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Language and State: the Yugoslav Experience¹

The relationship between language and state is a complex one and can be studied under many aspects. On the one hand, as a simple exercise in elementary arithmetic will readily show, today's world is very far indeed from anything approaching the one state – one language formula: dividing some 5,000 languages by approximately 200 states gives a global average of 25 languages per state. The principal "culprits" for such a glaring disproportion, of course, are the many multiethnic and multilingual states, especially but by no means exclusively in the so-called Third world. More generally, it is wise to remember that on the level of linguistic reality – as distinct from official declarations – there are very few monolingual states on our planet.

It is not my purpose here to expound on this state of affairs or to discuss the various demographic, ethnic, historical, political and other factors behind it. Nor do I intend to address the question of how the claim that states should preferably be monolingual as well as mononational should have arisen in the first place. Without embarking on this challenging chapter of the history of European ideas, however, one may make a purely factual observation. The emergence and development of nation states on our continent has indeed tended to go hand in hand with the establishment and affirmation of their national standard languages, these being at the same time instruments and products of nation building. This has generally occurred at the expense of any other idioms that may have been used on the given territory, which have thus been reduced to minority language status in one form or another.

It is this link between modern states and the national languages associated with them that I propose to discuss briefly in this paper, using the unusual life story of Yugoslavia as an example. A sociolinguistic summary of the Yugoslav experience in this context

¹ This is a somewhat tightened-up written version of a lecture presented before the Institute of Linguistics, University of Vienna, and the Vienna Linguistic Society on 9 April 1997. I am indebted to Professors Rudolf de Cillia, Ruth Wodak and Wolfgang U. Dressler for the invitation, and to Mag. Gottfried Wagner of KulturKontakt for sponsoring my visit. The warm reception I was given, as well as the stimulating multilingual discussion following the lecture, will stand out in my memory. An earlier and shorter version of the text was read as a paper at the 29th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea in Klagenfurt, 4-8 September 1996.)

may be of interest to students of the language-state complex, besides possibly shedding a little light on the position of language in the perplexing chain of events that has brought this part of the world into such turmoil. What this example seems to demonstrate is that language can play a major role in the construction, destruction, and reconstruction of states; moreover, and more interestingly, this role is in its three aspects just mentioned can be performed by one and the same language in different periods. What makes Yugoslavia a good candidate for a case study along these lines is the very rarity of its life cycle – passing through the three phases in a mere seven decades or so, almost within living memory of a single generation! Let us then concisely review the historical record.

The notion of Yugoslavia, as a common state of the Southern Slavs in which they might take final refuge from the great Habsburg and Ottoman empires, gradually took shape during the 19th century, long before it became reality in 1918, in the aftermath of World War I. This “first” Yugoslavia, as it is now sometimes called, a Kingdom bringing together three main national groups (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) along with some national minorities, was an essentially unitary state. Its official language was even for a while constitutionally labelled “Serbo-Croato-Slovenian” (*srpsko-hrvatsko-slovena#cki*) – a linguistic non-entity, since no such language ever existed in reality. Yet what is relevant to note here is the way in which language had been harnessed in a general drive to set up and maintain as a whole a structure composed of rather heterogeneous ethnolinguistic components. The all-pervasive task of state building implied that language too had to contribute its share, under the bizarre administrative pretence that this three-pronged linguistic phantasy was actually a living thing. In fact, of course, the Serbian and Croatian components could well be treated as making up a common Serbo-Croatian standard language (though this remained a matter of dispute in some quarters); what was quite extraordinary from a linguistic point of view was the idea that Slovenian too could be added without making a difference.

Such, then, was the first phase, pure and simple: language in state construction. There is not much more to say about it, because the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was quite short-lived, being dismembered by the Axis powers in 1941. Among the casualties, not surprisingly, was the phantom “three-nation language”, of which no more has been heard ever since.

The “second” Yugoslavia was granted a somewhat longer but still rather short lease of life, from 1945 to 1991. It was constituted as a Socialist federation of “Yugoslav nations” (the original three, plus the additionally recognized Macedonians, Montenegrins and ethnic Moslems) and numerous “nationalities” (i.e. national minorities). In accordance with the Communist regime’s “Leninist” ideology of national equality, the emphasis was on the constitutional and legal equality of a relatively large number of languages (Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian and Macedonian, as

well as minority languages). This meant that there was no single official language covering the whole territory of Yugoslavia. Even Serbo-Croatian, once again predominantly treated as a single though differentiated standard language with national variants, which was natively spoken (in 1981) by some 73 per cent of the entire Yugoslav population and widely acquired as a second language by the rest, enjoyed no special official privileges. However, it did serve as an unofficial language of wider communication across the federation, to the relief of some and resentment of others. On the whole, there was a kind of precarious balance, linguistically as well as politically, of convergence and divergence, of constructive and destructive patterns of development.

