This review is not written primarily for experts on Balkan language policy. Rather, it is written for an audience interested in broader questions of ethno-linguistic identity, dialect and language, language choice, language standardization, etc.

The title of the book, on the spine and on the cover, will lead some to think that the book would include language issues in the whole Balkan region, including Kosovo, Bulgaria, Albania, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, but the title page clarifies this with the subtitle “Serbo-Croatian and its Disintegration.” That is, the book covers only the former Yugoslavia (although pp. 164, 165 do address Albanian and the concept of a “greater Albania”). The word “Yugoslavia” will be used throughout the rest of this review to refer to the former Yugoslavia, rather than referring to the subsequent reduced area later known as Yugoslavia.

Greenberg states his goal very helpfully and clearly:

My goal is to document the political motivations and social forces that have brought about the unprecedented linguistic transformations in the former Yugoslavia. How have these transformations affected nearly twenty million citizens, who once spoke a unified language? The sociolinguistic issues are best understood in the context of the broader scholarship on the relationship between language and ethnicity…[and] language and nationalism. (p. 6)

Judged against his explicit macrolinguistic goal, Greenberg is successful. What he did not include in his goal was microlinguistic details answering the question he posed, telling how these events have affected school teachers, newspaper publishers, broadcasters, other public users of language, and ordinary citizens adjusting to these changes in language policy. He gives some anecdotes of the results of these policy changes at the local level, leaving the reader hungry for more, but that is beyond the scope of this book.

A main point of the book is that Serbo-Croatian as a unified language—one that had been delicately negotiated, standardized (albeit with two competing standards), and politically
defended over the years—has now officially been reduced to a historical artifact. Their respective governments have each proclaimed Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Bosnian to be separate languages. Greenberg speaks of the “death” of Serbo-Croatian, but with a question mark. As the death of a language, it is not by the usual scenario that sociolinguists envision.

The plan of the book is straightforward and easy to follow. Greenberg begins with a summary of the sociolinguistic and political situation in the former Yugoslavia, covering as much history as is relevant. Then chapters follow about each of the self-proclaimed languages now in use in each of the republics derived from Yugoslavia. The book concludes with a summary chapter.

The first two chapters fill 57 pages, giving readers a thorough introduction to the problems and history of language policy in Yugoslavia. These two chapters could profitably be read by themselves as a historical case study in language policy. However, many readers will be too intrigued to stop after 57 pages. (One minor problem for those who are not conversant with the Balkans: he begins using the established names for the various linguistically differentiated dialects, such as “ijekavian” (p. 3) and “Neo-Štokavian ijekavian” (p. 20) before he explains the labels (p. 30).)

The summary chapter lists language issues that have been resolved, plus a longer list of those issues that are still unresolved. This chapter includes a helpful timeline of events related to language planning since 1991 (p. 161).

**Language Planning After the Yugoslav Breakup**

Greenberg borrows from Bugarski (2000) in describing Serbo-Croatian as having a strong “external identity” but weak “internal identity.” That is, among people outside Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croatian had a strong identity as a single language, but among people inside Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croatian had a weak identity. These two categories of identity, either of which can be strong or weak, are useful concepts for understanding language and ethnic identity in multi-variety situations, including dialect chains in Papua New Guinea, Arabic across the world, and Chinese “dialects”.

Greenberg definitively classifies the four languages as “mutually intelligible” (p. 33), but he realizes that sociolinguistic pressures make this almost irrelevant. In today’s fractious climate, “mutual intelligibility’ has no bearing on the debate regarding the status of Serbo-Croatian as a single language” (p. 14). Not surprisingly, there is a great climate of suspicion of the other languages, e.g. the other three are fearful of Serbian influence or domination of their languages.

In each of these four self-proclaimed languages, language planners have been very busy: changing spelling rules, coining new words, preparing curricula, producing dictionaries and spelling guides, etc. They are deliberately highlighting, even inventing, differences between what are now Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Bosnian. In fact, “language planners are charged with the task of setting up new barriers to communication, rather than to the facilitating of mutual intelligibility” (p. 13)!
Sometimes language policies that are otherwise desirable are seen as tainted because they have been previously advocated by the wrong people. During World War II, the Croatian government installed by the Nazis took certain positions on the form of the Croatian language. Some contemporary Croats have tried to adopt some of the language policies once promoted by that government, but these policies have been attacked as having Nazi origins. At different times, both Croats and Serbs have advocated drawing on older lexical forms, but each has felt the approach to be tainted by the other’s use of the same approach.

