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**ŠTA USTVARI ZNAČI TO BRE?
‘WHAT DOES THIS BRE MEAN, ACTUALLY?’
DEFINING SERBIAN INTERJECTION BRE ≈
‘I’M TELLING / ASKING YOU!’**

Abstract. The paper proposes a lexicographic description of the Serbian interjection BRE ≈ ‘I’m telling/asking you!’. This lexeme is recognizably Serbian: while known in all the languages of the Balkans, nowhere else is it used as prominently. BRE is thus a culturally specific word in the sense of A. Wierzbicka. On another reading of *culture*, its reputation is questionable: it is perceived as belonging to “low register” and has been a target of fun poking on the part of “high-brow” speakers.

BRE is a non-descriptive lexeme, or signalative; unlike descriptive lexemes, signalatives do not communicate the information in an objective way but incorporate the Speaker’s take on the content of the utterance. Through a study of this specific signalative within the Explanatory-Combinatorial Lexicology framework, I hope to contribute towards a more general picture of how such expressions could be treated lexicographically.

Keywords: Interjections, Explanatory-Combinatorial Lexicography, Serbian, Signalatives (= Non-Descriptive Lexical Units)

1. The Problem Stated

Za tebe bre, Igore!

The paper proposes a lexicographic description of the Serbian interjection BRE ≈ ‘I’m telling/asking you!’, some of whose uses are illustrated in (1). (For the most part, the examples are from Serbian WWW pages, found through Google searches; in the literal translations of the examples, the meaning of BRE is left un glossed.)

- (1) a. *Ćuti bre!* ‘Do.not.talk, bre!’ ≈ ‘Zip it, **will you!**’
b. *Čujem bre, nisam gluv.* ‘I.hear bre, I.am.not deaf’. ≈ ‘I can hear you, **you know**; I ain’t deaf’.
c. *Gde si bre čoveče? Sto godina te nisam vid’o!* ‘Where are.you bre man? For hundred years I haven’t seen you!’ ≈ ‘Where **HAVE** you been, man? I haven’t seen you in ages’.

This is a word as unmistakably Serbian as EH? is Canadian.¹ And just like Canucks are teased by their neighbors South of the border for allegedly putting EH? in almost every sentence, so Serbians are teased by their Croatian and Bosnian fellow-speakers when it comes to BRE, which is not used at all in the Western part of the Balkans. (BRE/BE is very much alive in Macedonian and Bulgarian; its variants also exist in Greek, Albanian, Rumanian and some Turkish dialects.)

It is one of those words with which speakers have a love-and-hate relationship — it is associated with a highly colloquial style, even “redneck” parlance, yet at the same time it is so handy that it would be hard to dispense with. A cursory look at Serbian Webpages suffices to reveal its ubiquity: BRE is present not only in ordinary exchanges, but also in event titles (*Serbian jazz bre!* ‘Serbian jazz, **of course!**’, a recent project by the Belgrade Youth centre) and website names (*Srbija bre!*, *Forum BRE*), there are sales of T-shirts with “Њирилица, **бре!**” ‘Cyrillic, **of course!**’ prints, and, on top of all that, numerous discussions of the use and meaning of the word...² It seems that, for some, embracing the notorious interjection has become a matter of national pride, a defiant way of asserting their Serbian identity. And while BRE is especially prominent in popular culture, mainstream institutions do not shy away from using it either, as demonstrated by the fact that the RTS, the national broadcasting corporation, currently has a program of parliamentary political analysis titled *Šta radite, bre?* ‘What **do you think** you are doing?’. Nor do public figures; thus, Boris Tadić, Serbian president and the leader of the Democratic party, rallying his supporters in a recent election campaign: *Ima bre da ih pobedimo ponovo* ‘**Mark my words**, we’re gonna beat them again’,³ Novak Đoković (no need to introduce *this* guy): *Morate bre da navijate a ne da se po-*

¹ This “Canadian” *Eh?* (e.g. *It’s not close, eh, so you’ll have to take a bus*) means ‘≈ I am checking if you are paying attention to or agreeing with what I am saying’.

