

## Vernacular Spoken in Bosnia and Herzegovina

### **BUJAK Samra**

International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina  
E-mail: samra\_sa18@hotmail.com

### **AKBAROV Azamat**

International Burch University, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina  
E-mail: aakbarov@ibu.edu.ba

Received 12.02.2014; Accepted 12.03. 2014

### **Abstract**

*Bosnian language has long been, and continues to be, a sensitive question to discuss about. This paper will present the language history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, introduce some linguistic features such as high and low variety of Bosnian language, codification, pragmatics, prestige etc. Besides the issues that are affected by the standardization of Bosnian as individual language. I will also discuss about how much politics affected language in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Politics is everywhere around us, so it is also involved in Bosnian language. Politics affected the development of Bosnian language a lot. How much war in Bosnia affected the progress of language? The war, between Bosnian and Serbs, that lasted long 4 years, from 1992-1996. This war was so long, it destroyed many lives and it also affected the progress of language. This is also political issue that I will discuss throughout the paper. All of these issues will be presented throughout this paper. "Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian (BCMS) language is a South Slavic language. Because it has four standard variants, it is a pluricentric language" (Blum, 2002: 8). The language was finally standardized in the mid 19th century, decades before a Yugoslav state was established (Ibidem, 130-132.). Croats and Serbs differ in many ways. First of all they have different religion and they have historically lived under different territory, and have adopted different literary forms as their respective standard variants. Since independence, Bosnian has likewise been established as an official standard in Bosnia and Herzegovina. All four standard variants are based on the same dialect (Štokavian).*

**Keywords:** vernacular, prestige, codification, dialect, pragmatics

### **1. Introduction**

In the 20th century, Serbo-Croatian had served as the official language of the

Kingdom of Yugoslavia (as "Yugoslavian"), and later as one of the official languages of the Socialist Federal Republic of

Yugoslavia. Among pluricentric languages, Serbo-Croatian was the only one with a pluricentric standardisation within one state. “Serbo-Croatian is a pluricentric language, with four standard variants spoken in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These variants do differ slightly, as is the case with other pluricentric languages (English, Spanish, German and Portuguese, among others), but not to a degree that would justify considering them as different languages“ (Brozović, 1992). The dissolution of Yugoslavia affected language attitudes, so that social conceptions of the language separated on ethnic and political lines. Bosnian is a standardized register of the Serbo-Croatian language, a South Slavic language, spoken by Bosnians (Ammon, 1995: 46).

As a standardized form of the Shtokavian dialect, it is one of the three official languages of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The same subdialect of Shtokavian is also the basis of standard Croatian and Serbian, as well as Montenegrin, so all are mutually intelligible (Blažek, 2010). “Because of their mutual intelligibility, Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian are usually thought of as constituting one language called Serbo-Croatian“ (Fortson, 2010). Until the dissolution of SFR Yugoslavia, they were treated as a unitary Serbo-Croatian language, and that term is still used in English to subsume the common base (vocabulary, grammar and syntax) of what are today officially four national standards, although the term is no longer used by native speakers (Dalby, 1999/2000: 445).

The modern Bosnian language uses both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabet. However, scripts other than Latin were used much earlier, most notably the indigenous Bosnian Cyrillic called *Bosančica* (literally "Bosnian script") with roots in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. The irony of the Bosnian language is that its speakers are, on the level of colloquial idiom, more linguistically homogeneous than either Serbs or Croats but they failed, for the historical reasons outlined below, to standardize their language in the crucial 19th century (Miklosich, 1858: 8-9).

The first Bosnian dictionary, a rhymed Bosnian–Turkish glossary authored by Muhamed Hevaji Uskufi, was composed in 1631. But unlike e.g. Croatian dictionaries, which were written and published regularly, Uskufi's work remained an isolated foray. At least two factors were decisive:

The Bosniak elite wrote almost exclusively in foreign (Turkish, Arabic, Persian) languages. Vernacular literature, written in modified Arabic script, was thin and sparse. The Bosnians' national emancipation lagged behind that of the Serbs and Croats, and since denominational rather than cultural or linguistic issues played the pivotal role, a Bosnian language project didn't arouse much interest or support.

## **2. Language in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The name "Bosnian language" is controversial for those Serbs and Croats who think the name of the language implies it is the language of all Bosnians, which includes Bosnian Croats and Serbs. Croats and Serbs mostly use the Croatian and the Serbian,

respectively. It should be noted that all three languages are mutually intelligible and are examples of Ausbausprache. Due to the conjunction of historical circumstances, all are essentially identical due to being codified on the same Neoshtokavian dialect, with a number of people identifying their language as the unified Serbo-Croatian language. Štokavian is the prestige dialect of the pluricentric Serbo-Croatian language, and the basis of its Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin standards. It is a part of the South Slavic dialect continuum. Its name comes from the form for the interrogatory pronoun for "what" which is western štokavian što and eastern štokavian šta in the Štokavian dialects system.