Each of the four new states has proclaimed its own language, but Greenberg documents how the speakers, and more so the writers, are still debating the standardized form of each language. For example, there are new competing spelling manuals on the market, two for Serbian and two for Croatian. In each case, the manuals are designed to foster a purer form of the language, but their authors follow different paths, generally characterizable as prescriptivist vs. descriptivist.

A large complicating factor in Yugoslavian language discussions is that neither the dialect boundaries, nor the ethnic boundaries, nor the national boundaries coincide. The result is that people who live in part of one state may speak in a way that most closely matches the standard of another state.

Language matters in Yugoslavia are closely tied with identity, and identity is greatly shaped by history. Therefore, it is not surprising that Greenberg lists examples where, in the struggle to mold people’s identities, history is being rewritten to serve the purposes of different factions. As one part of this, different factions are claiming classics of Serbo-Croat literature as being written in their language, in an effort to give their language and identity higher status.

**Script and identity**

Greenberg gives a number of examples where the script used to write a language is seen as an integral part of the language and the identity of its speakers. It is an overlooked sociolinguistic fact that in matters of ethno-linguistic identity, the choice of script used to write a language is often seen as parallel to the question of language choice.

The Serbs, being largely Orthodox, generally use Cyrillic script; Croats, being largely Catholic, use Roman script. (Bosnians, being largely Muslim, wrote with the Arabic script up through the Eighteenth Century.) In 1913, as part of a proposal to agree on a unified way of writing for Serbs and Croats, it was proposed that both sides compromise: the Croats were to adopt a vowel pronunciation of the Serbs and in return the Serbs were to adopt the Latin alphabet used by the Serbs. Note that the compromise on the adoption of the distinctive ethnically-identified pronunciation was seen as equivalent to the adoption of the distinctive ethnically-identified script (p. 37).

In Tito’s Yugoslavia, everybody was supposed to learn both Cyrillic and Roman (Arabic no longer being used). As the unified Serbo-Croatian language broke apart, this was paralleled by a divided policy on scripts also, the Serbs declaring for Cyrillic and the Croats for Roman. The Montenegrins and Bosnians, seeking a delicate balance, have officially chosen to allow both scripts.
General Comments

The list of references at the end is comprised mostly of sources on Yugoslavia, with three items by Joshua Fishman representing a large segment of the exceptions. This reflects the book’s focus on description and analysis of the data rather than concentrating on sociolinguistic theory. Greenberg’s goal is to “document...motivations and...forces” at work in Yugoslavia, not to refine sociolinguistic theory. I value data-driven case studies, but readers who are more theory-driven are hereby put on notice. Greenberg does utilize theory in very helpful ways, describing Serbo-Croatian as being “pluricentric,” using the “Ausbau” versus “Abstand” distinction, and categorizing the death of Serbo-Croatian as a “nominal” death, using Kloss’ (1984) term.

Readers will be impressed with the extensive quotations from authors in the former Yugoslavia, citing the participants in the various debates. Greenberg translates them into English in the text, but gives the original text in footnotes. When an author quotes the actual writings of the activists for the various viewpoints and can claim to have been a participant at a crucial meeting of Yugoslav dialectologists in 1990 (before the breakup of Yugoslavia), then readers can feel confident that he has an adequate understanding of the viewpoints of the various groups.

Greenberg’s book will doubtless be compared with the recent anthology edited by Busch and Kelly-Holmes (2004), consisting of seven papers and a transcribed debate (but only 87 pages in all). Although both are important sources on the region and current language issues, Greenberg’s book is distinguished by its narrower focus, both topically and geographically. (Ironically, the volume that mentions “Yugoslavia” in its title touches on a broader region than the book whose title speaks of “the Balkans.”)

A detailed table of contents (including two levels of subheadings) and a six-page index add to the usefulness of the book.

Conclusions

The book can be enjoyed by any who study language planning (especially in fractious situations), readers interested in matters of language and ethnicity, and (obviously) those interested in Yugoslavia. However, it will be a goldmine and a standard reference for those who study language-related issues in the former Yugoslavia. They will appreciate, in addition to his detailed documentation of recent events, the inclusion of the texts of the 1850 and 1954 and language agreements.

As a teacher of sociolinguistics and language planning, I have drawn on this book for examples and insights in classroom presentations and anticipate assigning portions of it to my students. I have already cited this book in an article. I see this book as a tool I will be using repeatedly.

References