² The title of the paper is taken from one such discussion. Here is the entire post (translation, here and elsewhere in the paper, is mine): *What does this bre mean, actually? I do not know a single person who does not use it... Do you know how this word came into our language and what it really means? What do you think, bre?* [7/03/2012 <http://razbibriga.net/showthread.php/6023-Šta-ustvari-znači-to-BRE>]. And another one: [...] *Or, as a friend of mine would say, Serbian indefinite article BRE. It means nothing but says a lot in context* [14/08/2009 <http://www.zenskisvet.com/forum/tema/1119-2/Shta-ustvari-znachi-BRE.html>]. Virtually all of these discussions highlight not only the frequency of the use of BRE, but also a difficulty people have in explaining its meaning; some reasons for this difficulty will be given below.

³ Note the Balkanism “*Ima*·*has*’ *da*·*Conj* ‘that’ + *V*_{PRES}” in the presidential discourse: a form of the future tense, borrowed from Macedonian/Bulgarian, and associated in Serbian with the colloquial style. (The President was probably trying to come across as a man close to the people — and who could blame him for that?)

našate kao da ste u školi ‘You must cheer, **you know**, instead of behaving as if you were in the classroom’.

But it is not my goal to provide a sociolinguistic study of BRE. Nor will I delve into its etymology⁴ or related diachronic developments; suffice it to say that it is the source of the derivations (O)BRECATI SE ‘snarl/bark at’ and (O)BRECANJE ‘snarling/barking’. Rather, I will try to describe its meaning in modern Serbian — because, lo and behold, it has one. What people really mean, I presume, by their comments on the semantics of BRE is not that it has none, but rather that its meaning is difficult to pin down. So true...

First, words like BRE are non-descriptive lexical units, or signalatives (Mel’čuk 2001: 244ff.), with special properties that need to be captured in their lexicographic description. Unlike descriptive lexemes, signalatives do not communicate in an objective way information on a given state of affairs; rather, they convey the Speaker’s take — his feelings or beliefs — on this state of affairs (or the utterance itself). The underlying form of a communicating expression *P* is ‘I want you to know that *P*’, but that of a signaling *P* is ‘I signal that I want (feel, ...) *P*’. Here are some stock examples from English (the signaling expressions are boldfaced): *This is disgusting*. ~ **Yuck!**; *It hurts*. ~ **Ouch!**; *This surprises me (very much)*. ~ **Wow!**⁵ While the first member of each pair of utterances expresses the information explicitly, in a form corresponding to a logical proposition, the second one is expressing it *tout court* (without a logical proposition being constructed). For this reason, signalatives typically cannot be embedded under a cognition/communication verb (*X knows/says that...*) and do not accept negation, interrogation or free modification; cf. the impossibility of embedding a clause containing BRE: **Kaže da [ne znaju bre ništa]* ‘S/he says that [(they) do not know *bre* ≈ **I’m telling you** nothing]’.⁶

⁴ According to the Serbian Wikipedia, BRE is a Balkanism of Greek origin (that came into Serbian through Turkish): the vocative *μωρέ* from *μωρός*, *μῶρος* ‘moron ≈ a feeble-minded person’, abbreviated into BRE (a variant MORE BRE used to be used, too, but is now largely abandoned). As we shall see, in Subsection 2.2, in some of the modern uses of BRE, traces of this original meaning still persist (which may explain, at least in part, the bad reputation of the word).

⁵ In addition to interjections, signalatives include adverbs, conjunctions, particles, etc.; for a typology of signalatives, see Mel’čuk (2001: 354—356). Some of these items are known in literature as *discourse markers*; traditionally, they have of course been the “turf” of pragmatics. References are too numerous to be mentioned here.

⁶ One of the questions this raises is how to render the content of an interjection in reported speech. For instance, could the above sentence be paraphrased as *Tvrđi, insistira, uverava [da ne znaju ništa]* ‘S/he asserts (insists, assures) that [(they) do not know nothing]’? The answer may help elucidate not only the illocutionary force of the utterance within which the interjection appears (cf. Wierzbicka 1991a: 243), but also the meaning of the interjection itself.

