Observations on the Use of Jedan as a Marker of Indefiniteness in Serbian/Croatian

Among his many accomplishments, my dear friend and colleague Vasa D. Mihailovich has produced and participated in some masterful translations into English. When I was asked by the University of Pittsburgh press to review Vasa’s translation (with Milne Holton) of Vuk Karadžić’s famous collection of nineteenth-century South Slavic folklore, I wrote:

Although this material is available in other translations, the present is the first successful attempt to translate the form as well as the content of this poetry. Vasa Mihailović is a sensitive and nuanced poet in his own right, and together with Milne Holton, they have brought tremendous skill to bear on the extraordinarily difficult task of translating epic poetry from one language to another while preserving the metrical structure. [...] At a time when news from former Yugoslavia is so often tragic, it is well to remember that its territory gave rise to a great poetic tradition that has lasted into this century. Mihailović and Holton are to be congratulated for making that tradition available to the English speaking world in a form that is both accessible to the reader and faithful to the original. This is a truly remarkable and important accomplishment.

In this paper in Vasa’s honor, I shall use translations to examine a grammatical phenomenon of Southern West South Slavic, namely, the use of jedan ‘one’ and its co-forms (jedna, etc.) as a marker of indefiniteness, i.e. in a non-numerical function that resembles that of the indefinite article.
such uses of *jedan* are more characteristic of the Serbian standard than the Croatian, like the use of the imperfect. Unlike the use of the imperfect, however, the use of *jedan* as a marker of indefiniteness is not a preservation but rather an innovation, although like the preservation of the imperfect, it is also characteristic of Balkan Slavic. As such, it may well be connected with the rise of the definite article, a specifically Balkan Slavic phenomenon that for SWSS occurs only in the southeast.

As I have shown elsewhere, Common Slavic as represented by Old Church Slavonic almost never used the numeral ‘one’ as an indefinite marker, and on the rare occasion when an Old Church Slavonic use of ‘one’ corresponds to the English indefinite article, it does so with the markedly specific meaning of ‘a certain’ as in the following example:

(1) *I pristupi edini kćenžik* (Codex Zographensis, Jagić 1879)
   ‘And a certain scribe came’ (Matthew 8:19)

dialects south of Slovenian (and north of Macedonian and west of Bulgarian) can thus be classified as Southern West South Slavic, henceforth SWSS. Greenberg (see Robert Greenberg, “The Politics of Dialects Among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in the Former Yugoslavia,” *East European Politics and Societies* 10 [1996]: 393–415) has shown convincingly that the differentiation of SWSS dialects is based on geographic distribution and not ethnicity. This fact was behind the terminological shift to *Eastern variant* and *Western variant* during the period of the second Yugoslavia. At the same time, however, it is convenient to use the terms *Serbian* and *Croatian* (and *Bosnian*) to refer to the various SWSS dialects of the republics/countries that bear these names. (In the same spirit, one can—and in standard linguistic practice, does—also use regional names such as *Herzegovinian*, *Istrian*, etc., to refer to dialects spoken in the given region.) Moreover, the translations that will provide the data for this study had the conscious intent of conforming to either a Croatian or Serbian norm. I shall therefore use the term SWSS when referring to the geographic complex of dialects and the terms *Serbian*, *Croatian*, and *Serbian/Croatian* when referring to the specific literary variants that are being compared here (with the understanding that these terms have a geographic basis). Henceforth, I shall also simply use *jedan* to stand for all the possible inflectional forms of the word.


5 A note on orthography: I shall use Latin transliteration of Glagolitic and Cyrillic throughout this paper for the sake of convenience. Minor orthographic variations are irrelevant to my purposes and will not be indicated. For Serbian Cyrillic I shall employ the standard transliteration in use prior to the Wars of Succession. For Croatian I shall use the spelling of the original text. (For an analysis of current orthographic debates, see Robert Greenberg, “Language Politics in Yugoslavia: The Crisis Over the Future of Serbian,” *Slavic Review* 59 [2000]: 625–40).

