

# **Sociolinguistic Analysis of "Serbo-Croatian"**

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**Calgary Working Papers in Linguistics**

**Volume 18, Winter 1996, ISSN 0823-0579**

Nationalism is a phenomenon that has been responsible for a great deal of conflict and bloodshed throughout history, perhaps because national identity is by no means transparent nor easy to define. It is intimately tied to individual perceptions of unity and identity such as history, religion, culture, and language. The relationship between nationalism and these perceptions is also not one way. They both affect and define each other. In fact, sometimes national identity and factors such as language or religion, are treated as being almost synonymous. Such a situation currently exists in the former Yugoslavia.

Serbia and Croatia have had a long history of conflict on many levels. Daniel Solanovif quotes, "The war in the former Yugoslavia is being fought on several fronts, some of which are more salient than others. Even our dictionaries have become battle fields, where mortar shells have been replaced by the coinage of nouns in the effort of separating us from them." This "dictionary front", of course refers to the use of the language, "Serbo-Croatian". The common objective analysis is that there is one language, "Serbo-Croatian", of which there are three main dialects: Štokavian, Kajkavian, and „akavian (the names are based on the word for "what" in each dialect). Štokavian also has three dialects: Ekavian, Ijekavian, and Ikavian (the names based on the phonological variation between e, ije, and i). Ijekavian is the dialect considered to be standard Croatian and Ekavian is the dialect considered to be standard Serbian.

The general attitude of Croats is that Croatian (Štokavian - Ijekavian) and Serbian (Štokavian - Ekavian) are completely autonomous languages and as such, Croats try to emphasize the differences. Serbs however, are trying to down play those differences, taking the position that there is only one language with several variants<sup>1</sup>. Regardless, Croats appear to be the most vehement in questions of language, mainly because of the perception that

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<sup>1</sup> This statement concerning the general attitude of Serbs was made by my informants, neither of whom were Serbian. There is no reason to doubt the truth of the statement; however, since I had no Serbian informant to confirm or deny it, I recognize the possible bias.

Serbian had been imposed upon them. Currently, a movement to label all Serbian words and remove them from Croatian use is underway. Radicals may even completely alienate individuals (indeed, even cause bodily harm) for the use of any markedly Serbian terms or styles. More commonly, it is just emphatically discouraged. This is a particularly arbitrary movement, for many of these "Serbian" words have commonly been used by Croats and it seems that the labelling of words as "Serbian" or not is more politically motivated than etymologically. In fact, the movement has required the coinage of new words (using "Croatian" roots and affixation and compounding) for many meanings that had no word other than the "Serbian". The movement has also required the translation of foreign words such as common brand names and technological terms that were borrowings from other languages (Personal Consultation). Ironically, it appears that Croats with language variants similar to Serbs are looked down upon as much as Serbs themselves.

There are, of course, differences in the dialects of Serbs and Croats - mainly in the phonology and lexicon - however, this is hardly clear cut. For one thing, the two variants are completely mutually intelligible; the variation is systematic; and, as with any language, there is a continuum of variation that does not adhere to the political boundaries in the area. As well, the dialects of Ijekavian (Croatian) and Ekavian (Serbian) are more similar to each other than Ijekavian is to Kajkavian or „akavian even though the latter three are all considered dialects of Croatian.

Since, obviously, language and politics are so tightly entwined with each other in this area, it is necessary to look at the political history of the area in order to see how various influences have directed the development of the variants in Serbo-Croatian.

**History of the Balkans:**

The Slavs came to the Balkans (or alternately known as Illyria) around the seventh century: the Slovenes to the north and the Serbs and Croats to the south. With them they brought "Paleo-Croatian" a branch of "Paleo-Slavonic" and there was very little linguistic variation (Franolif 1984).

Croatia at this time was influenced by the Frankish Empire in the North and the Byzantine Empire in the south. It was also at this time that the Croats were converted to Christianity under the Roman Catholics. Because of this, Croats adopted Old Church Slavonic from the Macedonians and modified it into "Croatian Slavonic", written in Glagolitic. This was used by the church until 1965 when the Vatican decided that it was acceptable to use the vernacular during services. Croatian Slavonic is considered to be the first Croatian literary language (Franolif 1984).

Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire were constantly fighting over Serbia during this period and consequently, Serbia changed hands several times. It was around 800 that the Serbs were won over to the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Around 900 Croatia shook off its oppressors and emerged as a unit centered in Biograd on the Dalmatian Coast. Serbia, meanwhile, experienced various civil wars between rival factions through out the country - mainly between Montenegro and Hercegovina (in the West) and Raška (in the East). Eventually, around 1100, power shifted to Raška and Serbia was born. Around the same time, Hungary took over Croatia and its center moved to Zagreb. Croatia remained under Hungarian control for over eight hundred years (with occasional interruption), although it did maintain a great deal of autonomy and internal independence. At this time as well, the vernacular written in Glagolitic came to be used by the government and for local literature.

Between 1100 and 1300, the Serbian Empire (centered in Skoplje) grew through the development of mining and agriculture, and through the use of the Orthodox Church's

influence to build internal stability and quash Latin influences. About the middle of the fourteenth century, the Serbian Empire began to fall to the Ottoman Empire and by the late 1500's, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Hungary were under the control of the Turks. The Ottoman Empire, however, allowed a great deal of autonomy and tolerated all the religions and languages in the area.

Croatian, during the sixteenth century, was heavily influenced by Italian because of the renaissance and the Croats' desire for Croatian to be at least as significant.

Consequently, the Latin alphabet became widespread throughout Croatia and literature blossomed in all of the dialects. Some writers even consciously mixed dialects in an effort to amalgamate them. Spelling varied greatly, although it was somewhat standardized by the press. Later in the 1600's, there showed a marked convergence towards a standard based on Štokavian - Ikavian.

The area remained, for the most part, under the control of the Ottoman Empire until its decline in the late 1600's, at which point, Hungary, Croatia, and Slovenia were recovered by Austria. Over the next 50 years, areas of Serbia passed back and forth between Austria and Turkey until it finally rested back in Turkish hands. While under Turkish control this time, the Serbs were severely repressed - the Serb Orthodox Church was even taken over by the Greek patriarchate. In 1804, Serbs rose against their oppressors (aided by Russia) and managed to gain territory and assert the independence of the Serbian Church. Unfortunately, because of Napoleon's influence in Europe, by 1815 they were again under Turkish rule; however, they had won autonomy. It was not until this point that vernacular Serbia became seen in literature - until then, Serbs wrote in Russianized Church Slavonic or "Slaveno-Serbski".

Meanwhile, because of Napoleon, there was a growing movement towards the union of southern Slavs called the "Illyrian Movement" and in general, nationalism in all south Slavic

states increased dramatically (although the Serbs were against Illyrianism). Independently, Serbs and Croats were trying to standardize the dialects under the Štokavian - Ijekavian dialect. However, even though there were efforts to come to agreement (The Vienna Literary Agreement), because there was very little real contact between Serbs and Croats and because of certain ideological differences, nothing was ever really accomplished. As well, the Serbs shifted to using Ekavian as their standard.

The Illyrians supported borrowing of words into the language in an effort to modernize it for use in education and science and technology. Their borrowing took three forms: 1) adoption of dialect words and the resurrection of obsolete words, 2) borrowing of words from other Slavic languages and loan translation from German, and 3) coinage of new words from native elements by affixation and compounding. Unfortunately, the Illyrian movement eventually fell to Croatian independence and Serbian and Croatian continued to develop independently.

Throughout the 1800's, conflict over control of the area continued between Austria, Hungary, Turkey, and Russia. In 1877, Russia won Serbian independence from Turkey, and in 1882, Serbia was declared a kingdom. Conflicts in the Balkans were complicated by both Serbian and Croatian designs on the rest of the Balkans to create "Greater Croatia" and "Greater Serbia". With this development, it seemed that the idea of a Yugoslav state was lost. However, after the Serbs were successful in defeating Turkey, the Slavs under Austria-Hungary were re-inspired and under new leaders, the Serbs and Croats and other Slavs pulled together against Austria-Hungary.

