

Giusseppe Francescato  
Università di Trieste  
Istituto die Glottologia  
Italy

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# BILINGUALISM OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SLOVENIAN MINORITY IN ITALY

The purpose of this paper is to give an idea of the research we are engaged in at the University of Trieste (Istituto di Glottologia), with special reference to the linguistic problems of young bilingual speakers belonging to the Slovene minority. It is a well known fact that in the Province of Trieste and, within certain limits, in the town itself, there are groups of speakers whose mother tongue is Slovenian. However, their knowledge of Slovenian is usually accompanied by the acquisition of the Italian language, mostly in the course of their second socialization. More precisely, the global range of languages in the repertoire of the Slovene bilingual speakers in Trieste comprises: 1) Slovenian dialect (there are many different local dialects); 2) standard Slovenian (formal language, often replaced by a colloquial variant); 3) dialetto triestino (the local variant of dialectal Italian); 4) standard Italian (literary language, usually based on a sub-standard regional model). Of course, different speakers display a diversified control of these various types. Bilingualism is more or less balanced, according with the cultural level of the speakers, their level of schooling, their economic and working conditions, their sex, territorial distribution, and so on.

This paper refers particularly to the younger speakers, children from the sixth year of age on, pre-adolescents and adolescents (teenagers). The reasons for restricting our observations to this age limit depend upon the particular interest shown in the last few years for the development and the characteristics of language acquisition after infancy. This range of age falls entirely within the limits of the so-called "second socialization," which is, by definition, dominated by the influence of the school - on the one side - and of the peer-group, on the other side.

To stress the role of school influence, one has to consider that all children of Slovenian mother tongue, by entering the school at elementary level, begin learning both Slovenian and Italian in their written (and "formal") form. But for most of the children contact with regular education in two languages starts already by their entering in the "scuola-materna" (kindergarten). Our research moves from this level. The data we possess can be traced back to a number of dissertations (tesi di laurea) elaborated by students who are themselves bilingual. The aim of these dissertations is to illustrate, with a suitable analysis of the materials, some particular sociolinguistic situations, which typically reflect the behaviour of the Slovenian minority in Trieste.

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\* Original: English

A group of such "tesi" examines the linguistic and social behaviour of children who are enrolled in a "kindergarten" for Slovenian-speaking pupils. In fact, a careful inspection of the attitudes and reactions of such children at the moment when they start their second socialization, uncovers many differences among the children. These depend upon the influence of their previous linguistic education, and the difficulties which face the subjects when they meet this new situation. A considerable weight in determining such difficulties goes back to the complexity of the linguistic repertoire we have shown above.

In her dissertation, M. Ivasić takes account of three significant circumstances operating in the process of linguistic and social adaptation of her subjects: a) choice of code on the basis of other children's attitudes; b) choice of code on the basis of the other general communicative intentions. The results of her analyses show how, and in spite of which difficulties, the children are able to gain control over two, or more, linguistic codes, i.e., how they establish their linguistic competence, and in particular how they learn to control the use of different codes according to different situations and different interlocutors (i.e. how they establish their communicative competence).

According to Ivasić's remarks, a child who enters kindergarten already having some notion of at least one Slovenian code and one Italian code is able from the beginning to interact with other children (bilingual as well as monolingual). In this case children learn to use their codes alternatively, and they tend to keep this ability alive. On the contrary, children who, at the beginning, were able to communicate in one code only, tend to make exclusive use of this code. The author underlines the fact that children react very early to the conditions for bilingualism, and that they not only make a distinction between the ones who know and the ones who do not know a language, but they are even able to identify some aspects of the social distribution of the various codes in the community. In a parallel research V. Krizmančić examines similar cases of children who have been born in so-called "bilingual families," i.e. families where the parents do not speak as a mother tongue the same language. One would expect, in such a situation, greater difficulties for the integration and adaptation of the subjects, and this is what actually happens.

Another group of dissertations investigates the capacity of lexical and grammatical comprehension developed by children in Slovenian and Italian respectively. M. Poropat's work is centered on the comprehension of certain syntactic structures (the use of prepositions) with children from 3 to 7 years of age. Her dissertation shows how the cognitive aspects bound with the use of the prepositions develop in both languages along parallel lines. There are, however, some more complicated situations, when the semantic "content" of Slovenian and Italian prepositions, respectively, do not entirely overlap.

