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An American Linguistic Tragedy

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Alexander, Ronelle. *Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, a Grammar: With Sociolinguistic Commentary*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. xxi + 464 pp.

Alexander, Ronelle and Ellen Elias-Bursać. *Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, a Textbook: With Exercises and Basic Grammar*, Second edition. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. xviii + 510 pp.

The present article is an abridged version of a longer review of the two volumes, available at academia.edu/midhatridjanovic. Because of limitations of space, most examples of lexical and grammatical errors and omissions in the work reviewed, found in the longer version, are omitted in this article.

The first of the two books reviewed will be briefly called *Grammar* and the second *Textbook*. We will also occasionally use B, C, and S as abbreviations for Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian.

For the past eight years the twin volumes under review have been the major resource in the United States for teaching what used to be called Serbo-Croatian before the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1992. After the Yugoslav wars of 1991–1995, new splinter states were created, each naming its language after their new name. Thus were born Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian (BCS) and, recently, Montenegrin. Naturally, the new names did not change what was spoken by the four nations, in spite of efforts by normativists in each of the four countries, especially Croatia, to make the language of their country different from the other three „languages." In spite of their different names, they constitute basically the same language, whose speakers have no difficulty whatsoever in communicating with each other. Grammatical differences between them are negligible, and lexical differences are also few and far between. It is safe to say that British and American English are more distant from each other than B, C and S are from each other. Misunderstandings between speakers of British and American English do occur, but *linguistic* misunderstandings between speakers of the different variants of BCS are unheard of.

The authors set out to write a joint grammar and textbook of three varieties of the same language. While it may be possible to write a single book on the grammar of two or three closely related varieties of a language, it is impossible to write a good *textbook* which would enable the user to acquire a solid command of one or more

varieties. The irrefutable proof of this claim is the fact that no such textbook has ever been written for both British and American English.

In spite of the commercial success of the books under review, I claim that they might well be counted among the most inadequate foreign-language textbooks ever published. They are filled with errors of every kind: ungrammatical word forms, phrases, and sentences; meaningless clusters of words; incoherent dialogues; sloppy or wrong grammatical rules; omissions of important rules; wrong accents; and false allocations of individual words or grammatical forms to one of the three „languages“ in the BCS complex. This is to mention only the major, recurrent errors.

The *Grammar* volume includes some fifty pages of „Sociolinguistic Commentary,“ which, even if well written, has no place in a BCS textbook. The Commentary is basically a history of squabbles among Balkan linguists over insignificant details of usage, mostly in relation to claims of a separate B, C, or S language.

I think that the most serious error committed by the authors is the acceptance of artificial forms of words proclaimed as „correct“ by linguistically ignorant and nationalistically oriented Balkan „linguists.“ Any disinterested observer of the postwar political situation in the Balkans can see that the new splinter states are run by fascistoid governments, which are dead set on reestablishing the traditional attributes of nation states for their fiefdoms; since language is a hallmark of nationhood, they have found „linguists“ who are trying to produce „scientific evidence“ that the language of their particular state is a separate language, worthy of a name of its own. The „evidence“ is usually no more than a handful of words supposed to be peculiar to a particular „language.“

Another major error committed by Professor Alexander has to do with the designation of the territory on which a particular Balkan „language“ is spoken. Everybody accepts the fact that Serbian is the name of the language spoken in Serbia and that Croatian is the language of Croatia; there is a sizable national minority of Serbs in Croatia and of Bosnians in Serbia, whose members call their languages by their national names, though all the inhabitants of each of the two countries speak in the same way. But Bosnia-Hercegovina is more complicated. The most important fact about the language of this country is that *all its inhabitants speak in exactly the same way*. The only logical name of that language would be *Bosnian* in the *territorial* sense (the country was called only Bosnia from the creation of the first medieval Bosnian state in the 10th century to the mid-19th century). Besides, Bosnian Serbs and Croats are, in fact, descendants of Bosnian Orthodox and Catholic Christians who were „converted“ to Serbs and Croats in the course of the 19th century. Therefore, historically speaking, there are no Serbs and Croats in Bosnia.

The different names of the Bosnian language were created in the aftermath of the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995. Every informed person knows that the Agreement was signed hastily in order to put an end to the hostilities and that grave errors were made by carving up what had for centuries been one country into two “entities,” Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina, and by dividing a nation which had been marked by a common language and culture for more than a millennium. The Serbian and Croatian aggressors in the 1992–95 war killed or

persecuted tens of thousands of people in order to create „ethnically clean“ areas and, unfortunately, the Dayton Agreement largely legalized their illegal and immoral „ethnic cleansing.“ The tragic result is a total demographic redistribution of the country’s population, so that Serbs now constitute ninety percent of the population of the Republika Srpska while Bosniaks account for nearly half of the total population of the Federation of Bosnia-Hercegovina. Ethnic cleansing also resulted in the ludicrous situation in which one language was called by a variety of different names – Serbian in the Republika Srpska and Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian in the Federation of Bosnia-Hercegovina. This, in turn, gave rise to the totally crazy situation in schools, which divide children of different „nationalities“ because they must be taught different „national groups of subjects“ in language, literature, history, and religious instruction. Every bit of this abominable ethnic cleansing on all levels — from territorial to linguistic — is wrongheadedly recognized and reinforced by Professor Alexander in her book. The bitter irony is in how the authors state their main intent in the Preface to the *Textbook* (p. xii): „Our intent has been to give as true a picture as possible of existing usage within a framework that is accessible to students and usable in the classroom.“ What the authors have produced, however, is the exact opposite: their picture of „existing usage“ is filled with non-existing words in each of the three „languages.“

