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Bosnian for Foreigners

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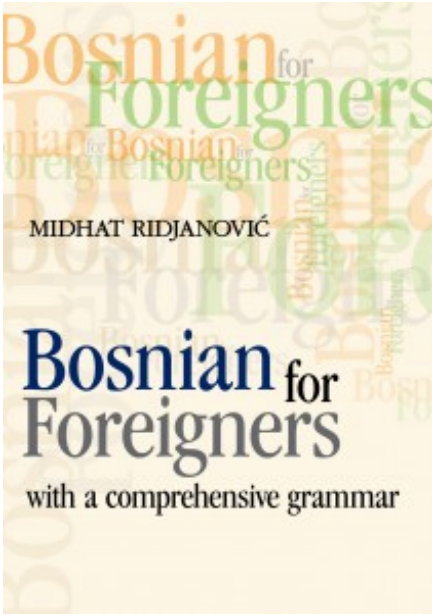
Dr. Midhat Ridjanović, professor emeritus of English and linguistics at the University of Sarajevo, recently published a major work on the Bosnian language – BOSNIAN FOR FOREIGNERS : With a Comprehenisve Grammar. It is a product of many years of research and writing, in which Professor Ridjanovć brought to bear his life-long involvement in language teaching and linguistics on a book that he modesty calls a textbook, although the 325-page grammatical part is a full-fledged grammar which includes many rules that were not observed in two centuries of grammatical investigation of the lanaguage now called by four different names (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian). By way of introducing Professor Ridjanović's book to our readers, we are publishing selected parts of the book's Preface and Lesson 17 (of 40).



Preface

Before the breakup of Yugoslavia the language spoken by Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Montenegrins was usually called Serbo-Croatian. When new countries were formed in the territories inhabited by the four nations, the same language came to be officially called Serbian in Serbia, Croatian in Croatia, Montenegrin in Montenegro, and Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian in Bosnia-Hercegovina. In spite of their different names, the four "languages" constitute basically the same language, whose speakers

have no difficulty whatsoever in communicating with each other. We will refer to this language as Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian, or BCMS for short. Unless signaled otherwise, Bosnian as used in this book also stands for BCMS. Grammatical differences between the four "languages" are negligible, and lexical differences are also few and far between. The sounds are exactly the same, although different speakers of BCMS may pronounce individual words in different ways.

It is hard to measure differences between dialects or variants of the same language, but it is safe to say that British and American English are more distant from each other than any of the four variants of BCMS from any other. (Misunderstandings between speakers of British and American English do occur, but *linguistic* misunderstandings between speakers of the different variants of BCMS are unheard of.)

Bosnian is what linguists call a highly inflected language. Such languages are characterized by a large number of different grammatical forms of a single word. Thus, apart from comparative and superlative forms, the English adjective *black* has only one grammatical form. This corresponds to 30 forms in Bosnian, 28 of which have multiple functions, because a Bosnian adjective will change its form depending on the gender, number, case and (in)definiteness of the noun to which it is grammatically related. This information is particularly important for people coming from an English-language background because English belongs to the *analytic* languages, in which grammatical relations are signaled mostly by function words and word order, sometimes in very complicated ways. Therefore, if we have the entire language in mind, inflected languages cannot be said to be more difficult to learn than analytic ones; rather, grammatical complexities in different languages are located in different segments of the grammatical structure of a language. Generally speaking, it is easier to learn a foreign language which belongs to the same family or branch of languages as one's own because genetically related languages display many more similarities than unrelated ones. Thus, a Russian or a Pole, whose languages are in the Slavic group to which Bosnian belongs too, will find it easier to learn Bosnian than an English-speaking person.

This textbook consists of three main parts: Lessons, Grammar, and Glossaries. There are 40 lessons. The introductory texts in 27 lessons are dialogues, one is a letter to the editor of the major Bosnian newspaper, three are excerpts from a short story, a novel, and a book on multiculturalism, one is an essay on translation, four are about the four countries where BCMS is spoken, and the last three are devoted to three prominent Bosnian writers. The introductory texts of the first 32 lessons are given along with an English translation. At the end of the Bosnian and English versions of each lesson's text are references to the sections in Grammar relevant to the particular text.

The introductory text of each lesson is followed by about ten exercises of different kinds designed to test the user's mastery of individual grammatical rules and enable her/him to practice applying these rules. At the end of each Lesson is the Key to the exercises, which includes suggested answers for translation exercises. Most sentences can be rendered into another language in two or more equally adequate ways, so if your version differs from ours, yours is not necessarily wrong.

While you may learn the words and the grammar of a foreign language needed to ask your way to the bus station and understand a native speaker's response, it does not mean that you will be able to do so in a real-life situation, with both you and your interlocutor speaking at normal speed. The ability to use a foreign language spontaneously, in ways similar to those of a native speaker speaking the language naturally, is known as *communicative competence*. The exercises are intended to give you practice which will help you achieve communicative competence in Bosnian. Of course, if you are living in Bosnia, you should take every opportunity to speak to (educated) Bosnians.

