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Book Review

Robert D. Greenberg, *Language and Identity in the Balkans: Serbo-Croatian and Its Disintegration.* Oxford University Press Inc., 2008, 205 pp.

Predrag Piper

In the study of Slavic sociolinguistics significant attention has been devoted in the past two decades to the issues pertaining to the creation of new standard languages in the territories where the Serbo-Croatian language was once spoken. This matter is well covered in various works published by linguists from the regions where one of these modern Neo-Štokavian standard languages is being used. Recently, we see that the Slavists beyond the borders of the western Balkans are more interested in post Serbo-Croatian Neo-Štokavian sociolinguistics. The strength of this particular phenomenon lies in the assumption that distance generally contributes to greater objectiveness. Nevertheless, it is easy to overlook seemingly miniscule or irrelevant facts and occurrences when analysing a certain matter from a distance. It is more difficult to gain an optimal view of all relevant primary sources of information while always running the risk of giving in to popular sociolinguistic and political stereotypes found in the local scholarly setting.

Writing a book about a subject like the one explored in the book *Language and Identity in the Balkans* requires a broad knowledge of the sociolinguistic apparatus, consistency in the application of a particular linguistic theory or methodology, exceptional knowledge of south Slavic dialects, their language history and in particular the history of standard languages. Knowledge of the South Slavic culture, customs, politics and general history is also essential. It is also important to separate relevant sources of information found in linguistic and general literature from the less relevant ones. When analyzing sources, one must differentiate facts from assumptions and refrain from referencing incorrect material or making presumptions. This requires a wide range of dialogue with other experts in the field and a critical assessment and analysis of their work. Such meticulous approach should be sufficient enough to respond to a wide range of unanswered questions in the field of study. Finally, assuming that all the above mentioned criteria are applied, one must leave sufficient room to present a clear and sound argument.

Robert D. Greenberg has closely studied the issues mentioned in his book *Language and Identity in the Balkans* since the early 90s. The 2004 edition of the book was not just a demonstration of the author's accumulated knowledge and long standing research experience. It was also a display of his findings that he had published in eight separate articles in the period from 1994 to 2001. The content of these articles is synthesised in the book cited.

In the two hundred and five pages of his book, Robert D. Greenberg gives a great deal of relevant information on a very dense subject. It's clear that the author had to be extremely selective in his work. In the introduction, Greenberg clearly states: "My approach has been thematic; rather than attempt to cover all facets of language change and the differentiation of the successor languages, I have sought articles that inform readers about the main controversies surrounding the new successor languages. In particular, I have focused on orthographic controversies, debates on literary dialects, disagreements on vocabulary, and issues related to the constitutional status of successor languages" (p. 5). This is why Greenberg's book has the characteristics of a wide panorama in which he describes certain contemporary issues. He supplements them with the explanations of their genesis, structure and function. We need only rely on some more in-depth future works to determine how optimal the author was in his selectiveness.

Robert D. Greenberg is clearly selective in favour of the works of some other authors dealing with a similar subject. He makes no reference to a number of relevant books and articles published both at the time Greenberg published his first book in 2004 and its updated version in 2008. These works are closely linked to the subject of Greenberg's interest. To mention but a few: Brborić 2000; Brborić et al. (2006); Bugarski (2002a; 2002b), Czerwiński (2005), Gröschel (2003), Jaroszewicz (2004), Jaroszewicz (2006), Kordić (2004); Radovanović (2004), Stojanović & Bojović (2006), Sotirović (2007), Spisi (1998–2008), Šipka (2006). In some other examples Greenberg points to the article of Albin (1970) where he could have perhaps referred to the book written by Mladenović (1989) which is probably the best work on this subject. Interestingly enough, his book makes no mention of the work of Brozović & Ivić (1988) even though this work examines the history of the Serbo-Croatian language and its dialects in a very clear and meticulous manner.

Greenberg claims that there are a number of works published on the territory of former Yugoslavia which lack scholarly rigour for investigating linguistic issues. An example of this is, according to Greenberg, the book Brborić (2001) in which he finds a "distinctly Serbo-centric point of view regarding the proliferation of new languages in ex-Yugoslavia" (p. 4). In the same context he refers to the books written by Ranko Bugarski: "Bugarski (1995 and 1997) has focused much of his attention on language developments affecting the new Serbian standard in the context of the wars in ex-Yugoslavia and social crisis in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia" (p. 4). There is no doubt that Branislav Brborić and Ranko Bugarski share some common ground but anyone who has read their works knows that they can hardly be put under the same umbrella such as "Often these works, given the ethnic affiliations of their authors, are subjective and at times lack the scholarly rigour required in the study of linguistics" (p. 4). Perhaps Greenberg was more interested in the works of the more ultra radical faction of modern Serbian linguists. These are mentioned throughout his book (pp. 67, 68, 69, 71, 72, 76, 80, 81, 161, 178, 179, 185 *et pas-*

sim). This however is a simple way to disregard or overlook the works of some authors without actually providing a more critical overview of their literature.

