REVIEWS

Snježana Kordić. *Jezik i nacionalizam*. Zagreb: Durieux, 2010. 430 pp.

Reviewed by Keith Langston

Snježana Kordić, a native of Osijek, Croatia, received her doctorate from the University of Zagreb in 1993. She then moved to Germany, where she has taught at a number of different universities. In addition to numerous articles and reviews, Kordić has published several books, including well-received works on the syntax of relative clauses (Kordić 1995, 1999) and on the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of pronouns and other selected high-frequency words that combine lexical meaning with grammatical functions (2001, 2002). She is widely known in Croatia as the author of a long series of polemical texts that have appeared in the journals *Republika* and *Književna republika* since 2001, in which she sharply criticizes the work of various Croatian linguists and argues that, from the viewpoint of linguistic science, it is impossible to speak of a separate Croatian (standard) language. For Kordić, the only tenable position is that there is a single Serbo-Croatian language, with several standardized variants which differ from each other only in negligible, linguistically insignificant ways.

Her book *Jezik i nacionalizam (Language and nationalism)* is an extended effort to prove this point. Kordić examines the relationship between language and nation in a broader sense, but her main focus is on the sociolinguistic situation of the former Yugoslavia, and Croatia in particular. The book is divided into three main sections: "Linguistic purism," "A polycentric standard language," and "Nation, identity, culture, history." Kordić has extensively researched the scholarly literature on language and national identity and makes many valid points throughout. However, when she begins her book with a section on "Purism and Nazism" and directly compares Croatian linguists to Nazi German purists, it is immediately apparent that the work is unlikely to offer a dispassionate view of sociolinguistic issues in Croatia. The sharply polemical tone of her writings in *Republika* and *Književna republika* is evident throughout. For example: "They [Croatian purists] produce neologisms in an infantile fashion, and say that this activity of

theirs, which is otherwise characteristic of pre-schoolers, requires great knowledge" (25). She accuses linguists of lying when they claim that Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian are separate languages (120), states that some might think that it is not worthwhile to examine the assertions of Croatianists critically because they underestimate the mental abilities of the reader (136–37), and speaks of the "autism" or "autistic traits" of Croatian linguistics (165, 371). To be fair, Kordić has herself been subjected to harsh criticism in Croatia (the book under review here has provoked especially strong reactions, including a lawsuit brought against the Croatian Ministry of Culture for subsidizing its publication), and her objections to views propounded by some Croatian linguists are often legitimate. Nonetheless, the acerbity of some of her language makes an unprofessional impression.

Kordić defines purism as unnatural, undemocratic, and as having no basis in linguistics. She sees it as a completely negative phenomenon, something that is imposed by a small elite group on the rest of the language community. It is true, as she says, that purism typically has pejorative connotations among linguists and that notions of purity and of cleansing a language by eliminating undesirable elements have no objective basis. However, I would argue that Kordić's view of purism is too narrow and one-sided. Although purism is most often discussed in the context of standard languages, purism in some form is probably characteristic of all language communities. Even members of non-privileged groups may reject forms that are seen as "not belonging" to their particular varieties; the phenomenon of covert prestige is well documented. I think that prototypical examples of standard language purism at the national level are best understood in relationship to other types of language-management activities, which may take place on a smaller scale (see Spolsky 2009). As an activity that language users commonly engage in, purism can be considered natural, and it serves specific sociolinguistic functions, namely those of solidarity, separation, and prestige (Thomas 1991: 59). It is not inherently bad or good.

Kordić sees prescriptivism in the same light, as something that goes hand in hand with purism (57). She reminds us that prescribing the use of specific forms cannot be considered part of the scientific study of language and that prescription alone does not equal standardization; the codified norm must also be widely accepted (62). How-

ever, Kordić seemingly discounts the fact that prescriptivism is nevertheless an inherent part of standardization, without which a standard language cannot exist. She argues that "the prescriptive approach to the standard language is in opposition to trends in the world" (65), citing statements by several authors that in many languages there has been a liberalization of standard norms under the influence of spoken usage. Even so, there still must be prescriptive rules (e.g., for the spelling of words) in order for a standard language to fulfill its function as a medium of widespread communication.