Further, this particular signalative is distributionally non-selective (which explains the very different translations that I used for it above). On the one hand, BRE easily combines with all sentence-types: as can be gleaned from (1), it is found in imperative, declarative and interrogative sentences. On the other hand, as we shall see below, BRE often appears alongside other interjections with similar meanings or within constructions which themselves are signalatives so that teasing out its meaning is not trivial.

Finally, BRE is applicable to a wide range of situations, which can affect the speaker both “negatively” and “positively”; it can be used in different registers — from neutral to familiar to vulgar — and convey widely different attitudes and feelings,⁷ which blurs the distinction between its semantic and pragmatic features.

What, then, should a lexicographer do, faced with a task of describing a word like BRE? Luckily enough, Igor (& friends) invented a very handy lexicological theory that I intend to use — Explanatory-Combinatorial Lexicology, or ECL (Mel’čuk et al. 1995; Mel’čuk 2006), the lexicological component of the Meaning-Text theory (Mel’čuk 1974; Kahane 2003). The ECL has already served as a framework for the description of signalatives — in Russian, (Quebec) French, Spanish and Serbian; see, for instance, Iordanskaja & Mel’čuk (1999; 2007a; 2007b), Vázquez & Alonso (2004), Dostie (2004; 2009), Iomdin (2006), and Mel’čuk & Milićević (2011). And of course, there is Wierzbicka’s Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach, in particular (Wierzbicka 1991a; 1991b). So, hopefully, I won’t do too poorly in their wake...

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 contains elements of an ECL-style description of BRE and Section 3 is reserved for a conclusion.

2. Elements of an ECL-Style Description of BRE

I will assume that there is just one lexeme BRE, whose function is, roughly, to highlight the type of speech act expressed by “its” utterance (cf. the gloss ‘I’m telling/asking you’, used at the beginning of the paper).⁸

⁷ Here is a literary account of the versatility of BRE (an excerpt from Kapor 1989): *It seems to me that we cannot utter a single sentence without at least one BRE in it, just like Bosnians cannot do without BOLAN [JM: lit. ‘(may you not be) sick’ ≈ ‘(hey) man’] or Dalmatians without that famous fleeting EEE!, with thousand meanings and intonations. [...] How is this small and yet so important BRE to be translated into any of the world’s languages? In it there is spite, defiance, gentleness, easy-going manner, something rebellious and mischievous, urchin-like and thuggish. It serves to express approval, admiration and, at the same time, disapproval and regret; it is used to convey astonishment, to appeal and to warn, to express surprise, to entice, encourage, embolden and implore.*

⁸ Stevanović *et al.* (1967) distinguish two word senses: **a.** For attracting attention to what is being said, often with menace. *Sviraj bre!* ‘Play bre!’, *Hajde bre, uspi još* [kave] ‘Come on bre, pour more [coffee]’; **b.** In astonishment. *Bre! Bre! čudi se Jordan.* ‘Bre!

In what follows, I will describe the linguistic environments in which BRE appears (2.1) and the types of linguistic situations which warrant its use (2.2); this should allow me to access the components of the meaning of BRE and suggest a preliminary definition of the word (2.3).

2.1. Linguistic Environments in which BRE Appears

Typically, BRE is used within a sentence containing a verb in the 2nd person, but this is by no means obligatory: the verb can very well be in the 1st or the 3rd person (or lacking altogether). A vocative noun in the role of address (*Jovane* ‘hey.Jovan’, *čoveče/ljudi* ‘hey.man/people’, ...) or insult (*budalo* ‘you.fool’, *majmune* ‘you.ape’, ...) is often present, as well, making explicit the dialogical nature of BRE. But even if a sentence featuring BRE does not explicitly mention an addressee, the presence of one is assumed; sentences like (2) represent a special case of dialogue, in which one person is taking turns as the speaker and addressee.

- (2) *Šta mi je bre ovo trebalo?, reče u sebi Jovan* ‘What *bre* ≈ **the heck** did I need this for?, said Jovan to himself.’

