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Language and Ethnicity in Sarajevo: Some Recollections and Observations

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This essay combines the author's linguistic memories from his youth in the multiethnic city of Sarajevo with recent observations on linguistic reality there, with reference to the links between language and ethnicity. The point is made that, whereas there had been no recognizable "ethnolects" in the past, political developments have laid the foundation for their possible partial emergence in the future. Although ordinary Sarajevo folk continue to speak the same language regardless of ethnic allegiance, the new national elites tend to emphasize linguistic features marking their members as Bosniaks, Serbs or Croats rather than just Sarajevans.

I have enjoyed and cherished Damir Kalogjera's friendship ever since we first met in the mid-1950s. He had just been appointed a teaching assistant in the newly established programme of English studies at the University of Sarajevo, where I was in my final undergraduate year. This initial distinction of status, coupled with a small difference in age, made it possible for me decades later to insist that he had been my teacher and to amuse our common friends by insinuating that he was my senior by a considerable margin. Yet there is a sense in which he was truly a model for anyone (including myself) with a keen interest in the social life of language: he was a born sociolinguist even before the advent of sociolinguistics as an academic discipline. I offer the following lines to him in the belief that he might enjoy reflecting, after nearly half a century, on Sarajevo speech as he remembers it and comparing his own recollections with mine. In so doing he may of course disagree with some of the things I say: as a relative outsider he could have spotted details which may have escaped my attention as a native.

I was born in Sarajevo and lived there for 28 years before moving to Belgrade. Thereafter I visited the place on and off until the siege of the city in 1992 and have not seen it since. My recollections, then, are based on first-hand experience during the



period indicated, and complemented with outside observations on any recent war-induced changes.

The first thing to be said, I think, is that a sense of perspective should be maintained despite the dramatic political developments and the official dissolution of Serbo-Croatian/Croato-Serbian into Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian. That is to say, the links between language and ethnicity in the Sarajevo area, while somewhat modified, do not appear to have been drastically reordered. Broadly speaking, the citizens of Sarajevo go on using essentially the same local dialect, or version of the standard language, for everyday spoken and written communication with little regard to ethnicity or nationality. But let us observe the chronology of events.

In the days of my youth, in a city which was then truly multiethnic (though perhaps without knowing it), members of numerous ethnic groups lived for the most part harmoniously and shared much the same speech habits. 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 differences: the belief that local urban Serbs, Croats and Moslems spoke and wrote differently depending on ethnonational affiliation is a myth. This general statement holds despite specific lexical markers, rare and unimportant, which might have identified a person using words like *kruh* or *vlak* as a Croat, or one frequently talking of *mejtef* or *denaza* as a Moslem. We also disregard characteristic speech traits of the uneducated suburban population groups, in which features usually perceived as Moslem may have been more expressed.

Speaking, then, mainly of the younger and educated urban population, it may be justifiably claimed that Serbs and Croats could in their normal speech be distinguished from Moslems with some difficulty and from each other not at all. Such a claim will probably be surprising to anyone who habitually believes that Moslems can always and everywhere be spotted as such the moment they open their mouths, since they have only the phonemes *ć* and *đ*, but not *č* or *ž*, insert *h* where the others would not, regularly swallow unstressed syllables, and so on. They allegedly utter things shocking to the well-behaved Croats and Serbs, such as *Des' pošo?* (Gdje si pošao?), *Priã'kaj bâ* (Pričekaj bolan) or *Jes' vidla?* (Jesi li vidjela?). But this was hardly an ethnic peculiarity of the Moslem populace; rather, it was more or less what everybody tended to say informally – Moslems perhaps more markedly at times. It was simply the general casual Sarajevo idiom of the time; the question what is in fact ethnic about all this, and in what way, remains open – the more so as the subtle distinctions which the trained ear could capture were, as we see, merely of a statistical nature.

At this point we may invoke an anecdote according to which this “Sarajevo ethnicity” in its spoken realization owes a lot to a single person, employed as guard at the entrance to a busy dance hall in the city centre, a highly popular local character with whose gags successive generations of youngsters wholeheartedly identified. (I can still see his freckled face as I write). He had, so the story goes, picked up and deliberately exaggerated the



features of speech just illustrated, building them into his personal image. However, his linguistic fooling around was enthusiastically welcomed and imitated, spreading like a craze across new generations to become after some time their normal everyday way of speaking. And what makes this urban legend particularly juicy is that this powerful generator of “Moslem” speech was of Serb nationality!

The anecdote may have been invented, of course, but *se non è vero è ben trovato*: the point is that it could have been real. We may add parenthetically that in the framework of modern sociolinguistic theory, which distinguishes between changes from above and from below, this might be described as an exceptional instance of change spreading from a well-defined single point somewhere in between.

Similarly, I recall an educated young woman from a respectable Sarajevo Serb family, living in the heart of the city with her Croat husband, whose casual speech sounded distinctly “Moslem” - as if she were an ordinary *mahaluša*. The same was true of a pharmacist of Montenegrin descent who had spent decades in Sarajevo with her husband, a Belgrade Serb, whose speech throughout this period differed markedly from hers. Examples like these could no doubt be multiplied. The situation suggests a rough analogy with Black English Vernacular in the USA (as described in Trudgill 1995:39-40): there exists a type of speech widely perceived as Moslem, although it is not necessarily used by all Moslems, or by Moslems alone. Which only goes to show how complex and intriguing is the nature of ethnicity and of its expression in language.

