Correspondence

Dr Jim Hlavac responds to Will Firth's article 'What's in a name?'

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As a T&I in a 'smaller' language, it is always interesting to hear the views and opinions of colleagues who share the same language combination, even if one does not share those views and opinions. This article is a response to Will Firth's article 'What's in a name?' that appeared in the Summer 2012 issue of *In Touch*. In his article, Will advocates the term 'Serbo-Croatian' and argues against categorisation of Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian as separate and distinct languages. In this response, I address the arguments that Will puts forward and counter them with data from the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, language planning and with information on T&I occupational practices to show that mutual comprehension between the languages does not justify their categorisation as a single code. This article also supports the notion that national speech communities should be able to designate their language in their own terms and for this to be uncontroversial and unremarkable. This article further argues that the comprehensive application of separate standards, together with language planning regulations that guarantee the linguistic rights of minority groups, has now led to a de-escalation of inter-ethnic tensions.

In his article, Will Firth states that 'the degree of divergence between standard Croatian and standard Serbian is no greater than between British and American English'. This is incorrect. The lexical differences between British and American English are few and usually fill a page or two on internet sites or ESL textbooks. The lexical differences between Croatian and Serbian are much more considerable: the largest Serbian-Croatian dictionary (Brodnjak, 1993) is over 600 pages long with about 40,000 entries. There are further differences between the languages in their syntax, semantics, intonation, prosody, phraseology and pragmatics. The two standard languages also have different official alphabets, different ways of coining neologisms and different orthographic conventions for apparent homophones. There is a degree of fluidity in the categorisation of some twentieth-century authors, but generally each language has its own distinct literary tradition. The argument that educated speakers in Zagreb and Belgrade have more in common with each other

than speakers of regional varieties of each respective language is also limited. It is often the case that speakers with particular profiles have as much in common with 'outsiders' than with their compatriots. Educated speakers from Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta probably have more in common with each other linguistically than speakers of rural varieties of Malay and Indonesian respectively. This evidence alone does not mean that Malay and Indonesian are the same language.

Second, categorisation of the languages as distinct is, as Will describes it, reflective of 'separatist views prevailing in Australia.. [and that readers] may be surprised to learn that many speakers in Europe avoid the issue by calling it *naški* ("our language")'. The categorisation of the languages as separate is not specific to Australia. In the US, the American Translator's Association introduced translation tests for Croatian in 2005 and undertook to introduce separate tests for Bosnian and Serbian in the near future. In Canada, provincial authorities, under the auspices of the Canadian Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters Council, distinguish between the languages for testing purposes and public directories also list these languages separately. In the UK, the Institute of Linguists lists Croatian and Serbian as separate languages. Professional associations in Austria (Universitas) and Germany (BDÜ) list all three languages separately in their online directories of practitioners. Further, the term *naški* ('our language') is a colloquialism that is not really indicative of any particular view that a person may have about the languages being distinct or common. For example, a group of Bosniaks could use the word to refer to their language, Bosnian, without the inference that they see themselves as speakers of Croatian or Serbian as well. Such a term may be used by speakers in the way Will describes, who engage in *lingua receptiva* interactions — each speaks his/her own language and understands the other's language. But a colloquial and ambivalent euphemism is not a realistic or useful term to employ in anything more than informal usage amongst a small number of speakers.

Third, Will also mentions the killings and violence during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s. He writes: 'Muslim names were particularly identifiable. Being a Mustafa rather than a Miroslav could decide whether you were let through at a checkpoint, or taken off the bus and executed.' Will is unable to relate this reference to arbitrary execution on the basis of ethnicity to any of his arguments in favour of 'Serbo-Croatian'. It appears as a piece of information that he does not relate

to his general argument. But it is supposed to serve the purpose of suggesting to the reader that there is some sort of connection between those people who kill others on the basis of their ethnicity and who advocate separate and distinct names for their languages.

I find it questionable that the execution of people, on whatever basis, is used as supporting evidence the claim that Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian are one language. As far as I am aware, there is no evidence that murder or other acts of violence were motivated by people's views about their or others' languages. No historian or political scientist who has written about the wars in former Yugoslavia has identified any group's views on their own or others' languages as a cause of the wars or as a motivating factor in group or individual acts of violence. Views on language were certainly *reflective* of inter-ethnic tensions, and during the time of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) until 1991, also a *causative* factor in inter-ethnic tensions. (I return to this later and show how contemporary language planning has now removed the issue of language as a bone of contention between the groups.) But there is no evidence that the recodification and return to a separate designation of each group's language in 1991 was a cause or motivation for inter-ethnic conflict. The causes of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were political, not linguistic.

