

**Hanka Vajzović: *Jezik i nacionalni identitet. Sociolingvističke teme*, Fakultet političkih nauka Sarajevo, Sarajevo 2008, 391 p. ISBN 978-9958-12-8.**

Svein Mønnesland

Although the subtitle is *Sociolinguistic topics*, this book does not cover, as the author admits herself, major sociolinguistic questions like linguistic differentiation according to gender, region, age, education etc. As the main title says, the topic of the book is *Language and national identity*, i.e. language and politics. And this is understandable, as long as the political situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina is as it is, extremely complicated.

For outsiders it is almost impossible to understand the complexity of Bosnian linguistics. For many it is a paradox that people who live on the same territory and speak more or less the same dialects, claim to have three different languages. There is certainly “mutual comprehensiveness,” so why should it not be claimed one and the same language? The problem with this view is that it does not take into consideration the difference between spoken language and standard language (written language serving a nation in all aspects of modern society). One language may be standardized in different ways, thus creating different “languages” in the sense of standard languages. An example is Norwegian, with its two standards of the same language. Or even the four Scandinavian standard languages, Danish, Swedish, Bokmaal and Nynorsk, may be considered different standardizations of the same linguistic entity, since

the mutual comprehensiveness is not less than within some other languages, e.g. German. As in Scandinavia, standardization is often connected to national identity. And that is exactly the case (or problem) in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Dayton Peace Accord of 1995, which was also a constitution of the post-war state, concluded that there are three constitutive nations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bosniaks (earlier termed Muslims), Serbs and Croats. The constitution was arranged according to this conception, with two “entities,” the Serb Republic and the (Bosniak-Croat) Federation. The Federation was divided into ten “cantons,” with extensive power, not the least in the field of culture and education. In some cantons the Bosniaks are in majority, in other Croats, while some are mixed. This constitutional framework created perhaps the most complicated state structure in the world. And language was to become an essential topic, and even a political instrument. This is what Hanka Vajzović’s book is about.

The book consists partly of texts published from the early 1990s, in journals and newspapers, and presentations given at conferences, but also of texts written especially for this publication. The fact that earlier texts are included, gives the reader an insight into the linguistic debates that have been going on. The main focus is the sociolinguistic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina after Dayton.

The author is a leading specialist, outstanding even among her colleagues in Sarajevo, because of her double qualification, both as an orientalist and slavist. Few other linguists in Bosnia and Herzegovina are familiar with the oriental heritage to the same degree as Professor Vajzović. Also in this book she includes some texts on earlier stages of the language used in Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely on the use of Arab script and the literature written in Slavic with Arab script, the so-called Alhamijado literature. One chapter is on “The use of scripts in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” **another on “The sociolinguistic aspects of the Alhamijado literature in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”** **These two chapters** will remain a standard reference to the topics. This historical overview constitutes, however, a minor part of the book.

The main characteristic of Professor Vajzović’s approach to the sociolinguistic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is lack of nationalistic overtones. She belongs to the Bosniak nationality and does not hide that

(why should she?). Her main target is nationalists, of all nationalities, who (ab)use the language for political aims. As a well-trained linguist, familiar with Western approaches to sociolinguistics, she keeps her head cool, even in polemic discussions and interviews when provoked by journalists. So, this is how a Bosniak intellectual, both a good scholar and a brilliant observer of ongoing politics, sees the situation. Her analyses are profound and her conclusions sound. So let us see what she finds important, and disturbing, in the linguistic situation. In a short review it is, of course, impossible to mention all the interesting topics, the book being a rich source for anybody interested in the linguistic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

One chapter is devoted to the history of language in Bosnia and Herzegovina, presenting a clear and analytic overview of the topic, from “the times of Ban Kulin,” i.e. **middle Ages, to Dayton**. This is, however, more of an introduction to the real topic, the last two decades.

