
Aegean Working Papers in Ethnographic Linguistics

Vol 2, No 2 (2019)

COMMENTARIES ON THE SPECIAL ISSUE Ethnographic Accounts of Linguistic Issues in the Yugoslav Successor States

“The Declaration on the Common Language”: A View from the Inside

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doi: [10.12681/awpel.22595](https://doi.org/10.12681/awpel.22595)

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To cite this article:

Bugarski, R. (2020). “The Declaration on the Common Language”: A View from the Inside. *Aegean Working Papers in Ethnographic Linguistics*, 2(2), 23–29. <https://doi.org/10.12681/awpel.22595>

“The Declaration on the Common Language”: A View from the Inside

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The editor of the special issue of AWPEL on former Yugoslavia has kindly invited me to provide the journal’s readership with more information on this document, evaluated in distinctly negative terms by Professor Christian Voß in his contribution to the present collection of articles. I will gladly do so, in my capacity as a native speaker of Serbo-Croatian, a consultant in the drafting process of the Declaration and one of its initial signatories and public supporters. I will not discuss the main topic of his article, that is the implementation of the Montenegrin and Macedonian standard languages, but will restrict myself to what strikes me as a rather loosely and artificially imposed frame around that topic. Professor Voß (henceforth V. for brevity) opens and closes his discussion with critical but unsubstantiated comments on the Declaration (which he even downgrades with the attribute “so-called”), without making it clear how they are relevant to developments that took place decades before this document was conceived. Indeed, one gets the impression that the author simply saw this article as an opportunity to reiterate his previously voiced dismissive reaction to the Declaration (Voß 2017).¹ In what follows I propose to provide some essential but missing information, while at the same time challenging certain key statements and evaluations made by the author. For this purpose, I append the full text of the Declaration (in my English translation), so that readers can see exactly what is being claimed or disputed and reach their own conclusions on these issues.

1. Background

The Declaration came into being as a result of a year-long regional project called “Jezici i nacionalizmi” [Languages and nationalisms], originally inspired by an influential book by the well-known Croatian linguist Snježana Kordić (2010). It was launched by a Belgrade-based writers’ association in collaboration with three cultural NGOs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro. Within this project a series of four conferences were held in the course of 2016, in Podgorica, Split, Belgrade, and Sarajevo, each featuring a mixed panel of invited language professionals (noted linguists, writers, journalists, critics, translators, etc.) bringing up and discussing with the highly responsive audiences a large variety of topics relating to linguistic issues and problems. All the conferences were well attended and enjoyed adequate media

¹ The theses advanced there called forth an immediate and sharp rebuttal by Kordić (2017). Perhaps surprisingly, neither of these articles is mentioned in V.’s present contribution.

coverage, which showed that there was indeed considerable public interest in the actual linguistic life of living people, as against official propaganda. Hence the Declaration is definitely a regional affair, not at all essentially Serbian as one might infer from V.'s terse introductory remarks (on most of the signatories allegedly being "from Serbia and Western Europe") and later references to it.

2. Motives

This initiative was motivated by the widespread perception that there was little correspondence between the strictly separatist language and identity policies followed by the authorities in all the four countries and linguistic reality on the ground, where many speakers of the officially recognized four national languages consider that the often artificial differentiation among them has gone too far, and that they still speak basically the same language under different names. The Declaration was conceived as a well-meaning grass-roots, bottom-up initiative by a representative group of concerned intellectuals with little else in common and with no executive power or political backing, contrary to accusations routinely made by its vociferous opponents. It has no hidden agendas or pretensions; least of all does it aim for a restoration of Yugoslavia under Serbian dominance, or for the official abandonment of the four national language names in favour of a revived common Serbo-Croatian. Accordingly, one is startled to read, at the beginning of V.'s section 2, about the Declaration's alleged "proximity to ultra-nationalist Serbian positions", as exemplified by the notorious pamphlet *Slovo o srpskom jeziku* [The Declaration on the Serbian language] of 1998. In order to appreciate the absurdity of this charge, it should suffice to compare two short quotations:

The so-called Croatian standard language is the Zagreb variety of the Serbian standard language... The so-called Bosnian standard language is the Sarajevo variety of the Serbian standard language (Slovo; see Marković 1998: 21-22).

