

Finding Common Cultural Ground: Folklore in the BCS Classroom

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My paper deals with a topic that may seem strange to the average reader, but which is all too familiar to instructors of South Slavic languages: the problem of teaching multiple national languages in one classroom. Now that the former standard language of Yugoslavia, “Serbo-Croatian,” has given way to national successor languages, instructors today teach “BCS” (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian) and often find themselves juggling all three variants in class simultaneously. While excellent resources have been developed to deal with the linguistic problems of teaching BCS, I still feel there exists a dearth of materials for working with the study of culture. To this end, I look to introducing folklore to the BCS classroom as one potential solution to this problem. I hope to show here not only the many ways in which the study of folklore can be useful for foreign language pedagogy in general but also the specific potential it has for bringing together the needs and interests of those studying Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian.

“POST-SERBO-CROATIAN” LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

For readers unfamiliar with the linguistic situation in the western Balkans, “BCS” refers to “Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian.” These three national idioms comprise a South Slavic linguistic system that during the Yugoslav period was generally referred to in English as “Serbo-Croatian.” While official western and eastern variants, based on the norms of Zagreb and Belgrade respectively, were both permitted in Yugoslavia, the two were considered to be part of one unified language. Indeed, this reflects the structural realities of BCS: While noteworthy differences in phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon do exist between the separate national standards, most international linguists consider BCS to be one pluricentric language.¹

Until the breakup of Yugoslavia, the instruction of Serbo-Croatian as a single language was rarely problematized. Whether their interest was related to one particular region or to Yugoslavia as a whole, all students in a typical Serbo-Croatian class would work with the same linguistic material. Instructors might teach the variety of language most familiar to them, while students interested in the norms of another region learned more about its particular nuances as their skills developed.

As the constituent republics of Yugoslavia broke off in the early 1990s, however, they set about codifying separate standards of their own national languages. Consequently, instruction in “Serbo-Croatian” is not only no longer a practical goal, it also does not give respect to the distinct linguistic identities of the independent Yugoslav successor states. Nonetheless, outside of the former Yugoslavia, resources simply do not exist to support the separate teaching of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. And realistically, doing so would be committing a disservice to students: Teaching BCS in a combined classroom allows students to learn more about the differences between all three standards and necessarily introduces them to the complexities of the post-Yugoslav sociolinguistic situation. A common joke among Slavists is that students of BCS get “three for the price of one.”

To the great fortune of instructors and students of BCS everywhere, Ronelle Alexander and Ellen Elias-Bursac’s *Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian: a Textbook with Exercises and Basic Grammar* facilitates the instruction of all three standards of BCS together in one classroom. Indeed, the authors write that their goal is “to bring some measure of unification to the fragmentation of language teaching which came about as a result of the wars accompanying the breakup of Yugoslavia” (xii). The great advantage of this book is that the common grammar and vocabulary of BCS are presented as a single linguistic system, but relevant

¹ In addition, Montenegro has also declared Montenegrin to be its own standard language. Its norms are still developing, but many linguists are beginning to include it in a broader acronym of “BCMS.”

differences between the standard languages are highlighted throughout the textbook. As such, if a student wants to study Bosnian, the vocabulary she actively learns and the dialogues she reads all sound like BCS speech from Bosnia. For example, the separate dialogues seen in Figure 1 even allow students to encounter prototypical names from each area: *Mehmed* in Bosnia, *Tomislav* in Croatia, and *Nada* in Serbia. With Alexander and Elias-Bursač’s book, students can focus on the national standard of their choice while still gaining an understanding of what makes up the common core of BCS.

This book is now widely used for teaching BCS in America, as it is extremely well suited for teaching BCS language proper. However, the flip side of this is that national differences—both linguistic and cultural—are no longer “swept under the rug” for students. We now face the unique situation of simultaneously teaching several national languages, which have not only their own grammatical and lexical norms but also a more distinct sociocultural identity. During my own time teaching BCS at UC Berkeley, where I had students of each variant, this led me to face a recurring question: How should one teach culture in the fragmented BCS classroom?