Štokavian is spoken in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the major part of Croatia, and the southern part of Austria's Burgenland. Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian (BCS) all hail from a dialect of Croatian called Stokavian. Two other dialects, Katavian and Cakavian, are still spoken in some parts of the region. Each of these dialects is named for the language's word for what. The difference between each of the Stokavian subdialects lies in how the language treats words which used to contain Medieval Slavic e: Ekavski retains e, Ikavski underwent a change e->i, and Ijekavski underwent diphthongization of e->ije or je.

Bosnian is described by Ijekavski, which is primarily found in the western Balkans. Of the three Serbo-Croatian languages, Bosnian is the most marginalized: many inhabitants of the region do not consider it a separate

language. Historically, it is the least standardized in orthography and lexicon. Yet it does exhibit some characteristics different from Serbian and Croatian: aside from a number of lexical differences, Bosnian is said to have retained pitch accent more clearly than the other two languages. Today there are standards and dictionaries for each of the three languages, but there is significant variation within each.

“Serbo-Croatian has a rich case structure that is reflected in the declension of nouns and adjectives. This makes syntax of little use and allows for a great deal of freedom in word order. In English, for example, the difference between "Man bites dog" and "Dog bites man" is shown by syntax. In Serbo-Croatian, Čovjek grize psa and Čovjeka grize pas have the same word order, but the meanings are shown by the noun endings. Any order is grammatically correct. However, the usual order is subject–verb–object“ (Kordić, 2006).

### 3. Political issues

Marica Petrovic, who lectures in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian at the University of Tuzla, believes language is always influenced by politics, but says this has happened far too much in BiH. Bosnian language is very much affected by politics even nowadays. Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into two Entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, which each have largely autonomous political power, as well as the district of Brčko, which is jointly administered by both. Each of the Entities

has its own constitution. So language is also divided because of the politics.

Many experts agree that the introduction of three separate languages instead of a common linguistic standard in Bosnia following the 1992-95 war has served the interests of political elites that wish to underline differences rather than commonalities among the three constituent ethnic groups. In their view, language policy is just another tool for deepening the divisions in an already partitioned country. If we pay attention on Sarajevo we can realize how much everything is affected by politics, not just the language but everything. Politics often becomes a major part of linguistic debates in this area. We have three different districts, three different presidents, three different standardized languages and all of these issues are affected by politics. So politics is pretty much everywhere in this country. Language is very much let's say "destroyed" by politics in this country.

#### **4. High and Low varieties of Bosnian Language**

When it comes to high and low varieties of Bosnian language spoken in Sarajevo it's very easy to distinguished whether the language is spoken in high or low variety. In formal situations, high variety is used; in informal situations, low variety is used. High variety is used in certain situations such as literature, formal education, universities, parliaments or other specific settings, but not used for ordinary conversation. Prestige people and upper-class people in Bosnia speak in high variety

of language, whereas working class people or lower-class people speak in low variety of language.

In informal conversations we use low variety of language; such as: - at home, in the neighborhood, on the street, at football match, with close friends etc. For example we cannot say for the cleaning woman lady, because she is not a lady. Lady is educated, beautiful, respected women. Lady is prestige women from upper-class society and cleaning women is working class. So we can see from this example how much prestige is important in terms of language.

#### **5. Prestige**

The concept of prestige in sociolinguistics is closely related to that of prestige or class within a society. Generally, there is positive prestige associated with the language or dialect of the upper classes, and negative prestige with the language or dialect of the lower classes. "Prestige is particularly visible in situations where two or more languages come in contact, and in diverse, socially stratified urban environments, in which there are likely to be speakers of different languages or dialects interacting frequently. Despite common perceptions that certain dialects or languages are relatively good or bad, correct or incorrect, "judged on purely linguistic grounds, all languages—and all dialects—have equal merit" (Fox, 1999).

In Sarajevo prestige is very important in terms of language. There are more than two languages spoken in Sarajevo and all of them come in contact with each other.

Besides Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian we have also Turkish language interacting very often between our standardized languages. There is a lot of Turkish language speaking communities in Sarajevo. There are also a lot of urban environments, small villages where people speak low variety of vernacular language and they speak with different dialects.

The arrival of the Ottoman Empire in 1463 caused two important nonlinguistic processes which have deeply impacted the development of Bosnian vernacular and literary works – Islamization and the migrations. The Islamization imposed on the Christians living in the region affected the development of written and spoken words in the Bosnian language, and the massive migrations that it triggered have caused dialectal shifts and even changes in the basis of the language. During almost four centuries of Ottoman rule, the Turkish language was the official language in Bosnia – the language of administration, Persian was the choice of language for poetic expression, and the Arabic was used in religion and the sciences.

Individuals who wanted to enter the fields of arts, sciences, military or politics had to have proficiency in all those tongues. Since only people of a higher-class social standing could receive education, those foreign idioms stayed confined to small numbers of population, never spreading to the masses who spoke the native Bosnian language. Christian religious ceremonies were conducted in the Bosnian language, as the

masses had difficulties understanding and connecting to Old Church-Slavonic.

The first Bosnian –Turkish dictionary was written in 1631, and is one of the oldest dictionaries within the South Slavic community. In order to demonstrate that Bosnian is not just a mix of Croatian and Serbian lexicon and grammar, some Bosniak linguists compiled a long list of what they call their “characteristic lexicon accompanied by the correct Bosnian pronunciation” (Halilović, 1991).

