

[Published in *Scando-Slavica*, vol. 57 (2011), issue 1, pp. 114–118;  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00806765.2011.569123>]

**Sven Gustavsson. *Standard Language Differentiation in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Grammars, Language Textbooks, Readers*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Centre for Multiethnic Research 2009 (= Uppsala Multiethnic Papers 52). 312 pp.**

Reviewed by Daniel Bunčić

The basic question posed by this book is: To what extent do the standard varieties of Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina really differ in practice? This is a very difficult question because the empirical data is so heterogeneous: On the one hand I might talk to someone in the streets of Sarajevo for a long time without being able to determine their ethnic affiliation, on the other hand I might see at first glance that a text printed in Cyrillic letters must be Serbian or that someone using a certain word is unmistakably Croatian etc. And here lies the beauty of Sven Gustavsson's clever approach: He restricts himself to schoolbooks, assuming that they represent in distilled form the language and linguistic attitudes of the ethnic group they are made for and that this is what children learn at school and will therefore probably accept as the norm and try to speak. A qualitative and quantitative study of actual usage and language attitudes based on sociolinguistic research conducted in three Bosnian schools is being prepared by Jasenka Trtak in the context of the same project.

Each of the three main parts of the book, the thorough analyses of grammars (27–103), language textbooks (105–156) and readers (157–200), examines first what these books say about language and then what language they are written in. The metalinguistic information is most extensive in the grammars (which are written for adults rather than children). In the readers there is no such explicit information, but what can be analysed here is the choice of authors. Furthermore, in the readers Gustavsson differentiates between the language of the texts and that of the metatexts.

While the grammars analysed can be found in most Slavistic libraries, hardly anybody outside Bosnia and Herzegovina will ever have seen the Bosnian textbooks and readers. Consequently, the results of the study are intriguing. They can be summed up as follows. All the Croat schoolbooks and grammars examined present the same nationalist discourse about the language and are written in a distinctly Croatian variety, though it is “not newspeak” (209). The Croat readers, which contain more international literature than the others (167), print the allegedly “Croatian poet” (172) Ivo Andrić and other authors in a Croatian ‘translation’, which is not only ijekavized but which also has *opće suosjećanje* in the place of *opšte saučešće* etc. (158). The schoolbooks used in Serb schools also present a nationalist discourse, based on the theses of the *Slovo o srpskom jeziku*. However, the examined grammar, which was actually printed in Belgrade, is based on a traditional Yugoslav approach (209), and the readers, which have an emphasis on folk literature and Vuk Karadžić (167), do not change the language of the original texts. In contrast to both the Serb and the Croat schoolbooks, the Bosniak ones inform about all the three standard varieties used in Bosnia and Herzegovina (128). The Bosniak textbooks also convey a rather open attitude towards the other languages (156) and they even have a non-Bosniak among their authors (193). The variety in which they are written is the traditional open Bosnian-Herzegovinian standard. The readers concentrate on

texts from Bosnia and Herzegovina, but almost without any ethnic bias (171), and even the most common “orientalisms” like *ćuprija* or *sultan* are explained when they turn up in the texts (198). Only one of the two examined Bosnian grammars presents a nationalist point of view (209 f.).

A comparison of the authors reprinted in the readers shows that seventeen domestic authors (and Mark Twain) are read by all Bosnian pupils (198 f., 205), forming something like “a small ‘canon’” (198), although of course there is no agreement about a real interethnic canon for Bosnian schools. Rather, this might be the remainders of the former Yugoslav canon.

Gustavsson’s analysis of the linguistic theories presented in the grammars and schoolbooks is aptly critical without categorically arguing for a fixed point of view. For example, he questions the substance of the notion of a “Central South Slavic diasystem” if it is nothing but a synonym for *Serbo-Croatian* (including Kajkavian, 30–32) rather than a linguistically justified group of dialects (223 f.) as in Gustavsson 1969. He doubts the existence of a “Western Štokavian” idiom as the basis for Croatian in contrast to “Eastern Štokavian” as the basis for Serbian (34–38) as well as any attempts to divide the Štokavian dialect continuum into ‘ethnic’ dialects (40 f., 68). He points out that the “tridialectal” nature of Croatian amounts to “only a number of (loan-)words, because as to grammar and orthography the Croatian standard is purely Štokavian” (39). At the same time he criticizes the neo-Vukovians’ neglect of the role Ekavian plays for the modern Serbian standard (61) but also the attempts to diminish the role of Vuk Karadžić and the Vienna Agreement for the Croatian standard (49 f.). Some statements he has found in the representations of all three language histories can only be called bizarre, e.g. the extension of the history of a separate Bosnian language to prehistoric times (67), the claim that the “Serbian (sic!) dialect” of Thessaloniki became the basis for Old Church Slavonic (116) or the regret expressed by Croatian authors about the fact that the language policy of the fascist Independent State of Croatia lasted only for a few years (50).

