

THE TEACHING OF THE SLOVENE LANGUAGE IN MINORITY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN CARINTHIA, AUSTRIA

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Abstract:

This article presents a historical overview of the teaching of the Slovene language and the present-day organisation of minority schooling in Carinthia, Austria. It presents the facilities that exist for teaching Slovene, various approaches and models of bilingual education in minority educational institutions, and the use of Slovene as a language of instruction as well as a language taught in these institutions. The article wishes to draw attention to the current situation of Slovene speakers in Carinthia and presents the reasons for which the mission of the minority school is nowadays different from what it was originally meant to be.

Keywords: *the Slovene language, Slovene lessons, bilingualism, minority schooling, Carinthia, Slovenians in Austria, sociolinguistics.*

0. Introduction

The southern part of the Austrian state of Carinthia has since the Middle Ages been home to two ethnic groups: the Slovene and German-speaking populations. Slovene and German, two state languages that are in contact with each other have never enjoyed an equal social status. In comparison with German, Slovene has always been in a subordinate position. It has been subject to unendurable pressures but the Carinthian Slovenians have nevertheless succeeded in preserving the Slovene language and continue to exist on Slovenian ethnic territory (Domej, 44). An important role in achieving this was played by minority educational institutions, which do not have only the classical function of transmitting knowledge, but also make an important contribution to shaping and preserving the identity of the ethnic minority and ensuring its social and demographic growth. At the same time they also play a very important role in teaching, developing and preserving the minority's mother tongue.

The current legal situation, the position of minority schooling in the general education system in Austria and the system of institutions which provide

the possibility for learning and teaching Slovene in the region inhabited by the minority reflect the historical, socio-political and socio-economic circumstances. The Slovenian and bilingual schools were originally meant for the children of the Slovenian minority, however, statistical data now shows that an increasing number of children attending these schools come from mixed marriages and even from completely non-Slovenian parents who are in most cases members of the majority population. Knowledge of Slovene is also increasingly valued from a European perspective as a good level of proficiency in the languages of neighbouring countries represents an employment advantage in the unified European market. Minority schools are trying to adapt to this trend by offering a high-quality and attractive program. Slovene is therefore gaining in prestige on the one hand but on the other hand it is being used less and less in families and outside the school context, which is something that not even the best teaching curricula and teachers can replace.

1. A sociolinguistic description of the situation of the Slovenian minority in Carinthia

The southern parts of the Federal state of Carinthia are home to the autochthonous Slovenian ethnic community, which is one of six ethnic communities that are present in Austria.¹ The ethnically mixed territory of Carinthia includes the municipalities that stand on a territory which was designated as bilingual school territory according to Austrian education legislation from 1945, as well as the municipalities of Villach and Klagenfurt. This territory is encompassed between Hermagor, Lavamünd, Diex and the Slovenian-Austrian border and measures around 2,500 km². In the last official census in 2001, this area was inhabited by a little short of 280,000 people, of whom the total number of people that regularly communicate in Slovene was a little more than 12,000, i.e. 4.4 %. The language of the autochthonous Slovenian minority in Carinthia is Slovene, which has the status of an officially recognised minority language and is therefore protected both by the constitution and international law.

The socio-ethnic situation of the Slovenian minority in Carinthia has been strongly marked by various periods in its history. The predominantly farming population, with only a small proportion of nationally conscious intelligentsia, was faced in the twentieth century with traumatic events and assimilation processes that were tightly connected with these events. During the Nazi period the Slovenians and the Slovene language and culture were intentionally limited and oppressed. There were legal regulations in place, which

¹A small part of the autochthonous Slovenian ethnic community in Austria lives in the Federal State of Styria, mainly in the region of Radkersburg and in a few other places along the Slovenian-Austrian border.

were supposed to protect the minority but unfortunately the unfavourable regional politics ignored them or implemented them very ineffectively. All this made it all the more difficult for the Slovenians to form an appropriate national consciousness regarding their identity as members of the Slovenian ethnic group.