All four currently existing standard variants enjoy equal status, insofar as none of them can be considered a language, the rest being variants of that language (Declaration, see Appendix).

I confess that any proximity between these two positions escapes me; in fact, all I perceive here are polar opposites. Nor do I see from this how the Declaration "reiterates the traditional discourse of those who use linguistic criteria to deligitimise or even deny the existence of neighbour nations", or how "linguistic support of nation-building is stigmatised and even blamed for the failure of the Yugoslav idea" (p. 2), both wholly groundless accusations. Is it not clear enough that the Declaration – quite to the contrary – grants Bosnian and Montenegrin exactly the same status as it does to Serbian and Croatian, a position disputed by many?

In a similar vein, V.'s preoccupation with "the Serbian mental map" apparently leads him to suggest that the common language might more properly be identified with Serbian; he quotes, with implicit approval, a Bosniak reaction (Bulić 2017): "This prompts Bulić to ask already in the title of his response to the Declaration, if the common language should in fact be called Serbian" (note 3). Alas, this is simply false: it is evident from V.'s own list of references that the title referred to asks no such

question, and moreover there is no hint in that direction in the body of that article either; one therefore may conclude that V. is here projecting his own view, carelessly attributed to another commentator. But however that may be, it will be useful once again to see what the Declaration actually says:

Each state, nation, ethnonational or regional community may freely and independently codify its own variant of the common language... The fact that what is involved is a common polycentric standard language enables its users to name it as they wish.

Again, I fail to detect in these proposals any trace of a Serbo-centric orientation which might justify identifying the language as “Serbian” rather than “common”. Likewise, it is difficult to agree, in V.’s concluding paragraph, with the alleged “naivety of the initiators of the [Declaration], since it supports the position of the neighbouring ‘Big Brother’ ... and ignores the cultural and especially communicative memory of the language communities involved”. And frankly, I cannot comment on the rhetorical question following this in the very last sentence, perhaps intended as the upshot of the entire argument, because its import evades me.

3. Reception

The Declaration met with two sharply different kinds of reaction. On the one hand, it encountered some fierce opposition from the nationalist political and/or cultural establishments, allegedly as directed against this or that language and nation, but on various other charges as well. These attacks were by far quickest and most vehement in Croatia, where the very notion of a common language was perceived as a threat to its existence; some of the charges made by high-ranking persons there were not just offensive but simply bizarre. In the other three states official reactions were much more subdued or even nonexistent, though there were negative responses from academic institutions or individuals. Overall, the Declaration’s actual text was typically ignored or deliberately misinterpreted, with arbitrary accusations levelled against its drafters as a bunch of incompetent busibodies and traitors trespassing on the sacred ground of national interests. In other words, no attention at all was paid by the power holders to the burning practical issues which motivated the Declaration in the first place.

Yet on the other hand, the Declaration enjoyed an unofficial but warm reception from numerous noted public personalities, as well as thousands of so-called ordinary speakers. By January 2019 it was signed by well over 9,000 people from the entire region, the diaspora and beyond, who welcomed the opportunity to line up behind a spontaneous initiative concerning matters of language use which they felt were important but neglected or mishandled by the authorities. And so a document originally conceived as a fairly modest venture quickly outgrew its expected audience. It should be pointed out that the Declaration, being meant for home use, was published on the internet only in “the common language”, while the English translation appended below was much later prepared by myself for restricted circulation among interested non-readers of Serbo-Croatian. This enabled some leading linguists, including for example Noam Chomsky and Peter Trudgill, as well as

many scholars in other fields, to sign it.² The list of supporters includes many well-known names from Germany, Austria, Greece, The Netherlands, Poland, UK, USA and Australia.³

