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## **Linguistic (Un)reality in Contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina**

This paper is a preliminary report on my research in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country with three official languages, Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. I wanted to find out how the present linguistic situation influences the students of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian philology and their perspectives after graduation. I placed the emphasis on what young people about to graduate think about the language policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and what they think about the new trends in the language they study. I asked about the other languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well, and what brought about this linguistic situation in their country, and finally, where this all will lead to. I thought that it was important to investigate what they thought of possible solutions; what, in their view, could be done to improve the situation; and what are the realistic chances of qualitative changes in the linguistic situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### **The Birth of Bosnia and Herzegovina**

In the early 1990s, as the result of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, a number of new states were founded. Autonomy and independence was first declared by Slovenia, then by Croatia, and finally by Macedonia in 1991. Bosnia and Herzegovina did the same in 1992. The independence of Montenegro was declared much later, in 2006—this was the result of the dissolution of a common state called Serbia and Montenegro. Kosovo, which was not a republic but an autonomous province of the former Yugoslavian federation, declared its independence from Serbia in 2008.

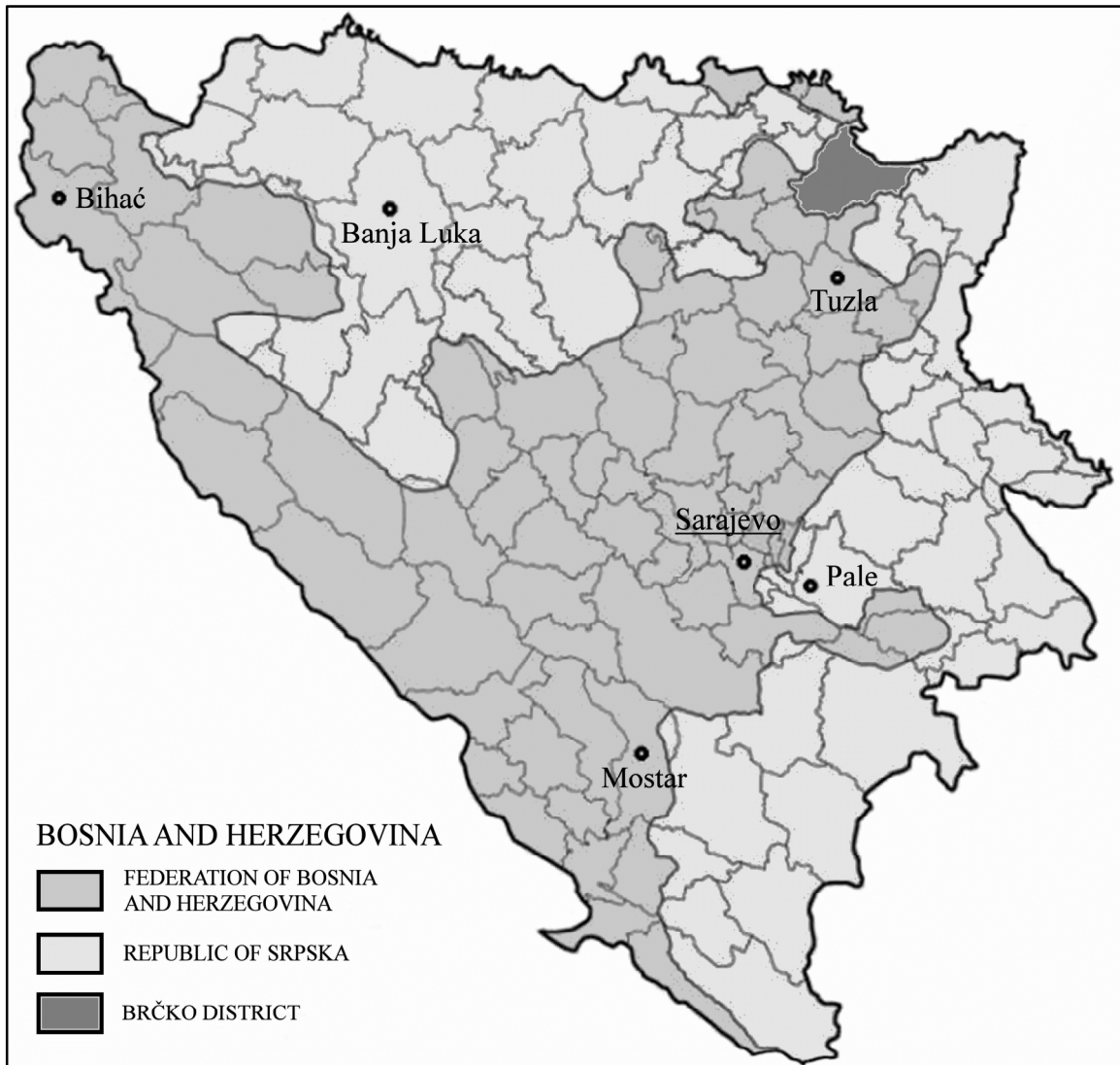
The period of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina lasted from 1992 to 1995 (in Croatia from 1991 to 1995). The war ended in Croatia after Croatian military and police operations and in Bosnia and Herzegovina after