Three dissertations (by N. Bizjak, I. Starc and L. Leghissa) are devoted to the problems of lexical comprehension by students of the "scuola media." Subjects from 10 to 18 years of age are enrolled in schools for young people with Slovenian mother



tongue. For these studies a number of tests have been developed, especially in order of taking account of the age level and of the process of maturation acquired in the school. By means of a multiple-choice test, comprehension of lexical items is measured. One of the major difficulties in this research has been the elaboration of a set of questions, to be used in the test, and offering a similar range of difficulty in both languages. In Leghissa's dissertation even orthographic difficulties have been put to proof. The results of these studies have been evaluated with reference to a number of variables, such as social group, socio-cultural status of the family, sex, schooling level, place of residence. An evaluation of the objective results of tests in comparison with the subject's opinions has been traced with the help of a test for self-evaluation.

Language comprehension in general appears to be related with age. In the particular setting of the Province Trieste there seems to be some connection between bilingualism and place of residence, in the sense that in the villages situated on the coast bilingualism is more common, as against the villages in the interior, where monolingualism (and the use of Slovenian) is the rule. In the group of young people submitted to investigation there appeared to be a tendency to develop bilingualism, in spite of the fact that the activity in the schools takes place almost exclusively in Slovenian.

With references to differences among sex groups, it appears that girls prefer to choose a bilingual behaviour, while young men are easily oriented towards monolingualism in either one of the two languages, Slovenian or Italian. These results underline the importance of the socio-cultural variables with reference to the linguistic competence and general linguistic ability of bilingual speakers.

As a consequence of the research conducted by means of tests, it has been possible to elaborate a sort of "index" for the evaluation of "orientation" of subjects towards either bilingualism or monolingualism. Comparing the results obtained by the subjects in both languages, it has been established that, when the number of errors remains within a certain range, it has to be taken as an indication of the subjects' tendency to develop a good control of both languages (bilingualism); when, on the contrary, the number of errors is very small in either one of the two languages, it has to be taken as an indication of the leaning of the subjects to become by preference a monolingual in that language. This "index" was used with good results in all research undertaken with the aim of classifying individual performances and the collective performances of groups of pupils as well.

The data on self-evaluation, on the other hand, have shown how young people perceive the peculiar characteristics of their linguistic experience, and how they feel as members of a minority group and experience the special difficulties inherent in their situation. In the self-evaluation data there appeared to be some homogeneity, in so far as the majority of the subjects declared to have some difficulties in the use of the Italian language. On the other hand, while they estimated to possess a much better command of the Slovenian language, a majority of them declared to have trouble with both languages, and to be dissatisfied with

their competence, especially of Italian. They emphasized the need of having a good access to the language of the majority.

One significant point is made by the differences between various schools. To interpret these data, one has to take into account the various aspects of the local socio-economic situation. For example, in the families of lower social level there is a tendency to enroll their children in schools of lower prestige, where linguistic performances are usually less appreciated.

Somewhat surprising is the fact that, in absolute terms, the comprehension of the Italian section of the test appeared to be slightly better than the comprehension of the Slovenian section. In order to explain this apparently contradictory fact, it has to be remarked that in general the knowledge of Italian is the result of a scholastic process, so that Italian is normally acquired in its standard form, while Slovenian is usually known first in its "dialectical" form. This leads to a situation of "diglossia," because communication in the family as well as outside the school goes on in the Slovene dialect (the number of those families where standard or colloquial Slovenian is used is relatively limited, but increasing). The use of dialect has some negative influence upon the control of the standard language, and this is a reason for some concern in an environment like the one of the minority, where puristic tendencies are obviously prevailing.

There are some other problems of some significance in order to assess the conditions of the bilingual minority. One could consider, for example, the problem of balance in bilingualism. A number of young people acquires, through the school, but also by direct experience, a balanced knowledge of both Slovenian and Italian, usually at a high level. This is not the rule for bilingual speakers at large, however. There is then the problem of the "national" feelings of the young people, largely based on their linguistic experience. A short final comment can be made to stress the fact that research on the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of the Slovenian minority in Trieste is at present underway, and it can be said to state some good premises, which will help to face the problems of the minority in all their complexity in the future.