The foregoing account relates to a time when all the inhabitants of Sarajevo believed they spoke one and the same language, *sprskohrvatski*, whose name they informally abbreviated to *es-ha*. However, with an exception to be noted below, linguistic reality does not seem to have changed much since those days. Everyone still speaks basically the same Serbo-Croatian, except that it is now formally called Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian, as the case may be. In private, though, it is likely to remain *es-ha*, or *sarajevski*, or *naški* - the last two representing traditional, evasive non-ethnic labels felt by many to be the most comfortable.

I recently heard one such “our” voice on TV, the set itself being outside my vision, and after a few sentences I concluded that the speaker was from Sarajevo, probably Moslem (that is, now, Bosniak). But on approaching the screen I recognized the face of a Sarajevo Croat, once a football star and at present a noted international coach. Thus my guess was nearly correct; it might have been perfect had the man by any chance been in a hurry to catch his *vlak* and said so... To my regret he did not refer to his old-time team, *Željezničar*, so I was left wondering whether the name would still be telescoped as before, in rapid speech, to *ženčar*!

Even more recently I watched a Belgrade TV journalist interviewing three young men in a Sarajevo coffee house. They all spoke exactly alike, and I listened attentively for possible ethnicity markers. At one point one of them happened to use the word *hefta*, a supposedly Bosnian (Moslem) form meaning ‘week’. When the interviewer, apparently struck by this usage, asked if this was the usual word, the youngster commented



in an unmistakably ironic tone of voice, “*Hefta, sedmica, nedjelja*: govorimo tri jezika!” A minute later I caught the speaker’s name: it was Željko – which in Sarajevo would probably identify a Croat, possibly a Serb but hardly a Moslem. This episode, like others that could be cited, indicates that even today Sarajevo residents of any ethnic background are conscious of speaking the same language, whatever they may choose to call it. And it is highly unlikely that, given a mixed group of mates chatting together and asked what language they were using, the three names Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian would be seriously offered in accordance with individual ethnicity; some form of “our” language would be a much more likely response.

There is, however, a notable exception to the prevailing uniformity of current linguistic practice. This is the newly acquired habit, developed during and after the armed conflicts on Bosnian soil, of the new political and cultural elites of the three nations to pick out and emphasize ethnicity markers, especially in formal speech and writing. The motivation underlying such public behaviour would seem to be mostly emotional, reflecting increased ethnonational consciousness in the three-way cleavage, or else purely pragmatic, as upward social mobility now apparently necessitates or at least encourages overt “streaming” into Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats on the linguistic level as well. Such identification acts as a powerful symbol of national allegiance, which under the changed circumstances supports claims to a share in political representation and the distribution of social power. A certain artificiality of the exercise is highlighted by the fact that most public performers have not been very good at it, producing strange hybrids by mixing ekavian and ijekavian forms or pronouncing “Croatian” or “Serbian” words with a strong “Bosnian” accent.

The picture just presented actually represents most of Bosnia-Herzegovina with its two “entities” and not only Sarajevo itself, now overwhelmingly Bosniak anyway. (We may note in passing that within the idiom now officially designated as Bosnian there are marked variations in the amount of ethnic overlay from one register to another. For example, religious publications are far more imbued with Oriental and Islamic linguistic features than most of the daily press of wide circulation; see e.g. Mønnesland 2003).

In any case, what we have described is a clear example of gradual change from above, with the elites in effect forcing new speech habits on the general public. The pattern seems similar to that found in Croatia, where increased Croatization of the official registers has had only a limited influence on the everyday language of the common people (see Kalogjera 2003). No such comparison can be made with Serbia, since there have been no serious attempts to “purify” the language there on ethnic grounds. On the other hand, the abortive wartime effort by the Bosnian Serb leadership to impose the ekavian pronunciation on an ijekavian-speaking population, thus making it “more Serbian”, stands out as a drastic instance of attempted instantaneous change by decree which was naturally doomed to failure. (For more on this last point, but also for the general context of nationalism and war which gave rise to the developments surveyed here, see Bugarski 2001, with further references).



To conclude, if there is a lesson to be drawn from the miniature case study presented, it is that language, ethnicity and nationality are interwoven in intricate ways, defying neat administrative or other divisions. This is hardly breaking news to any sociolinguist, but our little essay may at least serve as an additional reminder of the true complexity and delicacy of real-life situations in contrast to the schematic partitions that may be dictated by the course of political events. And as regards the Sarajevo area, it remains to be seen whether the currently creeping diversification will eventually result in reasonably coherent and recognizably distinct “ethnolects”.

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JEZIK I NARODNOST U SARAJEVU: SJEĆANJA I ZAPAŽANJA

U ovom radu autor kombinira svoja lingvistička sjećanja iz mladosti provedene u multietničkom gradu Sarajevu sa svojim novijim zapažanjima u vezi s aktualnom situacijom u pogledu veze između jezika i narodnosti. Iako u prošlosti nije bilo prepoznatljivih “etnolekata”, politički događaji uvjetovali su njihovu moguću djelomičnu pojavu u budućnosti. Premda obični narod u Sarajevu i dalje govori istim jezikom bez obzira na etničku pripadnost, nove nacionalne elite pokazuju težnju k naglašavanju jezičnih obilježja koja ih označavaju ne kao Sarajlije, nego kao Bošnjake, Srbe ili Hrvate.