The selectiveness in Greenberg's approach can also be seen in the range of issues that the book tries to address. For example, in the section based on the Bosnian dialect, the focus is primarily on the consonant /x/ (pp. 144–146). The differences between the Bosnian and Croatian and Serbian languages are examined only at the lexical level (pp. 146–149) while the distinction between political and historic language is not explicitly scrutinised. The fact that the book is trying to deal with a very bulky topic on a relatively small number of pages somewhat explains this selectiveness in Greenberg's work. Greenberg was no doubt aware of other issues, but he deliberately opted not to elaborate on them. In this case, I feel that it would have been useful had he only tried to list these issues or even provide just the most basic explanation.

Greenberg uses a variety of sources to back up his sociolinguistic analysis. If he strictly relies on primary sources of information his arguments are very convincing. In his book Greenberg also devotes a significant amount of attention to the 1850 Vienna Literary Agreement. Here, he also relies on the secondary sources and their interpretations of how the Vienna Literary Agreement came into being. Primary sources are always the most reliable and in the absence of those one should look to the best available secondary source as, in this case, Osolnik (2004). In his work Osolnik presents evidence that the Literary Agreement was actually the result of the process to unify legal terminology in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This document in essence did not have the aim or the significance that many Serbian and Croatian linguists thought it had. Discussing this subject, linguists often replicated each others' work instead of actually reconstructing this event based on original documents and archive material.

Robert D. Greenberg must have found it extremely difficult to write a book about the politically induced turmoil in the Serbo-Croatian speaking region when the turmoil was still ongoing. The landscape of the standard languages in the western Balkans is changing as we speak. This is why Greenberg's book feels more like a live report from a well-informed war reporter who genuinely tries to be as objective as possible then a depiction of an unwavering field that one can analyse from a safe time distance, without limitation in the scope and size of the research. The subject of the book *Language and Identity in the Balkans* necessitates years of project research by qualified experts and Greenberg's book could serve as a good introduction for such an endeavour.

The subtitle *Serbo-Croatian and its disintegration* is actually a more fitting description of the subject explored in the book. The title itself sounds more catchy than precise because a reader cannot tell whether the book is about a linguistic identity, the identity of a language, an ethnic identity or about all those three things put together (simultaneously or alternatively). Secondly, one must wonder if the author writes only about the languages of the western Balkans and not the entire Balkans as suggested in the title because the book

itself actually deals with some other issues separate from the problem of language and identity in the Balkans.

The Titova Mitrovica road sign on the book cover fails to inspire since the book barely mentions (p. 164) the language problem in Kosovo (new information on this subject can be found in the work of Reljić 2009 as well as in her previous works, for example Reljić 2006).

Robert D. Greenberg's work is clear, well referenced and funny at times. This is easily observed from the chapter titles: *Serbo-Croatian: United or not we fall* (p. 16), *Serbian: Isn't my language your language?* (p. 58), *Montenegrin: A mountain out of a mole hill?* (p. 88), *Croatian: We are separate but equal twins* (p. 109), *Croatian from Broz to Brozović* (p. 111), *Bosnian: A three-humped camel?* (p. 135). The things that may seem humorous to the author (mainly various absurdities of the language secession) to the majority of people living in the Balkans represent one of the many faces of the enormous and bloody tragedy. Bearing this in mind, a dose of humour can sometimes be inappropriate even if there are good grounds for such humour. However, occasional light humour gives the reader the impression that the author has allowed an appropriate amount of time to pass to write about the disintegration of the Serbo-Croatian standard language. Readers who lived through this disintegration "somewhere over there in the Balkans" should find this light humour a useful ingredient for making it easier to read a book that deals with bitter Balkan themes.

On the other hand, being objective does not imply that the author should refrain from an emotional style of writing. In scholarly methods of writing this is often considered a positive approach and is often encouraged. It is my firm belief that Robert D. Greenberg could not remain indifferent to language aspects of the tragic Balkan history at the end of the 20th and the start of the 21st century. The simple and easy style in which he wrote his book is probably an attempt to reassure all those readers who were afraid that this book would be difficult to digest.