As shown in (1), BRE is compatible with declarative, imperative and interrogative sentence types; it appears in full sentences as well as in verbless ones:

- (3) *Sramota bre!* ‘Shame *bre*’ = ‘**Pure/Sheer** shame!’; *Juče bre!* ‘[It was] Yesterday *bre* ≈ **don’t you get it!**’; *Ko bre?!* ‘Who *bre* ≈ **the heck** [do you mean]?’

It is often found in rhetorical questions, including special constructions expressing emphatic disagreement, like those in (4b):

- (4) a. *Kome bre da se izvinjavam?! lit.* ‘To whom *bre* ≈ **the heck** am I to apologize?! = ‘I absolutely do not have to apologize to anyone!’; *Šta bre gledaš? lit.* ‘What *bre* ≈ **the heck** are.you.staring.at?’ = ‘Stop staring, will you?’
 b. *Ko bre lopov?! ‘Who *bre* thief?!’ = ‘Who are you calling a thief?!’; Šta bre nije loš?! Super je!* ‘What *bre* [it] isn’t bad?! It is super!’ = ‘What do you mean ‘it isn’t bad’?! It is great!’.

Also, BRE appears frequently with other interjections, such as *Ej* ‘Hey’, *Alo* ‘Hello’,⁹ *Aman* ‘For God’s Sake’, *Dobro* ‘All.right’, and hortative particles *Ajde* lit. ‘Do [what you are supposed to]!’ = ‘Come.on’ and *Daj* lit. ‘Give!’ = ‘Come on’:

Bre! says Jordan, astonished’. Sense **b** is obsolete (or regional: it may be restricted to Southern dialects, influenced by Macedonian and Bulgarian usage).

⁹ This is HELLO4 from LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH online: used when you think someone is not acting sensibly or has said something stupid.

- (5) a. *Ej bre, pa ovo je prosto k'o pasulj.* 'Hey bre ≈ I say, but this is as easy as pie.'; *Dobro bre čoveče, o'ladi malo!* 'All.right bre ≈ I say man, chill out a.little!'.
 b. *'Ajde bre, krenite već jednom!* 'Come on bre ≈ I say, move it for once!'; *Daj bre, prekinite više!* 'Come on bre ≈ I say, cut it out!' [Said to a group of people: the verbs are 2p plural.]

All these items are singalatives themselves; although they do not have to be used concurrently with BRE, this is what frequently occurs.¹⁰

When it comes to linear placement, in full sentences, BRE is placed after the main verb — its syntactic governor — or sentence-finally, as in (6a). If present, a communicatively loaded item (an interjection, address, interrogative pronoun, a tonic personal pronoun...) can "attract" BRE, which is then preferably placed next to it; this is shown in (6b-c):

- (6) a. *Neću bre da idem!* 'I.won't bre go!' = 'I won't go, **period.**' or *Neću da idem, bre!*
 b. *Ej bre ljudi, šta vam je?!* 'Hey bre ≈ I say people, what's with you?' or *Ej ljudi bre, šta vam je?!* or *Ej ljudi, šta vam je, bre?!*¹¹
 c. *Ko bre to kaže?!* 'Who bre ≈ the heck says so?' or *Ko to bre kaže?!* or *Ko to kaže, bre?!*

Sentence-initial placement for BRE is available only if in this position it immediately precedes an address (or an insult):

- (7) [?]*Bre nemoj da me nerviraš!* 'Bre ≈ I say, do not irritate me!' vs. *Bre Jovane* ⟨*čoveče, kretenu*⟩, *nemoj da me nerviraš!* 'Bre ≈ I say Jovan ⟨man, you.idiot⟩ do not irritate me'.

The possibility of BRE appearing in verbless sentences raises the question of its syntactic governor in this particular environment: do synonymous sentences like *To je sramota, bre!* lit. 'This is shame **bre!**' = 'What a shame!' and *Sramota, bre!* lit. 'Shame **bre!**' have identical syntactic structures (i.e., with BRE depending on the verb), which, in the case of the second sentence, eventually gets elided? This problem needs to be examined within a larger context of treating minor type sentences

¹⁰ Some combinations with interjections have undergone phraseologization; thus, used on its own, *Ej bre!* 'Wait a minute!' ⟨'Stop it!', 'Get your act together'⟩ is a warning and *Ma daj bre!* '≈ Give me a break ⟨Spare me⟩, please!' (often spelled *Ma daaaj bre!* to mimic its particular prosody) a scornful objection.