Notes given after most introductory texts contain cultural information relevant to learning Bosnian as well as linguistic information that could not be conveniently included in the grammatical part of the book. They should therefore be read immediately after the first reading of the introductory text.

The meanings of individual words contained in the introductory texts can be found in the English translations and/or the Bosnian-English Glossary at the end of the book. Only the meanings in which the Bosnian words are used in the book are given in the Glossary, but it also contains information about the complements with which a Bosnian word (especially a verb) can or must be used. The Bosnian-English Glossary is followed by a much shorter English-Bosnian Glossary, which gives Bosnian glosses of the English words found in exercises requiring users to translate English sentences into Bosnian.

There are several BCMS-English dictionaries which may be useful to foreign learners of Bosnian. I believe that the best ones are *Croatian-English Dictionary*, second edition, by Željko Bujas, published in Zagreb in 2001, and *Serbocroatian-English Dictionary*, third edition, by Morton Benson, published in Belgrade. (Both authors have also published dictionaries in the opposite direction, which you may not need at the early stages of your study of Bosnian.) There is also the excellent six-volume monolingual dictionary *Rečnik srpskohrvatskog književnog jezika* (Dictionary of the Literary Serbocroatian Language) published (in Cyrillic) in Novi Sad in 1967.

The grammatical terminology used in this book is of the simple kind usually learned at school. The meanings of some grammatical terms can be gathered from context. Should you still come across terms that you don't know, you can look them up in a good dictionary. I would also recommend a small inexpensive book entitled *A Glossary of Morphology* by Laurie Bauer, published in 2004 by Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C.

The texts of most lessons are recorded on a CD, which accompanies the book.

There is a tradition on the European continent of prescribing "correct" forms of individual words and sometimes even of grammatical structures. Most prescriptive rules formulated within the BCMS speech community have been woefully inadequate from the linguistic point of view. The rules are published in the *Pravopis* (official orthography guide) and are usually observed only in the media, in schools, and by public speakers. Most "correct" forms of words sound artificial and jar on ordinary people's ears. Fortunately, the number of such words is quite limited. The forms of all

Bosnian words contained in this book are naturally used by the overwhelming majority of the population. Still, we do provide “correct” variants of the few words in our book which have them.

I feel I ought to warn foreign learners of Bosnian of the existence of textbooks of BCMS written by authors who are not native speakers of the language. With rare exceptions, such books are usually marred with numerous errors and serious omissions. Alas, this is also true of the latest textbook of BCS published in the U.S., which has a great deal to recommend it (especially as a sociolinguistic guide to the language), but is filled with errors of every kind.

Proponents of some new commercially oriented methods of teaching foreign languages claim that it is possible to learn a language without learning its grammar. Grammar is the engine of a language and just as it is impossible to drive a car without an engine, it is also impossible to learn a foreign language without learning its grammar.

Needless to say, all informed and well-intended comments will be appreciated. Send them to r.midhat@gmail.com.

Lesson 17

A: What did you do last week?
B: I went to Travnik with a friend.
A: What did you do there?
B: We walked through the streets of that beautiful old Bosnian place and admired its old Bosnian houses.
A: Are they really old or have they been built in our time in the old-fashioned style?
B: They have mostly been built recently, but they are all faithful copies of the houses from the 16th and 17th centuries.
A: What is specific about Bosnian architecture?
B: It seems that some ideas in the construction of family houses were unique in the world and because of that Bosnian architecture attracted the attention of some very well-known architects.
A: And what is unique about Bosnian houses?
B: First and most interesting is the fact that each of several rooms in a Bosnian house served all those purposes served by separate rooms in a modern apartment – it was a living room, and a bedroom, and a dining room, and a work room, and had a bathroom too.
A: How was that possible?
B: This is how. Against two or three walls of the room there was a *sećija*, a kind of wooden sofa covered with *šiljteta* (thin mattresses), with cushions filled with straw leaning against the wall. Along one entire wall of the room they built the so-called *musandera* from carved wood (somewhat like the American closet), which was divided into several parts – the *dušekluk*, where mattresses, quilts, pillows and other bedding were kept, then the *dolaf*, which was a kind of cupboard with shelves and where mostly tableware and cutlery were kept, and, finally, the *banjica* for baths. There was also an earthenware stove in the *musandera*, which heated the room and water for the *banjica*.

A: OK, but how did they eat?
B: They ate at a low round table, no more than about twenty centimetres from the floor; that table was called *sinija*. If it was small, the sinija was kept – when it was not used – against the wall in the same room, but if it was big, it would be rolled (because it was round) to the hall or to some storage room.

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