Bosnian	Croatian	Serbian Cyrillic
1. <i>Mehmede!</i>	1. <i>Tomislave!</i>	1. <i>Надо!</i>
2. <i>Molim?</i>	2. <i>Molim?</i>	2. <i>Молим?</i>
1. <i>Imaš li teku?</i>	1. <i>Imaš li bilježnicu?</i>	1. <i>Да ли имаш свеску?</i>
2. <i>Imam je, ali nemam rječnik. Imaš li ga ti?</i>	2. <i>Imam je, ali nemam rječnik. Imaš li ga ti?</i>	2. <i>Имам је, али немам речник. Да ли га ти имаш?</i>
1. <i>Rječnik imam, ali teku nemam. Želiš li da učimo zajedno sutra?</i>	1. <i>Rječnik imam, ali bilježnicu nemam. Želiš li da učimo zajedno sutra?</i>	1. <i>Речник имама, али свеску немама. Да ли желиш да учимо заједно сутра?</i>
2. <i>Sutra, to jest četvrtak? Izvini, ne u četvrtak nego u petak.</i>	2. <i>Sutra, to jest četvrtak? Oprostí, ne u četvrtak nego u petak.</i>	2. <i>Сутра, то јест четвртак? Извини, не у четвртак него у петак.</i>
1. <i>Može! Vidimo se u petak.</i>	1. <i>Može! Vidimo se u petak.</i>	1. <i>Може! Видимо се у петак.</i>

Figure 1: Alexander & Elias-Bursač, p. 6

THE PROBLEM OF “BCS CULTURE”

As I see it, there are generally two obvious approaches to introducing relevant cultural discussion into a BCS language course. The first is to focus primarily on the cultural history of Yugoslavia. This could seem to be an ideal topic of focus, as all of the cultures in question were politically united in this period, but I find it to be problematic for several reasons. First of all, a great deal of attention in academia is already devoted to Yugoslav history and, in particular, to the trauma of the breakup. Unless students work on 20th-century history, they often grow weary of reading about Yugoslavia and Yugonostalgia. Needless to say, there is much more than this to the culture of the western Balkans, and an overemphasis on Yugoslav history creates the risk of defining BCS culture in terms of one historical period. Indeed, the memory of Yugoslavia is becoming less relevant for modern citizens, and successor states have begun to seek their own independent paths. Given that Croatia in 2013 became the newest member of the European Union, Marijeta Božović suggests, “Another such period of B/C/S language instruction in the United States—one shaped by the legacies and aftershocks of Yugoslav dissolution—may well be coming to an end” (16). In that many of today’s undergraduate students were not even alive while Yugoslavia remained a unified state, continuing to return to the memory of this era becomes increasingly less relevant.

Furthermore, many students (often, the majority) take BCS because they have some personal connection to the region and feel allegiance toward one particular national identity. Cultural norms in Yugoslavia were generally characterized by a great deal of hegemony, with Serbian culture almost always taking center stage. As such, many students may have misgivings about paying unnecessary attention to a place and time in which their own identity would have been marginalized. On my first day teaching BCS, when I explained that we’d be learning Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian together, one student firmly announced, “Hold up! I’m only here to learn Croatian, and I’m *not* going to learn Bosnian or Serbian!” The question of how to work with culture in this situation is clearly a delicate one, and students respond best to material they feel is relevant to their own language of study.

Another option for working with culture is to provide students with different lessons about more specifically national topics. For example, one day the class can read about a Croatian Catholic holiday, the

next day they can discuss a Bosnian historical figure, and so on. However, these materials can still seem irrelevant for someone not focusing on the language of the particular nationality being discussed. Furthermore, it can lead to a complicated balancing act: When I was teaching BCS, for example, I regularly introduced contemporary pop songs to my students as listening exercises, but I felt obligated to keep a tally going to ensure that they were getting an equal representation of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian songs. While most students are generally not so averse to learning about other national cultures, they do like to feel that they are engaging with material that has real meaning for them and the national culture they are studying.

Another possibility I'd like to propose, however, is working with materials from South Slavic folklore. Many folk texts are shared across the entire BCS linguistic area; for example, we might find the same proverb in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia. While these texts are cherished as part of "authentic" national culture throughout the successor states of Yugoslavia, they are often *not* restricted to one particular nation or ethnic group, and, as such, are appropriate for students of all varieties of BCS. In the following section, I explain the advantages folkloric texts have for use in the BCS classroom along with why I think folklore is well suited for use in other language classes as well.

WHY FOLKLORE?

- *Folklore is culture.*

As scholars have come to understand language as not only a set of formal rules for verbal production but also a culturally based system of communication, we're reminded all the more often that teaching culture is a critical part of instruction for any foreign language. As the Modern Language Association reminds us, "Culture is represented not only in events, texts, buildings, artworks, cuisines, and many other artifacts but also in language itself. Expressions such as 'the pursuit of happiness,' 'liberté, égalité, fraternité,' and 'la Raza' connote cultural dimensions that extend well beyond their immediate translation. As recent world events have demonstrated, deep cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are equally necessary if one wishes to understand people and their communities" (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2). Students need to understand the values, cultural symbols, and ways of life of the people whose language they are learning. Folklore—in particular, the catalogued national verbal lore that I have in mind here—is just one part of culture, but working with these materials is particularly valuable for students, as it provides them with a direct encounter with culture. Rather than reading a secondary article about food, holidays, etc. (or, for that matter, a text *about* folklore), working with actual proverbs, songs, and the like brings verbal culture itself into the classroom.