Gustavsson’s text analyses are enriched by background information about the authors of the schoolbooks (119, 193) and comparisons with older originals (43) or originals written for Serbia or Croatia (109, 111), which were often only insufficiently adapted to the situation in today’s Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this context he makes the astute observation that microlanguages like Kashubian, Rusyn or Montenegrin are instrumentalized by Croatian and Bosnian authors “in order to strengthen their promotion of their own separate languages” (66). A juxtaposition of the schoolbooks for all three ethnic groups also shows that some writers are given different ethnic affiliations, and Ivo Andrić is even claimed by all three groups to be one of them (172).

The analysis of the language in which the books are written enormously benefits from Gustavsson’s profound knowledge of the minute differences between the standards (cf. e.g. 233 f.). The analyses are presented in great detail with long lists of words and quotations with comments (e.g. 176–192). Apart from the results summed up above, this yields a great deal of interesting insights about the agreement of the language described and the language used as well as the degree to which the doublets are still used to avoid repetition. In a Croatian grammar Gustavsson notices that the imperfective verb *upotrebljavati* is mostly (and the noun *upotreba* completely) replaced by *rabiti* (and *(u)poraba*, respectively), but the perfective counterpart is still almost exclusively *upotrijebiti* and only once *uporabiti* (88).

It is fairly impossible to write a book like this without any minor mistakes. The most obvious one here is on the cover, which shows a map of the two entities

of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This map is strangely inaccurate and, most importantly, represents the Posavina Canton, which belongs to the Federation, and the Brčko district, which officially belongs to both entities, as parts of the Republika Srpska. Apart from that, the language of the book contains quite a few minor mistakes with respect to word order, missing words, wrong diacritics (consistently with *ě* instead of *ǣ*, cf. 232 passim) etc., and some slips of the pen like “Vuk’s etymological spelling” (202). Some verbatim repetitions (e.g. 198 f. = 205, 246 f. = 268) might be intended for the benefit of those who do not read the book from cover to cover.

Even though the terms *literary language* and *standard language* are explicitly defined in the sense of ‘standard variety’ (240, 245), there is some vagueness about them, and it seems that they are sometimes employed in the sense of a whole language. For example, a statement like “this text [...] nonetheless mentions the variants of that language as separate standard (literary) languages” (58) does not make sense with the definition above, since “variants” are always standard varieties. Even the assertion in the blurb that Serbo-Croatian “ceased to function as a common standard language” makes sense only if we interpret *standard language* in the sense of ‘language’, since Serbo-Croatian never was a common standard variety but always comprised at least two of them.

Gustavsson seems to make a difference between Bosnian as “a continuation of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian standard language expression/idiom” (103) and ‘nationalized’ Bosnian with words like *kahva*. It is true that some texts are written in a “more liberal” (197) and others in a ‘more national’ style. However, we should not mistake them for different standard varieties (or “literary languages”). Both styles are realizations of the variety that developed from the *bosansko-hercegovački književnojezični izraz* used by all inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which underwent nationalization by becoming the variety of the Bosniaks (cf. Bunčić 2008: 97–99) and is nowadays most often called *bosanski jezik*.

