A NOTE ON THE NATURE AND THE STATUS OF
THE STANDARD SERBO-CROATIAN IN BOSNIA-HERCEGOVINIA

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In the standard language controversy which has been going on in Yugoslavia for over
two decades there remain two questions on which serious and reasonable specialists still
disagree. One is the question whether the Croats have the right to call their variant of the
standard language by the single name Croatian rather than by the joint name Croato-Serbian
or Serbo-Croatian (or Croatian and Serbian/Serbian and Croatian). The 1974 constitution
gave them the legal right to use the single name. Dunatov (1978) and Brozović (1984) give
several sociolinguistic arguments for the correctness of this position.

The other question concerns the number of standard language variants on the territories
of the republics of Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Hercegovina, and Montenegro.

Everyone now agrees that there are at least two variants: the Western or Croatian or
Zagreb variant, and the Eastern or Serbian or Belgrade variant. The last linguist to deny
the existence of even these two variants was Stevanović (1965) in a work that actually gives
one of the most complete inventories of the features that differentiate the two variants.

The different names, Western vs. Eastern, Croatian vs. Serbian, Zagreb vs. Belgrade,
each emphasize the different components which have contributed to the development and
the preservation of the differences, namely the areal, the ethnic, and the principal cultural
center components. Of the three components, the areal is the most non-controversial and
will be used here.

The problem with the "one standard with two-variants" solution is that it leaves out large
areas of the Serbo-Croatian-speaking territory, namely Montenegro and Bosnia-Herce­
govina, where the forms of the standard Serbo-Croatian do not correspond completely to
either the Western or the Eastern variant. What then is the status of these forms of standard
Serbo-Croatian?

This paper is concerned with only one of these forms of standard Serbo-Croatian, that
in Bosnia-Hercegovina. It has been described over the years in various ways: as the
coexistence of the Western and Eastern variants, as a hybrid of the two variants, as the
interpenetration of the two variants, or as the neutralization of the oppositions that define
the two variants. That latter view is convincingly argued by Janković in a series of

The answer to the question whether the form of the Serbo-Croatian standard in Bosnia­
Hercegovina is a variant depends on how one defines the term variant. Brozović defined
standard language variants as follows: "Variants are adaptations of a single standard
language to tradition and to contemporary needs of a nation as a specific ethno-social

Janković, while praising this definition as the first serious attempt at a formal definition,
nevertheless finds it wanting. In his opinion, it overemphasizes the ethnic component and
makes no provision for the areal one. He proposes the following modification: "Variants
are adaptations of a single multi-territorial standard language to the conditions, needs and

Both of these definitions, however, are too general to provide a clear answer to the
question whether a given set of linguistic and sociolinguistic differences (i.e., adaptations)
constitute a standard language variant. Is there, for example, a minimum of differences or
adaptations? The existence of such a minimum is implied by those who argue that the
Montenegrin form of standard Serbo-Croatian is not a variant, because it differs from the Eastern variant by only one feature, namely the jekavian vs. ekavian pronunciation.

What gives the Western and Eastern forms of standard Serbo-Croatian the rank of variants is the existence in each of a set of phonetic, morphological, syntactic, orthographic, and above all lexical features in opposition, the so-called variant doublets. Even though these variant doublets comprise a relatively small percentage of features (e.g., only approximately 5% of the lexicon), they are sufficient for the speakers to be aware of them; i.e., to be aware of a different norm in their speech compared to the speech of someone from the other area. Janković (1978, 1982) maintains that the presence of these oppositions is essential for the existence of variants. Since in the Bosnian-Hercegovinian form of standard Serbo-Croatian these oppositions are neutralized, it does not, according to Janković, meet the minimum requirement for a variant.

What is meant by “neutralization of variant opposition” is this: the word for ‘soccer’, for example, in the Western variant is nogomet and in the Eastern fudbal. Most speakers of the Western variant know the word fudbal and know that it means ‘soccer’ in the Eastern variant: i.e., that it is the Eastern counterpart of their word nogomet. In Bosnia-Hercegovinian both words, nogomet and fudbal, are used in the meaning ‘soccer.’ Some speakers use only nogomet, some only fudbal, some use both forms interchangeably, as synonyms, without the added notion that nogomet is Western and fudbal is Eastern.