She describes the development from the pre-war time (1970s) when the Communist Party promoted a special “Bosnian-Herzegovian expression.” **When Yugoslavia broke apart in 1991 and Bosnia and Herzegovina** became a field of nationalistic struggle and war (in 1992), the two non-Muslim nationalities abandoned the common “B-H expression.” Instead Serbs started to use the Serbian standard as in Serbia, and Croats the Croatian one as in Croatia. This left the Bosniaks in a confusing situation; it was not clear what their “Bosnian language” should be. The older Bosniak (Muslim) tradition had been destroyed by the common standard. To which degree should they look back and reintroduce old stuff? But also the Serbs and Croats were confused, because they were now expected to use standards that were different from their traditional ones and which they did not master fully. Professor Vajzović shows, on concrete examples, how this situation made people insecure, and even led to humoristic examples of mixing and faults.

A topic in the book is how absurd the linguistic situation is. The absurdity is seen on several levels. In one respect the right to use one’s own language is a fundamental right. Both the international community and local politicians have insisted on this right. However, in practice, as shown by Professor Vajzović, the situation is not so simple. In the name of equal rights for all three nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a consid-

erable part of the population does not share this right. First of all there all those who do not belong to any of the three nations, the so-called Others: Jews, Roma, etc., how shall they name their language? Then there are those who want to declare themselves Bosnians (or Herzegovians), regardless of religious affiliation, and those of mixed marriages, who often do not know what to declare themselves as, except as citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since the three standards are official in administrative areas according to the majority population, there are groups of citizens deprived of the right to use the standard they want: Serbs in the Federation and Bosniaks and Croats in the Serb Republic. Also in the cantons, priority is in many cases given to one language, notwithstanding the official policy of both standards being equal. So, in schools, administration and media, many citizens are exposed to another standard than the one they would voluntarily choose.

According to Professor Vajzović, the right to use one's own language is often claimed by politicians who use the linguistic situation for their own nationalistic projects. By insisting on the three different standards they divide the population according to their plans. They use the linguistic differences in order to justify the establishment of mono-national schools, separate media, etc. Schools in many parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina have been segregated, children from the same town go to separate schools or to school at different times or are physically separated. The main justification used by nationalistic politicians in order to make the international community allow such a practice, has been language. Since the children of different nationalities "use different languages," **the education must be separated. In this way the nationalists manage to raise a new generation without a common Bosnian-Herzegovian identity.**

A chapter is devoted to the debates on how to name the language. When the Bosniaks in the early 1990s decided to call their standard "bosanski" (Bosnian), this was conceived as unacceptable by the Serbs and Croats, who invented the term "bošnjački," derived from the stem Bošnjak, meaning the language of the Bosniaks. Professor Vajzović defends the right of the Bosniaks to call their language Bosnian, but her etymological derivations of these two terms, both based on the country name Bosnia, seem unnecessary and less convincing. The justification

of the term “Bosnian language” is simple: the Bosniaks have the right to choose the name of their own standard, especially since it does not coincide with any other linguistic idiom with that name (there is no “Bosnian language” meaning the common language of all citizens of the state).

The situation for the Bosniaks is complicated by many factors. One is the unstable status of the Bosnian language. How is it to be standardized? Some Bosniaks insist on the use of orientalisms (often called Turkisms), others tend to use Croatian forms. This “Croatization” of the Bosnian standard is seen as a problem, also by Professor Vajzović. Many of these words or forms are newly introduced and totally unfamiliar to Bosnian Muslims. “Croatization” has, however, become “in” among many Bosniaks, primarily as a reaction to the Serbian influence on the language in Bosnia and Herzegovina in earlier times, and also due to war experience.

One extensive chapter is devoted to the fate of Turkisms (words of Turkish origin). The author gives an overview of the extension of such words from the 19th century, both in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia. She analyses how different dictionaries treat them, and how authors use them. The conclusion is that a certain amount of Turkisms is used as a necessary means of communication on the whole linguistic territory, although less among the Croats. Turkisms can be used effectively in order to create local colour, but this should not be exaggerated. Many Bosniaks tend to do exactly this, since they consider the use of Turkisms as the most significant marker of a special Bosnian language. The author criticizes, with good reason, many of the Bosniak linguists who gave the impression that the Bosniak standard language was overloaded with orientalisms. In the dictionary *Školski rječnik bosanskog jezika* by Dževad Jahić (1999), 99% of the words on a- are Turkisms, most of them unknown to an ordinary reader. Professor Vajzović cites further, without commentary, an article written by a Bosniak literary critic in 1993, in a language so filled with Turkisms that it is more or less incomprehensible for an ordinary Bosniak reader. It is difficult to believe that such a text has been written seriously, and not as a joke, but serious it was.

