

Bilješke i diskusija
Notes and discussion
Notizen und Diskussion

Marko Kovačić
Indiana University
Bloomington

**Serbian and Croatian:
One language or languages?**

Introduction

Time and again the question has been asked: are Serbian and Croatian one language or two? And the answers are ever wary, elusive or inexistant, contradictory, and stimulated by emotions because of the political implications the question carries, however inadvertent. Some Scandinavian languages share more similarities than Croatian and Serbian, yet nobody ever asks questions such as whether Swedish, Norwegian and Danish are in fact one language. Some years ago one could have argued that the reason for the different treatment is simple: Swedish, Danish and Norwegian are spoken in Sweden, Denmark and Norway respectively, so they follow different standards, even if they used to be the same, while Serbian and Croatian are spoken within the boundaries of one country. But today, after more than ten years of separate political lives of Croatian and Serbian the question lingers and it is not just for practical reasons that the two languages are taught together at the universities, but because the belief in their sameness pervades even among the scholars.

It is always practical to rely on political situation where ethnology or linguistics fail to give us a straight answer, and to call a language by the name of the country in which it is spoken. Therefore there is no confusion between Macedonian and Bulgarian, Norwegian and Danish, Malay and Indonesian, and in

Pakistan and India between Urdu and Hindi, to name best known cases. It even comes as a surprise that there are fewer differences between those pairs than between mutually unintelligible dialects such as Mandarin and Cantonese, or more intelligible variants such as German of Germany and of Switzerland, Portuguese of Portugal and of Brasil, or various Italian dialects, or the Croatian dialects for that matter.

However, the question of Serbian and Croatian is not so much the matter of dialectology, which tells us that there are three major dialects in that area, named after their word for ‘what?’ which is ‘ča’, ‘kaj’ and ‘što’. The dialect of ‘što’ or Shtokavian became the common dialect for the two peoples, as the cultural nationalistic pan-Slavic movement sprang during the 19th century, although at that time Kaykavian was culturally dominant in Croatia, due to the cultural strength of Zagreb on Kaykavian area. However, it was in Shtokavian that literature was created earlier in Dubrovnik and it was decided for the sake of its geographic middle position, the majority of its speakers and its chronological closeness to the literature of Dubrovnik that Shtokavian be the common south Slavic dialect. The question was what to name it, whether Yugoslavian, Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian, or all of it. Whatever its name, the standard was widely used and taught in Slovenia and Macedonia too. So was intelligibility established but the cultural differences remained and no suppression could erase them.

Some linguistic differences remained too, such as the reflection of the Old Church Slavonic ‘yat’: as *e* in Serbian and *ije* and *je* in Croatian, as in examples *cvet* ~ *cvijet* ‘flower’, *pesma* ~ *pjesma* ‘song’. Its double reflection in Croatian makes it discouraging for a beginner but it eliminates some ambiguities in the written text:¹ in Serbian *svetlo* can mean ‘light’ as a noun and as an adjective, in Croatian *svjetlo* and *svijetlo*, *sledeći* ~ *sljedeći* and *sljedeći* is ‘next’ and ‘following’, *dela* ~ *djela* and *dijela* ‘deeds’, ‘of a part’, *sedim* ~ *sjedim*, *sijedim* ‘I am sitting’, ‘my hair is graying’. *Svet* in Serbian means both ‘holy’ and ‘world’, in Croatian it is *svet* and *svijet*, *redak* is both ‘a line (in a letter)’ and ‘seldom’, in Croatian *redak* and *rijedak*, *veće* can mean ‘council’ and ‘bigger’. *Ona je nema* in Serbian means both ‘She doesn’t have it’ and ‘She is mute’. The latter would be *Ona je nijema* in Croatian. *Sede na senu* in Serbian is both ‘He sat on the shadow’ and ‘They sit on the hay’. In Croatian it is *Sjede na sjenu*. and *Sjede na sijenu*. In Serbian *Dva retka pisma* is both ‘Two lines of a letter’ and ‘Two rare letters’ – in Croatian *Dva retka pisma* and *Dva rijetka pisma*. Not every *ije* is a reflection of ‘yat’, so *krijem* ‘I hide’, *pijete* ‘you drink’, *sporije* ‘slower’ is the same in both languages and so are the foreign words like *orijent*, *materije* ‘matters’.