4. Concluding remarks

Two further points should be made with reference to V.'s critical observations. One, the fact that the Declaration is still being presented and discussed, regionally and internationally, nearly two years after publication, seems to belie his estimate of its "minimal sustainability" (p. 1), attributed to its failure to "formulate concrete political propositions" (p. 1-2). But this document is an appeal, not a treatise, and as such it had to be short and fairly general; formulating such propositions on its basis is primarily the responsibility of state authorities, if at all interested. And two, the discussion triggered by its publication has been about various things but mostly not "around the question of perceived dominance of Serbian within the pluricentric model" (p. 1): this question, obviously of primary interest to V., simply does not arise from the text of the Declaration, as we have already indicated.

Actually, the focus of any serious reflection should have been on the recommendations made in the last part of the Declaration, which contains the "meat" of the whole document: the highly regrettable consequences of the separatist language policies consistently followed in the region. Nation building may be a worthy cause in itself, but the Declaration is about practical language-related problems in the lives of ordinary citizens who, after all, constitute these very nations. Unfortunately, such considerations have been signally absent from the negative reactions. They were largely replaced, as shown above, with discrediting the people who brought these issues to public attention: a time-honoured rhetorical trick, known as a call to kill the messenger! The document is certainly not offered as a new Gospel to be accepted uncritically, but in order to be helpful any critical remarks should be relevant, well-grounded and fair. And I have yet to see an unfavourable response that is not a wholesale dismissal but rather contains a careful, non-emotional point-by-point analysis showing exactly what is wrong with each individual statement or recommendation, and why.

V. himself mentions only one of the problems, the enforced ethnic segregation of schoolchildren on the basis of their allegedly different mother tongues – and that in a slighting manner. Yet this unique example of apartheid in twenty-first century Europe, which raises generations of young nationalists, future voters of local political parties, under the pretext of securing their rights as part of "European values", is surely not a matter to be dismissed lightly. Neither are the enormous sums of citizens' money which are wasted on completely superfluous translation and interpretation

² A German translation has appeared on the net more recently: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deklaration_zur_gemeinsamen_Sprache (accessed 27.11.2018).

³ A complete overview of the motives, origin, reception and effects of the Declaration, including the main objections and the author's answers to them, as well as an illustrative list of 180 noted signatories from the region and abroad, can be found in Bugarski (2018). Those interested enough but lacking a reading knowledge of Serbo-Croatian may look out for a condensed English version: Bugarski (forthcoming 2019).

among the national languages in administration, judicial procedures, higher education, media, publishing, culture, etc. – all in the name of ensuring equality and preserving the particular national identities. Or, for that matter, any of the other problems listed in the Declaration.

Instead of referring to these issues, even critically, V. has chosen to ignore them and lament over what he sees as possible adverse effects of the Declaration, but does so in a way that is difficult to understand. He introduces the topic of effacing official signage in the region’s different languages or alphabets, only to suggest that the Declaration might somehow justify such vandalism instead of opposing it, through “blurring cultural differences rather than approving them”, and proceeds to ask how such things can be “reconciled with the European standards of minority rights” (p. 2). And speaking more generally, he makes the following remarkable statement: “It is only possible to speak of a form of Serbo-Croatian pluricentrism for the period from 1850 to 1967”, since “in 1967 Serbo-Croatian ended in the Croatian Declaration” (p. 4). While it makes sense to identify the year of the Vienna Literary Agreement as marking the birth of the Serbo-Croatian idea, it takes “a willing suspension of disbelief” (in Coleridge’s well-known phrase) to accept that a living language, having existed in a standardized form for many decades, can end overnight, simply because a body of speakers – in this case, the signatories of the “Declaration on the name and position of the Croatian literary language” – has declared that they no longer recognize it. Even officially, that was only the beginning of the end, which came some twenty-five years later. And unofficially, as a vehicle of communication if not of national identification, the language is still very much alive; after all, languages as communicative systems are not created or abolished by decree.