¹¹ Placement after the interrogative pronoun *ŠTA* 'what' is impossible in this particular case because the pronoun must be immediately followed by the clitic cluster [*vam je* 'to.you is'] (which, as can be seen, includes the copula).

and elliptical constructions in general; for the time being, I will assume that this is indeed what happens.

As far as the basic prosodic features of BRE are concerned (i.e., the pauses it induces and its exclamative intonation—prosodic features linked to specific situations of use, superimposed on the basic ones, will be mentioned below), these do not seem to be stable: BRE is not systematically set off by pauses from the rest of the sentence (this is somewhat more frequent if it is sentence-final), and it may almost “lose” its exclamative prosody in declarative sentences. This is reflected in spelling: variants with or without commas and with or without the exclamation mark are found with the same frequency in similar or identical contexts on the WWW.

2.2. Linguistic Situations in which BRE Is Used

The primary function of BRE, as far as I am able to see, is to flag the basic speech-act type of the utterance in which it appears, thereby allowing the Speaker to insist on what is being stated, requested or asked. In other words, by using BRE, the Speaker is signaling, roughly, ‘I insist that this is so (statement) (that you do/not do this (request), that you tell me this (question))’; cf., respectively, (8a), (8b) and (8c):

- (8) a. *Sviđa mi se to, bre* ‘I like that, **I am telling you**’ ≈ ‘I like that, **you know/I do** like that.’
 b. *Nemoj bre da brineš* ‘Don’t worry, **I am telling you**’ ≈ ‘Don’t you worry/No need to worry, **really**.’
 c. *Šta mislite, bre?* ‘What, **I am asking you**, do you think? ≈ ‘Well, what do you think?’

But, BRE can signal more than just ‘I insist on this’: it can convey something like ‘This is obvious to me/anyone and should be obvious to you too’. In contexts where the Speaker and the Addressee have a common frame of reference (i.e., they share some expectations, beliefs, etc., regarding the content of the exchange or the corresponding situation), this will amount to seeking to agree and to identify with the Addressee, and, in contexts where the common reference frame is lacking, to disagreeing with and dissociating from him. Let us start with “agreeing” contexts.

- (9) *Kupiš čamac, uživaš na vodi, sunce, pivo, divota bre. (Kad najednom, ...)*
 ‘You buy a boat, enjoy being on the water, sunshine, beer, marvel, *bre*.
 (Then, suddenly, ...)’ ≈ ‘(...) sunshine, beer, **simply (in a word)**, marvelous. (...)’

In (9), the Speaker is describing a situation, qualifying it as ‘marvelous’; by adding BRE, he is invoking a frame of reference, supposedly shared with the Ad-

addressee, within which such a situation can be naturally characterized in that way, as if he were saying *Right? <You know>*.

- (10) (*Iskreno, ako ti se ne javlja ni na poruke ni ništa ...*) *ma kreten, bre, zaboravi.* ‘(Frankly, if he is not answering messages or anything...) but [he is] an idiot, bre, forget [about him]’ ≈ ‘(...) he is **simply** an idiot, not worth mentioning’.

Here, the Speaker is using BRE with a negative characterization of a person as a way to empathize with the Addressee: ‘This person is obviously an idiot and, therefore, you should not be affected by his behavior.’

In agreeing contexts, two extended uses of BRE can be observed. First, it often co-occurs with congratulatory expressions and greetings, where it conveys closeness and empathy (notice the Ethical Dative **mi** in (11b)):

- (11) a. *Srećan rođendan, bre!* ‘Happy birthday **bre!**’
 b. *Kako si mi bre?* ‘How are you to me, **bre?**’ ≈ ‘How **ARE** you, **my dear?**’

Second, it is part of the syntactic phraseme (Mel’čuk 1995; forthcoming) $L_{(N)}$ *bre!* ‘ $L_{(N)}$ of course <naturally>!’, whose instances *Srbija bre!*, *Ćirilica bre!*, etc., were mentioned earlier. These expressions function as endorsements (of whatever is denoted by the noun — a situation, phenomenon, person...) based on the shared knowledge of the real situation; thus, the two expressions above could be interpreted along the following lines (the interpretations may be slightly different for different people): ‘We love our country’/‘We should stand for Serbia’, and ‘Cyrillic is our script.’/‘We should promote Cyrillic’. These expressions need to be described separately (i.e., not within the lexicographic entry for the lexeme BRE.)