After the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and the beginning of World War I, a Slavic unity seemed to be the only hope for Slavs to keep from being overrun, and so in 1917, Yugoslavia was born. It was declared as a constitutional, democratic, and parliamentary monarchy, with equality for the two alphabets (Latin and Cyrillic) and the three religions

(Roman Catholic, Moslem, and Eastern Orthodox). During World War II, Yugoslavia was defeated, and partitioned and occupied between the Axis powers. The Communist Party lead by Tito was instrumental in forcing the Axis Powers out of Yugoslavia and after the war, finding no organized political opposition, Tito formed a new, communist, Yugoslav state completely independent of Russian influence - the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Freedom of religion was promoted (as well as the division of religion and state) under Tito's government and while the Orthodox and Moslem faiths adjusted to the new government, the Roman Catholic Church remained vehemently opposed to communism. Under Tito, Serbo-Croatian was declared the official language and it was required by all citizens. The media retained in the various local standards and languages; however, when Serbo-Croatian was taught in schools, Ekavian, the Serb standard was the one that was taught.

Tito remained leader of Yugoslavia until his death in 1980, at which point Yugoslavia began to disintegrate. Eventually, Serbia tried to take over power in the government and this led to Slovenia's and Croatia's declaration of independence and the war that is currently waged.

The actual differences between the dialects Ijekavian and Ekavian are mainly limited to orthographic, phonological, and lexical, although there are other minor grammatical and semantic differences (for example, Ekavian has a borrowed Turkish affix).

#### **Orthographic:**

Serbian is mainly associated with the Cyrillic alphabet, although the Latin alphabet is also quite widespread. Croatian employs the Latin alphabet almost exclusively.

#### **Phonological:**

There is basically only one phonological distinction<sup>2</sup> - the regular variance between /e/ (Ekavian) and /je/. (Likewise the sound varies with /i/ in Ikavian.)

**Lexical:**

Here there are a great many distinctions. Such is to be expected considering the different influences each variant has experienced over the course of time. For example, Turkish heavily influenced the speech of Serbs, and literary Serbian still has many of these borrowings:

	Serbian (from Turk.)	Croatian Equivalent
'garden'	bašta	virt
'soup'	..orba	juha
'a quilt'	jorgan	poplun

However, again, there are no clear dialectal boundaries. Croatians that are emphatically nationalistic have used some of these words all their lives. As well, the variant spoken in Bosnia has been described as "Ijekavian using Ekavian words" (referring to the fact that they use the "ije" phonological variant and Ekavian lexical variants).

Thus, we are left with the question, "Are Serbian and Croatian the same language or not?" This, of course, is not easy to answer nor will the answer remain constant throughout various contexts.

From a linguistic standpoint, we must come to the conclusion that they are simply dialects of the same language. There are no more variations between Serbian and Croatian than there are between Canadian English and any other dialect of English, indeed, perhaps even fewer in some cases. Syntactic and morphological constructions remain the same and the languages are mutually intelligible. Even though there are words marked as either

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<sup>2</sup> According to my informants, there is also some degree of variation in voicing. However, I could find no reference to it in other sources, nor could they formalize the variation to a satisfactory degree.

"Serbian" or "Croatian", everyone is at least aware of the words and know their meanings. Therefore, the vocabulary of each can be said to be part of the lexicon of a speaker even though it may not be utilised.

Dragutin Subotif, Ph.D. and Nevill Forbes, M.A., Ph.D. had this to say in the preface of their book "Serbian Grammar" (1926):

"The title of this book has been chosen for the sake of simplicity. The full name of the language is Serbo-Croatian. It must be emphasized that Croatian, except for slight differences of dialect and vocabulary, is absolutely the same language as Serbian, only written with the Latin alphabet with diacritic signs. Knowledge of both of the Cyrillic and Latin (Croatian) alphabets is indispensable to any student of Serbo-Croatian"

Politically, however, the variants are quite different. It is human nature to try to define identity with other humans and quite often a basis of that identity is common language. It becomes not only a tool for communication, but a symbol of identity - of a group's autonomy. Such is the case here. Regardless of the linguistic facts presented, on the whole, the speakers of the language perceive the variants as being different languages. If we compare Serbian and Croatian using Bell's seven criteria (1976) for language, we must conclude that they are, indeed, separate languages.

