

## EUROFILE LANGUAGE

# TIME TO MAKE FOUR INTO ONE

After the break-up of Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croat split into ethnic variants.

**PETER TRUDGILL** calls for its reunification



In a bookshop some years ago I came across a Croatian phrase-book, published by a reputable British publisher. Then, on a higher shelf, I also noticed a Bosnian phrasebook from the same company. A few minutes' perusal of the two volumes, holding them side by side, showed that the books were exactly the same in every respect – except for the covers and title pages.

The major language of Yugoslavia used to be known as Serbo-Croatian. It was spoken in the Yugoslav republics of Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Serbs most often wrote it using the Cyrillic alphabet, while Croats employed the Latin alphabet.

The language was also used everywhere else in the country, for example in Slovenia, as the lingua franca of wider communication.

Then, as Yugoslavia gradually split up into separate republics, the Croats declared that they no longer spoke Serbo-Croat but Croatian, whereupon the Serbs began referring to the language they used as Serbian.

The Bosniaks then had little choice but to declare that the language they spoke was Bosnian. And when in 2007 Montenegro became an independent country, after departing from a short-lived Serbia-Montenegro federation, it promptly declared that its language was called Montenegrin. One language had become four.

This was all rather silly. The four varieties – Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian – are all totally mutually comprehensible, and the written forms of the languages are almost exactly the same.

It is true that, as one would expect, there are considerable regional dialect differences within the former Serbo-Croatian-speaking territories, but the boundaries between the dialects do not coincide at all with the boundaries between the states.

People who favour linguistic common sense will therefore be pleased to learn that, on March 30 this year, a rather remarkable thing happened in the four countries.

A declaration was published in Zagreb (Croatia), Belgrade (Serbia), Podgorica (Montenegro), and Sarajevo (Bosnia & Hercegovina) which was signed by hundreds of intellectuals and other influential people; initially around 200 linguists, writers, scientists and other

public figures added their signatures. The declaration was intended to counter “the negative social, cultural, and economic consequences of political manipulations of language in the current language policies” of the four countries.

It asserts that the use of four different language names – Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian – does not imply that there are four different languages.

What there is, is a common, polycentric standard language – just like, say, French, which has Belgian, Swiss, French, and Canadian variants but is definitely not four different languages.

Pretending that BCSM, as some linguists now call it, is four separate languages has particularly serious consequences in Bosnia, where Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Muslim Bosniaks are deemed by politicians to use different languages, even though the way they speak in any given town or village is exactly the same. Children are taught in separate streams at school, with separate curricula, on the grounds that they speak different languages. All public documents have to be ‘translated’ and published in three versions. And there is even a story that a Bosniak being prosecuted in Serbia for some offence had to be released because no ‘interpreter’ could be found for him.

Some nationalists are doing their best to make the four varieties more distinct from one another by artificially introducing differences where none existed.

Writers in Croatia have had their work censored through the removal of supposedly ‘Serbian’ words, which are replaced with ‘Croatian’ words, some of them recent inventions.

This is all seriously at odds with common sense, and it's no surprise that the Declaration now has almost 9,000 signatures. Linguistic scientists are agreed that BCSM is essentially a single language with four different standard variants bearing different names; it is unsurprising that linguists are well represented on the list of signatories. I have signed it myself. And I wish the defenders of linguistic common sense every success in their struggle against the linguistic unreason of the nationalists.

## POLYCENTRIC

**Polycentric – ‘many-centred’ – languages have two or more different standard variants. Standard German differs as between Austria, Switzerland and Germany. Latin American Spanish is not the same as the Spanish of Spain. Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese are quite divergent. And of course English comes in many versions around the world.**

# THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS

From Austria to Slovenia, every December 5 is one devil of a night.

**RICHARD LUCK** investigates the Krampus phenomenon



Those old enough to remember the 1970s might recall how John Craven's *Newsround* – when it wasn't busy covering rocket launches and panda births – always made a point of covering the annual St Nicholas' Day celebrations in the Netherlands.

As most children Christmas simply couldn't come quickly enough for me, so it was hard not to envy these infants whose big festive celebration came at the beginning rather than the end of December.

St Nicholas' Day looked an absolute scream, not withstanding the fact that Zwarte Piet's fondness for blackface felt out of place – even in the 1970s.

Little did we know that a rather different event was taking place at the same time many miles south. For in Austria and Bavaria, in the Czech Republic and Hungary, in Croatia and Slovenia – in fact, pretty much everywhere that had once been ruled by the Hapsburgs – while December 6 belonged to St Nick, so the night before was the province of Krampus, a horned half-man half-goat who sought to punish naughty children even while his counterpart rewarded the good.

Exactly how so foul a beast became part of the most wonderful time of the year has been the subject of some debate. The folklorist Maurice Bruce believes the demon's origins are tied to the pre-Christian traditions of the Alpine

countries. It's a position the Smithsonian's Jennifer Billock supports. As she wrote in 2015: “Krampus's roots have nothing to do with Christmas. Instead they date back to pre-Germanic paganism. His name originates with the German ‘krampen’ meaning ‘claw’ and tradition has it that he is the son of the Norse god of the underworld.”

With his horns, cloven hooves, furry torso and craven eyes, Krampus has more than a touch of the Devil about him. Heck, according to some interpretations of the myth, he's even given to abducting children and dragging them to the netherworld, an element of the folk tale inspired by the way in which the Moors kidnapped people from coastal Europe and then pressed them into slavery.

All of which goes somewhat towards explaining why the Catholic Church tried so hard to remove all mention of the fiend from seasonal festivities during the 1200s. Further attempts to crack down on Krampus occurred in the 1920s and 1950s, the latter decade seeing the distribution of a government-sanctioned pamphlet entitled “Krampus Is An Evil Man”.

So what do the people make of the chain-wielding freak who whips those juveniles he believes to be delinquent with a birch switch? Given the growing popularity of Krampuslaufen – Krampus Runs, in which a man dons full demonic regalia, then pursues kids through the neighbourhood streets – it would appear they can't get enough of the Horned One. It seems the modern incarnation is so child-friendly he's even been used to help refugee kids feel more a part of Austria's festive activities, a move that was applauded by Jeremy Seghers, the man responsible for Krampusnacht celebrations in Orlando, Florida. “I think it's wonderful that they want to get the refugees used to this sort of thing,” Seghers enthused. “You can't force people to adopt cultural traditions of which they have no basis or point of reference.”

It's really no surprise that kids should have taken to Krampus. He's just so much more entertaining and exciting than the