In “disagreeing” contexts, such as those in (12), the common frame of reference for the Speaker and the Addressee is, as I just said, lacking.

- (12) a. (*Ko još pravi punjene paprike za slavu?*) *SARMA se pravi, bre!*
 ‘(Whoever cooks stuffed peppers for the patron saint’s day?) You cook stuffed cabbage, **bre** ≈ **of course!**’
 b. *Skloni se bre!* (*Zaklanjaš pogled*).
 ‘Move away, **bre** ≈ **will you!** (You are blocking the view).’
 c. [The Speaker asked the time but the Addressee, who heard the question, is not replying.]
Koliko je sati, bre? ‘What time is it, **bre** ≈ **hello4?**’

In (12a) the Speaker is insisting on something that he takes to be a piece of common knowledge, thereby conveying that it should be available to the Addressee, as if he were saying *Everyone knows that, how come you do not?* In (12b), by insisting on his request, the Speaker additionally signals that the Addressee should

have realized that he is being a nuisance and moved out of the way without being told to do so: *How come you do not realize this yourself?* Finally, in (12c), by insisting on getting the information, the Speaker also signals that the Addressee should have provided it the first time he was asked (by virtue of a politeness rule he shouldn't have flouted): *Don't you know that you should try and answer a question when asked?* Thus, by insisting on his statement, request or question, the Speaker is conveying additional information and making a value judgment of the Addressee or his behavior in the situation in question: he is signaling that the Addressee is “not doing something right”, that he “should know better”, as if he were “not getting it”. And this is the link with the etymology (cf. footnote 4).

Note that the object of disagreement is not something inherently negative (just as the object of agreement is not inherently positive), it can be simply something that is perceived differently by the participants in the exchange; cf.: *Volim te, bre!* ‘I love you, *bre* ≈ don't you get it?’

Combined with the appropriate prosody, BRE can convey different attitudes (dis/approval, dis/satisfaction, compassion...), or express — or at least contribute to expressing — various speech acts (endorsement, warning, menace...). On top of this, BRE can signal the Speaker's emotional involvement in the exchange or the corresponding situation. If, for instance, the Addressee is doing something that according to the Speaker he obviously should or should not do, it is easy to explain why the latter could become emotionally affected. Here too, the prosody plays a crucial role.

This “surplus” of meaning is brought about by the context, both linguistic and extralinguistic (the situation in which the exchange takes place, real world knowledge, etc.) Sometimes the same expression (with different prosody, of course) can express different speech acts and different emotions: for example, *Zašto bre ne dođeš?* ‘Why *bre* don't you come’ could be an invitation or a reproach, *Šta ti je bre?* ‘What is with you *bre*?’ could convey concern or irritation, etc. This is the pragmatic aspect of the description of BRE that I still do not know how to handle properly.

To sum up, saying *P, bre!* is, in the first place, insisting on what is stated in, requested by or asked about *P*. Additionally, BRE can convey the Speaker's attitude towards the Addressee and the way he is acting, as well as his emotional involvement, giving rise to more specific speech acts. This additional information is expressed by prosodic means.

I can now try and sketch a definition.

2.3. A Sketch of the Lexicographic Definition of BRE

According to what has been established above, the central component of the definition of the lexeme BRE should be ‘I insist [on the content of this utterance]’.

In addition, there should be two peripheral components, taking into account its attitudinal and emotional side; both of these components are optional, since they are not activated every time BRE is used; cf. the examples in (8), for instance.

The central component of the meaning of BRE can be formulated as follows (“P” here is the utterance expressing the fact P; the optional components appear in parentheses):

[“P”] *bre!* ≈ [I say “P”]

and I signal that

I insist on P being the case/your (not) doing P/your telling me about P’.