With respect to the purist tendencies in Croatia over the last two decades, Kordić somewhat exaggerates their scope and effect. She speaks of "chaos" in the media due to linguistic censorship (39) and quotes a author who states that in the 1990s there was a large-scale campaign of purification, when not a single word could be published without first passing the censorship of language editors, and that even in everyday life individuals were subject to the control of others who were constantly evaluating their speech to see if it was sufficiently Croatian (40). However, Kordić herself contradicts this later when she says that many Croats are opposed to purism and that relatively few changes can actually be observed in the language of the media, despite the efforts of purists (44–45). Apart from official terms used in government administration, which have been widely adopted in the media (e.g., *putovnica* instead of *pasoš* 'passport', *veleposlanstvo* instead of *ambasada* 'embassy'), purists have had the greatest success with forms that were already familiar to some extent prior to 1991. Many of these have increased in frequency, especially in the more nationalist media outlets (e.g., *glazba* vs. *muzika* 'music', *zrakoplov* vs. *avion* 'airplane'). However, most recent neologisms or archaic forms that purists have attempted to revive are still only rarely used (e.g., *suosnik* for *koaksijalni kabel* 'coaxial cable', *nadnevak* for *datum* 'date').[1]

In the following section Kordić defines the main characteristic of a standard language as its status as a supra-regional means of communication (69) and discusses the concept of a polycentric standard language. In her view, the question of whether we are dealing with one

[1] This is from the results of my own research, based on a combination of data from the Croatian National Corpus (http://www.hnk.ffzg.hr/cnc.htm), my own text corpora, and corpus data published by other scholars.

standard language or several in the case of the standardized štokavian varieties used in the former Yugoslavia can be answered on the basis of three criteria: the degree of similarities and differences among the varieties, the degree of mutual intelligibility, and whether they are based on the same dialect (97). After considering and dismissing what she refers to as "allegedly sociolinguistic criteria" (status as an official language, the opinions of users of the language about its status, and the view that a group has the right to define and name its own language), she critiques specific assertions made by Croatianists to justify the status of Croatian as a separate language in a subsection titled "Manifestations of Ignorance" (136ff.). She concludes that by all generally accepted (socio)linguistic criteria, the varieties in question constitute a single language and that linguists should continue to refer to this language as Serbo-Croatian.

It is possible to agree with Kordić in many of her negative assessments of positions espoused by some Croatian linguists. They have a tendency to magnify differences and downplay similarities among what are indisputably closely related language varieties. Despite their arguments to the contrary, the existence of variation does not necessarily mean that we are dealing with more than one language, because variation is inherent to all language varieties, regardless of whether they are commonly referred to as languages, standardized variants, or dialects. The existence of different historical and cultural traditions in different regions does not necessarily mean that these regions cannot be united by a single standard language. The case of (Serbo-)Croatian is not so different from that of standard languages in other parts of the world that general linguistic criteria cannot be applied. However, Kordić's interpretation is shaped by a similarly dogmatic approach to the question, which is flawed in its own way.

Kordić fails to recognize that "languages" or "language varieties" are constructs rather than naturally existing entities that can be defined unambiguously on the basis of objective criteria alone. They are abstractions that serve not only scientific purposes, as labels that allow us to make generalizations, but also sociolinguistic functions, as part of the ways that language users construct their views of the world around them. Although we may agree that languages should be defined on the basis of similarities and differences and/or mutual intelligibility, any decisions about the degree of similarity or mutual intelli-

gibility required for grouping language varieties into a single language are essentially arbitrary. Kordić claims that if the percentage of complete identity between texts in different varieties exceeds 50%, then the idioms must be considered to belong to a single polycentric standard (98). She adds that if the basic lexicon contained in the Swadesh list is at least 81% the same in two varieties, then they are part of the same language. She does not attempt to explain why the thresholds should be precisely 50% and 81%. For example, if the basic lexicon were only 80% the same, would they definitely be two different languages? This arbitrariness is equally apparent in her discussion of mutual intelligibility. She quotes one author as saying that if a speaker of one variety understands 70% or more of a spoken or written text in a different variety, then these must be considered dialects of the same language (106), while on the next page she says that different varieties are grouped into the same language if the mutual intelligibility is somewhere between 75–85%. Although she quotes numerous statements from the sociolinguistic literature in support of her opinions, she ignores others that call some of her basic assumptions into question. For example, she criticizes Croatianists for attempting to "relativize" mutual intelligibility by saying that it depends on the willingness of speakers to understand each other (151), although this is in fact widely acknowledged in the scholarly literature. It is noted, for example, by Ammon (1987: 324), which Kordić cites elsewhere regarding techniques for measuring mutual comprehension (106–07). Ammon discusses at some length the difficulties in making satisfactory determinations of mutual intelligibility, describing it as gradient, rather than categorical, and also potentially asymmetrical. Although he does not state this explicitly, we should also note that mutual intelligibility can only be measured directly for individual speakers, not for varieties. Ammon goes on to say that mutual intelligibility "forms a continuum in which, in the case of a binary division (good as opposed to bad mutual intelligibility), an arbitrary borderline would eventually have to be drawn" (1987: 324). He is similarly cautious about measurements of systematic linguistic difference between varieties, concluding that those who have attempted to develop rigorous, numerically based techniques of taxonomy mostly "assume that classification is fundamentally artificial and that the search for naturalness is hopeless […]. Independent of that fact it is doubtful whether languages can ade-