1) **Standardization:** Both Serbian and Croatian are standardized. Despite the obvious alphabet differences, there are different standardized spellings for the same words. As well, media and literature use both variants.

2) **Vitality:** Obviously, both variants have a living community of speakers.

3) **Historicity:** Although Serbian and Croatian have shared very similar histories and at times, language was a basis for unity, this is not true now. In fact, historical differences are being emphasized (primarily by Croats). For example the influence of Turkish on Serbian

because of the years of control by the Ottoman Empire.

**4) Autonomy:** Croats certainly feel that they speak a different language. The opposite appears to be true however, with Serbs<sup>3</sup>. Despite this incongruity, it cannot be said that there is agreement.

**5) Reduction:** Obviously, the conflict has led to animosity between the nationalities, and therefore, they look down on each other in general. However, I don't feel that we can claim that either variant is seen as a sub-variety of the other. If anything, the feeling is that they have nothing to do with each other at all (Personal Consultation). There is no reduction in the uses of the language - both are used in all levels of society in their colloquial and standard forms. In other words, it appears that it is the nationality, of which the language is a marker, that is stigmatized within each community, not the language itself.

**6) Mixture:** In neither case do the speakers feel that their language is impure<sup>4</sup> or is a marginal variety of some other language. As well, Croats at least, believe that their variant has a purity distinct from Serbian in that they perceive Serbian as being "impure", having more outside influences from other languages than Croatian (Personal Consultation).

**7) Presence of De Facto Norms:** Both Croatian and Serbian have a continuum of "good" and "poor" speakers. Unsurprisingly, the poorest speakers of Croatian are those with a variant closest to Serbian. However, the perceptions of "good" and "bad" are not only restricted to Croatian vs Serbian; it extends to regional variants and register variants within the dialects of Croatian and Serbian.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a conclusion based on two sources: 1) the literature printed in Yugoslavia during its existence and the fact that in all cases, Serbo-Croatian is treated as a single language, and 2) the reports of my informants as to the attitudes of Serbs. I recognize that both of these sources may be biased. However, even if this conclusion was found to be untrue, it would only strengthen the argument that according to Bell's criteria, Serbian and Croatian are quite different.

<sup>4</sup> This does not refer to the fact that Croats have been instituting a "purity movement" in their language. In fact, the feeling is that the impurities that are being removed are Serbian influences and that they are returning to a more pure form of their language.

So, therefore, according to these criteria, we find that, at least from the perspective of those involved (particularly Croats), Serbian and Croatian can be considered different languages.

Obviously, the question of language in the former Yugoslavia is a complicated one and here, I have only scratched the surface. This has mainly been a discussion of the standard dialects of Serbian and Croatian. The situation becomes more complicated if we look at the other languages in the area such as Slovenian and Macedonian. As well, there are increased movements for autonomy among other groups - Bosnians, for example. Radicals suggest that the variant spoken in Bosnia be proclaimed a language distinct from Serbian and Croatian. Also, because of the limited sources available, it is possible that this discussion is biased in perspective. A more in depth study into the linguistic attitudes of the various groups in the former Yugoslavia would certainly be called for and would reveal much.

One thing is clear, however, this is a pivotal point in the history of the people in this area as well as their language. The result of this conflict could well determine whether the variants present are driven apart enough so that in the future they do indeed become two distinct languages.

**Note:** I would like to thank Daniel Solanovij and Jasminka Kazif for their aid in the production of this paper. They have provided much information not available in literature due to the recent nature of this topic. Their help was invaluable and greatly appreciated.

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## Other Sources

**Personal Consultation:** A series of informal interviews with Daniel Solanovif, a Croatian, and Jasminka Kazif, a Bosnian Moslem over November and the beginning of December, 1993.