This is borne out by the fact that utterances containing BRE have the following paraphrases, which are almost literal expressions of the component above:

Statements:	<i>Kažem ti (lepo) da P</i>	‘I am telling you (nicely) that P’
Requests:	<i>P kad ti kažem!</i>	‘(Do/do not do) P, when I am telling you!’
Genuine questions:	<i>Pitam te (lepo) P</i>	‘I am asking you (nicely) P’. ¹²

Rhetorical questions are to be interpreted as statements or requests; see below.

The component accounting for the Speaker’s attitude towards the situation and the Addressee:

‘(I think that P/my reason for saying “P” should be obvious for you.)’

In “agreeing” contexts this component can be realized as *Šta da kažem* ‘What (else is there) to tell?’, *Jasno* ‘[It’s] clear’, *Fala Bogu* lit. ‘Thank God’ ≈ It’s a no brainer’, *Nego šta!* ‘You bet’, *Naravno* ‘Naturally’. In “disagreeing” contexts, it can be verbalized as *Jel’ ti čuješ šta ti se govori?* ‘Do you hear what you’re being told?’, *Jel’ si gluv?* ‘Are you deaf?’, *Kako ne shvataš* ‘How come you do not get it?’, highlighting the Addressee’s lack of attention or understanding, or, if a lack of knowledge is being alleged, as *Kako ne znaš?* ‘How come you do not know?’, *Nemaš pojma!* ‘You are clueless!’

And, finally, the emotive component:

‘(I feel something because of P.)’

This component represents a wide range of emotional responses (cf. footnote 7), which explains this very general wording.

¹² *Lepo* ‘nicely’ is not innocuous and is meant rather as a threat: ‘Now I am talking, but when I’m done talking...’

I now need to show that the definition is valid by performing the substitution test (the lexical unit being defined must be substitutable by its definition *salva significatione*, i.e., with preserving the meaning, in all contexts); cf.:

Za tebe bre, Igore! ≈

“(I’m doing this) for you, Igor”

and I signal that

I insist that I’m doing this for you,

I think that the reason for my doing this for you should be obvious for you,

I feel something because of this.

In order for the substitution test to be applicable to rhetorical questions containing BRE, they first need to be interpreted as statements or requests, as the case may be. For instance, this is how this works with the rhetorical questions cited in (4), with a slightly simplified wording of the definition:

*Kome bre da se izvinjavam?! lit. ‘To whom *bre* am I to apologize?!’* ≈

“I do not have to apologize to anyone”,

and I insist that this is the case; I think you should know this too ...

Šta bre gledaš? lit. ‘What *bre*. are.you.staring.at?’ ≈

“Stop staring”,

and I insist that you should stop staring; I think you should know this too...

The reader is invited to continue the exercise, if he or she wishes so. As for me, I am ready to wrap up.

3. Conclusion

I have to admit that when I started writing this paper I had no clue what BRE meant. (I thought I did but it proved to be a hard nut to crack...) Only now am I beginning to understand it a bit better. In the end, this rogue word, the laughing stock of the Balkans, has a pretty complex and not at all unsophisticated meaning. Who knew? So, my fellow Serbians, be embarrassed no more, go ahead, *bre* away...

But perhaps more to the point, defining BRE has been a humbling experience; it lead me the hard way to realize to what extent words of its kind are recalcitrant to a “normal” lexicographic description, i.e., the one we comfortably use with non-descriptive lexical units: this little word, this *mine de rien*, kept thwarting my best attempts to see through its meaning, leaving me almost on the verge of despair. What I found particularly useful were the paraphrases, including translations, for BRE that I was trying to come up with; they helped me focus. So, if there is one thing worth sharing that came out of this exercise, it would be «do your paraphrases».

Needless to say, what I suggested above is only a rough first attempt at a definition. What is lacking are the conditions under which the two optional components are activated, as well as a specification of speech acts that can be expressed by means of BRE when they are. And for this, we need some pragmatics. Which, in spite of some high-level skepticism, does exist. After all.

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