In conclusion, V.’s treatment of the Declaration revolves around two basic claims: that this document is actually Serbo-centric under the guise of pluricentricity, thus being a mere extension of traditional Serbian nationalism; and that it therefore hinders the normal processes of nation building in the neighbouring countries. I hope to have demonstrated that these two related claims, while reflecting certain ideological preferences or political prejudices, have no basis whatever in the actual text of the Declaration, as anyone who reads it carefully and with an open mind can readily see.

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Appendix: Declaration on the common language

Faced with the negative social, cultural and economic consequences of political manipulations of language in the current language policies in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, we the undersigned issue the following

DECLARATION ON THE COMMON LANGUAGE

The answer to the question whether a common language is used in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia is affirmative.

This is a common standard language of the polycentric type – one spoken by several nations in several states, with recognisable variants, such as German, English, Arabic, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and many others. This fact is corroborated by Štokavian as the common dialectal basis of the standard language, the ratio of same versus different in the language, and the consequent mutual comprehensibility.

The use of four names for the standard variants – Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian – does not imply that these are four different languages.

Insisting on the small number of existing differences and on the forceful separation of the four standard variants causes numerous negative social, cultural, and political phenomena. These include using language as an argument justifying the segregation of schoolchildren in some multiethnic environments, unnecessary "translation" in administration or the media, inventing differences where they do not exist, bureaucratic coercion, as well as censorship (and necessarily also self-censorship), where linguistic expression is imposed as a criterion of ethnonational affiliation and a means of affirming political loyalty.

We, the undersigned, hold that

- the fact that a common polycentric language exists does not question the individual right to express belonging to different nations, regions or states;
- each state, nation, ethnonational or regional community may freely and independently codify its own variant of the common language;
- all four currently existing standard variants enjoy equal status, insofar as none of them can be considered a language, the rest being variants of that language;
- polycentric standardisation is the democratic form of standardisation that is closest to actual language use;
- the fact that what is involved is a common polycentric standard language enables its users to name it as they wish;
- the standard variants of the polycentric language exhibit differences in linguistic and cultural traditions and practices, in the use of alphabets, in lexical

stock, and on other linguistic levels; this may be demonstrated, inter alia, by the different standard variants of the common language in which this Declaration will be published and put to use;

- the standard, dialectal and individual differences do not justify forced institutional separation; on the contrary, they contribute to the great richness of the common language.

Therefore, we, the undersigned, call for

- abolishing all forms of linguistic segregation and discrimination in educational and public institutions;
- discontinuing the repressive and needless practices of language separation that are harmful to the speakers;
- terminating the rigid definition of the standard variants;
- avoiding the superfluous, senseless and costly “translations” in legal proceedings, administration, and public information media;
- the freedom of individual choice and respect for linguistic diversity;
- linguistic freedom in literature, the arts, and the media;
- the freedom of dialectal and regional use;
- and finally, the freedom of “mixing”, mutual openness, and interpenetration of different forms and expressions of the common language, to the benefit of all its speakers.

About the author

The author was until his retirement Professor of English and General Linguistics at the University of Belgrade. He was a guest lecturer at numerous universities in Europe, the USA, and Australia, and has published widely in English and general linguistics, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics etc., including the co-edited books *Language Planning in Yugoslavia* (1992) and *Language in the Former Yugoslav Lands* (2004). He has served as President, Societas Linguistica Europaea; Vice President, International Association of Applied Linguistics; and Council of Europe expert on minority languages (Strasbourg), as well as on the editorial boards of several international journals. He is a member of Academia Scientiarum et Artium Europaea (Salzburg). His students and colleagues worldwide have honoured him with four festschrifts.