¹ In spoken language most confusion is eliminated by the distinctive feature of vowel length.

A different or more subtle way to ask the question from the beginning of this text (and without political implications) is 'What are the differences between Serbian and Croatian?' It is much easier to answer that, although it would now be the asker's turn to be confused.

Phonology and orthography

There are some prosodic differences in pronunciation. There is a slight tendency in Serbian of a consistency in differentiating between *č* and *ć* and *dž* and *đ* (like in Polish *cz/ć*, *dż/dź*) as well as respecting the rule that a word should never be stressed on the last syllable, not even in French loanwords (Serbian: *bistro*, *métro*, *kabare*, *restóran*)², which is disregarded in Croatian in native- and loanwords (*bistró*, *upaljác* 'lighter', *teretnják* 'freight truck', *fakultét*, *automát*). As far as the stress is concerned, Serbian also respects the rule of the stress shift to the beginning, so that stressless proclitics take the stress of the word they precede, therefore: *NeN ljutišN se naN mene*. 'You are not angry with me' should be /néljutišše námene/, but speakers in the west would say /neljútišše naméne/ leaving the stress unchanged. On the other hand /h/ sound is more often omitted in the east, so *hoćeš* 'you want' becomes something like *óćeš*. However, these rules are uniform on television and there is no difference in writing.

The first and obvious difference in writing is the use of different scripts which reflects the historical orientation towards Constantinople and Rome, towards Orthodoxy and Catholicism: Serbian is written in Cyrillic characters and Croatian in Roman. Serbian can however be written in Roman characters as well but it is uncommon to write Croatian in Cyrillic. The system is in both cases following the phonetic principle and ignoring the etymological, so if the verb *pasti* 'to fall' is joined with the preposition *iz* 'from, out of' the result, meaning 'to fall out of', is *ispasti* not *izpasti* as would be in written Slovenian or Czech. The only difference is the treatment of the verbs ending in *-ti* in future tense: in Serbian 'I, you, he... will read' is written *pročítaću*, *pročítaćeš*, *pročítaće...*; in Croatian it is *pročitát ću*, *pročitát ćeš*, *pročitát će...* but they are pronounced the same. When verbs end in *-ći*, they are both languages treated equally: *moći ću* 'I shall be able' in.

As a consequence of being written in Cyrillic and following the phonetic principle, it is a common practice in Serbian to write foreign words, including personal names, following the same principle, adapting foreign words. Jacques Cousteau in Serbian thus becomes Жак Кусто > Žak Kusto, Churchill is

² Stress is normally not written, it is indicated here for the purpose of argument.

Черчил > Čerčil, Thatcher is Тачер > Tačer; Rocky Mountains become *Roki Mauntins*, Grand Canyon *Grend Kenjon*. The principle is in fact a compromise because Göteborg, Wrocław and Łódź become *Geteborg*, *Vroclav* and *Lođ*, with no attempts to imitate their local pronunciation (something like **Jeteborj*, **Vrocav*, **Vuđ*). Croatian mostly adopts such a principle when turning nouns into adjectives, so a New York policeman could be either *njujorški policajac* or *newyorški policajac*.

Serbian observes the rule that no consonant cluster should be in the end of a word, except for *-st*, *-št*, *-zd*, *-žd* (*r* counts as a vowel). Foreign words are therefore more adapted in Serbian: *elemenat* ~ *element*, *šnicla* ~ *šnicl* 'steak' from German Schnitzel, *dokumenat* ~ *dokument*, but both languages make exceptions.

Vocabulary

Most conspicuous differences between Serbian and Croatian are however present in the vocabulary, mostly among nouns, and it is the main argument in considering them as separate. Since speakers are confused themselves as to what word belongs to which language, many manuals have been written, such as Jovan Ćirilov's *Hrvatsko-srpski rječnik inačica*, *srpsko-hrvatski rečnik varijanti*, but the most ample and at the same time controversial though scientific is Vladimir Brodnjak's *Razlikovni rječnik srpskog i hrvatskog jezika*.