quately be (re)constructed in this way, for the natural or artificial element grouping provides no criteria for delimiting between continuous transitions" (1987: 323–24).

Kordić argues that since the standardized varieties in the region are based on the same štokavian dialect, they must necessarily represent a single language. She refers in several places to the concepts of *Abstandsprachen* and *Ausbausprachen* developed by Kloss, who stipulates that a polycentric standard results when two standardized variants are based on the same dialect or on two nearly identical dialects (Kloss 1976: 310, cited by Kordić 99). However, the decision whether two varieties represent the same dialect is ultimately based on arbitrary determinations of the necessary degree of similarity and different weights given to competing criteria, as shown above. Kordić assumes that the štokavian dialect group represents a genetically determined natural entity, but the *Stammbaum* approach to historical linguistics, which assumes that proto-South Slavic split into several distinct branches which later followed separate paths of development, does not correspond to reality. The traditional dialect groupings of štokavian, čakavian, and kajkavian are informed in part by historical and political factors. In fact, the drawing of borders between different varieties in a dialect continuum, such as South Slavic, can never be indisputably determined on purely linguistic criteria alone. Furthermore, Kloss's classification of "languages by distance" and "languages by development" explicitly recognizes that languages in the latter category result from the conscious efforts of users to shape the language (Kloss 1967: 29). Kloss also acknowledges that "the relation between the polycentric standard language (as typified by Serbo-Croatian) and the ausbau language (as typified by Slovak in its relation to Czech) is not a static but a dynamic one (1967: 33)," i.e., that it is possible to turn a polycentric standard into two or more separate languages or vice versa. These distinctions are not as clear-cut and immutable as Kordić describes them.

In the longest section of the book, Kordić systematically tries to dismantle the popular view of the nation as a natural entity, defined by a common language, a common origin, and a shared history and culture. She presents generally accepted scholarly views of the nation as a social construct and criticizes Croatianists and others in the former Yugoslavia for portraying the nation as a primordial, objectively de-

termined societal group. While this criticism is justified, she again pushes her point too far. As Anderson (1991: 6) remarked about Ernest Gellner's work, Kordić equates what has been variously termed as the construction, imagination, or invention of the nation with the fabrication of a falsehood, and she portrays nationalism as something that is inherently evil. While one cannot deny the negative aspects of nationalism or ignore the terrible things that have too often been done under the guise of "defending the nation," it is important to recognize that "nations and nationalism are no more 'invented' than other kinds of culture, social organization, or ideology" (Smith 1991: 71).

Kordić pays special attention to the language policies of the former Yugoslavia, portraying them as exceptionally democratic and protective of minority language rights. According to her, the spread of characteristically Serbian lexical items to Croatia was a natural process due to the prestige of Serbian (since the capital city was Belgrade, and Serbs were the largest national group in the former Yugoslavia). She criticizes Croatian linguists for promoting the "myth of linguistic unitarism" (283ff.), i.e., the idea that Serbian linguistic norms were imposed on Croatia as part of a governmental policy aimed at creating a unified Serbo-Croatian standard. She emphasizes the equal treatment of the two variants in the 1954 Novi Sad Agreement and the rights granted to all nations and nationalities in the Yugoslav constitution to use their own languages and alphabets. There was no official language on the federal level; rather, each republic or autonomous region was free to declare its own official languages. Kordić disregards, however, the continuing emphasis on the unity of Serbo-Croatian and the importance attached to it by the communist authorities. Although the 1974 constitution of the Socialist Republic of Croatia declared the "Croatian literary language" to be in official use, it also went on to define this as "the standard form of the national language of Croats and Serbs in Croatia, which is called Croatian or Serbian" ("Socijalistička Republika Hrvatska," hr.wikipedia.org). The Novi Sad Agreement also clearly states that Serbo-Croatian is one language, and both constituent parts of the name must always be included in official usage (Greenberg 2004: 171–74). The main goals of this agreement were to complete a joint orthographic manual and joint dictionary and to develop joint terminology, all of which were aimed at unifying the language as much as possible while still allowing for the use of accepted variants.