This general framework seemed adequate while the federation lasted, but confederal trends recognized by the 1974 constitutions enhanced all kinds of divisive behaviour. On the linguistic level, this speeded – and increasingly gave recognition to – the already existing attempts at fragmentation of the country’s largest language, Serbo-Croatian, notably by elevating its national variants to the status of distinct standard languages. This marked a turning point: language, with had hitherto largely served the purpose of state construction and maintenance, now heralds the destruction of the state. Interestingly, the disintegration of Yugoslavia had actually been announced in developments concerning its principal languages, especially Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian, about a quarter of a century before its occurrence in 1991-92. A major signal was the well-known “Declaration on the name and position of the Croatian literary language” of 1967, signed by the leading Croatian cultural institutions, which called for the recognition of the separate identity of Croatian, as against its official status as a variety of the common Serbo-Croatian (or Croato-Serbian) language. This demand was temporarily silenced under the supreme authority of Marshal Tito, to be gradually met and even surpassed in the course of time. Comparable in effect was the setting up in Slovenia of a peculiar Language Tribunal, a semi-official institution controlling the public use of Slovenian, which largely meant protecting it from Serbo-Croatian influences. Along with this went the insistence on the absolute and literal equality of the language in all federal affairs, military ones included. Some years later, the decision to conduct the trial of four Slovenes (accused of disseminating classified information) before a Yugoslav Army tribunal in Ljubljana in Serbo-Croatian rather than Slovenian caused an outburst of public revolt. This incident can now be seen as an overture to the later armed conflict between federal military units and Slovenia.²

² For information and references on the language situation and policy of Yugoslavia up until its breakup see Bugarski/Hawkesworth (1992). Some of the subsequent developments are reviewed in the references to be cited below.

But the disputes about linguistic purism, separatism and so on turned out in retrospect to have been mere child's play compared to the show language was called upon to put on in preparations for open conflict and armed combat leading to the federation's downfall. Political and partly also national elites, first in Serbia and Croatia and then also in Bosnia-Herzegovina, generated and disseminated through the mass media under their control an incredible amount of verbal abuse and hate speech. It is by now commonplace to the state that the Yugoslav warfare first broke out in language, as a war of words, and was then transferred to the cultural battlefields. Not only were the ruling circles of the opposed sides exposed to continuing verbal barrage, but whole nations were satanised and declared unfit to live with. Thus the most deadly labels, invoking the horrible interethnic and fratricidal killing during World War II, were readily recalled with mixed collective feelings of fear and vengeance, the point of the manipulation being that now all Croats were implied to be Ustashis and all Serbs Chetniks. And when the war spilled over into Bosnia-Herzegovina, the third party found there had to be granted equal treatment, so all Moslems were declared to be Mujahedeens (or, less opaquely and more popularly, Turks). In this way the language of nationalism and chauvinism, further degenerating into the language of war, made its own massive contribution to the destruction of Yugoslavia.³

What about the present? In the "third", internationally semi-recognized Yugoslavia (i.e. Serbia and Montenegro), as well as in the other new states emerging on formerly Yugoslav territory, we witness a new reversal, in that language again displays its potentials as a factor in state construction and a major symbol of national sovereignty. In different ways and to various degrees, this is true of all these countries. In Slovenia and Macedonia, the respective languages are open to further development, without hindrance from their former alleged linguistic "Big Brother". As for Serbo-Croatian itself, the dictate of political developments, including warfare on its territory, has led to an outcome inevitable under the circumstances. The identity of standard Serbo-Croatian had in some respects been controversial ever since its emergence in the latter half of the 19th century. In recent decades there were disputes surrounding its different standard variants in the republics in which the language was spoken. The two well-defined and mutually opposed variants, Eastern (Serbian) and Western (Croatian), increasingly functioned as standard languages in their own right. Additional complexity was added by such social-psychological matters as language attitudes and speaker identification, since some speakers viewed the language as a single though differentiated entity, calling it Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian, while others tended to recognize in it broadly distinct entities, Croatian and Serbian. At the heart of the controversy were not the relatively insignificant linguistic differences themselves but

rather the symbolic values attached to them in an ethnically and sociopolitically variegated community of speakers living together in the republics of a progressively loose federation. When this finally broke up, internal language boundaries became external, the previous national variants of a polycentric standard language turning into separate national standard languages of the newly created states.