Slavic words

The difference in vocabulary again reflects different cultural backgrounds because most of them concern loanwords. Should the two languages be stripped of foreign influence, differences would be lesser, they would only concern the original Slavic roots which are still making quite a difference. The following two paragraphs are essential in differentiating the two languages in their early stages, without the help of foreign elements or politics: *vazduh* ~ *zrak* 'air', *pozorište* ~ *kazalište* 'theater', *zadocniti* ~ *zakašniti* 'to be late', *vasiona* ~ *svemir* 'universe', *pravo* ~ *ravno* 'straight', *izvini* ~ *oprosti* 'sorry', *uslov* ~ *uvjet* 'condition', *voz* ~ *vlak* 'train', *varnica* ~ *iskra* 'sparkle', *saobraćaj* ~ *promet* 'traffic', *takmičenje* ~ *natjecanje* 'competition', *vaspitanje* ~ *odgoj* 'upbringing', *pacov* ~ *štakor* 'rat', *beli luk* ~ *češnjak* 'garlic', *gvožđe* ~ *željezo* 'iron', *zapeta* ~ *zarež* 'coma (in grammar)', *duvati* ~ *puhati* 'to blow', *sopstveni* ~ *vlastiti* 'own', *bukvalno* ~ *doslovno* 'literally', *svirep* ~ *okrutan* 'cruel', *stepen* ~ *stupanj* 'degree', *krst* ~ *križ* 'cross', *pozadi* ~ *straga* 'behind'. Neologisms differ too: *oblakoder* ~

neboder (from *oblak* 'cloud' and *nebo* 'sky') 'skyscraper', *kolodvor* in Croatian is a train or bus station, *postaja* is a (bus) stop, both corresponding to Serbian *stanica* which is used in Croatian in the same meaning. The word *odojče* (suckling) in Serbian refers to a child, while in Croatian to a pig.

Differences can be slighter, almost hair-splitting and therefore more confusing: *šta* ~ *što* 'what', *što* ~ *zašto* 'why', *ko* ~ *tko* 'who', *verovatno* ~ *vjerovatno* 'probably', *lenj* ~ *lijen* 'lazy', *odbrana* ~ *obrana* 'protection', *savremen* ~ *su-vremen* 'modern', *plata* ~ *plaća* 'salary', *nesrećnik* ~ *nesretnik* 'unfortunate one', *tačno* ~ *točno* 'correct', *osa* ~ *os* 'axis', *pol* ~ *spol* 'sex', *ćutati* ~ *šutjeti* 'to be quiet', *poručiti* ~ *naručiti* 'to order', *zavisiti od nečega* ~ *ovisiti o nečemu* 'to depend on something', *naočari* ~ *naočale* 'glasses', *pomenuti* ~ *spomenuti* 'to mention', *sudija* ~ *sudac* 'judge, referee', *tanjir* ~ *tanjur* 'plate', *šolja* ~ *šalica* 'cup', *zrak* ~ *zraka* 'ray', *slepi miš* ~ *šišmiš* 'bat', *viljuška* ~ *vilica* 'fork', *ubistvo* ~ *ubojstvo* 'murder', *muva* ~ *muha* 'fly', *posmatrati* ~ *promatrati* 'to observe'; 'weight' is *teg* ~ *uteg*, 'louse' is *vaš* ~ *uš*, 'wheel' is *točak* ~ *kotač* but in plural differences are greater: *tegovi* ~ *utezi* 'weights', *vaške* ~ *uši* 'lice', *točkovi* ~ *kotači* 'wheels'. As will be seen throughout this text, in many cases it is impossible to draw a line. Even if words belong to one language or the other, its derivatives not necessarily do. So, an 'addict' isn't *zavisnik* in Serbian, but *ovisnik* in both languages, and 'stairs' can be *stepenice* in both (from *stepen*), although in Croatian they can also be *stube*. *Krstiti* is 'to baptize', *raskrstiti* is 'to break a relationship'.