The main objection of Croatian linguists to the joint dictionary project was that it listed variant forms without clearly identifying them as characteristic of either Croatian or Serbian, in keeping with the communist government's policy of suppressing nationalism within Yugoslavia. Their fear was that this lack of differentiation would accelerate what they saw as the intrusion of Serbian forms into Croatian usage, precisely because they were aware of the forces of frequency and prestige mentioned by Kordić. Furthermore, the acceptance of linguistic variation in socialist Yugoslavia only went so far. Some individuals reportedly suffered professional and legal consequences for using specific words that did not meet with the approval of the authorities. For example, Dr. Ivan Šreter was sentenced to 50 days in prison in 1987 for writing *umirovljeni časnik* instead of *penzionirani oficir* 'retired officer' for a patient's occupation in his medical file (Babić 2007: 33). In addition, language handbooks or other reference works that were seen as promoting linguistic separatism and/or Croatian nationalism, such as the 1971 *Hrvatski pravopis* by Babić, Finka, and Moguš, were also banned. All but a few copies of this book were destroyed, and the work was not published and distributed in Croatia until 1990. In practice, language policies were not as liberal as Kordić describes them.

Throughout the book, Kordić criticizes Croatian linguists for their ignorance of western scholarly literature on sociolinguistics and national identity. Perhaps because of this, she relies heavily on other authors' work, using direct quotations much more extensively than is normally done. There are many pages where the only words written by Kordić herself are short phrases used to introduce and connect these quotes. Thus pages 12–13 consist almost entirely of quotes from the same work by von Polenz (1967); the text from the bottom of 217 through the first half of 219 is taken almost entirely from Sundhaussen (1993: 45–47); and pages 322–27 are quoted almost entirely from Mappes-Niediek (2005). These examples could easily be multiplied. Occasionally in her zeal to bolster her arguments by citing other scholars, Kordić takes statements out of context. For example, she cites Cameron (1995) in several places (59, 61, 66) to support her position that linguists should be concerned only with description and not prescription. However, one of the main thrusts of Cameron's book is to call into question the anti-prescriptivist bias among linguists, which leads us to view prescriptivism as unnatural. Cameron suggests that

"making value judgments on language is an integral part of using it and not an alien practice 'perversely grafted on'" (1995: 3), and argues that the distinction between description and prescription is not as clear-cut as it would seem (1995: 5ff.).

Kordić seems to be motivated by a genuine desire to combat the deleterious effects of purism and nationalist ideology on the linguistic culture of Croatian speakers, Croatian linguistic scholarship, and more generally on the people of the region as a whole. However, her arguments for the existence of a polycentric Serbo-Croatian standard language (or a Serbo-Croatian language as a distinct variety in general) are no more objectively valid than arguments for a distinct Croatian (standard) language. As abstract concepts, these are dependent on the criteria applied, and as shown above there is always some degree of arbitrariness in determining where exactly one draws the boundaries between related language varieties. There is nothing intrinsically unscientific about positing different groupings based on different criteria, as long as the underlying assumptions are clearly understood. Croatian exists as a standardized norm used by all levels of society as a supra-regional means of communication within Croatia. Whether we refer to it as a separate standard language or as a variant of a single polycentric standard language is largely a question of terminology. But there is more to it than this. Given the arbitrariness of any purely linguistic classification of language varieties, we should recognize that the grouping of different standardized norms into a single language (as in the case of English, for example) reflects a desire on the part of these different language communities to maintain some sense of a shared linguistic-cultural identity (see Joseph 1987: 170–71). Where no such desire for a common linguistic-cultural identity exists, there is no real justification for insisting on the existence of a polycentric standard language as opposed to two or more independent standard languages. This does not mean that we are denying the ability of speakers in the different communities to communicate with each other, or that we are ignoring the structural linguistic facts. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of the social dimension of language.

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