In the past fifty years, the economic makeup of society in Carinthia has changed: farming has gradually lost its primacy and the cultural and political circumstances have also changed drastically. Relations between the majority and minority ethnic groups in Carinthia have also warmed somewhat. As a result, the circumstances of linguistic socialisation have changed, as has the use of language on a daily basis. Linguistic socialisation, i.e. in the local dialect, used to take place in the family circle, usually in a family comprised of several generations, but nowadays the key linguistic socialisation takes place in cooperation with school and other public institutions, and to an increasing extent also with electronic media. In minority schools, social life, minority media and other fields of public life, a standardised form of Slovene is used but there is still a lack of opportunities in which Slovene speakers would really feel the functionality of the Slovene language. The learning of German (the majority language) is much more positively encouraged so the language that is used most spontaneously (often also by the most nationally conscious Slovenians) is predominantly German.

Slovenians in Carinthia are now a modern minority: socially emancipated, economically integrated, intellectualised, territorially dispersed, culturally active and well organised. The minority has been successful in making a social breakthrough thanks in particular to the positive effects of the minority education system. The more educated members of the minority have as a result of their linguistic competence, mobility, social independence and acquired self-confidence had an easier job of resisting assimilation (Zupančič, 68). An economic, political and cultural elite has formed which controls the socio-economic processes in the region and holds the minority together. Changes in the external circumstances have also had a significant influence: open borders and an increased need for cross-border cooperation in various domains. The internal problem of the Slovenian minority remains a noticeable decrease in the use and knowledge of the Slovene language. The demographic and socio-economic situation is not very encouraging either: the younger population especially is moving to the German-speaking centres, most marriages are mixed, population growth is small. Besides, young people are being faced with the processes of globalisation and individualisation, which are reducing the functionality of the Slovene language.

2. The teaching of Slovene in Carinthia, Austria

2.1 The situation of the Slovene language throughout the history of minority schooling

The beginnings of public bilingual education in Carinthia date back to the enlightened reforms of Maria Theresa who in 1774 introduced compulsory primary education for all children aged between six and twelve via the “General Educational Decree”. Prior to this, the only children who had access to education were the children of upper social classes and rare talented individuals from the lower classes. In the schools, which sprang up on the territory inhabited by the Slovenians, the main focus was on teaching German while Slovene was only an auxiliary language.

The great turning point in school history was the revolutionary year 1848 when it was specified in the constitution of the Austrian Empire that the language of instruction in schools should be the children’s mother tongue. Unfortunately, there was at the time a deep-rooted conviction that knowledge of German is more important than mastering the standard forms of the Slovene language and that the Slovene dialect is learnt well enough by children at home anyway. Between 1891 and 1938, special schools, known as “utraquist schools”, became commonplace. In the utraquist schools, the Slovenian language was nothing but an aid to help children who spoke only the Slovene dialect to learn the German language as quickly as possible. In the years of National Socialism (1938–1945), the Slovene language was all but expelled from Carinthian compulsory schools.

In 1945, the Carinthian provincial government adopted a decree governing compulsory bilingual primary education in Southern Carinthia which clearly defined the territory on which instruction must be bilingual in the first three school years for all children. On 15 May 1955, Austria signed the Austrian State Treaty, which is the main legal basis for the protection of the Slovenian minority in Austria. Article 7 of the treaty stipulates that Austrian citizens of Slovenian nationality shall be provided with basic instruction in the Slovene language, a proportionally appropriate number of their own secondary schools and their own department on the school supervisory boards. However, efforts to demolish compulsory bilingual schooling were too strong. In 1958, the Carinthian provincial governor made it possible for parents to stop their children from attending bilingual instruction and in 1959 a minority law was passed which introduced the principle of applying for bilingual instruction. In the tense, nationalistic, anti-minority atmosphere of the time, a large number of children from Slovenian families stopped attending Slovene lessons.

In recent years, the law governing minority schooling in Carinthia has experienced several positive changes. The maximum possible number of pupils per class has been reduced, children are separated according to the language of

instruction, a two-teacher system has been introduced in classes with pupils who are taught only in German alongside those attending bilingual instruction, and in 2001 bilingual instruction was also introduced at the fourth educational level.

The main problem in the history of minority education in Carinthia is that for a long time the Slovenian minority had neither a bilingual nor a Slovenian secondary school. It was not until 1957 that the Slovenian Grammar School was founded in very humble circumstances in Klagenfurt. This was the first grammar school in which Slovene was the language of instruction. In the 1990s it was joined by two more business oriented secondary schools: the Bilingual Federal Commercial School (in Klagenfurt, in 1990) and the private bilingual High School for Business Studies (in the village of St. Peter near St. Jakobim Rosental, in 1989).

