national states and national standard language was established in the societies of the former Yugoslavia. Still, the correspondence between the two categories is far from being absolute: Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina would claim they speak Serbian and Croatian respectively, while Bosnian is the language serving as a symbolic flag for the Muslim Bosniak identity; likewise, the Muslim population inhabiting the region of Sandžak in the Republic of Serbia and non-Albanian Muslims in Kosovo would claim that they use Bosnian standard language. The situation is further complicated by the fact that not all members of the given ethnic group use the same variety of language that used to be called Serbo-Croatian. In addition, there are no differences in the language of members of different ethnic or religious groups who live in the same area: Serbs from Croatia speak the same way as their Croatian neighbours do. Likewise, in the pre-war Bosnia there was no difference in the language spoken by Serbs, Croats, or Muslims. Linguist Ranko Bugarski wrote about the linguistic situation in pre-war multiethnic Sarajevo: "Naturally, there were individual differences in vocabulary range. Style of expression and level of language culture related to education, social status, profession, etc. But the point is that there existed no recognizable 'ethnolects' to cut across such difference: the belief that local urban Serbs, Croats, and Muslims spoke and wrote differently depending on ethnonational affiliation is a myth". The American linguist Victor Friedman similarly stresses that "in an ethnically mixed village or region, all the inhabitants will speak the same dialect, i.e. ethnically based dialects do not really exist".

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Language-successors of Serbo-Croatian have high symbolic value. Together with religion they are perceived as the most salient symbols of statehood and national identities in the post-Yugoslav societies. On purely communicative and everyday level, however, the symbolic importance of “linguistic separation” neither significantly endangered mutual intelligibility of idioms spoken by citizens of societies where Serbo-Croatian used to be spoken, nor did it facilitate a need for translating or interpreting. Twenty years after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and after more or less intense attempts to make the language-successors of Serbo-Croatian as different from each other as possible, it seems that the situation has normalized and that the project of ‘language engineering’ was abandoned. Although there are four different names for languages not many would claim that they are really that much different from each other. Societies in which Serbo-Croatian used to be spoken function again as a single area to a significant extent, particularly when it comes to publishing, cultural, and entertainment production. In a globalized and market oriented world, the fact that citizens of Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro speak languages which are difficult to tell from each other is no longer perceived as much of a reason for an identity crisis, but as an advantage. In the media industry, particularly as far as TV shows are concerned, it is not only possible to once again watch programs (including many very popular TV series) made in other former Yugoslav republics during Yugoslav times. The producers of contemporary programs, moreover, have the ambition to distribute them across the entire former Serbo-Croatian area. For example, local ‘soap operas’ are being watched across the region. The most popular are produced in Croatia, and they often feature a Serb among the cast, speaking the typical Serbian (Ekavian), usually with a strong tinge of Belgrade urban idiom. Here, the differences between various idioms that once belonged to Serbo-Croatian kept the role which they had while Serbo-Croatian existed: not only that these small differences did not influence mutual understanding and disturb communication – they enabled attaching extra-linguistic, cultural meanings to the varieties of Serbo-Croatian. This was obvious in movies, jokes, comic books, etc.

In the less interest-driven fields, such as arts, literature and cultural production in general, one can notice intensified cooperation and exchange, which are, according to some observers, even more intense than in the Yugoslav period, when these cultural ties were institutionally governed and maintained.

As regards the very name of the Serbo-Croatian language, it officially ceased to exist with the end of the socialist Yugoslavia. There are, however, a number of speakers who would, at least in some communicative situations, still identify the language they speak as Serbo-Croatian. In cross-national encounters as well as in diasporic settings, where interactions of people from different parts of former Yugoslavia are dense and more frequent, this label would also be frequently used, next to the descriptive, label-free expression ‘our language.’

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

Further cohesion and consumption of all 'new' standard languages in the whole area is to be expected, through sharing of media contents and entertainment programs, literary texts, etc. With Croatia becoming a member of the European Union in 2013, the Croatian language will become one of the official languages of the EU, while Serbian, Montenegrin and Bosnian will be more present in the official communication as the membership negotiations advance. All this will bring into the focus the necessity of translating official documents to/from all four languages. Solving this issue will inevitably give priority either to a symbolic 'height' of national languages derived from Serbo-Croatian, or to the fact that these are mutually intelligible idioms, that are in addition culturally clearly readable in the whole area where Serbo-Croatian used to be spoken.

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

The recent developments, which include the disintegration of the common Serbo-Croatian language and attempts to differentiation among its successors, should be observed in a broader historical context. It is important to bear in mind the fact that at any moment in the history of Serbo-Croatian there were simultaneous and parallel tendencies of convergence and divergence.

In the broader historical context, the sociolinguistic situation in the area where Serbo-Croatian used to be spoken is comparable with some other cases in Europe, for example with the development of Czech and Slovak from a single standard language. However, the comparison only makes sense to a certain extent: I believe that Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin will never achieve such degree of divergence as it has happened with the Czech and Slovak: market demands, shared media consumption, orientation of the former Yugoslav societies towards each other in the domains of economy and culture are among the factors that will prevent developing a significant distance among these languages. Of course, they will function separately as official means of communication in respective nation states, and will develop some particularities in their local contexts – but that was also the case with Serbo-Croatian, which was a polycentric language and had four standard varieties used in Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia.

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