- *Folklore provides access to the cultural concepts important to a language community.*

Many folk texts make explicit mention of a concept or historical event or are tied to a particular tradition that is of significance to their community. When an instructor introduces such a text to the class, he should also make a point of discussing the context of the text and what it means to speakers of the language being studied. For example, if BCS students listen to a recording of a song that refers to the medieval Battle of Kosovo, it can lead to discussion of why this region holds such a significant place in the national memory of Serbs; in turn, this adds to a student's understanding of why the question of Kosovo's independence is still so complicated today. Even older folkloric texts carry great weight in shaping contemporary attitudes and beliefs.

- *Folklore foregrounds the traditions that a nation uses to construct its national identity.*

Although the origins of many folk texts are often romanticized as “authentic,” it is important to note that much of what can be found in song books, proverb collections, and similar folk anthologies has been curated, so to speak, by individuals seeking to define a particular national or ethnic identity. That is, by documenting and publishing collections of verbal lore, such individuals help to create a nation’s folklore “package,” something with which to point to and say, for example, “This is Croatian folklore.”

If we teach students a song in class that is marked as coming from a particular ethnic group—for example, “*Ajde Jano*” (“C’mon, Jana”), a well-known song that is emblematic for Serbs of their national dance culture—this can be particularly meaningful for students with heritage from the group or region in question; students might imagine that their ancestors helped create the song or took part in its performance. It is my view that such nationally marked texts do have a place in the BCS classroom, because, while they have the potential to resonate with some students on a very personal level, at the same time, they can lead to discussion of how folklore can be employed to construct a national identity. That is, when introducing texts like these, instructors can simultaneously deconstruct some of the notions about the origin and “authenticity” of these texts that our students may have and, in doing so, lead them to question whether a text’s national marking is as certain as it may seem. Students can still find value in a text that holds special significance to a particular community, but they will also come away with a richer understanding of the various roles folklore can play in society.

- *Folkloric texts demonstrate the universality of human values.*

Verbal folklore is a part of culture that is truly shared across the entire BCS linguistic area. While certain songs, stories, and other pieces of lore are particularly important to only one ethnic group or region, a great many more folkloric texts can be found in the folk heritage of multiple peoples of the former Yugoslavia. Take, for example, the proverb “*Bez zdravlja nema bogatstva*” (“Without health there is no wealth”). If one searches for it on Google, already on the first page of results appear hits from Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia. This is very meaningful: Not only is the proverb relevant for students of all variants of BCS, it also serves as evidence of the amount of cultural spread that has occurred throughout the western Balkans and, in fact, further validates the instruction of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian in one classroom.

What is more, however, students enjoy encountering texts—particularly proverbs—that are common to both BCS and English. If students are taught the proverb “*Kad neće br(ij)eg Muhamedu, hoće Muhamed br(ij)egu*” (“If the mountain won’t come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain”), they will likely recognize the proverb from English or another language they know. This recognition helps to de-exoticize a region that is often thought of as the “wild,” Orientalized Balkans, and impresses upon students that similarities among national cultures are more pronounced than they might have realized. The number of these international proverbs is greater than one might expect, and the delight students take in uncovering familiar expressions makes them ideally suited for classroom use.

- *Shared international texts allow students to work with familiar ideas in the target language.*

In addition to the previous point, these international texts are especially useful for teaching new words and grammatical patterns. If, for example, students are presented with the proverb “*Jabuka ne pada daleko od stabla*” (“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”) early on in their first semester, they should already understand “the apple doesn’t” and “far from the.” As such, they can easily guess the rest of the proverb and derive a great sense of accomplishment from using what they already know in BCS to figure out unfamiliar words.

Moreover, sometimes proverbs are very similar to an English-language proverb but contain a slight variation. Students may be surprised at first when they encounter the proverb “*Kad mačke nema,*

miševi kolo vode” (“When the cat is not there, the mice dance a *kolo*”).² Due to the garden path effect—expecting one thing but hearing another—students remember these proverbs particularly well; this proverb is particularly wonderful, as its South Slavic twist introduces students to the concept of the *kolo* as a leisure activity.