2.2 How minority schooling is now organised

The minority school system allows the Slovene language to be taught in various forms at all levels of education: in nurseries, primary schools,¹ secondary schools,² general schools³ and vocational schools.⁴ The different institutions abide by the official regulations to varying extents.

2.2.1 Pre-school education

Pre-school education in Austria is not part of the school system, so bilingual nurseries do not enjoy the same rights as schools. The law governing institutions for preschool children does not foresee the compulsory founding of bilingual nurseries or groups (as in the case of compulsory schooling) even if there are enough applications. However, it is possible for them to be founded voluntarily by private investors and public legal entities. This means that the opening of nurseries in areas where both languages are spoken depends largely on the good will of the local authorities, the Slovenian organisations, parents and individuals. Nurseries in Carinthia that have been founded one way or another⁵ are to be financed by the province if they fulfil the legally prescribed conditions (at least 15 children in one group).

2.2.2 Primary schools

In Austria, a child is generally obliged to attend school after he or she has reached the age of six. In the Austrian school system, primary school represents

¹Primary schools (Volksschule) in Carinthia cover the first four years of a child's education.

²Hauptschule in Carinthia cover years five to eight of a child's education; at this level the child can also enrol in the lower grammar school level.

³Schools in Carinthia that provide general education include: a) eight-year grammar schools, which cover the lower and higher level, b) four-year grammar schools only for pupils in the last four years.

⁴Vocational schools include business schools, higher technical institutes and institutions that teach various trades, which usually last five years.

⁵In Carinthia there are 10 private and 9 public municipal bilingual nurseries.

the first four years of school and is common for all children. The law governing minority schooling stipulates that children whose parents enrol them for bilingual lessons with a special application form will have roughly half of all lessons in the first four years in Slovene and half in German. The number of pupils in a class in which lessons are taught in two different languages must not be fewer than seven or larger than twenty. If the total number of children (those that have been enrolled and those that haven't) is at least nine, then there must be parallel classes. Bilingual lessons can then take place in integrated (mixed) classes in which children that have been enrolled and those that haven't are taught together by the class teacher who is qualified to teach bilingual lessons and a monolingual team teacher who is assigned to the class for a maximum of 14 hours per week. If all the children in the class have applied for bilingual instruction, then they are taught only by the bilingual teacher. Alongside the possibility of enrolling children for bilingual lessons, parents can also send their children to optional Slovene lessons, which means that their knowledge of Slovene is not assessed but class attendance is registered in the half-year and end-of-year school reports.¹

At the beginning of primary school, the children's Slovene level varies greatly. Most of the children who attend bilingual classes do not yet have any knowledge of the Slovene language. They are followed by the children who speak better German than Slovene. There are virtually no more children who cannot speak German when they begin primary school. The different levels of language proficiency are an increasing challenge for bilingual teachers and demand special didactic approaches and often some adjustments regarding organisation. In primary schools, different models of Slovene instruction are used. Most schools use a tried and tested model in which the language of instruction passes from German to Slovene and vice-versa in a structured way within the space of one lesson. In this way, children make progress in both languages in one day. The other model is used for example in the private Mohorjeva Družba School in Klagenfurt in which the language of instruction is changed on a daily basis: one day lessons are in German and the next day they are in Slovene. At the state bilingual Primary School 24 in Klagenfurt a weekly language "bath" is used, which means that the language of instruction is changed on a weekly basis.

2.2.3 "Hauptschulen"² and new secondary schools³

After completing the four-year primary school, pupils in Austria can go on either to a four-year Hauptschule or a new secondary school¹, which has a less

¹In the school year 2011/12 there were 73 primary schools in Carinthia in which 2,216 children learnt both Slovene and German.

² General secondary school.

³Neue Mittelschule.

demanding curriculum, or an eight-year grammar school that ends with the *matura* school-leaving examinations. At this level, the Slovene language most often disappears completely as the law only stipulates that the first four years must be bilingual, after which the language of instruction is exclusively German and there is no more bilingualism thereafter. An exception at this level of education is the lower level at the Slovenian Grammar School in Klagenfurt where Slovene is the sole language of instruction in all subjects. The grammar school can be attended for years 5 to 8 of compulsory education (lower grammar school) or up until the 12th school year (upper grammar school).