Loanwords

But the greatest differences come with the loanwords. The most common example of differences between Serbian and Croatian *hleb* as opposed to *kruh*, is in fact an old Germanic loanword and is used in Croatian as *hljeb*. Both peoples have been subject to similar foreign influence. However, there is more Italian and German influence in Croatian, and more Turkish and Greek in Serbian. Despite the fact that Croatian is less reluctant to giving in to new rules, it has a tendency to be purer, occasionally through the efforts of individual linguists, such as Šulek who invented well-established words such as *kisik* (oxygen, *kiseonik* in Serbian), *sustav* (system), *sladoled* (ice cream, literally 'sweet-ice'), *vodoskok* (fountain, literally 'water-jump'). Both languages took many words from Latin and Greek, which were spoken in the area later inhabited by the Serbs and Croats. Inherited words are not felt by its speakers as foreign anymore. Here are some examples of different reflections of the same loanwords: *sunder* ~ *spužva* 'sponge', *Stevo* ~ *Stjepan* 'Stephen', *hemija* ~ *kemija* 'chemistry', *milion* ~ *milijun* 'million', *kafa* ~ *kava* 'coffee', or the different ones: *hartija* ~ *papir* 'paper',

bioskop ~ *kino* 'cinema', *parče* ~ *komad* 'piece', *sirće* ~ *ocat* 'vinegar', *makaze* ~ *škare* 'scissors'. The two languages even have different words for a 'kangaroo' *kengur* ~ *klokan*. Words are adapted through morphological patterns *informisati* ~ *informirati* 'to inform', *organizovati* ~ *organizirati* 'to organize', therefore *informišem* ~ *informiram* 'I inform', *organizujem* ~ *organiziram* 'I organize'.

Different past and purist tendencies resulted in Croatian perserving more of its original Slavic vocabulary: *pasulj* ~ *grah* 'beans', *kašika* ~ *žlica* 'spoon', *stomak* ~ *trbuh* 'stomach', *geografija* ~ *zemljopis* 'geography', *historija* ~ *povijest* 'history', *komšija* ~ *susjed* 'neighbor', *pantalone* ~ *hlače* 'trousers', *pijaca* ~ *tržnica* 'market', *peškir* ~ *ručnik* 'towel', *bašta* ~ *vrt* 'garden', *gas* ~ *plin* 'gas', *procenat* ~ *postotak* 'percentage', *ćošak* ~ *ugao* 'corner', *đubre* ~ *smeće* 'garbage', *džaba* ~ *besplatno* 'for free' (also *badava* in both), *šargarepa* ~ *mrkva* 'carrot', *fudbal* ~ *nogomet* 'soccer'. However, there are opposite cases. In examples *čas* ~ *sat* 'hour, lesson', *sprat* ~ *kat* 'floor', *prodavnica* ~ *dućan* (*prodavaonica*) 'shop' it is Croatian that uses words received via Turkish. In Serbian the word *kola* 'cart, wagon' acquired a new meaning 'car' which has a limited use in Croatian outside its original meaning (such as in *vatrogasna kola* 'firetruck'), while *auto* is used for 'car'. Croatian however reapplied the word *kola* in the word *kolodvor* mentioned earlier. Often the same word exists in both languages but is used differently. Confusion results in hypercorrectness and attempts to ban certain words. The word *čas* is used in Croatian as 'moment' being synonymous to *tren(utak)*. *Pravo* means 'real, true' in both languages, but it doesn't mean 'straight' in Croatian. *Bol* is mostly a feminine noun in Croatian, so 'my pain' is *moj bol* ~ *moja bol*; *poručiti* means 'to send a message' in Croatian but in Serbian it also means 'to order'; the verb *igrati se* means 'to play' in both languages but while in Croatian it exists only as reflexive, in Serbian it can also be transitive acquiring a new meaning, so *igrati* ~ *plesati* 'to dance'; the word *vek* in Serbian is 'century' which in Croatian is *stoljeće* but there exists in Croatian the word *vijek* denoting a long period of time: *životni vijek* – 'a lifetime', it certainly exists in derivatives such as *uvijek* 'always' and *vječnost* 'eternity'. Purism conducted by a lack of facts often results in impoverishing a language of synonyms and in negative attitude towards purism in general.