The following is probably the most astonishing statement in any foreign-language textbook; in the Preface to the *Textbook*, on page xvi, the authors say: „It is not necessary to teach all elements of the complex BCS accentual system, either at the outset or at all, since one can communicate perfectly well by simply knowing the place of accent and a few important instances of vowel length.“ We all know that there are ways to communicate without using words – sign language, pantomime, gesture and body language in general – so why learn languages, why write foreign-language textbooks? The statement which writes off BCS accents as irrelevant to communication is analogous to one that would appear in a textbook of English as a foreign language in which the author claims that it is not at all necessary to teach all elements of the complex system of English verbal tenses!

The dialogues appearing in every lesson are usually stilted and artificial, sometimes even senseless. The authors made what I believe is the worst mistake in writing foreign-language textbooks: they composed dialogues which will illustrate specific grammatical elements and/or lexical items they want to teach in the particular lesson, paying little attention to the content of the dialogues so that some are unnatural and sometimes border on crazy; this is illustrated by the following excerpt from the dialogue appearing on page 6 of the *Textbook*:
2. George je profesor, a Mary je profesorica. (George is a professor, and Mary is a woman professor.)
3. A njihov pas? (And their dog?)
2. Njihov pas nije profesor. Pas nije čovjek! (Their dog is not a professor. A dog is not a man.)
The authors of the *Textbook* must be very fond of dogs. So they compose a dialogue, appearing on page 24, to prepare the American user of the book to buy a dog when s/he gets there, rather than a ticket at a bus station. The American is offered a yellow dog [sic], but her/his brother, for whom s/he is buying the dog, does not like yellow dogs, he prefers (non-existing) red ones! What the authors have failed to do is

compose a dialogue between the American learner of BCS and the Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian airport employee who will have to enlighten her/him about the complicated regulations connected with transporting the dog by plane across the Atlantic!

Other examples of ludicrous sentences in the dialogues:
Pod *djevojkama su stolice*. 'Under the girls are chairs' (p. 113)
Doručak je u *djevojkama*. 'Breakfast is in the girls' (p. 113)
Doručak je u *mirnoj djeci*. 'Breakfast is in the quiet children' (p. 115)
Bez *balkanskih jezika* nema sreće. 'There can be no happiness without Balkan languages' (p. 119)
Pjevam pjesme *balkanskim jezicima*. 'I sing songs to Balkan languages, i.e. I serenade Balkan languages' (p. 119)
S *balkanskim jezicima* divno je živjeti. 'It is beautiful to live with Balkan languages' (p. 119)
O, balkanski jezici! 'Oh, ye Balkan languages!' (p. 119)
Ispod čega je stolica? 'What is the chair under?' (page 120)
This question is related to the statement *Pod djevojkama su stolice*. Since *djevojke* (girls) are human beings and not things, the corresponding question, however ludicrous to begin with, should have been *Ispod koga su stolice* 'Who are the chairs under?'. The only answer to the question *Ispod čega je stolica*? that would make any sense would be *Ispod djevojčine stražnjice* 'Under the girl's bottom.'

In the dialogues on p. 26 of the *Textbook*, participant „1." asks the salesperson in a bookstore if they have a new German dictionary, to which the salesperson replies: *Imamo ga. Želite li ga?.* 'We have it. Do you want it?'. The first of these two sentences is ungrammatical in the context in which it is used (it should have been just *Imamo*), and the second one would have been acceptable only if *Želite li ga* had been followed by *kupiti* 'to buy'; without this complement verb, *željeti* means 'desire', and we do not normally desire dictionaries. Every normal native speaker of every language will tell you if a string of words in her/his language is grammatical or not. Neither author of the books under review is a native speaker of BCS, though Elias-Bursać lived in Croatia for many years. They obviously did not bother to check the grammatical acceptability of their BCS sentences with a native speaker of the language. If they had asked a native speaker of BCS what *Želite li ga?* means, s/he would have interpreted the pronoun *ga* as referring to a man and the whole question as 'Do you desire him?'

Having examined closely the first 70 pages of the *Textbook*, I have found enough errors to suggest that this book should not have been published, even if it had been heavily edited (a discussion of all the errors on its 510 pages would no doubt fill a mid-sized book!). Because the length of the present article is strictly limited, we cannot afford to describe the errors but interested readers who do not mind being shocked are encouraged to read the entire review published in academia.edu/midhatridjanovic, where the errors are fully described and explained.

