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(SERBO-)CROATIAN: A TALE OF TWO LANGUAGES

Since Croatia joined the European Union on in July 2013, Croatian is now the 24th official language of the Union. But not everybody agrees on what constitutes the Croatian language and whether such a separate language exists at all. What makes a form of speech a distinct language or a mere dialect can mean different things to a linguist than to a government or a nationalist. Many people adopt Max Weinreich’s half-joking definition of language as a “dialect with an army and a navy”. For example, we think of Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian as three languages rather than dialects because they are spoken in three different countries, with their own armies and navies. Linguists, however, prefer to define languages as dialects that are not mutually understandable. Under this definition, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian are dialects of the same language because a Swede, a Dane, and a Norwegian can understand each other fairly easily. In the former Yugoslavia, the tricky issue of what constitutes a language feeds into the ethnic and political discord that has ravaged the region for decades.

Slovenian and Macedonian are distinct languages, but the rest of the former Yugoslavians—Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, and Montenegrins—speak three major dialects that are as similar to each other as are Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian. These three dialects are named after the way the word for “what” is pronounced: “shto” in the Shtokavian dialect found in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and northeastern Croatia; “kay” in the Kaykavian dialect of the Croatian capital Zagreb and environs; and “cha” in the Chakavian dialect now limited to Croatia’s Dalmatian coast and some of the islands in the Adriatic Sea. Besides pronunciation, the dialects differ in word choice and grammar. Importantly, the three major dialects in the Serbo-Croatian zone do not correspond to the geopolitical boundaries of the four constituent countries (Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia). However, one important aspect of language—writing—does correlate with geopolitical boundaries. Because of the influence of their respective religions, Serbs, who are Eastern Orthodox Christians, traditionally use the Cyrillic alphabet, similar to the one used for Russian, while Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks use the Roman alphabet, almost identical to the one used in English.

While issues of writing are of no great concern for linguists, who focus on spoken languages, they are crucial for government authorities, keen to establish national standards to be used in state administration, the media, and most importantly in schools. (The British English standard, for example, is to write honour and theatre, while the standard American English spelling is honor and theater.) When it comes to standardized national language, Serbs and Croats have a long history of disagreeing about what to call any such language and which forms to adopt. During most of the twentieth century, when Yugoslavia was a unified country, the national standard of Serbia and Croatia, as well as of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, was called “Serbo-Croatian”, a standardized language based on the Shtokavian dialect. The equality of the two written forms of the language was formally established by the Novi Sad Agreement, signed by Serbs and Croats in 1954. But in 1967 several Croatian cultural institutions issued the Declaration on the name and status of the Croatian literary language, calling for a recognition of a separate Croatian standard. Yugoslavian state authorities launched a merciless attack on the Declaration and its signatories. Work on the Croatian dictionary was halted, and many of those who signed the declaration were imprisoned.

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the issue of language identity came to the fore once again. Serbian nationalists insist that everybody shares the same language, “Serbian”. But many Croats persist in making their national language, still based on the Shtokavian dialect, as distinct from Serbian as possible. To do so, international words (such as kualifikacija [“qualification”] and aerodrome) and words perceived as “too Serbian” are being eliminated from the language and replaced with “native Croatian” words. For example, the Croats play nogomet (literally ‘foot-throwing’), while the Serbs play fudbal ‘soccer’. As so often occurs, politics intrudes on language, and in so doing changes the map of linguistic patterns in unexpected ways.

And that is the Geography News Network. July 17, 2013. #8.

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