- *Folkloric texts allow even beginning students to work with metaphor.*

Proverbs such as those discussed above are valuable because their meaning is encoded in metaphor and they require students to think in the target language on an abstract level. Instructors can ask students not simply to translate a new proverb into English, but rather to explain in the target language what a proverb really *means* to say. Another genre of folklore that is particularly valuable for its use of metaphor is the riddle. Students enjoy encountering texts such as “*Vas dan ide, a iz kuće ne izlazi*” (“It walks all day but never leaves the house”).³ A riddle like this (which refers to a snail) can be an enjoyable tool for getting students to think in abstract terms.

- *The linguistic specifics of many folklore genres make them particularly well suited for language pedagogy.*

I find this statement to be true for several reasons. First of all, the texts of many folkloric genres are remarkably brief. Proverbs, riddles, incantations, etc. are able to circulate orally in relatively fixed form precisely because of their brevity. Teaching a new proverb takes literally just a minute or two, and students can recall them in the future with little difficulty. Similarly, many folkloric texts contain a particular meter or rhyme, which helps them stick in students’ heads. Students might learn a rhyming proverb that demonstrates a particular grammatical case, for example, and then “play back” the proverb in their head the next day when trying to remember the new declensional ending.

Furthermore, many folkloric texts contain special grammatical or structural patterns that students need to learn to recognize but that don’t appear as often in the modern standard language. Sometimes, a pattern may simply be hard to drill in class. Practicing vocative forms for personal names, for example, can be difficult with a group of several students, many of whom often have names that don’t inflect in BCS; simply asking students to go around the table calling out to each other can be impractical. But the song mentioned above, “*Ajde Jano*,” features a girl, *Jana*, being addressed with a vocative form, *Jano*. In that this and many other folk songs are addressed to a particular named individual, students can learn such a song and, in doing so, gain an easy way to memorize how personal names inflect for the vocative.

- *Advanced students should be able to recognize folkloric texts when they are “borrowed” into other contemporary genres.*

Although proverbs are often looked upon as a source of “ancient wisdom,” contemporary speakers employ them regularly in their own speech. In Figure 2, an article from *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, for example, we see that a political commentator has used the proverb discussed earlier, “*Kad mačke nema miševi kolo vode*,” in the



Figure 2: Pejić, “*Kad mačke nema miševi kolo vode*”

² The *kolo* is a South Slavic circle dance found throughout the BCS linguistic area.

³ Note that this riddle also contains dialectal language, which can be of particular interest to more advanced students.

headline of his article to issue a call for American political leadership.⁴ Students need to be able to recognize when a popular figure of speech such as this one is used in contemporary language in order to be able to figure out the real meaning of a speaker or writer's words.

What is more, many genres of folk texts have certain characteristic stylistic features. For example, proverbs often have a marked word order, with the main verb at the end of the sentence. If students are exposed regularly to proverbs, they will come to recognize that sentences constructed with this word order may be intended to sound "proverbial." Then, when they come across an unfamiliar proverb used in a text or, perhaps, even a novel creation with this word order intended to mimic the style of proverbs, students will have a better sense of what a speaker is hoping to communicate. Thus, working with folkloric texts in class prepares students for encountering many potential nuances of modern linguistic culture.

CAN FOLKLORE UNITE THE BCS CLASSROOM?

Clearly, the problem of teaching culture in BCS classes is not one with an easy solution. Rather, as the former republics of Yugoslavia drift further apart politically, the national cultures of Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia will likely come to be even more distinct as well. This, in turn, makes the task of the BCS language instructor all the more challenging. No plan for teaching culture to a BCS language class is, in my find, free of potential problems, but I do believe that folklore can be introduced in this situation to great advantage. While it has several strengths for helping students master new grammar and vocabulary, working with folklore in the BCS classroom also has the potential to highlight some of the common culture that speakers throughout the BCS linguistic area share.

It is my hope as well that other language instructors may be inspired to bring folklore into their own classrooms. To many, national folklore, particularly that which is assembled in volumes for the purposes of nation building, can seem outdated and irrelevant for today's language students. However, in my mind, the special linguistic traits of folklore along with its still current cultural significance make these texts a quintessential part of teaching students the culture of their target language. Only by introducing our students to this special part of linguistic culture can we ensure that they indeed have a solid understanding—linguistic and cultural—of the people whose language they are studying.

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⁴ Original source: Pejić, Nenad. 2007, December 10. "Kad mačke nema miševi kolo vode." *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/kolumna_pejic_ugled_usa/782581.html.