Different forms of Slovene instruction are possible at the Hauptschulen or the new secondary schools. Pupils can decide to learn Slovene as an additional compulsory subject, which means that Slovene is taught on the same level as German, that is, four hours per week. If they decide to have Slovene as a foreign language (they can choose between English, Slovene or another foreign language), Slovene is considered to be an alternative compulsory subject. At this level Slovene can also be learnt as a freely chosen optional subject if at least five pupils want it. On the basis of school autonomy, some schools also offer Slovene as the language of instruction in different subjects (e.g. mathematics, biology).

One of the main structural weaknesses of minority schooling in Carinthia becomes evident when pupils pass from primary to secondary education, as it is at this point that school socialisation in Slovene comes to an end. In the Hauptschulen and new secondary schools Slovene is no longer a language of instruction but becomes a degraded school subject for which pupils must often sacrifice additional time as it is usually placed on the timetable margins or in the afternoon. This means a loss in prestige of the language and the discrediting of pupils who choose to continue learning Slovene at this level. This is why there is such a radical decrease in the number of pupils that opt for Slovene. It is precisely at this level that competence in the Slovene language is usually lost.

2.2.4 Secondary and high schools

Pupils have another possibility to change the type of school they attend, and thereby the language of instruction, after they have completed eight years of school, i.e. after the fourth year of Hauptschule or grammar school when they can move to a school that provides either a general or vocational education. There are three secondary schools in Carinthia in which Slovene is either the main language or is on a par with German as the language of instruction. Two of these schools are state/federal (the Slovenian Grammar School and the Bilingual Federal Commercial School), and one is private (the High School for Business Studies). The Slovene language is also taught at some other (non-minority)

¹In the school year 2011/12 Slovene lessons at secondary level were attended by 516 pupils in 16 secondary schools.

institutions offering general education, and vocational secondary and high schools in Carinthia where Slovene is optional (at the grammar school and business school in Völkermarkt as well as in Wolfsberg, Villach and Klagenfurt)¹.

The new propositions in the field of secondary education give young members of the Slovenian minority the possibility to continue being taught in Slovene from the end of primary school onwards. Schools compete against each other to some extent as they draw from the same population and it is encouraging to note that interest in this kind of education is not falling, which shows that the concept of minority secondary education in Carinthia is appropriate.

2.2.4.1 The Slovenian Grammar School² in Klagenfurt

The Slovenian Grammar School³ in Klagenfurt is an eight-year grammar school with Slovene as the language of instruction which ends with the *matura* – the school-leaving examination⁴. Ever since it was founded in 1957 it has offered a general and classical education, while being strongly oriented towards multilingualism. The main language of instruction is Slovene and a particularity of the school is its four-language departments (so-called Kugy's classes) in which pupils learn Slovene, German, English and Italian throughout the eight years. Besides its general educational aim, the Slovenian grammar school also has a very important role in consolidating Slovenian national consciousness and in preserving the Slovene language, and in this way the life and creative force of those citizens of Austria who belong to the Slovenian ethnic group. Schools have always been the pillar of Slovenian identity, which helps young members of the Slovenian ethnic group consolidate their Slovenian self-confidence and identity. Many representatives of the Slovenian community in Carinthia were educated on these school benches and the good education they acquired in grammar school helped them become more fully involved in the professional, economic, political and cultural life in Carinthia and Austria. The functioning of the Slovenian grammar school has indirectly led to changes in the social structure of the Carinthian Slovenians. The ethnic minority of medium and small-scale farmers and workers which, with the exception of priests, numbered only a few educated people has gradually caught up with the majority population in terms of social status and level of education, and even overtaken it.

¹In the 2011/2012 school year there were 618 pupils enrolled in high schools providing a general education and in vocational secondary and high schools at which Slovene is taught.

²Bundesgymnasium and Bundesrealgymnasium für Slowenen/Zvezna gimnazija in Zvezna realna gimnazija za Slovence.

³In the 2011/2012 school year there were 506 pupils enrolled in the Slovenian Grammar School.