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bombings by NATO and military operations by joint Croatian and Bosniak forces against the Serbs.

In November 1995, a tripartite peace agreement was brokered in Dayton, USA, between the Croats, the Serbs, and the Bosniaks (represented by the heads of states: Franjo Tuđman, Slobodan Milošević, and Alija Izetbegović). The peace deal, called the Dayton Agreement, was signed by the three parties a month later in Paris. The Dayton Agreement divided Bosnia and Herzegovina into two parts called “entities”: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (which is controlled by the Bosniaks and Croats) and the Republic of Srpska (controlled by the Serbs). There is also a special administrative unit, Brčko District, jointly administered by the three nationalities.



**Map of Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The appearance of these constitutional units was formed by the war, although there were certain territorial concessions. For example, the Croats handed over a part of central Bosnia, Mount Ozren. Serbs, in return, gave up the city of Odžak in Posavina, and the Bosniaks gained the capital Sarajevo, except for the eastern part of the hills around Pale, which is now called Eastern Sarajevo, renamed after being called Serbian Sarajevo by the Serbs during the war. But for the most part, the Dayton Agreement map was based upon the front lines of the three-year war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the map divides Bosnia into two parts. In the Republic of Srpska the majority of the population are Bosnian Serbs (including Serbs from Croatia who fled Croatian forces in August 1995), with the city of Banja Luka as their capital. In the other part, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the majority of the population are Bosniaks and Croats, with Sarajevo as the capital. Sarajevo is also the capital of the entire state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### **Background to the Current Linguistic Situation**

It is impossible to talk about Bosnia and Herzegovina and its language without taking a look at the situation in neighboring Croatia and Serbia. As a result of the dissolution of the common state, new states began to create their own language policies. Croatian became the official language in Croatia in 1990, and Serbian in Serbia a year later.

Until the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, many Croatian (only rarely Serbian) scholars of the main standard language of Yugoslavia disputed over its name: it was known as “Serbo-Croatian”, “Croato-Serbian”, and even “Serbian or Croatian” and “Croatian or Serbian”. The official name always included both a Croatian and Serbian component until the fall of the state.

The dispute over the name of the main language of Yugoslavia culminated in 1967 when “The Declaration on the Name and Status of the Croatian Language” (*Deklaracija o nazivu i položaju hrvatskog književnog jezika*) was published in Zagreb. It was supported by all the concerned cultural and scientific institutions in the former socialist Croatia, and met with strong political conviction. Croatian scholars, led by a constellation of distinguished linguists such as Dalibor Brozović, Stjepan Babić, Ljudevit Jonke, Tomislav Ladan, and many others, required that the official language in Croatia should carry the name of the nation and therefore it needed to be called the Croatian language. Shortly after that, in a response to the views expressed in the declaration, a group of Serbian writers published a

pamphlet called “A proposal for consideration” (*Predlog za razmišljanje*) demanding the same level of independency for all languages in Yugoslavia.

However, Bosnian political circles criticized the Croatian Declaration even before the Serbian writers did. The Bosnians were already much concerned about the Croatian-Serbian linguistic and terminological disputes. Specifically, the elite of Bosnian linguists felt they were losing ground because of the disintegration of the Serbo-Croatian language. Most of Croatian linguists claimed that the Serbo-Croatian language was the result of a linguistic and political compromise in the 20th century and it actually never existed as a common language of both nations: Croatian and Serbian. A claim like this would mean the evaporation of the language identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the language was called “the Bosnian variety of the Serbo-Croatian standard language.” It was a variety with (I)jekavian<sup>2</sup> standard pronunciation, with a large number of Orientalisms and wide lexical and morphological variation, being a mixture of elements from the Croatian and Serbian languages.