The book conveys two popular misconceptions about two important texts. Firstly, it says that the authors of the Vienna Literary Agreement met “in order to get some order into the rather confused literary language situation at that time” (250). In fact they met because the government had commissioned most of them to compile a terminological dictionary of the South Slavic languages for use by the Austrian administration (cf. Commission 1853, with the Vienna Agreement on p. V–VIII). Consequently, they were concerned with practical questions of standardization, not with status questions or the language situation. Secondly, the *Deklaracija o nazivu i položaju hrvatskog književnog jezika* is repeatedly said to have been directed “against the Novi Sad Agreement” (228; cf. also 19, 202). In fact the *Deklaracija* only demands the equal status for the Croatian standard variety that the Novi Sad Agreement grants it. It is the group of the Serbian nationalists that in their *Predlog za razmišljanje* “regards the Vienna and Novi Sad Agreement as void” (“смагтра Бечки и Новосадски договор поништеним”, quoted from the reprint in Brborić 2000: 16–17, 16), whereas *Matica hrvatska*, the main organization behind the *Deklaracija*, cancels the Novi Sad Agreement only four years later, on 16 April 1971 (cf. Jonke 1971: 348).

Apart from the obvious constituents that a monograph like this needs, there are two rather unexpected parts, which significantly increase the book’s value. One of them is a chapter simply entitled “Definitions”, which turns out to be an extensive glossary giving solid background knowledge about the Serbo-Croatian language question (213–252). Some of the articles, like “Čakavian”, “Glagolitic script”, “Jat” or “Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović”, are really mainly addressed to non-

Slavicists, but others are very valuable even for expert readers. The article “Bosnian-Herzegovinian language question”, for example, is a very good overview of the whole sociolinguistic problem of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 8½ pages (214–222), accompanied by another article “language question” about the non-Bosnian aspects of this problem on 2½ pages (236–239). Here Gustavsson, en passant, adds three interesting issues to the ones found to be central for the whole Serbo-Croatian language problem by Greenberg (2004: 162–163) and gives an exhaustive list of the most important authors to have written on the subject (238 f.). In the article “Ten theses about the Croatian language” (246–248), the author cunningly unmaskes the “rather demagogic” tricks employed by Brozović in this text (248).

The other unobvious part of the book is an appendix containing six important source texts with English translations (253–289): the Vienna Literary Agreement of 1850, the Novi Sad Agreement of 1954 (these two texts were already reprinted with English translations in Greenberg 2004: 168–174), the *Deklaracija o nazivu i položaju hrvatskog književnog jezika* of 1967, part of Dalibor Brozović’s *Deset teza o hrvatskome jeziku* of 1971, part of the *Slovo o srpskom jeziku* of 1998 (the English version of this text was published by its authors themselves) and the *Povelja o bosanskom jeziku* of 2002. This good idea might have been extended, for example, to the Serbian *Predlog za razmišljanje* of 1967, to the relevant parts of the *Memorandum* of the Serbian Academy (SANU) of 1986 or Alija Isaković’s *Slovo o bosanskome jeziku* of 1992.

All in all, the book is an enormously valuable empirical study that can help bring a little more dispassion into a passionately disputed topic. Summing up the questions about the right way to teach language in Bosnian schools, Gustavsson draws a moderate conclusion: “I have no answer to these questions but the present situation is not good, neither for the teachers, parents nor pupils.” (211) Nonetheless, his book leads the way towards answers, and despite the neutral standpoint and the strict focus on the abundance of empirical data, it becomes quite clear that an improvement of the situation is not to be expected from the nationalists, who have unfortunately so far exerted great influence on the school programme in Serb and Croat schools.

## References

- Brborić, Branko. 2000. *O jezičkom raskolu: Sociolingvistički ogledi. I*. Beograd, Novi Sad.
- Bunčić, Daniel. 2008. “Die (Re-)Nationalisierung der serbokroatischen Standards.” In *Deutsche Beiträge zum 14. Internationalen Slavistenkongress, Ohrid 2008*, edited by Sebastian Kempgen et al. München. 89–102.
- Commission für slavische juridisch-politische Terminologie. 1853. *Juridisch-politische Terminologie für die slavischen Sprachen Oesterreichs: Deutsch-kroatische, serbische und slovenische Separat-Ausgabe*. Wien.
- Greenberg, Robert D. 2004. *Language and identity in the Balkans: Serbo-Croatian and its disintegration*. Oxford.
- Gustavsson, Sven. 1969. *Accent paradigms of the present tense in South Slavonic: East and Central South Slavonic*. Stockholm.
- Jonke, Ljudevit. 1971. *Hrvatski književni jezik 19. i 20. stoljeća*. Zagreb.