The majority of these words are archaisms which were borrowed from Turkish during almost four centuries of Ottoman rule (1483-1878), and “whose integration and active use is highly variable, especially given the multivalent nature of Bosnian society” (Ronelle, 2006). Many Bosnians (Muslim or not) use Turkish-derived words (Turkism) when they are talking about Muslim religion and secular concepts rooted in the Ottoman times, some of which are family relationships, clothing items and food preparation. Even though the Turkism in Serbo-Croatian/ Croato-Serbian Language was the most comprehensive dictionary of Turkism which included over 8,700 words and phrases, “it is estimated that there are over 10,000 Turkism in the Bosnian language” (Halilović, 1991).

## **6. Linguistic Divisions**

The situation regarding languages and the differences between languages in BiH is rather stunning. Although, as previously discussed, the idiom spoken by all the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from the linguistic point of view, is in fact one

language with a number of variants and dialects, Bosnians use different names for their languages (Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian respectively).

Based on the material covered before, it is clear that the names of the languages in this region are based on nationalities and politics. It is then obvious that in the mixed cantons the strict insistence on separating children by sending them to schools where they can learn “their own” language in the FBiH is politically and not linguistically motivated.

This reality is reflected in the fact that education system supports such policies by teaching each language separately and corresponding to the ethnic majority in the region, thus there are textbooks on „Bosnian language, „Croatian Language” and „Serbian Language”. Sadly, the only difference in these books is mostly “substitution of one letter for another – using /o/ instead of /a/ (e.g., što „what” (Croatian) instead of šta (Bosnian), can be deemed a nationalistic act and cause a problem” (Pašalić-Kreso, 2002)

## **7. Conclusion and suggestions**

Today Bosnia consists of three nations, who speak three (mutually intelligible) languages, and remember three different versions of the history they made. Incredibly enough, people are the ones who pay the steepest price, for the pre-war generations who knew life in peace and unity are left with nothing they can relate to – segregation based on different histories, names of languages majority doesn't even know how

to refer to, and even artificial differences among the languages that goes against the innateness of Universal Grammar they were born with.

Thus, those generations deal not only with the Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, poverty as a result of post-war economic depression hit hard by the worldwide economic crisis, but they also have to deal with loss of personal, cultural and national identity. So, are the idioms spoken in on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro one or four separate languages?

I guess the right answer is that looking from the linguistic point of view, by analyzing the organic idiom that people speak, it is one language. But, from the non-linguistic perspective, by looking at the inorganic idiom, which is politicized standard, it is clear to see that “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy”. I have found out more than I expected about the language of my native country and its history. And just like in any other social spheres, what is on the paper seems to be much more important than how it impacts everyday lives. So, I guess for once in my lifetime, I can benefit from the ignorance behind such attitude, for, now on paper, I am considered a multilingual –since I can fluently speak Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian and Montenegrin. But really, given everything presented in this paper, I cannot help but ask myself, “Does the name of language I speak truly define who I am and where do I come from?”

To sum up, I want to state that the languages studied in this paper plays a big role in the lives of people who speak them. Languages form the character and mentality of the country where it is spoken, which is really important. I hope that in nearest future these languages will become more popular in the world.

### References

1. Ammon, Ulrich. (1995). German Language in Germany, Austria and Switzerland: The Problem of National Varieties (in German). Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 46. OCLC 33981055.
2. Blažek, Václav. "On the Internal Classification of Indo-European Languages: Survey", retrieved 20 Oct 2010, 15-16.
3. Blum, Daniel, (2002). "Language and Policy: Language Policy and Linguistic Nationalism in the Republic of India and the Socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1991)". In Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung, vol. 192 (in German). Würzburg: Ergon. pp.130-132 ISBN 3-89913-253-X. OCLC 51961066.
4. Brozović, Dalibor (1992). "Serbo-Croatian as a pluricentric language". In Clyne, Michael G., Pluricentric Languages: Differing Norms in Different Nations. Contributions to the sociology of language, 62. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 347–380. OCLC 24668375.
5. Dalby, David. Linguasphere (1999/2000, Linguasphere Observatory), 53-AAA-g, "Srpski-Hrvatski, Serbo-Croatian",445,
6. Fortson, Benjamin. IV, Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction, 2nd ed. (2010, Blackwell), pg. 431
7. Fox, Margalit. (2009). "The Way We Live Now: 9-12-99: On Language; Dialects". In The New York Times.
8. Kordić, Snježana. (2006). Serbo-Croatian. Languages of the World/Materials; 148. Munich & Newcastle: Lincom Europe. p.71. ISBN 3-89586-161-8. OCLC 37959860. OL2863538W. Lay summary.
9. Miklosich, Franz. (1858). Monumenta Serbica, Viennae, 8-9.
10. Pasalic-Kreso, Adila.(2002). Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Minority Inclusion and Majority Rules. Current Issues in Comparative Education.
11. Ronelle, Alexander. (2006). Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian: A grammar with Sociolinguistic Commentary. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press