6 Friedman, “The Bulgarian Indefinite Article Revisited in Its Balkan Context.”

7 See Collins.


Croatian and two Serbian. What emerges from this comparison even of so small a sample is that the Serbian is closer to the Bulgarian original in the use of *jedan* as an indefinite marker, although none of the versions use the numeral in this function as frequently as does Bulgarian. Of the eleven examples with 'one' in the Bulgarian original that can be identified as article-like indefinite markers, five are not translated into any of the Serbian/Croatian versions and two are translated into all four, leaving four that show differential treatment. The following examples are those with indefinite 'one' only in Bulgarian. The order of presentation throughout is Bulgarian original, Croatian (Gundrum 1909), Croatian (Rujanac 1917), Serbian (Rujanac 1907), Serbian (Paunović 1955).

(2) a. Pomognaha na baj Ganja da smakne ot pleštite si agarjanska jamurluk, nametna si toj edna belgijska mantija—i vskički rekoха, če baj Ganšo e veče cjal evropeec. (01.01)

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15 Or Macedonian; see Friedman, “The Bulgarian Indefinite Article Revisited in Its Balkan Context.” The translations themselves contain a variety of interesting and noteworthy features that are beyond the scope of this paper. One issue worth addressing here, however, is that of time period. Konstantinov’s original and three of the four translations all date from 1895–1917, i.e. they reflect the Serbian/Croatian literary language(s) prior to the establishment of the first Yugoslavia, and the Bulgarian original itself is more than a century old. In some respects, both the language of the original and of the translations reflect vocabulary and usages that are now obsolete. The question therefore arises whether or not the use of ‘one’ in such texts is consistent with contemporary usage. In the case of the Bulgarian original, I checked with various native speakers born after World War Two, and each judged the occurrences of ‘one’ to be consistent with current usage. In the case of the Serbian/Croatian translations, it may be the case that various factors have influenced the translators’ choices, but the general tendencies are nonetheless clear. The subject will in any case be worthy of further research.
16 English translations will be normally based on the Bulgarian original. Minor variations among the different versions will be ignored. In my translations, however, inspired by Vasa’s own skill in this art, I shall attempt to combine faithfulness to the original with a style that sounds best in English. At times, therefore, the translation will not be completely literal for the sake of literary quality. Such minor differences will not affect my arguments. Owing to variations in pagination in various editions, the references in the Bulgarian are by chapter and sentence. Thus, for example, the first example is from Chapter One. First Sentence. I have indicated the order of the Croatian/Serbian translations only on first occurrence.

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(2) b. Pomogoše Baj Ganjo, da baci s leđja agarjanski oplečak, metne ti on na se belgijski ogrtać—i vskički rekoха, če baj Ganjo potpun Evropeec. (Cr 1909)

c. Pomozi baj Ganju s leđa skinuti starinski jamurluk, pa obući belgijski kaput—i vskički rekoха, če baj Ganjo pravi pravci Evropljanin. (Cr 1917)

d. Pomogoše Baj-Ganja, da sladnadi s pleča agarjansku dzoku, ogrte ti on belgijski ogrtać—i vskički rekoха, če baj Ganjo jevroplanin od glave do pete. (Sr 1907)

e. Pomogoše baj Ganju da zbaci s leđa tursku kabanicu, a on ti se ogrnu belgijskom pelerinom i vskički rekoха, če naj jevropan od glave do pete. (Sr 1955)

‘They helped Baj Ganjo off with his heavy wool Turkish cloak, he put on a Belgian frock coat, and everyone said that Baj Ganjo had become a real European.’

(3) a. Portierat sled vseki pet minut udrij žvâncea i ravnođušno, s edin leniv glas, šobobstava napravlenieto na trenovate: (01.26)

b. Svakih per minuta zvoni vratar i ravnođušno, lijennim glasom objavljuje raspored vlakova:

c. Vratar svaki pet časaka zvoni zvončićem i ravnođušno lijennim glasom pjeva, kud će krenuti vlak:

d. Na svakih pet minut zvoni vratar i lenim glasom objavljuje raspored vozova:

e. Vratar posle svakih pet minuta udara u zvono i lenim glasom ravnodušno saopštava pravce vozova:

‘The stationmaster would strike a bell every five minutes and with an indifferent, lazy voice announce the destinations of the trains.’

(4) a. Hele po edno vreme gledam, posprje se i az hop, ta vatre. (01.44)

b. Ele malo poslije gledam, zaustavi se, a ja hop! pa unutra.

c. Nakon nekog vremena opazim, da je vlak stao, a ja hop—pa unutra.

d. Ele malo poslije gledam, zaustavi se, a ja hop! te unutra.

e. Elem, malo posle pogledam, zaustavi se, i ja hop! pa unutra.

