

## After Serbo-Croatian: The Narcissism of Small Difference<sup>1</sup>

Snježana Kordić. *Jezik i nacionalizam* [Language and Nationalism] (Rotulus / Universitas Series). Zagreb, Croatia: Durieux. 2010.  
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Kordić's book *Jezik i nacionalizam* [Language and Nationalism] is a study of language politics or political sociolinguistics. Language being such a burning political issue in Yugoslavia after the adoption in 1974 of a truly federal constitution. In her extensive monograph, written in Croatian (or Latin script-based Croato-Serbian?), Kordić usefully summarizes today's state of the linguistic and popular discourse on language and nationalism as it obtains in Croatia, amplified with some comparative examples drawn from Bosnia, Montenegro and Serbia. These four out of the seven post-Yugoslav states (the other three being Kosovo, Macedonia and Slovenia) partitioned among themselves Yugoslavia's main official language, Serbo-Croatian (or, in the intra-Yugoslav parlance, 'Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian'), thus reinventing it anew as the four separate national languages of Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian. The first two are written in the Latin alphabet; Montenegrin is written both in this alphabet and in Cyrillic; Serbian is officially in Cyrillic, but is in practice also written in Latin characters.

The monograph is divided into three parts. The first and shortest one, Linguistic Purism (*Jezični purizam*), sets out the theoretical (and also ideological) position adopted by Kordić. Building on this theoretical framework, she conducts her analysis and discussion in the two further sections, The Pluricentric Standard Language (*Policentrični standardni jezik*) and the final more far-ranging one, Nation, Identity, Culture and History (*Nacija, identitet, kultura, povijest*).<sup>2</sup>

In the initial section, the author proposes that linguistic purism was strongly connected to the ideology of national socialism (popularly abbreviated to 'nazism')

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Michael O'Gorman for his discussion and advice.

<sup>2</sup> To a degree, the author developed many of this book's themes and issues first in her numerous articles published between 2001 and 2009 in *Književna republika* (before 2003, the journal's title was *Republika*), a bimonthly of the Croatian Association of Writers (Hrvatsko Društvo Pisaca). The texts are available from Kordić's website <http://www.snjezana-kordic.de/>, Jul 31, 2010.

of the Third Reich (pp. 10–16). The claim is not invalid in itself. In the German Empire (the Third Reich's official name) of those times the ideal was a *Volksge-meinschaft*, or a homogenous, unified German nation, whose members would live in a single nation-state, 'cleansed of racially inappropriate elements,' and would speak an equally homogenous and unified standard German language, hence 'cleansed' of dialects, variants and 'foreign influences.' But the idea of linguistic purity as an instrument of nation-building had budded already at the turn of the nineteenth century and had been employed time and again for more than a hundred years across the length and breadth of Central Europe before the rise of the national socialist regime in Germany. In the nineteenth century Czech was standardized on the basis of sixteenth-century Bohemian writings and was 'cleansed of ugly Germanisms.' Similarly, the national purity of Hungarian was ensured by removing Germanisms and Latinisms from it, to be replaced in turn by Finno-Ugric neologisms. In the case of Walachian, which was transformed into the national language of Romanian, Cyrillic was supplanted with the Latin script, and Slavicisms with French linguistic loans in order to recover the 'true' Romance character of this language (Baár 2010; Kamusella 2008).

Likewise, Kordić's assertion that wartime independent Croatia's language policies copied 'nazi linguistic purism' (pp 16–18) is not incorrect. The same could be said of independent Slovakia's de-Czechizing approach to Slovak language planning during World War Two (Kamusella 2008: 820–851). Yet, it seems more appropriate to say that both states not so much copied the German kind of linguistic purism prevalent then in the Third Reich, but rather followed the national-cum-puristic model of constructing a national language, as developed in Central Europe during the previous century.

I sense that what the author is driving at is a tacit emphasis on an unprecedented intensity and invasiveness of the implementation of language policies, made possible by totalitarian methods, as worked out and imposed on the populace in Hitler's Greater Germany. I presume language planners in wartime Croatia and Slovakia aspired to this level of efficacy. However, totalitarian control of language making, destruction and its total overhauling did not originate in the Third Reich either, but in the interwar Soviet Union, where it was realized on a much vaster scale and for many decades longer (Brandist, Chown, 2010; King 1999). I see a problem of the same kind with Kordić's conclusion that linguistic purism and prescriptivism are not part of the scholarly discourse (pp. 50–56, 58–67). These represent two approaches to the issue of language planning, codification and standardization (as we know and practice them). Other approaches to language planning are available in this respect, notably descriptivism. Linguistics, like many other social and exact sciences, has two complementary goals, namely, research and the subsequent application of research findings to alter the material and social reality that surrounds humans. Physicists work in the same fashion. For example, some probe into the composition of matter and energy at a micro level, and others employ this fundamental research to construct nuclear weapons or computer chips. The knife is an ethically neutral object until a person decides to use it, for good or evil, as judged by a society. Kordić's reluctance

to ascribe a scientific character to linguistic purism and prescriptivism amounts to an ethical judgment on how these approaches were employed in Croatia and other post-Yugoslav countries.