One of the most fascinating aspects is the author’s role as an observer of the linguistic reality in media. She shows how confused many people are due to the different standards and expectations to speak the

“right” idiom. Mixing is found in many instances: Serbs mixing the (autohtonic Bosnian) Ijekavian with (Belgrade) Ekavian, Croats using “new” Croatian words that they do not quite know the meaning of, Bosniaks exaggerating the use of orientalisms and localisms. However, she also shows that many, in public oral presentations, still cling to the old “B-H-expression” that was in official use before the war in the 1990s.

Very interesting is her conclusion that the three members of the Bosnian-Herzegovian Presidency, i.e. the highest official representatives of the three nations, not at all exaggerate in linguistic nationalism. Both the Serbian member, Nebojša Radmanović, the Croatian Željko Komšić and the Bosniak Haris Silajdžić speak more or less the same language, void of any nationalistic overtones. For Professor Vajzović this is a proof of how the communicative aspect of language is the most important, and that politicians should admit the existence of a common Bosnian-Herzegovian linguistic norm, admit the reality and not cling to nationalistic projects. However, on this point it seems that she does not take into account the distinction between spoken language and standard language. A standard language is primarily a written form. It is perfectly possible for citizens to use a spoken form different from the standard they chose in writing. In Norway, for instance, many people would not be able to say whether their oral form is closer to Bokmaal or Nynorsk, mostly it is a mixture. But when writing, one has to choose a norm belonging to one of the standards. Such is the situation in linguistic communities without a strict orthoepic norm. Thus, citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina may speak their dialects, more or less common, but when writing they have to chose the norm of one of the three standard languages, as long as there is no common Bosnian-Herzegovian norm.

When asked by a journalist if it would be possible to conceive common schoolbooks in the “national subjects,” Professor Vajzović answers definitely yes. She would be happy to participate in making a common language manual. But, as she says, that would demand another political atmosphere with less emotion. One can only agree, it would be a useful tool for schoolchildren of a certain age to learn about the differences, to get acquainted with the language and culture of the “others,” living in the same state.

According to the author, one reason why the linguistic situation is so complicated is the fact that the state has no language policy. The state is weak, and there are no state institutions to follow up and control the linguistic situation, as there are in several other countries. This shows how the sociolinguistic situation is merely a reflection of the general political state of affairs. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a state so decentralized that there are almost no functioning institutions on the state level. But not even on the entity level are there any institutions responsible for language development. The result is a low level of linguistic culture even in official use. The author cites the text of a verdict written in an administrative style that is far from any literary norm.

Opposing nationalism, the author seems, at least in some passages, to regret the loss of linguistic unity; since there is mutual comprehensiveness, it is unnatural and unnecessary to have three languages. As an argument, she quite rightly points to the artificial “translation” of texts, both on the state level and by international organizations. Such a view is understandable, and it was natural to think in this way at the time of the Yugoslav dissolution, before the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Today however, it is a sign of nostalgic wishful thinking that has little to do with the Bosnian realities. It is furthermore not sure that the adoption of different standards in Bosnia and Herzegovina was solely the result of nationalistic politicians. For Croats and Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e. ordinary citizens, it was understandable that they wanted to join the standards in Croatia and Serbia respectively, especially in the light of the political development. Bosniaks, including the author of this book, have a tendency to criticize the Serbs and Croats for having chosen “non-Bosnian” standards. Instead, one should conceive of both Serbian and Croatian as being also Bosnian standards. It is possible to be a good citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina using a Croatian or Serbian standard language. It is not the standard language that defines loyalty to Bosnia and Herzegovina or a Bosnian identity. What should be criticized, as Professor Vajzović does, is the tendency to make differences in standard language much more important than they are, as signs of separation and the impossibility to live together. The main function of language is the communicative one, and not the symbolic one, which has been so exaggerated in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It is to hope that Professor Vajzović' views may have some impact on the development in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that those responsible read and follow her advices. However, since politics, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are not guided by rationality, it is, unfortunately, to expect that the situation described by Professor Vajzovic will continue. Her book remains nevertheless a rich source of information and analyses of the complicated situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And it gives hope to read a book fighting nationalism, in an environment where nationalism is still prevailing.