Will invokes further images of violence later in his article when he states that 'the Serbian/Croatian "divide"… can easily be blown out of proportion by… testosterone-fuelled clashes between young males or the statements of nationalist zealots'. Violence and extremism are things that he attributes to the opponents of 'Serbo-Croatian' — again with no reference to actual events or people. In so doing, he appears to pander to and perpetuate a trope that people from Serbia or Croatia or elsewhere in the Balkans are in some way violent and/or extreme. (I believe that violence and extremism are present in the Balkans in doses that are comparable to their presence in other countries; 'moments' in history may witness an increase or decrease in their incidence.) Referencing stereotypes in this way is an activity that T&Is as bi-cultural language experts should not engage in. Instead, as mentioned below, it is not a vociferous and extremist minority that advocates the distinctness of each language, but the overwhelming majority of all speakers that label their own

language by their nationality, irrespective of the similarities or differences to surrounding groups.

Fourth, Will refers to a UN institution that has adopted a policy of grouping Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian together — the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague (ICTY). However, the ICTY does not have such a policy. The Head of the T&I services at the ICTY, Maja Draženović-Carrieri states that 'this designation does not in any way intend to put the three languages under the same hat or claim that they are one and the same. … The choice was guided by pragmatic reasons…' (2002: 49). The formulation that the ICTY uses is that the language a defendant or a witness will receive translations or interpretation in will not necessarily be his or her native language, '…but a language that he understands' (Draženović-Carrieri, 2002:49). In a decision on a request from a defendant to receive translated transcripts and interpretation in 'a language which he understands', the pre-trial judge 'denied the Accused's request to receive all relevant documents "in [the] Serbian [language and written] in Cyrillic [script]"', determining that the right of an accused to receive relevant material in a language he understands does not entail 'a right for an accused … to come before this Tribunal and demand the production of documents in any language … he chooses' (ICTY, 2010). Scarcity of resources and time restrictions are also listed as reasons why the request was rejected (cf. Dragovic-Drouet, 2007). Other defendants (e.g. Vojislav Šešelj) have complained that the language(s) that interpreters are using are not their own, while in Croatia, there have been negative public responses to simultaneous interpretation into Serbian at the trials of Croatian generals.

Fifth, Will asserts that 'Serbo-Croat' is a pluri-centric language. The concept of pluri-centric languages developed in response to the need to describe national varieties that now function independently of the 'parent-language' that was usually the language of a colonising power. Thus English is a pluri-centric language for which there is no longer one correct norm but a language for which there are many norms; e.g. Australian English has a dictionary that codifies these, the Macquarie Dictionary. The term 'pluri-centric' language is easily applied to the languages of formal colonial powers, such as English, French and Spanish where it is incontestable amongst all speakers that their languages originated in England, France and Spain (Castille) respectively and that these languages were already more or less codified languages

before the spread of the languages of these colonial powers to other countries. In the case of Croatian and Serbian, both languages had been codified more or less independently of each other before the creation of a common state and the systematic imposition of a common norm after 1918. There was no scientific or popular need for each language community to have a further 'fraternal' linguistic standard to draw from and therefore no reason for them to be considered Siamese twins. This is congruent to the situation of speakers of Danish and Norwegian, Lao and Thai, Malay and Indonesian, Dari and Persian, who do not consider themselves to be speakers of twin-languages. The pluri-centric argument also lacked credibility in relation to Bosnian and Montenegrin. For decades, speakers of these two languages were fed the myth that their national vernaculars were non-standard, low-prestige dialects and/or low-register idioms and the official designation disenfranchised them by not including the names of these nations in the 'common code'. Attempts in the late 1970s and 1980s to develop semi-official Bosnian-Hercegovinian and Montenegrin standards within the orbit of 'Serbo-Croatian' were too little too late. Contemporary research on pluri-centric languages no longer lists 'Serbo-Croatian' or 'BCS' as an example of a pluri-centric language.

Next, Will also mentions texts in which authors mix their prose drawing on different standards. This is a device that writers commonly employ when they assume that their readership will understand not only the different codes, but the allusions that these different codes have for the protagonists involved. For example, in the same way Catalan writers may sporadically employ Castilian text, German writers may code-switch into English, Montenegrin writers may employ borrowings from Croatian for literary effect. There is nothing remarkable about this and the shifts in language are evidence of the differences that each language embodies, not their sameness. Of course such instances are a challenge for translators working into English who wish to convey the effect of these code-switches.

