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Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian: One Language or Three?

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

In August 2004 I visited Sarajevo and Zagreb, the capital cities of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, respectively, in order to consult with linguists and sociolinguists in these two countries. The title of my research topic, "Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian: one language or three?" embodies the dilemma of all who once took it for granted that Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Montenegrins all spoke a language named Serbo-Croatian, and makes reference to the book I am currently writing.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

It is well known that when Yugoslavia split up into several smaller countries, the language known as Serbo-Croatian ceased officially to exist. Although its place was taken by the successor official languages Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian, the inhabitants of former Yugoslavia continued to be able to communicate directly with one another. Thus, although the question embodied in my research title stated above may sound both rhetorical and oxymoronic, it is necessary to keep asking this question even when the answer to this question can be shown to be relatively clear-cut.

This "relatively clear-cut" answer may in turn be phrased as follows: If "language" is seen as communicative system, the three are still component parts of one unit, since all of them share the same grammar, and the differences in pronunciation and vocabulary do not prevent speakers from being able to converse freely with each other. But if "language" is seen as symbolic icon, representing ethnic/national identity and embodying the full cultural repository of a people's past, then the three are clearly separate. It is in this second sense that each of the three now represents a newly independent state and fulfills the function of "official" language in that state: Croatian is the official language of the Republic of Croatia, Serbian is the official language of Serbia-Montenegro, and Bosnian is one of three official languages in the complex unit of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Indeed, this clear perception of the symbolic tie between language and national/ethnic identity was one of the contributing factors in the escalation of tensions which led to the wars of the 1990s.

The reason we need to continue asking this question is because the situation is still a very dynamic one, imbued with great complexity. Nearly all on the outside with a serious interest in the former Yugoslavia (and many on the inside as well) are confused and frustrated, since it is not only unclear when one should take the unitary view ("one language") and when the multiple view ("three languages"), but it is also difficult to know what the consequences of each view are. It is a truism that to understand a country and a people, one must know their language. But how does one approach this goal when something so seemingly simple as "the language of a people" cannot be unilaterally defined?

Approach and Research Methodology

To aid such individuals, many of whom are or will be involved in policy-making decisions concerning the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, I have undertaken to write a detailed account of this situation. My book, entitled *BCS, A Grammar of Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian; with Sociolinguistic Commentary*, contains both a full description of the core grammar (and the differences among the three "implementations" of this grammar) and an analysis of the social and political background which has allowed this single "language" to morph into three "languages". Originally the grammar portion of the book was intended to serve both as classroom grammar and as teaching grammar, and the 2003 version of it was used that way in manuscript form by several different teachers. Their experience convinced me that the situation is too complex for a single-book approach. Therefore, I have decided to split the book into two: a classroom manual (containing dialogues, exercises, vocabulary listings and brief grammar explanations) and a reference manual (containing in-depth grammar explanations and sociolinguistic commentary). I have been fortunate to find an experienced pedagogue (Dr. Ellen Ćilas-Bursač) to co-author for the first of these with me, while I continue to be sole author of the second. The two books, due to be published by the University of Wisconsin Press, are keyed to each other, and both consciously present the language situation as simultaneously "one language" and "three languages".

My research visit was focused on Bosnia due to the relative novelty of the language situation there and the relative lack of solid information. In preparing the first full version of the manuscript I had been able to describe Serbian and Croatian relatively well since (on the one hand) Serbian had not changed radically since the days of Serbo-Croatian, and (on the other) the relatively dramatic changes in Croatian have been well documented in numerous published reference manuals. Bosnian, however, is much harder to pin down, and for this reason it was necessary to work with language professionals on the ground in Bosnia to round out my description of Bosnian.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

During my visit to Bosnia I was able to fill many of the lacunae concerning issues of Bosnian grammar. I was also able to check certain of my descriptive statements about Croatian with Croatian professionals, and to interview sociolinguists in both Bosnia and Croatia about the current sociopolitical issues of language and identity. The material gathered during this work period is now being incorporated into the final versions of these two books.

The primary purpose of these books is to provide a concrete and detailed description of a language situation in flux – a "synchronic slice", taken in the first decade of the twenty-first century, of something which is both relatively stable (the core grammar of "BCS") and extremely dynamic (the evolving separate languages). It is my hope that the second of these books will also help illuminate the ways in which language issues have participated in – sometimes shaping and sometimes being shaped by – the delicate balance between the centripetal and the centrifugal which characterized the entire history of Yugoslavia.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

It is important not to forget how politicized issues of language and identity are, nor how volatile and dynamic the situation still is on the ground in the former Yugoslavia (and especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina). In particular, while there clearly now is such a thing as the "Bosnian" language, it does not follow that everyone in Bosnia speaks "Bosnian" (or "Bosniac"). Only if language could once again be viewed as geographically

determined (and not ethnically determined) would this statement be true. As things stand now, it is critical, when Bosnia-Herzegovina is concerned, to frame any statement involving the idea of language in multivalent terms, in such a way as to allow access to all. It is also highly desirable that policy makers attain an understanding of language issues that goes deeper (and further) than the new language labels.