

The Importance of Preserving the Bosnian Language Among the Diaspora



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*“One language sets you in a corridor for life.
Two languages open every door along the
way.”*

– Frank Smith

Bilingual Brain

- Fluency in two languages especially from early age enhances:
 - Intelligence reserve due to greater white matter (sustains damage from stroke, Alzheimer's disease, etc. without hurting intelligence)
 - Concentration capacity as a result of neural plasticity (reorganizing brain networks)
 - NOT speaking the other language

Bilingual Brain (2)

- Knowing other languages also means being familiar with different cultures, ways of thinking
- This improves overall innovative thinking that is an asset in professional and private life
- Empathy and ability to change perspectives, adaptability to diverse environments

International Mother Language Day

- UNESCO declaration - Feb 21st is celebrated internationally as a day commemorating native language
- 1952 Pakistan – Bengali students executed while protesting for equal linguistic rights for their native Bengali language
- Equal recognition, multilingual education
- Preserving identity abroad

Bosnian language in the Diaspora

- Aggression on BiH from 1991-1995
- 2.5 million displaced Bosnians
- 350,000 families estimated to be in USA (mainly Bosniak)
- Attempt to eliminate primarily Bosniak cultural heritage



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Bosnian Language

- 1994 - BiH officially declared Bosnian as one of official languages
- Attempts to change to Bošnjački in 2002: ethnic exclusivity in multi-ethnic BiH? - ridiculous
- 2017 linguistic Declaration of the Common Language: Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Bosnian languages are one **polycentric** language
- Administrative/linguistic designation less important than the fact it is a native language, mother tongue
- Most common designation : “naški”
- Most important, what is conveys for you: your culture, your values, your traditions, etc.

Moj dedo

- Grandfather Mirza Hamzić prolific writer of songs and poems: Mostargija
- House filled with *sevdalinka*, Bosnian cooking and of course language
- Understanding the emotion filled stories of personal events and historical facts
- Book reports in school, language exchange with parents, listening to music
- Continuing the story of my native land abroad
- Greater acceptance, belonging and improved chance of establishing relationships with locals in BiH

Importance of Preservation

- Diaspora youth do not practice the language spoken by their parents, except in the home.
- Some learn to understand it because their parents and grandparents speak their language to them, but the youth never learns to reply in Bosnian.
- Grammar typically not formally learned, language is a faulty tool to be used in the professional world
- Risk becoming disconnected from the collective consciousness of their people

Saving the link

- Widely confirmed that by third generation, native language no longer enforced in household
 - Parents have greatest influence: choosing the home language
 - Older siblings typically will speak dominant language
- Desire for parents to ensure children's best chance for success
- Maternal language teaching not seen as economic benefit:
 - Denison (1977) “direct cause of language death is lack of transition to children. This occurs because a community sometimes 'decides', for reason of functional economy, to suppress a part of itself” (p.21)
- Other heritage typically preserved: cuisine, music, folkloric traditions

Saving the link (2)

- Speaking the language at home is not sufficient, parents must put forth effort and include other resources as support (Kondo, 1998)
 - Parent's attitude toward language pivotal
- Building skills in native language at home improves reading and writing in dominant language (Kourtizin, 1999)
- Language stores our memories from childhood, first experiences of the world around us
- Learning the native and dominant community language eliminates the implicit differentiation of superior/inferior culture

Saving the link (3)

- Keeping native language encourages embracing ethnic identity – understanding where coming from

- Confidence and pride in roots
 - Strengthens family ties (grandparents, family in BiH)
 - My Aunt in Sarajevo (BHFF) by Goran Kapetanović



- Culture exists because of us: institutions we create, values we enforce
 - We are guardians of our culture
 - Language keeps culture alive and allows for authentic transmission

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”

– Nelson Mandela



What are we doing about it?

- Chicago – weekend program for children in mosques and Islamic Cultural Center
 - Teach Bosnian language and history
- BOSNAWA (Bosnian North American Women's Association)
 - Content created by members and textbook provided by Consulate in Chicago (learning through play)
 - Currently securing funding for teacher, free space established in Roger Franklin Library

Learning as adults

- Multilingualism is beneficial, choosing between Spanish and Bosnian
 - Both significant and serve specialized purposes
 - Bosnian does not need to be perfect to be beneficial
 - Jobs in diplomacy (Foreign Service), government
 - If motivation exists, next step is managing precious time and energy resources
 - Monthly book clubs and conversation classes if volunteers in community exist (ex. MeetUp – NYC Balkan Culture and Solidarity Meet UP)

What do you think?

Is it important to teach your native/heritage language to your children?

How do you plan on doing this?

How can we organize as a community to make it easier?

Vicevi :)

- *Kako je Crnogorac postao lijen? Rekao mu Bosanac: Sjed' bolan da ti nešto objasnim...*
- Dođe Mujo kod doktora i kaže: Doktore, žena mi ima temperaturu. A je li visoka? Ma nije mnogo, metar I šezdeset pet.
- *Kako se zove neko ko je i ljevak i dešnjak? Lješnjak!*
- *Kako bi se Slovenija zvala da je u Africi? Mali...*

References

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