Although the authors state that Serbian is ekavian in Serbia but ijekavijan elsewhere, this information is hardly sufficient for the student, who must be confused by the maze of „languages" s/he has to cope with, which, to top it all, includes two different „Serbians." The only right, scientific approach to this problem would have been to call

the language spoken by *everybody* in Bosnia-Hercegovina *Bosnian* in the territorial sense, and then add the information that the language is officially called Serbian in Republika Srpska.

Users of the *Textbook* are told that „the vast majority of words in B, C, and S are used by all speakers of B, C, and S with the same meaning." To illustrate the small minority of words different in Serbian and Croatian, the authors give a list of pairs of words one of which is Serbian and the other Croatian. This is followed by the statement that „Bosnian will sometimes use both words, sometimes it will prefer the Serbian word, sometimes it will prefer the Croatian word, and in a few instances it will have its own word altogether." This statement tells us that Bosnian *uses* Croatian and Serbian words, i.e., that it is a mélange of the other two languages and makes use of its own words only „in a few instances." This same racist view of Bosnian is found in references to Bosnian by extreme Croatian and Serbian nationalists and needs no further comment, though it *should* be pointed out that the earliest *lengthy* written record of Bosnian predates Croatian and Serbian written records of historical significance.

A majority of strict grammatical rules are expressed in sentences whose predicates are modified with words like *usually*, *mostly*, *often*, *commonly*, *generally*; the predicates themselves are often expressed with or include verbs of indeterminate meaning, such as *may occur*, *tends to occur*, etc. Examples can be found on almost every page of the two volumes under review. Thus, talking about prepositional phrases in which the preposition is followed by a noun, the author says: „For most speakers of BCS the accent remains on the noun, although in a few instances it can move back onto the preposition. In Bosnian, however, the accent frequently moves back onto the preposition if the noun object carries a falling accent. These accent shifts do not occur with all nouns or with all prepositions but they tend to be common with prepositions that take the accusative case." (*Grammar* p. 26). This rule is worthless on at least two counts: (a) Indeterminate phrases like *for most speakers*, *in a few instances, frequently moves back, do not occur with all nouns/prepositions, they tend to be common* make it impossible to apply the rule in a way that will enable the learner to use the proper accent on the proper syllable. (b) There is a contradiction in the rule: We are first told that in BCS „the accent remains on the noun." The next sentence begins with „In Bosnian, however, …" But if BCS includes Bosnian, which it obviously does, what is this new contrasting information about Bosnian?! Grammatical rules should be precise and must not contain indeterminate words; a „linguist" who does not know this is not a proper linguist.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I am absolutely convinced that a student who tries to learn BCS using B*osnian, Croatian, Serbian, a Textbook: With Exercises and Basic Grammar* and its companion volume *Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, a Grammar: With Sociolinguistic Commentary* would easily produce hundreds of wrong BCS word forms, phrases, or sentences.

My *Bosnian for Foreigners: With a Comprehensive Grammar* has been available for purchase since August 2012. There has been only one order from the United States. The book was announced on the American Slavic Linguistic Society website in December 2012 and on the Linguist List in March 2013. Information about the

purchase of the book can be obtained at www.rabic.ba/english. There is also an electronic version of the grammatical part of the book, which was produced at the request of the international translation and marketing company Lionbridge and is being used by them in the construction of BCS language technologies; the version is entitled *Bosnian Grammar* and can be purchased at this http://midhatridjanovic.ba/book-preview.

This is what Professor Wayles Browne of the Department of Linguistics at Cornell University, one of the world's leading Slavists, said about my book:

> The book is a product of many years of research and writing. Professor Ridjanović brought to bear his life-long involvement in language teaching and linguistics on a book that he modesty calls a textbook, although the 345-page grammatical part is a full-fledged grammar which includes many rules that were not observed in two centuries of grammatical investigation of the language now called by four different names.

American teachers of BCS, who may have been put off by „Bosnian" in the title of the book, have fallen victim to the propaganda of the fascistoid governments of the new Balkan states that the people who speak what used to be called Serbo-Croatian should be divided into four nations, each with a language of its own. This artificial division of a single language into four is, of course, soundly rejected by all rational people living in former Yugoslavia.

This is not a promotional plea for my book. The book is selling quite well, and the first edition of 500 copies may soon be out of print. I doubt that any of those who teach BCS in the States or who make decisions about teaching BCS will necessarily be moved by this review or by the information that the textbook currently used in the US to teach the language is deeply flawed, while there is another textbook on the market which could seriously compete for one of the best foreign-language textbooks ever published.

Since the time of writing of my review of *Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian* by Alexander and Elias-Bursać, I learned that the book was given the Annual Award of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East-European Languages (AATSEEL) as "Best Contribution to Language Pedagogy for 2009." No number of exclamation marks can express my deep disappointment at this "Award." Sadly, a dozen professors in the area of Slavic studies from the US, UK and Germany sing the praises of this misguided work and hail it as "a conceptual masterwork" and "the ideal solution for all those who want to know "exactly how it is." They can be found at www.bcsgrammarandtextbook.org/Textbook/comments. I invite you to consider and reflect on these praises in light of my review. I do not want to tell Slavic scholars what to think; I do want them to reflect critically on what they are saying.

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