The prime target of Kordić's most ardent criticism is *kroatistika*, or philology of the Croatian language alongside the study of Croatian culture, literature and other cultural production (cf. p. 164). University departments of *kroatistika* follow the German model of *Germanistik*, or nationally construed and socially applicable philology, which became the standard of how the scholarly study and 'development' of national languages should be organized across Central and Eastern Europe. Since the nineteenth century, university departments of *albanologija* (for Albanian), *belorusistika* (for Belarusian), *bohemistika* (for Czech), *Hellenistik* (for Greek, but in German-language terminology), *hungarológia* (or more puristically, *magyarságtudomány*, for Hungarian), *lituanistika* (for Lithuanian), *polonistika* (for Polish), *românistica* (for Romanian), *rusistika* (for Russian), *slovakistika* (for Slovak), *slovenistika* (for Slovenian), *sorabistika* (for Lusatian Sorbian) or *ukrainistika* (for Ukrainian) have not only studied their respective languages and cultures; they have also codified and standardized the languages in a prescriptivist manner, and subsequently produced hordes of schoolteachers of language and literature responsible for spreading such a national standard across their respective nation-states through the various polities' national systems of education, which were specifically designed for this purpose (pp. 364–366). In this way languages were imagined, created and spread across Central (and Eastern) Europe, the process being closely intertwined with nation and nation-state building in this region, as empirically described and analyzed in the Czech classic of the study of nationalism by Miroslav Hroch (1985), not mentioned by Kordić. Hroch's 'phase model' of nation building, especially the later one more strongly incorporating the process of language planning (or this reviewer's bringing together of Hroch's (1994) model with that of language standardization as proposed by Einar Haugen), would offer the author a useful analytical instrument with which to interrogate her subject matter (Kamusella 2001).

After the sustained, in-depth discussion, the author rightly notes that there is no linguistic or sociolinguistic basis that would justify or necessitate the splitting of Serbo-Croatian into its (to date) four successor languages (p. 378). But it was not the upstart philologists-cum-proponents of the four new languages who saw the split as unavoidable (as she proposes at p. 119); they basically followed political developments at the crest of which leaders of new nations and their nation-states surfed and managed to survive. These essential 'ethnic political entrepreneurs,' besides winning new posts of presidents, premieres and ministers for themselves, also secured new positions of high academic rank for loyal supporters from the intellectual elite, and thus co-opted to their various national projects 'faithful' linguists, readily supplied with academic departments of the new languages (pp 206–208). The transition of employees and practitioners between philology (linguistics and literary studies) and ethnolinguistically legitimized politics in Central Europe is nothing new (Kamusella 2008). It suffices to instance the case of Tomáš Masaryk, a co-founder of interwar Czechoslovakia and its longest serving president.

Before the twentieth century there was no coordination between linguistic and political borders (pp. 169–177), but now the ethnolinguistic nation-state became the norm of the political organization in Central Europe. The normative model of ‘normal’ legitimate nation-state that prevails in Central Europe ultimately boils down to language. First, speakers of something reified as a national language constitute a nation. In turn, the ethnolinguistically defined nation has the right to a national polity whose territory would coincide with the contiguous geographical distribution of the language’s speakers. Since 1918, Central Europe has been reorganized in line with this ethnolinguistic kind of nationalism, though this is unusual elsewhere in the world (Kamusella 2006). Kordić states that there are no objective criteria for making a nation, what counts is political will of a populace and contingency (pp. 188–194). For better or worse the same is true of languages reified as politicized objects through writing, dictionaries, grammars, textbooks and decisions of politicians and language planners. To paraphrase Benedict Anderson, languages are as imagined as nations. And nation and nation-state building in modern Central Europe (and to a large extent in Eastern Europe) has thrived on the inextricably joint imagining of nation and its language, or of language and its nation.

Bearing this in mind, the position is neither as regrettable nor as unintelligible as claimed by Kordić (pp. 76, 161–163, 271), though it does not have to be rational and, indeed, at times it may appear illogical and anachronistic (pp 254–263, 265). Decisions and consensus on political changes reached by leaders and people are what they are. That is why the academic field of *jugoslavistika* (or more correctly, *s(e)rbokroatistika*) as the study of Serbo-Croatian has sundered, in parallel with the division of this language. The process is confusing and painful to many because it is happening in the present. In Croatia and Serbia, there are already university departments of *kroatistika*<sup>3</sup> and *srbitika*.<sup>4</sup> But in Bosnia and Herzegovina the University of Sarajevo rejoices in a department of the languages of Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian,<sup>5</sup> and the University of Montenegro in a department of Serbian language and literature,<sup>6</sup> though a department of *montenegristika* was founded in late 2008 at Nikšić.<sup>7</sup>

