THE SERBO-CROATIAN PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEM AND PROBLEMS IN PRESENTING IT TO FOREIGN LEARNERS

CASLAV STOJANOVIC

The Institute of Foreign Languages
11000 Belgrade, Yugoslavia

ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the Serbo-Croatian phonological system, covering all its prosodic features occurring in words.

The four melodic accents, the lack of reduction, as well as the sequence and distribution of vowels present a lot of challenges to foreign learners.

Six consonants have a vocalic nature in the phonetic sense. A more precise description has been provided here as to the place or manner of articulation of several consonants.

Problems of presentation are coupled with the wrong rendering of the SC sounds on the part of foreign learners whose mother tongues belong to various language groups.

INTRODUCTION

The Serbo-Croatian phonological system covers 5 relatively pure vowels and 25 consonant-type sounds. A more detailed analysis, however, reveals a few extremely interesting points.

VOWELS

Phonetic Description

There are 5 vowels. According to the place and manner of articulation, they are as follows:

1/ front, close, unrounded [i]
2/ front, half-close, unrounded [e]
3/ central to back, open, neutral [a]
4/ back, half-close, rounded [u]
5/ back, close, rounded [u]

There are no nasalised vowels.

Suprasegmental Features

In some words, there may be one of the four melodies:

1/ long-rising
2/ short-rising
3/ long-falling
4/ short-falling

The accents may occur:

a) only the falling ones: in one-syllable words
b) only the rising ones: in the middle of a word
c) any one of them: on the first syllable
d) none of them: on the last syllable

In some words, bear no accent, having unaccented long or short vowels only.

A theoretical problem could be raised at this point: Could one — following an arithmetical transaction — come to a conclusion that there are virtually 25 vocalic phonemes in Serbo-Croatian?

Reduction

By definition, there is no vowel reduction in standard SC. In some subdialects, however, there is a lot of reduction, even elision, of some unaccented vowels. Cf. standard v. reduced:

S: Jesam li ti rekao šta ima da bude?
R: S' ti rek'o bre štima da bude?
S: Što češ raditi večeras?
R: Što ′ š radit ′ večeras?

In the teaching process, on the contrary, emphasis is laid on the length of every unaccented long vowel, particularly for grammatical reasons, e.g., in the plural genitive: žene (of women).

For practical purposes, a horizontal line is placed above the long vowel.

Sequence

By definition, there are no diphthongs in SC, but only vowel clusters, that is,
In Russian there are a few varieties of 24.4.2
vowels of which 13 are short and 11
long, as shown below: [1], [2], [3], [4],
[5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11],
[12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17],
[18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23],
[24], [25].

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vowels, 14 diphthongs, and 7 semivowels.

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The Germans devoice stops in all positions: biti = piti; dobro = topo; gad = kat.
The English often hear and reproduce SC /p, t, k/ as [b, d, g] due to the lack of aspiration in the SC voiceless stops:
Papić-Babić: klato = gladno.
All Germanic languages have regressive assimilation, whereas Slavic languages have progressive assimilation. Compare the SC and English renderings of "pet banana":

SC rendering: ped banana
E rendering: pet panana

All foreigners (and a lot of SC speakers too) find it almost impossible to distinguish between [t, d, g] and [s, z, j, ʃ], respectively. R learners neutralise 
and into [tʃ]; kuće, kuća = [kutʃ], and into [dʒ] idžak, djak = [dʒak].

It is advisable to point out the double articulation of these palatals. The tip, blade, and rise of the tongue touch the upper alveolar ridge and side teeth. At the same time, the front of the tongue is raised towards the hard palate, less (for [s, z]) or more (for [ʃ, ʃ]). That explanation should help anyone, particularly the Greeks, who pronounce [ts] instead of [tʃ] and [dz] instead of [dʒ], and pronounce; uzel sam sok = [uzela sam sok] doživela sam sok = [doživela sam sok].

The Spanish often assimilate [s] or [z] to the following nasal or lateral:

piso = [pijmo]; razlog = [rajlog]
The French have no [x], so they drop it: hitno = itno.
The English have the glottal fricative [h], so they hear the velar fricative [x] as the voiceless velar stop [k] and pronounce it thus: hleb = kleb; čeh = ček.

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