As early as the war year of 1993, the Sarajevo authorities released statutory provisions on language policy providing that “both the Serbo-Croatian and Croato-Serbian (I)jekavian language pronunciation is in official use in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina” (*Službeni list republike BiH* 1993a; my transl.). However, the law was changed only half a year later, and the authorities avoided naming the official language, which could be named Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian after any one of the three constituent nations: “The standard language with (I)jekavian pronunciation of the three constituent peoples which is called by one of three names: Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, should be in official use in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina” (*Službeni list republike BiH* 1993b; my transl.).

In Croatia, language policy became an integral part of nation building. The consolidation of the specific characteristics of the Croatian language was brought about by going back to the roots of the Croatian language and drawing from its long tradition by resuscitating some archaic Croatian words, and by introducing some new ones. Serbia has also implemented a national language policy that has had nationalistic qualities (especially by promoting the Cyrillic alphabet as the only official script). These parallel

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<sup>2</sup> Proto-Slavic phoneme \*ě has three main reflexes in the South Slavic linguistic area: (I)jekavian (-ije- in long syllables, -je- in short syllables), Ikavian and Ekavian, which means that examples like *sěno* and *město* can be pronounced *sijeno*, *sino*, *seno*, and *mjesto*, *misto*, *mesto*.

developments led to an even greater rift between the Serbian and Croatian standard languages.

This linguistic nationalism has been part of the national turmoil in Bosnia. The change in the linguistic situation in Croatia and Serbia in the early 1990s affected Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the situation caused by the ethnic structure and the war was most complicated. The Bosniaks started to insist that their language should no longer be called the Bosnian variety of the standard language, nor was it Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian, but rather—the Bosnian language.

We should now, however, look briefly at the centripetal forces characteristic of both the Croatian and Serbian communities in Bosnia, since in questions of language policy they have leaned heavily on the developments in Zagreb and Belgrade, respectively.

From the very beginning of the war, standard Croatian as used in Croatia was introduced in the Croatian parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most of the Croatian linguists and politicians thought that it was unacceptable to create a separate Bosnian Croatian standard language that would be different from the Croatian used in Croatia. However, there was some resistance to such thinking, especially in literary circles. Some Croatian linguists did try to point out the harmful effects of, for example, the low acceptance of the new or restored words (neologisms and archaisms), which were more or less unusual even for the Croats in Croatia, let alone the Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They warned about depriving the Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina of their rights to their own linguistic characteristics, meaning primarily the Orientalisms but also some similarities with the Serbian standard language.

Serbian language policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina had its peculiarities, too, the primary concern having been the relationship between the Ekavian and (I)jekavian pronunciations. At first (that is, in 1992), the only pronunciation used was the (I)jekavian, which is the typical pronunciation (with some phonetic variation) for all the nationalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A year later, still during the war and under the aegis of the unity of the Serbian language in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, only the Ekavian pronunciation was allowed in official use in the Republic of Srpska (which was proclaimed in 1992, first, until August of the same year, as the Republic of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina).

However, this solution was not accepted by many Serbian linguists because it was thought to be an unnatural violation of the language of the

Bosnian Serbs. After five years (until 1998) in which the Ekavian pronunciation was the only official pronunciation in the Republic of Srpska, with a language law prescribing relatively high penalties for its breaching, numerous educational institutions and linguists succeeded in repealing such regulations in the Constitutional Court, meaning that now Ekavian and (I)jekavian pronunciation are equally used in the Republic of Srpska.

Simultaneously with the Croatian and Serbian efforts to introduce Croatian and Serbian languages in the Croatian and Serbian areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosniak linguists decided to write normative reference books for the so-called Bosnian language. In 1996, the Bosnian linguist Senahid Halilović published the *Orthography of the Bosnian Language* (1996), and four years later the same author wrote the *Grammar of the Bosnian Language* (2000) with Jahić and Palić. Alija Isaković's *Dictionary of the Bosnian Language* was published in 1995.

The name "Bosnian language" (*bosanski jezik*) is disputed both by the Serbs and the Croats (in and outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina) because it implies that it is the language of all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, not only of the Bosniaks. In the Serbs' and Croats' view, it should therefore be called the "Bosniak language" (*bošnjački jezik*), since both the Serbs and Croats in Bosnia have their own official languages named after their nationality. Nevertheless, the majority of Bosniak linguists use "Bosnian" to denote the Bosniak-Muslim standard.