Languages also differ colloquially, so 'jeans' are *farmerke* ~ *traperice* (stemming from English *farmer* and *trapper*). It is common for Serbian youngsters to call their parents *matori* or to use *keva* for 'mom' and *ćale* for 'dad'. Very often the word *važi* is heard in Serbian everyday speech, denoting any kind of agreement, while common prop-words belonging to the Balkan sprachbund are *more* and *bre*. Many Serbian colloquial, cultural and religious terms are hardly trans-

latable, words such as *folirati se*, *šegačiti se*, *švalerisati*, *dasa*, *delija*, and those hardly understood by an average Croatian speaker: *dirinčiti*, *taze*, *sabajle*, *zejtin*.

Some geographical terms are different: *Alpi* ~ *Alpe* 'Alps', *Atina* ~ *Atena* 'Athens', *Kipar* ~ *Cipar* 'Cyprus', *Španija* ~ *Španjolska* 'Spain', *Švajcarska* ~ *Švicarska* 'Switzerland', *Rumunija* ~ *Rumunjska* 'Romania', and of course the principle of writing is different: *Džordžtaun* ~ *Georgetown*. The adjective of *Italija* is *italijanski* ~ *talijanski*. The adjective of *Slovenija* is *slovenački* ~ *slovenski*, and 'Slavic' is *slovenski* ~ *slavenski*, so *slovenski* means 'Slavic' in Serbian but 'Slovenian' in Croatian.

Syntax

'Membership' to the Balkan association mentioned earlier includes the loss of infinitive and while Macedonian/Bulgarian, Greek, Albanian and Rumanian have succumbed to this rule, Serbian is still resisting. Serbian verbs have infinitive forms but they are avoided whenever possible. This feature is the main syntactic difference between the two languages not taking into consideration that in the southern parts of Serbia, particularly around the town of Niš, even grammatical cases are less frequently used (which is another characteristic of the sprachbund).

This slight difference can cause quite a confusion because infinitives are replaced in Serbian by *da* (+ conjugated verb) which can have various meanings. A simple example of this difference is *Kad ćeš da dođeš?* ~ *Kad ćeš doći?* 'When will you come?' *Ne mogu to da jedem.* ~ *Ne mogu to jesti.* 'I can't eat this'. Again there is not a straight line between the use or not of infinitive/non-infinitive form, and there are many cases of false *da*-forms, since besides 'that', *da* can also mean 'in order to' and 'if': *Da imam vremena, došao bih.* means 'If I had time I would come' in both languages.

Infinitive cannot be used with indirect speech, so for both languages: *Reci mu da dođe.* 'Tell him to come.' wouldn't work as **Reci mu doći.* Same with *Rekao sam da odlazim.* 'I said I was leaving' (as opposed to **Rekao sam otići*); *Zamolio sam ga da mi pokaže.* 'I asked him to show me' (as opposed to **Zamolio sam ga pokazati mi*). Serbian may resort to the use of infinitive in order to avoid repetition of 'da' as in *Hteo sam da ti kažem da nisam mogao da dođem* 'I meant to tell you that I couldn't come'. In Croatian it would be *Htio sam ti reći da nisam mogao doći*. Infinitive does not contain a designation of person and must be avoided when it is not clear who the verb refers to. *Da* must be used in the following examples: *Nadam se da ne brineš.* 'I hope you're not

worried'. *Ne znam što da radim*. 'I don't know what to do'. *Rekao sam to da vidim što ćeš učiniti*. 'I said that (in order) to see what you would do', *Jedimo da možemo rasti*. 'Let us eat so we can grow'. In Croatian, infinitive can substitute *da* even if it has the meaning of 'in order to': *Došao sam te vidjeti*, *Došao sam da te vidim*, both 'I came (in order) to see you, just like 'in order' is optional in English.