As a result, then, Serbo-Croatian no longer officially exists in any of the remaining three states as a single language of that name, having dissolved into Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian (with Montenegrin as an additional possibility in the at present unlikely event that Serbia and Montenegro part company). As I argued in a recent paper, the identity question now seems even more complicated than previously: "To say resolutely that there exists today one single Serbo-Croatian language and leave it at that for all purposes is to speak plain nonsense. To claim with equal resolution that Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian are all fully legitimate and distinct languages, while there is simply no such thing as Serbo-Croatian on any level of fact or interpretation, is to make a political or emotional statement" (Bugarski 1997b: 71). So, as a native speaker of an officially dead language, I can only conclude that there is no simple answer to the question of its identity. Still a viable entity from the point of view of structure and communication, Serbo-Croatian finds itself in the rather extraordinary situation of being one language linguistically but three languages politically.

What is common to the three instances is having a new state imprint, reflected in symbolically important regulations concerning official names, pronunciations and alphabets of the languages involved. Where they differ, on the other hand, is in the existence, manner and extent of interventions aimed at affecting the normal course of language development. From this viewpoint Serbian may be schematically visualized as staying still, relatively speaking, since there have been no particular moves motivated by a desire to change the language internally as well. In contrast, Croatian is apparently undergoing extensive linguistic engineering of a croatizing variety (mainly in vocabulary, terminology and phraseology, but also in points of grammar and spelling) so as to diverge from Serbian, or from the common Serbo-Croatian heritage, as far and as fast as possible. The comparative newcomer, Bosnian, is also moving away, though more slowly and in another direction, reinforcing the Arabic-Turkish stream in the native tradition. Put differently, and against the background of the recent past, one might perhaps say that the distinctive language-state link is at present strongest in the Croatian case, somewhat weaker in the Bosnian and still weaker in the Serbian. It is tempting to see in this a reflection of Croatia's and then Bosnia's secession from Yugoslavia as represented and symbolized by Serbia: it is generally the dissenter who needs to stress his difference, and language is surely one of the handiest means of doing so.

³ Some techniques of manipulating language for war-mongering purposes are identified and illustrated in Bugarski 1995a, b, 1997a.

Although this review is concerned only with the three Yugoslavias, it may be of interest at this point to recall quite briefly a comparable situation in the four-year period of World War II, when no Yugoslavia existed. Nothing noteworthy happened to Serbian in occupied wartime Serbia, whereas Croatian in the so-called Independent State of Croatia immediately became an object of large-scale official "purification", akin in spirit – and partly also in actual performance – so that going on in the Republic of Croatia today.⁴

In summary, the Yugoslav experience shows us language at work in the different aforementioned processes at various levels. Specifically, one and the same language, Serbo-Croatian, has acted in different ways as a powerful instrument of both convergence and divergence in well under a century. We see here how, in the present context at least, language indeed goes with state: it is a result of having followed the turbulent paths of the successive states using it that this particular language has come to assume the peculiar status noted above.

Before closing, I would like to point out a related aspect of the matter under consideration – the relationship between language and ethnicity as it impinges on the processes we have been concerned with. One would normally assume that a common language, as a vehicle allowing full mutual understanding, should reduce any interethnic tensions within a state – and, conversely, that an explosion of such tensions must at least in part be attributed to the lack of a truly shared instrument of communication. The Serbo-Croatian case, however, demonstrates that this is not necessarily so, that speaking the same language is in itself no guarantee that difficulties will be overcome by rational negotiation and that situations of conflict will be kept under control.