‘And so after a while I look, it stopped, so up I jump and get inside.’

(5) a. Te malko li ni skubjat!—otgovori baj Ganšo s edin ton, netarpišť vžraženie. (01.54)

b. A malo li nas oni gule!—odgovori Baj Ganja tonom, koji ne trpi prigovora.
These examples illustrate several distinct usages of ‘one’ in Bulgarian not corresponding to Serbian/Croatian. We can generalize them, however, into two types: one is the use with non-concrete objects (3, 4, 5), the other is with concrete objects (2 and 6). Examples (3) and (5) are stylistically marked in Bulgarian, while (4) is idiomatic. In example (2), my native Bulgarian consultants felt that the object by itself was too non-referential, some sort of specifier or definer was needed, and that ‘one’ was the most neutral, whereas in the case of (6) the value of edin was felt to be close to numerical and, according to my consultants, the item was potentially omissible thanks to the contextual specificity of ‘new’. Apparently, in example (2) the qualifier ‘Belgian’ serves a similar specifying or referential function in the Serbian/Croatian translations but not in the original Bulgarian. We can thus venture a preliminary suggestion at this point that a difference between Bulgarian on the one hand and SWSS on the other is the degree of contextual referentiality invested in qualifying adjectives.

Let us now consider the two examples where the correspondence is the same in all versions.

(7) a. Kako sam znao, da ćemo se tu zadrazilj čitav sat, udobno se uvalim u jednu stolicu kraj stola i naručim zakuse i pivo.

b. Kako sam znao, da ćemo se tu zadrazilj čitav sat, udobno se uvalim u jednu stolicu kraj stola i naručim zakuse i pivo.
(9) a. Zavedoh baj Ganja v kantorata na edin bălgarski tărgovec i go ostavih tam, a sam se kačih na tramvaja i otidoh v Šenbrun. (01.05)
b. Odvedem Baj Ganju jednom bugarskom torgovec u dućan i ostavim ga tamo, a ja sjednom na tramvaj, pa u Schönbrunn.
c. Odveo sam baj Ganja u trgovinu torgova Bugarina, te ga ondje ostavio, a sam se popeh na tranvaj i odvezoh u Senbrun.
d. Odvedem Baja-Ganja jednom bugarskom torgovcu u dućan i ostavim ga tamo, a ja sednom na tramvaj, pa u Schönbrun.
e. Odvedoh baja Ganju u radnju kod jednog bugarskog torgova z ostavih ga tamo, a sam se popeh na tramvaj i odoh u Senbrun.

'I took Baj Ganjo to the office of a Bulgarian merchant and left him there. As for myself, I hopped on a streetcar and went to the Schönbrunn palace.'

(10) a. Njama džeb, njama ništo, ami beše se porazprala mako dresškata mi, ta turih edno parcalče... (01.117)
b. Kakav džep, nema džepa, ali mi se učinila mala skulja, pa udarih jednu zadrpicu.
c. Nema džepa, nema ništa; ali mako mi se rasparala odjeća, pa houču da prišjem ovu krpicu...
d. Kakav džep, nema džepa, ali mi se beše dreska mala porasila, te udarih jednu zakrpicu...
e. Kakav džep, ništa nema, nego mi se beše mako rasparala haljinka, pa turih jednu zakrpicu...

'What pocket? There's no pocket! It's just that my jacket got a little torn so I basted on a patch.'

In one example, jedan is lacking in both Croatian versions and used in both Serbian versions:

(11) a. "Eh, da ima sega njakoj da me počerpi edno vince», sedna nasreštha mi, zasmja se dobrodusnio i sled kato me gleda umilno cjela minuta, reče: (01.61)
b. "Eh da ima tkogod, da mi doda nešto vina", sjedne nasprot meni, nasmije se dobroćudno, posto me je milostivo gledao cijelu minuta, reče:
c. Zatim strese mrvice na dlan, progrutne i njih, pa izmrlja pod nosom: — Eh, da ima sada tkogod, da me počasti čašicom vina. Onda sjedne meni licem u lice i dobrodusno se nasmije. A kad me je cijeli časak zadovoljno promatrao, reče:
d. "Eh da ima kogod da mi doda jedno vince", sede spram mene, nasmjeja se dobroćudno i, gledaviši me milostivo celu minutu, reče:

(11) e. "Eh, da je sad neko da me časti jedno vince", sede prema meni, nasmeši se dobrodušno i, pošto me je posmatrao umiljato čitav jedan minut, reče:

"Eh, now if only there were someone to treat me to a little glass of wine." He sat down opposite me, smiled benevolently, and after looking at me in a kindly manner for an entire minute, said:

In one example, jedan is present only in the modern Serbian version of Paunović (1955):

(12) a. Baj Ganjo priklekna nad prisije prikupljanina, izvadi položin pita kaškaval, otjara se edno delikatno kášce, otjara i edin ogromen rezan hljab i počna da mlajška s edin čudesan apetit, (01.59)
b. Baj Ganjo čućnu na svoje torbe, okrenuviši mi leđa, izvadi pol kotača kaškaval, odreže priličan komad odreže i gradn komadina kruha i stane čudnim apetitom da mlajše,
c. Baj Ganjo se nagnuo nad bisage prišima lečima, izvadio po pite kaškaval i otdrzao tanki komadičak. Uto odvadilo i veliki komad kruha pa počeo žvakati, da je milota,
d. Baj-Ganje čućnu na svoje bisage, okrenuviši mi leđa, izvadi pola kotura kaškavalja, odseče priličan komad, odseče i grdan režanj hleba i zaoopuča s čudnim apetitom,
e. Baj Ganjo prikleknu uz svoje bisage, okrenuviši meni lečima, izvadi pola kotura kaškavalja, odreza jedno tanko parče, otseče i ogroman komad hleba i poče da mlajška s jedinim neverovatnim apetitom,

'Baj Ganjo leaned over his bags with his back to me, pulled out half a half-wheel of kaškaval cheese, cut himself a delicate slice, cut a huge slab of bread as well, and began to chew with a wonderful appetite.'

It could be argued that in (9) and (10) Rujanac is purposefully attempting to differentiate his Croatian and Serbian versions of the same material in accordance with prescriptive norms such as those articulated by Maretić, cited above. In (11), however, both Croatian translations eschew jedan whereas it is present in both the Serbian ones. Finally, in (12) we see a difference that may be due to the greater freedom in representing colloquial speech Serbian norms. If these examples are examined from a semantic point of view, we see that almost all have concrete referents, 'appetite' in (12e) being the one exception. Example (9) is highly specific and referential while (10) also refers to a specific, concrete object. In (11), the glass of wine is only potential and not specific or referential. In example (12) we actually have three occurrences in the Bulgarian original (12a) and only two correspondences in the latest Serbian (12e), but of those two, one actually has a non-concrete reference ('appetite'),
while the other resembles (10). What emerges from this picture is a continuum typical of indefinite article development: The most highly specific, referential, and concrete are the most likely to occur with ‘one’ in a non-numerical function. Moreover, taking Bulgarian as the South Slavic literary language with the highest degree of article-like usage of ‘one’, we see that the Serbian and Croatian norms form a continuum with the Bulgarian, with the Serbian closer and the Croatian more distant.

When we look at the non-Slavic Balkan languages (Albanian, Greek, and Romanian—and also Turkish) we find that they all use ‘one’ as a type of indefinite article—albeit with different degrees of grammaticalization—and that their standard grammars acknowledge such usage. While it is indeed the case that West European Romance and Germanic languages also have such usages, the geographic and grammatical patterns of South Slavic suggest the possibility of a Balkan origin. There is also the issue of prescription versus description. According to Stephen Dickey of the University of Virginia,17 use of ‘one’ as an indefinite marker is much more frequent in colloquial Croatian and Slovenian than in the published norm. It is certainly the case that it is frequent in conversational Serbian.18 The art of translation, as Vasa knows, is a difficult and delicate one, and yet where art and grammar intersect, it is sometimes possible to tease out interesting conclusions. The linguistic (referential) and ideological (West European versus Balkan) functions of jedan as an indefinite marker in SWSS have yet to be adequately compared and studied. The comparison of different translations provides us with an interesting and useful starting point.

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17 Personal communication.
18 See, for example, Uwe Hinrichs and Ljiljana Hinrichs, Serbische Umgangsprache. Osteuropa-Institut der Freien Universität Berlin Balkanologische Veröffentlichungen 27 (Wiesbaden: Harrasovitz, 1995).