Not every pair of doublets is used this way, however. Many Western forms and some Eastern forms do not occur at all (see, e.g. Diklić, 1970; Janković, 1967; Marković, 1971), and some doublets are becoming semantically differentiated (e.g., čas ‘lesson’, sat ‘hour’). Ridjanović (1984) explains this as the tendency of languages not to tolerate absolute synonymy, because it is contrary to the principles of linguistic economy. Janković (1967) and Diklić (1970) have demonstrated that the choice between Western and Eastern forms of doublets does not correspond to the ethnic identity of speakers, and that the speakers are poorly aware of whether a given form belongs to the Eastern or the Western variant. Similar results were obtained by me in an English to Serbo-Croatian translation exercise of a set of sentences containing one or more lexical doublets given to students in advanced-level English language classes in Zagreb, Belgrade, and Sarajevo. While students in Zagreb and Belgrade did in fact use consistently only the Western or the Eastern forms, students in Sarajevo used both forms, but with different degrees of preference. Thus, the Eastern word stanica is used to the complete exclusion of the Western kolodvor, and the Western forms papir, analizirati to the complete exclusion of the Eastern forms hartija, analizovati; the Eastern words sprai, pozorište, voz, supa, utisak, hirurg, hemija, avgust, ostrvo, opština, sto, šta, neko, pisaču are greatly preferred to the Western kot, kazalište, vlak, juha, dojam, kirurg, kemija, august, otok, općina, sto, što, netko, pisati ću; the Western prvenstveno, kuhar, uho, kasniti, are greatly preferred to the Eastern prevazhodno, kuvar, uve, docniti; while the forms grah-pasulj, kolegica-koleginica, dječji-dječiji, tinta-mastilo, zrak-vazduh, plin-glas, nogomet-fudbal, kisik-kisionik show almost equal distribution.

Counting the total number of doublets used in the sentences by the Sarajevo students, the ratio of Western to Eastern forms was 30%-70%. However, if we count the instances where the Eastern form was greatly preferred, the figure was only 53%, compared to 20% for the Western form, and 27% for instances where both forms were more or less equally preferred.

While these figures show that in Bosnia-Hercegovinian the Eastern variant members of lexical doublets are found more frequently that the Western ones, the substantial number
of the latter, used either as synonyms with the Eastern forms or as the only forms, make the Bosnia-Hercegovinian situation radically different from that of Montenegro, where only the Eastern variant forms occur. But is this enough to justify giving the Bosnia-Hercegovinian form the rank of variant?

It would be a mistake to equate the term variant with the differences or adaptations. If we consider the differences or adaptations of each variant as its *propria*, while those features shared by the variants as the *communis*, then a variant can be defined as the sum of the *communis* and the *propria*.

We can represent the Western and Eastern variants of standard Serbo-Croatian graphically as follows:

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WESTERN PROPRIA (5%)

COMMUNIS (90%)

EASTERN PROPRIA (5%)
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If we include the Bosnian-Hercegovinian *propria* in the above scheme, the picture looks like this:

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BOSNIAN-HERCEGOVINIAN PROPRIA

WESTERN PROPRIA

COMMUNIS

EASTERN PROPRIA
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The Bosnian-Hercegovinian propria is larger than each of the other two, since it incorporates more than it excludes from each of them.

Returning to Brozović's and Janković's definitions, it seems to me that the Bosnian-Hercegovinian form of standard Serbo-Croatian does represent an adaptation of a single language to tradition and to contemporary needs of the Bosnian-Hercegovinian republic. It represents a separate norm of usage (although the norm is not completely established), and the speakers are aware of this norm. For speakers in Bosnia-Hercegovinia it performs the same functions as the Western and the Eastern variants for speakers in their areas. Sociolinguistically speaking, it is therefore a variant.

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POVZETEK

O NARAVI IN STANJU ZBORNE SRBOHRVAŠČINE V BOSNI IN HERCEGOVINI

Mnogi strokovnjaki govorijo o ‘srbohrvaščini’ kot o enem samem zbornem jeziku z dvema različicama (zahodna/vzhodna, hrvaška/srbska, itp.). Takšna obravnava zanemarja problemska področja, v katerih oblike zbornega jezika ne ustrezajo ne eni ne drugi različici. Članek obravnava eno tako področje, in sicer Bosno in Hercegovino. Avtor na podlagi objavljenega gradiva in še zlasti svojih lastnih poizkusov pride do zaključka, da je bosanso-hercegovska oblika zborne srbohrvaščine zares posebna različica.