Ambiguity exists in the third person. In the Serbian example *Želi da dođe*. 'He wants to come' it is not clear whether he (or she) wants to come himself or whether he wants someone else to come. In Croatian the first case would be *Želi doći* the second *Želi da dođe*. Further confusion is added by the multiple meanings of verbs. *Znati* is 'to know', 'to be able to', 'to be acquainted with'. *Zna da umire*. 'He knows he is dying' is ambiguous in both Serbian and Croatian (and English) (who is dying?). In Croatian 'I can swim' is *Znam plivati*, 'he can swim' is *Zna plivati*. 'He knows that he (someone else) is swimming' is *Zna da pliva*. While Croatian avoids the ambiguity by alternating the use of infinitive and *da*-form, Serbian uses the verb *umeti*, so *Zna da pliva* is the same as in Croatian but 'he can swim' becomes *Ume da pliva*. The verb *umijeti* exists in Croatian but is rarely used.

Final remarks

Considering everything that was said before and adding more to it, let us take a look at some parallel sentences that will make the point of the two languages being different.

A slight difference is demonstrated by:

Sr. *Sačekaj minut da uporedim tvoja i moja dokumenta*.

Cr. *Pričekaj minutu da usporedim tvoje i moje dokumente*.

'Wait a minute so I can compare your documents and mine'.

Greater differences are demonstrated by the following:

Što ga biješ? ~ Zašto ga tučeš? 'Why are you beating him?'

Sr. *U januaru sam rešio da uradim sve što me ranije mrzelo*.

Cr. *U siječnju sam odlučio učiniti sve što mi se ranije nije dalo*.

'In January I decided to do everything I didn't feel like doing before'

Sr. *Uopšte me ne interesuje šta se desilo*.

Cr. *Uopće me ne zanima što se dogodilo.*
I am not interested at all in what happened’.

Sr. *Hteo sam da ti kažem da ne umem da igram, treba da idem na kurs.*
Cr. *Htio sam ti reći da ne znam plesati, moram ići na tečaj.*
‘I wanted to tell you that I can’t dance, I must take a course’.

Sr. *Voz je stigao na stanicu tačno u pet časova.*
Cr. *Vlak je stigao na kolodvor tačno u pet sati.*
‘The train arrived at the station at exactly five o’clock’

Sr. *Na zadnjem spratu oblakodera vazduh je ređi, a saobraćaj tiši.*
Cr. *Na zadnjem katu nebodera zrak je rjeđi, a promet tiši.*
‘On the last floor of the skyscraper the air is rare but the traffic more quiet’.

We could even make up similar or identical phrases that have different meanings in the two languages, or in fact only one of them, while in the other they may sound as nonsense: *suprotni pol* Sr. ‘opposite sex’ Cr. ‘opposite pole’ ; *Zemljina osa* Sr. ‘Earth’s axis’ ; Cr. ‘Earth’s wasp’ ; *prava stvar* Sr. ‘straight thing’, Cr. ‘real thing’.

Sr. *Odojče igra na zraku.* ‘An infant is dancing on the ray’.
Cr. *Odojče se igra na zraku.* ‘A piglet is playing on the air’.

Or: *Pravi zrak igra svoju igru.*
Sr. ‘Straight ray is dancing its dance/Real ray is playing its game’.
Cr. ‘Real air is playing its game’.

Kad počinje slovenski čas?
Sr. ‘When does the Slavic lesson begin?’
Cr. ‘When does the Slovenian moment begin?’

Only some differences are mentioned here. In Croatian verbs are rarely used in their past tenses, other than simple, which are still in use in Serbian, on the other hand, in Serbian international names of the months are used, while Croatian uses Slavic names. The two languages are closely related but not identical. Similarities between them are superficial, while differences are found more deeply, and many of them are based on subtleties, preferences, semantic nuances, caused by discrepancies between what is attempting to be standard and what is colloquial and by the political instability (which resulted in the emergence of languages such as Bosnian). They certainly deserve more attention and

studying, instead of being ignored by considering the two languages as politically designated variants of one, thus maintaining the confusion among native speakers and foreigners alike or taken into account out of nothing more than tolerance.