⁴In the 2011/2012 school year the school-leaving examinations were sat by the 51st generation of pupils, while a total of 1,953 pupils have so far successfully passed these examinations.

2.2.4.2 Bilingual federal Commercial School¹

The Bilingual Federal Commercial School in Klagenfurt² was founded in 1990. It is a five-year secondary school in which the languages of instruction are Slovene and German which are used alternately in all subjects. Schooling is aimed at the acquisition of a general, linguistic and business education: it encompasses job fields such as banking, industry and the trades, transport, tourism, marketing and public institutions. The school's mission is to provide contemporary business and economic competence and the central role in this is played by knowledge of languages. The main reason the school has chosen this philosophy is that in today's world, successful participation in a bilingual or multilingual environment is a condition and an advantage for participation in the international world of work. Schooling ends with a school-leaving examination and diploma, and successful school graduates have good career possibilities and access to university.

2.2.4.3 High School for Business Studies in St. Peter near St. Jakobim Rosental³

In 1974/75 the Institute of School Sisters of St. Francis Christ the King in St. Peter opened a three-year bilingual specialised school for girls. In 1989, this school became the five-year bilingual High School for Business Studies,⁴ and in this way became the first vocational secondary school with Slovene and German as languages of instruction in Carinthia. It offers a five-year course which ends with school-leaving examinations and a diploma examination. It provides a general, linguistic (Italian and English are compulsory subjects alongside Slovene and German) and business education. The focal points of the curriculum are nutrition and business. Pupils are also taught in the fields of tourism and gastronomy, information technology and creativity. The High School for Business Studies in St. Peter also offers a one-year business course in which Slovene is a compulsory subject.

From its foundation in 1989 to the present day, the school has surpassed regional and state boundaries and draws Slovenians from both sides of the Slovenia-Austria border. It has developed a strong local catchment area, attracting pupils from most of the municipalities on bilingual territory in Carinthia as well as young people from Slovenia, especially from nearby municipalities in the region of Gorenjska.

¹ Zweisprachige Bundeshandelsakademie/Dvojezična zvezna trgovska akademija.

² In the 2011/2012 school year, there were 163 pupils attending the Bilingual Federal Commercial School.

³ Höhere Lehranstalt für wirtschaftliche Berufe/Višja šola za gospodarske poklice.

⁴ In the 2011/2012 school year, there were 124 pupils attending the private High School for Business Studies in St. Peter.

3. The Slovene language: under threat on the one hand and a growing interest in learning it on the other. Challenges of bilingual schooling in Carinthia

The Slovene language in Carinthia shows a number of different faces: on the one hand it is gaining in prestige, the number of pupils attending Slovene lessons has never been greater, German-speaking fellow citizens are increasingly respectful, relaxed and free of negative emotions regarding the use of Slovene in private and in public. However, the Slovene language is used less and less in families and outside the school context.

In the past, periods of political and social tension meant that Slovene rapidly ceased being used for conversation in families, between relatives and neighbours. The result is a visible lack of children and young people that converse in Slovene. Another serious problem is the fact that young people experience the Slovene language only in conversations when they are addressed by “persons of authority” (parents, older relations, teachers, priests etc.), but there is lack of opportunities when they could experience the Slovene language as a language of relaxed communication and life with their peers (in their free time, during unsupervised times of recreation, outside school etc.). Many of them do not succeed in overcoming the interiorised dominance of the German language; they are often preoccupied with their dialect and do not wish to expose themselves in public. Another characteristic of the language situation in Carinthia is that one-way bilingualism is prevalent. Slovene and German are spoken only by Slovenians, Slovene is spoken in very limited circles and there is no self-evident presence of Slovene in public. It is only in the activities of the Slovene organisations and associations that Slovene does not have to compete with German.