The result of these developments is that there are three official languages co-existing in Bosnia and Herzegovina today: Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian, and, in the linguistic sense, all the three languages have actually one, Neo-Štokavian<sup>3</sup> basis. This language situation could be interpreted from a sociolinguistic point of view as a unique example of one language having multiple standards.

The formal linguistic situation in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina is evidently an extremely complex one. The mere fact that the entire state operates with three standard languages raises numerous questions, posing the country a big challenge to ensure and respect the linguistic rights of every community and every individual. On the other hand, the linguistic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is also a simple one, because in terms

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<sup>3</sup> The term "Neo-Štokavian" is borrowed from dialectology to differ from "Old-Štokavian" dialects, which are still in use in some part of Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. The term "Neo-Štokavian" refers mainly to the prosodic characteristics of having four accents and post-accentual length, e.g. *kùća*, *nòga*, *môre*, *rúka*, *viđīm*.

of practical everyday communication, there are no difficulties since the pre-war common standard language remains virtually unaltered.

The actual problem is thus the large gap between what the linguistic reality in Bosnia and Herzegovina is and what the proponents and developers of the standard language would like it to be. In fact, it is completely clear that Bosnia and Herzegovina, linguistically speaking, is a particular area with many special characteristics that are determined by a variety of factors, but these linguistic traits do not generally coincide with ethnic divisions. This means that Bosnia and Herzegovina has its own characteristics of spoken and written communication shared by all of its inhabitants that are well known to anyone who in any way comes in contact with the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are, of course, differences in language use that are, for example, related to the speakers' educational and social background, but such differences are inherent to any language.

### **The Survey**

I conducted sociolinguistic interviews in all the universities of Bosnia and Herzegovina where the Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian languages are studied. The following centers were included: in Sarajevo, the Department of the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian language; in Banja Luka and Eastern Sarajevo, the Department of the Serbian language; in Mostar, the Department of Croatian Language and Literature (in the western part of Mostar); and in Bihać, Tuzla, and (eastern) Mostar, the Department of Bosnian language and literature.

The interviews were conducted in groups in college classrooms. No such intermediaries as teachers or assistants were present in order to attain a more realistic picture of the students' attitudes to the languages. The interviewees were second- to fifth-year students of one of the official languages. The first-year students were excluded because the research was conducted during the autumn time when they had practically just started their study. The interviews took place in 2010 and 2011. The interviews covered the majority of the student population (e.g. in Tuzla interviews covered nearly 80 % of all students of the Bosnian language). In a relatively short time, we succeeded in visiting the seven universities and in talking to more than 300 students of the official languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>4</sup> In the

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank again colleagues from all these universities for their kindness, cooperation, and help during this research.

interviews, special attention was given to the members of other nationalities than the local majority, although their number was small.

In addition to the interviews, students were also asked to complete a questionnaire that attempted to thoroughly cover all the topics relevant to this study. The results of this part of the study will be presented in a later publication. In this article, the questionnaires will be quoted only as a corroboration of the interviews. The questionnaire was administered in the three languages (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian), and in both alphabets (Latin and Cyrillic).

The questions in the interview and the questionnaire included a number of important topics that were designed to elicit students' opinions about the linguistic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of the most delicate issues in contemporary linguistics in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the naming of the languages. The naming of the language in Bosnia and Herzegovina is in fact the most significant issue, because the communication or identification issue does not exist; some authors believe that in everyday and even in more scholarly communication it was not possible to discern the nationality of the speaker in pre-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, the issue of naming the language students use in communication with their family members, teachers, or members of other nationalities was one of the first questions posed in the interviews.

Another central topic of this study is the question about the degree of satisfaction with the language policy and the language situation both in their faculties and at the state level. Further questions address other problematic elements of the language policy such as the students' opinions about the other two official languages of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the practice of using two scripts, although the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not explicitly prescribe the official language or the official script. The final question to all of the students was about their thoughts on the future of the language in their country.