Kordić opposes this change from the pluricentric language of Serbo-Croatian to the monocentric languages of Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian (pp. 77–78). One readily sympathizes with her, as the process is bound to lessen the almost full mutual intelligibility among the four new languages, as has already happened in the case of Czech and Slovak, thus dividing the old, broader Serbo-Croatian sphere of communication and cultural exchange into much smaller communication spheres. This is an unfortunate development, but is impossible to reverse; it recalls the case of

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ffzg.hr/kroat/>, Aug 2, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bg.ac.rs/csrp/clanice/fakulteti/drustv-human/filoloski.php>, Aug 2, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ff.unsa.ba/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogcategory&id=28&Itemid=8](http://www.ff.unsa.ba/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=28&Itemid=8), August 2, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ucg.ac.me/cg/filozofski.htm>, August 2, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ff.ac.me/Informatori/Crnogorski%20%20jezik%20i%20juznoslovenske%20knjizevnosti%20%281%29.pdf>, Aug 2, 2010; <http://www.studentskisvet.com/info/20080522/montenegristika-predavanja-crnogorskog-jezika-na-srpskom-filozofski-fakultet-niksic>, Aug 2, 2010.

the 1918 breakup of the wide political sphere and large market of Austria-Hungary, still deployed in Central Europe.

As I said at the beginning Kordic book is a study of language politics. In 1983, Miloš Okuka (now the leading commentator on the split of Serbo-Croatian) devoted his essayistic *Jezik i politika* (Language and Politics) to the problem. (This is not mentioned by the author, though she quotes Okuka's later works on the breakup of Serbo-Croatian.) Similarly, although Kordić uses some articles by the United States linguist of (post-)Serbo-Croatian, Robert D Greenberg, she does not refer the reader to his definitive monograph, *Language and Identity in the Balkans* (2004), which was immediately translated into Croatian (Greenberg 2005) and followed by a lively discussion among Croatian intellectuals (Peti-Stantić 2008). Further, in her monograph Kordić has not devoted much attention to the problem of the two scripts (Cyrillic and Latin) employed for writing Serbo-Croatian, though this duality might influence the split of this language into Croatian and Serbian, ethnoculturally and politically connected to the respective alphabets. Last but not least, Kordić could have enriched her discussion of her favored broader and pluricentric communication spheres by extending her scope to include interwar Yugoslavia's official language of Serbocroatoslovenian, which at that time also contained Macedonian, construed as a south Serbian dialect of this official language.<sup>8</sup> To my knowledge, not a single substantial article (let alone a monograph) has focused on this essentially 'Yugoslav' language, which aspired to embrace all the dialects of interwar Yugoslavia's Slavic-speakers.

The author's principled stance on *kroatistik* and her outspokenness were clearly not welcomed in her native Croatia. Perhaps this was the reason behind her 1993 departure for Germany to study, teach and conduct research.<sup>9</sup> Her perseverance is admirable, and has come to fruition in the form of the reviewed monograph. With this she not only literally drives home her views and opinions, steeped in the Western (European) approach to language and its (ab)uses, but also transplants into the discourse of her own country, for the sake of the Croatian public, the useful concepts of Aufbau and Ausbau languages, dialect continuum, and also those of the study of nationalism and ethnicity. With such intellectual instruments in hand, the Croatian reader (and her Bosnian, Montenegrin and Serbian counterparts who read the book) may analyze the national message of *kroatistik*, and agree or disagree with it. This is quite an achievement in itself.

Those parts of the monograph directly dealing with the discourse on language, culture and politics in Croatia, especially if more broadly compared with similar developments in Bosnia, Montenegro and Serbia,<sup>10</sup> would make interesting reading

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<sup>8</sup> See art 3 of the 1921 Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, [http://sr.wikisource.org/sr/%D0%A3%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2\\_%D0%9A%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%99%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5\\_%D0%A1%D1%80%D0%B1%D0%B0\\_%D0%A5%D1%80%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0\\_%D0%B8\\_%D0%A1%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B0\\_%281921%29](http://sr.wikisource.org/sr/%D0%A3%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2_%D0%9A%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%99%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5_%D0%A1%D1%80%D0%B1%D0%B0_%D0%A5%D1%80%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0_%D0%B8_%D0%A1%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B0_%281921%29), Aug 4, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.snjezana-kordic.de/snjezana\\_kordic.htm](http://www.snjezana-kordic.de/snjezana_kordic.htm), Aug 2, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Hasnija Muratagić-Tuna's de facto Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian contrastive grammar and orthographic dictionary could offer a good starting point for such a comparison. (Muratagić-Tuna 2005).

for the international scholar and public and this would amply justify the translation of such an overhauled volume into English.

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