The number of people attending bilingual lessons has been growing in recent years: one quarter of children living on minority territory attend bilingual primary schools. The linguistic structure of these children has also changed quite strongly in the past years. Most children have no knowledge of Slovene when they enter school, and they are followed by those who have a better knowledge of German than Slovene. There are few balanced bilingual children and those that speak Slovene better than German are even rarer. Ensuring a high level of Slovene learning as first and second/foreign language is therefore one of the great challenges for minority schools. One of the main principles of language learning, which is that the teacher must adjust himself to the child’s prior knowledge, is very difficult to put into practise in Carinthia. The teacher is faced with at least four different levels of proficiency in Slovene. (1) The first group includes pupils from Slovenia who are quite common in all three secondary schools. They of course have a good mastery of the Slovene language in spoken and written form but lack the linguistic knowledge they would have gained if

they had learned it as a foreign language. (2) The second group consists of bilingual pupils with a good knowledge (especially dialectal) of Slovene which they have acquired in their families. They only use their dialect in school when in contact with schoolmates that speak the same dialect, otherwise they switch to German. (3) The third group includes pupils whose mother tongue is German and who are mostly Slovene beginners. (4) The fourth group is made up of pupils whose mother tongue is neither German nor Slovene. They are mostly the children of immigrants who often speak a Slav language. They are usually beginners in German as well as in Slovene. Such heterogeneity undoubtedly makes teaching complicated and many teachers have trouble dealing with it. Such situations demand innovative didactic approaches that attract pupils and provide them with an inviting and life-like contact with the Slovene language. A significant problem, which is quite common in minority schools, is that teachers have a relatively poor knowledge of Slovene. Some teachers are capable of verbal communication but have trouble writing Slovene. For a teacher who is not competent in Slovene there is therefore the danger that he/she completely abandons the language of instruction that is determined by law and replaces it with German.

The increased interest in learning Slovene by those who have no Slovenian roots shows that they choose to learn the language for pragmatic reasons, such as the economic advantages of bilingualism¹. After all, knowledge of Slovene in Carinthia represents a competitive advantage for employment in the Alps-Adriatic region. All this has also helped increase interest in adult learning of Slovene. This means that Slovene in Carinthia is no longer just one of two regional languages but also has a broader significance. Ever since Slovenia entered the EU, it has proved to be a useful and therefore increasingly sought-after language in cross-border cooperation. Slovene has become a useful language and this has significantly altered its status: from being a minority language whose role was primarily that of national symbol and was useful at home behind the walls and in church, it has developed into an important business language. For the Slovenian minority, this is admittedly not something that indicates a growth in their numbers, but we can say that the growth in interest for the language is accompanied by a growth in interest in Slovenian culture and this is something that usually has a positive effect on relations between the majority and the minority ethnic communities.

¹It is for the most part only those children who have attended schools with Slovene language of instruction (either with Slovene as the predominant language or on an equal footing with German) for 12 or 13 years leading to the matura school-leaving exam that achieve a more or less balanced bilingualism.

4. In lieu of a conclusion

In a multilingual society in which different languages enjoy varying levels of prestige and find themselves in different situations, which is typical of regions with minorities, the teaching and learning of Slovene is particularly important and surpasses pedagogical, linguistic, social and cultural significance. The minority school does not only have the function of providing a general and vocational education but also of protecting identity and ensuring the social and demographic development of the Slovenian minority.

National school systems, of which minority school systems are an integral part, to a certain extent hinder the mission of minority schools but on the other hand allow a fair amount of flexibility (e.g. regarding teaching methods, content etc.), so it is important that teachers are well-trained to ensure the success of minority schools. Statistics show that in the past years in Carinthia there has been an increased interest in learning Slovene but not so much within the Slovenian community itself as from members of the majority German-speaking population. Knowledge of Slovene is becoming increasingly advantageous from a European point of view. This is a unique challenge to which the educational institutions in Carinthia must adapt.

So, on the one hand, Slovene is gaining in prestige, but we should not forget that on the other hand Slovene is spoken less and less in families and outside schools. Unfortunately, this is not something that even the best teaching programs and teachers can help.

When we consider future studies in this field, a number of questions arise. What will be the future role of the school in developing national consciousness, the Slovene language and culture if we bear in mind the fact that there are fewer and fewer pupils who learn Slovene at home and more and more young people from German-speaking families that would like to learn Slovene? How will the prior knowledge of Slovene change in future, be it as a result of linguistic assimilation or through a possible growth in interest? It is probably appropriate to ask oneself how these changes will be followed by changes in teaching approaches to make lessons as effective as possible for those that have no prior knowledge of Slovene, for members of the minority who have learnt the language at home, as well as for native speakers – pupils from Slovenia for whom Slovene is an equally important subject.

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