The language and the style in the book *Language and Identity in the Balkans* are clear and simple. This particular style is more attributed to popular textbook scholarly literature than to a monograph which is what this book actually is. Greenberg must be credited for writing about complex issues in an easy and accurate manner. This is illustrated in the structure of the book. Each chapter is divided into several subparts and Chapters 2–6 are complimented with the conclusion. After the introduction part (pp. 1–15), the book has segments dealing with Serbo-Croatian (pp. 16–57), Serbian (pp. 58–87), Montenegrin (pp. 88–108), Croatian (pp. 109–134) and Bosnian (pp. 135–159) languages. There is also the conclusion (pp. 159–167) and the postscript (pp. 168–182) referring to the period after 2004. The book contains two appendixes: text of the 1850 Literary Agreement of 1850 and text of the 1954 Novi Sad Agreement. It ends with the bibliography of cited works and index.

Greenberg's target audience is not just the linguists who are familiar with the subject of south Slavic standard languages. The book also targets read-

ers who have no preexisting knowledge about the identity and the languages in the Balkans but are interested to learn about the subject. This is examined mostly in the third part of Greenberg's book.

Public opinion can be very prone to certain stereotypes about different countries and their people. To a certain extent, scholars are also not immune to these stereotypes. Anyone who has spent insufficient time in Yugoslavia must be careful not to fall into the trap caused by a common stereotype about the existence of endemic hatred among different ethnic groups. This stereotype is still very present in the countries where it was originally created. There are probably numerous examples to back up the claim about the endemic animosity among the people in the Balkans (this claim is highlighted in the first sentence on the back cover of Greenberg's book). But there is also an abundance of examples to suggest quite the opposite; that there was a great deal of inter-ethnic tolerance, respect, cooperation and co-existence. The people of the western Balkans cannot be considered solely responsible for the abrupt escalation of inter-ethnic tensions in this region. Just like the process of dismantling the other two Slavic federations Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, the process of dismantling Yugoslavia had its external and internal causes.

One element of this process was the language secession. Many foreign countries were quick to support this idea just as quickly as they had been to support the secession of the state. Many Slavists also tacitly supported this idea. Interestingly, not many of them had actually predicted or argued in favour of this language secession. When this secession did take place, they all considered it to be a normal phenomenon. Some of them even openly supported it while a large majority, in the good spirit of political correctness, quietly agreed with their governments' political decisions. The rationale behind such a hasty decision of many Slavists to explicitly or quietly agree with the language secession and the re-standardising of the Serbo-Croatian language is bound to be a subject of some future research and studies in the field of new Slavistics and the sociology of science. Anyhow, if one wishes to gain a broader understanding of the current sociolinguistic, jurislinguistic and political situation in the western Balkans, he/she must take into consideration all the external causes. Such pursuit would probably take them to political and academic centres outside the Balkan Peninsula. This book review only wishes to keep this idea at the level of hypothesis for other researches to prove or disapprove.

To sum up, Robert D. Greenberg's book *Language and Identity in the Balkans* should be most useful to the readers who know very little about the re-standardising of the Serbo-Croatian language. It is also a good aide to those readers who could use the book to expand and make their existing knowledge more complete. The book also presents a challenge to those researchers who had investigated this topic well before Greenberg did to either reconsider their current positions in light of Greenberg's arguments or simply offer new counter arguments of their own.

Greenberg has chosen to focus on the four above-mentioned important issues pertaining to the (post) Serbo-Croatian language area. He either deliberately or purely unintentionally disregards some other existing issues. In terms of his descriptiveness and factual exactness, it can be said that Greenberg is rather accurate even though he frequently relies on secondary sources of information. When it comes to his interpretations it is obvious that he is trying to maintain a safe distance from all four different sides involved even though being too distant is not always desirable.

It would be unfair to accuse Greenberg of being biased but the reader can't help but feel that somehow everyone in this book is equally right and equally wrong. If anyone should in anyway bear more responsibility then Greenberg perhaps should have made it clearer who this ought to be. In terms of innovation Greenberg's book does not present a fresh new standpoint on the issue of the re-standardisation of the Serbo-Croatian language but it does offer a number of very sharp-sighted observations on certain realities. Greenberg's book does not rely too much on the contemporary works that deal with this particular subject. Greenberg is noticeably selective in the choice of his sources and supporting material.

The author's position in the book *Language and Identity in the Balkans* remains ambiguous. On one hand, one gets the impression that Greenberg feels that there was no need to re-standardise the Serbo-Croatian language. On the other hand, Greenberg does not contest the political and to some extent linguistic realities of the new standard languages. If this is true, than Robert D. Greenberg's views on the result of this re-standardisation of Serbo-Croatian can be grouped (in his own terminology) close to the views of linguists who claim to belong to the *status quo* group. However, only Greenberg himself can take a position on his exact view. While reading his book, I felt that Greenberg could have presented his personal view in a clearer manner.

Robert D. Greenberg book's *Language and Identity in the Balkans* is essentially written very professionally and pragmatically. The book deserves to have and will no doubt have many readers. This review is one of hopefully many to come. Those future reviews are sure to help better identify the book's qualities and its shortcomings.

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