The question of the official language and script has been left to the constitutions of the two entities, the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the initial constitutions in which the Serbian language and Cyrillic script were excluded as official (in the Constitution of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), or Croatian and Bosnian language were excluded as official and Cyrillic was confirmed as the official script (in the Constitution of the Republic of Srpska), a decision of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina subsequently

determined that both the Latin and Cyrillic script (or Cyrillic and Latin) are the official scripts, the Latin script being primary in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Cyrillic script in the Republic of Srpska. The word “primary” implies the usage of a script in public communication (all signs, advertisements, notices, etc.). In practice the situation is very often exclusive, i.e., in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina the Latin alphabet is dominant and almost the only script (except for place name signs along the roads), and in the Republic of Srpska Cyrillic is dominant. For example, at the Faculty of Philology in Banja Luka not a single document on the bulletin board was written in Latin script, and students only use Cyrillic script when signing their names on the bulletin board. At the Faculty of Education in Bihać or at the Faculty of Arts in Mostar, on the other hand, the usage of Latin script is exclusive.

As for the definition of the official languages of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Amendment XXIX of the Constitution it is clearly stated: “The official languages of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina are the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian languages,” while the name of any language in the amended Constitution of Republic of Srpska is avoided: “The official languages of the Republic of Srpska are: the language of the Serbian people, the language of the Bosniak people, and the language of the Croatian people” (*Constitution of the Republic of Srpska*, Amendment LXXI, Art. 7).

## **Results and Discussion**

Students of the Bosnian language (in Bihać, Tuzla, and at the Bosniak University in Mostar) view, according to the interviews and the questionnaire, that the most appropriate name for the language they use is Bosnian (*bosanski jezik*). As almost all the students were Bosniaks, this result is to be expected since professors and teachers of those students, being Bosniak linguists, are exponents of the idea of the Bosnian language as a sovereign language under that name. Students (mostly Bosniaks) of the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian language in Sarajevo were not quite so unanimous. In their answers some of them argued for the name Bosniak language (*bošnjački jezik*), thinking that the name is more correct because the language should be named after the nation—after the Bosniak nation.

The students of the Croatian language in Mostar, apart from the expected answers that the Croatian language is the best name, gave several new proposals for the name of their language: Bosnian (*bosanski jezik*), Bosnian-

Croatian (*bosanski hrvatski*), and even Herzegovinian (*hercegovački jezik*). The students of the Serbian language, on the other hand, had no doubt: their language is Serbian. However, this name also refers to the language of the other two nations and, in their view, the Bosniaks and Croats were wrong to call their language differently. The only correct name for the language(s) in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be Serbian.

The answers about the degree of satisfaction with the linguistic situation at the universities vary greatly: the students of Serbian were all very pleased with the linguistic situation in their universities, and they gave their professors credit for this. However, the students of the Croatian language in Mostar did not give excellent marks for the language policy at their university. A large percentage of them were only partially satisfied, their discontent being directed towards their teachers, but also to the leadership of the faculty and linguists in general. Like the Croats, the students of the Bosnian language were only partially satisfied with the linguistic situation at their universities, and this is primarily attributed to their professors and the faculty leadership, but also to politicians and linguists. Examining the results regardless of the students' ethnic background in Bosnia-Herzegovina reveal the following overall attitudes towards the language situation and policy at the national level: more than 90 % of students of all nationalities express great dissatisfaction, and almost none of them are pleased with the linguistic situation in their country. They blame primarily politicians and linguists, and, to a lesser extent, the international community (mainly the Croats chose this option).

On questions about attitudes toward the other two official languages, the answers are quite diverse, too. The students of the Serbian language (in Banja Luka and Eastern Sarajevo) often express attitudes that could be summarized in the following kind of statements: "The other two 'languages' are based on the Serbian language. In fact, it is a single language which now has several new names." Or: "I think there is an insistence among Bosniak and Croatian linguists that there are three separate languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is not in fact the case." Some students of the Serbian language were worried not about the Croatian, but the Bosnian language: "I am appalled at the Bosnian language and the Bosniaks who want to name all languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina the Bosnian (*bosanski*) language, which is completely wrong." The general impression is that students of the Serbian language do not see any significant differences between the three

languages. In their view, the existing differences are artificially created and intentionally emphasized and all this is controlled by the politicians.

The students of the Croatian language mainly think that they do not know enough about the other two languages, which implies that their teachers do not speak about the languages from a comparative perspective. This happens although the languages could be, as one Croatian student writes, "...interesting because, despite being considered different languages, they are similar to Croatian. It would be interesting to observe the differences among these three languages." The majority opinion seems to be characterized by answers like the following: "Every nation has the right to use their own language," or: "I respect both other languages," or: "I am glad that they are similar to my language and that I can understand both of them without problems, though we all learn just our own language," but also: "The other two languages are in a better position than Croatian." One student expressed the issues with other languages like this: "I think that the Bosnian language is a hybrid language between Croatian and Serbian," and, as a solution, one student of the Croatian language proposed: "I think they [Bosnian and Serbian] are just as valuable as Croatian, and, in the future, they should unite as one common language."