This may be less clear if we look only at Serbo-Croatian in Serbia and Croatia – or, in the present terms, at Serbian and Croatian as employed there: after all, we have already observed that the distinctions between these have long been a controversial issue. But the point I wish to make comes out in full clarity when we consider the territory of the former Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, markedly multiethnic and multicultural yet linguistically the most homogeneous of the six republics of ex-Yugoslavia, which was to suffer worst of all. As the dark clouds ominously gathered over it, after bloodshed had already begun in the Serb-dominated regions of Croatia, the general feeling was that "it couldn't possibly happen here". The three main ethnic groups – Moslems, Serbs and Croats, none with an absolute majority – had lived there together for centuries, often in mixed marriages, and all of them speaking exactly the

⁴ A more detailed assessment of current developments is now to be found in Bugarski 1997b, on which a segment of this paper is based. A discussion set in a more general theoretical framework is offered in Bugarski 1997c. The present situation is discussed against a background of historical events leading up to it in two recent Austrian contributions: Pohl 1996 and Neweklowsky 1997.

same language (in some instances with barely perceptible and quite insignificant ethnic overtones). Yet might is right, and happen it did, with a vengeance: mindless polycentric destruction, genocidal mass killings of civilians, ethnic cleansing and other assorted horrors which stunned the world at large but no less the peaceful majority of the local population.

Let me add, finally and parenthetically, that from a linguistic point of view such a scenario, however unlikely it may seem, is not without parallel. A possible comparison, hardly complimentary to what after all is – or was – a European state, is with the terrible fate of Rwanda. This case is similar in that the warring Tutsi and Hutu display great ethnic closeness, being traditionally intermixed and sharing the same culture, religion and – language.

Such comparative evidence leads us to the surely unwelcome and perhaps somewhat surprising conclusion that linguistic bonds, however strong in relatively normal times, may easily break under the strain when outside pressure becomes too strong. The irony, even perversity of it all is that language itself contributes in no small measure to building up that same extralinguistic pressure. It may thus, as in the case of Serbo-Croatian as reviewed in this paper, be both an instrument and a casualty of violence and war. Under markedly unfavourable circumstances, this could well be the price languages has to pay for its ambiguous role in state construction, destruction and reconstruction.

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Abstract

Jugoslawien stellt ein markantes Beispiel für die Rolle der Sprache bei der Konstruktion, Dekonstruktion und Rekonstruktion von Staaten dar. Der im wesentlichen einheitliche Charakter des „ersten“ Jugoslawien (1918 - 1941), das drei nationale Hauptgruppen vereinte (Serben, Kroaten und Slowenen) spiegelte sich in der offiziellen Bezeichnung seiner Sprache als „Serbo-Kroato-Slowenisch“ wider (ein sprachlicher Un-Begriff).

Das „zweite“ Jugoslawien (1945-1991), eine Föderation von „jugoslawischen Nationen“ (die drei ursprünglichen und die neu anerkannten Mazedonier, Montenegriner und die zur Nation erklärten Moslems) und Nationalitäten (nationalen Minderheiten), betonte die verfassungsmäßige und rechtliche Gleichheit von zahllosen Sprachen (Serbo-Kroatisch, Slowenisch und Mazedonisch und Minderheitensprachen). Während des Bestandes der Föderation als Bundesstaat wurde ein generelles Gleichgewicht zwischen Konvergenz und Divergenz aufrechterhalten, aber Entwicklungen, die durch die Verfassung von 1974 anerkannt wurden, verstärkten bereits existierende Bestrebungen zu einer Spaltung der größten Sprache des Staates, Serbokroatisch. Das stellte einen Wendepunkt dar: Die Sprache, die bis dahin hauptsächlich dem Zweck der Konstruktion und Aufrechterhaltung des Staates gedient

hatte, wird nun zu einem Moment der Dekonstruktion des Staates, und die Desintegration Jugoslawiens kündigte sich so schon lange, bevor sie tatsächlich stattfand (1991-92), in der Entwicklung der Hauptsprache an. Im „dritten“ Jugoslawien (Serbien und Montenegro), genauso wie in den neuen Staaten, die auf dem Gebiet des ehemaligen Jugoslawien entstanden, sind wir nun Zeuge einer Kehrtwende, insofern Sprache wieder zu einem Faktor in der Konstruktion von Staaten wurde und zu einem wesentlichen Symbol nationaler Souveränität, indem Serbokroatisch offiziell in Serbisch, Kroatisch und Bosnisch getrennt wurde. Auf diese Art hat ein und dieselbe Sprache in einem knappen Jahrhundert die verschiedensten Rollen gespielt. Der Bericht schließt mit einem Blick auf die Beziehung zwischen Sprache und Ethnizität und die Auswirkungen auf die dargestellten Prozesse.