The last argument that Will puts forward is the instance of a speaker of one language requesting the services of a health interpreter from another language because of the fear that an interpreter in his/her own language would divulge information to other members of his/her community. Apart from confirming the relative separateness of the speech communities, this instance reminds me of an account from a French interpreter who asked an Arabic-speaking client with low proficiency in French, why

he requested a French-speaking interpreter (Hlavac, 2010: 1999). The reason was the same one that Will identifies in his example: the fear of personal information reaching the ears of the local Arabic-speaking community. No one would argue that this is evidence for arguing that French and Arabic are the same language. Will does not recognise in this instance its most pertinent point — its problem in relation to T&I ethics: a client fears that an interpreter does not uphold confidentiality. It is the fear of a breach of confidentiality that motivates a client to seek the services of an interpreter from another language, not because of a client's belief that all of the languages are the same.

In conclusion, I would like to make brief reference to the term 'Serbo-Croatian' and to contrast this with contemporary language planning regulations that have now largely solved 'the language problem' in the successor states of the SFRY. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the languages of the Bosniaks, Croats, Montenegrins and Serbs had more or less developed separately, notwithstanding degrees of similarity that are common in other language families, such as the north Germanic or west Romance languages. The label 'Serbo-Croatian' arose as part of a political ideology in the mid-nineteenth that advocated the unity of all South Slavs. According to this ideology, known as the Illyrian movement, the idea of union in a common, South Slavic state would need to be underpinned by linguistic homogeny amongst large numbers of its future citizens. Until the formation of a common state in 1918, 'Serbo-Croatian' which in name included only the two largest groups, was still a rather vague generic term for a yet to be determined 'common code'.

After the creation of Yugoslavia in 1918, political agendas continued to guide linguistic ones. In its early years, the political hegemony of Serbs in Yugoslavia (the Serbian king was made the king of Yugoslavia; the Serbian capital Belgrade also became the Yugoslav capital; Serbs were the single most numerous ethnic group) included a commensurate policy of linguistic homogenisation. The Yugoslav policy of linguistic engineering and levelling upheld and advocated Serbian linguistic norms in a way that it did not for other ethnic groups, most notably Croats but also Bosniaks and Montenegrins. The estrangement of non-Serb national groups from 'Serbo-Croatian' is not only, as many would see it, a political act, but a consequence of that linguistic variety primarily representing the largest ethnic group and not other, less numerous ethnic groups. At the same time, in Serbia there were many who objected

to 'Serbo-Croatian' on the grounds that it led to a marginalisation of the Cyrillic alphabet. On the ground and in private usage, the term 'Serbo-Croatian' remained unused and unloved.

It was not only nationalists, as Will suggests, who opposed the designation 'Serbo-Croatian'; intellectuals, teachers, students and ordinary citizens became disenchanted with an official policy that relegated their own language to that of a 'dialect', lower-register 'standard' or peripheral 'alternative'. During periodic crackdowns (e.g. 1971) writers were imprisoned, teachers sacked and translators had their careers ruined if they advocated traditional and popular rather than official linguistic designations. What once may have appeared to be a laudatory and emancipatory linguistic project had long since become an unpopular koine and instrument to punish dissidents.

After the democratic elections of 1991, the designation 'Serbo-Croatian' was abandoned across SFRY, and the official designations matched popular sentiment. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the presence of three constituent peoples guarantees that these three languages are the official ones — Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian. In Croatia the official language is Croatian (in areas of Croatia where the Serbian minority is domiciled, the Serbian language and alphabet are permitted alongside Croatian); in Montenegro there are two official languages which reflect the two largest national groups – Montenegrins (45%) and Serbs (35%); in Serbia, the official language is Serbian (in northern Vojvodina where the Croatian minority is domiciled, the Croatian language and alphabet are permitted alongside Serbian). The perhaps complicated but comprehensive language planning arrangements that pertain in all four countries of former SFRY have now largely resolved and ended the linguistic antagonisms that once plagued inter-ethnic relations during the time of SFRY. Far from igniting antagonisms, the current linguistic arrangements have now contributed to a de-escalation of tensions between all four groups. Grievances about one group using linguistic means to impose its hegemony over another are now a thing of the past.

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A forthcoming article: 'Interpreting in one's own and in closely related languages. Negotiation of linguistic varieties amongst interpreters of the Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian languages' will appear in March 2013 in Vol. 15, No. 1 of *Interpreting: International Journal on Research and Practice in Interpreting*.