Students of the Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian languages at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo emphasize the fact that they study only the Bosnian language, and that their professors do not teach the other two: "We study the B/C/S language here, but the emphasis is on Bosnian. I respect the Croatian and Serbian language, but more attention should be paid to the equality between all the three languages." One student writes about the differences between the languages: "I think these three languages are actually one language, Central South Slavic," and another student writes: "People who have lived in Croatia and Serbia really talk Croatian and Serbian, but those Croats or Serbs whose parents were born in places where the Bosnian language is spoken actually speak the Bosnian language, but they call it Croatian or Serbian."

The general impression is that the students of the Bosnian language at the other universities (Bihać, Tuzla, and Mostar) are aware of how detrimental it is to "artificially create differences" between the three official languages. Students were very critically disposed towards all language issues in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina. They criticized the actions of the other constituent nations (Serbs and Croats) regarding their language policies, the Croats promoting the Croatian language spoken in Croatia, the

Serbs the Ekavian dialect and the Cyrillic alphabet. However, they also criticized the language policy of the Bosniak people, especially some linguistic features that were not familiar to them (using phoneme *h* in some words as *lahko* ‘easy’, *mehko* ‘soft’, *sahat* ‘hour’, even *hudovica* ‘widow’, *hlopta* ‘ball’,<sup>5</sup> which is different from former Serbo-Croatian (and present Serbian and present Croatian) standard forms *lako*, *meko*, *sat*, *udovica*, *lopta*, preferring the Orientalisms and the like). They are aware of how policies at the state and entity level played a crucial role in the division of language in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and they believe that the differences between Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian in Bosnia and Herzegovina are very small and that in the last 15 years artificial differences between these languages were created in order to emphasize the singularity of each language (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian).

Students at the universities of Bihać and Tuzla were especially unhappy with the rejection of the curriculum of their universities and with the fact that their degrees are not accepted at the University of Sarajevo so they have very uncertain prospects of employment outside their region.

Answers to the questions about the linguistic future of Bosnia and Herzegovina largely correspond to the views on the language policy and the linguistic situation in that country. The answers are pessimistic because the situation, according to the opinion of the majority of students of all official languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is very complicated and, in the long run, unsustainable.

The opinion of most students of the Bosnian language is expressed in statements like these: “I think that the situation will not significantly change in the future because politicians play a central role.” “You can do something, but only after all the three nations first agree on something.” “Without the dialogue of the three nations the situation won’t improve.” “I hope that the three languages will be united in the future.” “This language policy only leads to the destruction of all three languages.” There are, however, those who think positively; one student pointed out: “It can’t get worse—just better.”

The Croats are mostly concerned about the vitality of the Croatian language in Bosnia and Herzegovina: “I am afraid that the Croatian language will disappear from Bosnia and Herzegovina if we do not fight for

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<sup>5</sup> Most Štokavian dialects do not have a phoneme *h* in their phoneme inventory and it is replaced with the phonemes *v*, *j*, *k* or it is just lost: *suh* > *suv*, *snaha* > *snaja*, *grah* > *gra* etc.

it.” “One language will prevail at the expense of the other two.” “It is not possible to create a unique language of all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, although it would be the best solution.” “If politicians didn’t interfere in the language policy, it would be much better.”

The Serbs were also very pessimistic about the preservation of their language because they think that the Bosnian language is favored: “I think it will not be easy to preserve the Serbian language because the Bosniaks and Croats lay claim to it and want to corrupt it.” “We, as inhabitants of the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, would be forced to accept the Bosnian language as an official language or we will be forced to move into areas where the Serbian language is accepted.” “I don’t see a bright future.”

The interviews and the questionnaire achieved their original purpose: they uncovered the opinions of the young generation of future teachers of the official languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the future generations of linguists in this linguistically fragmented Balkan state. In their answers students of the official languages of Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed their dissatisfaction with the linguistic situation in their country and blame the politicians and to a lesser extent linguists for that. The vast majority of students of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian do not envision a positive future owing to the linguistic fragmentation of their languages, mainly because of the views of the politicians representing the three nations.

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