

Ocene / Reviews

Marta Pirnat-Greenberg. *Colloquial Slovene: The Complete Course for Beginners*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge, 2012. 313 pp.

This is one of sixty-five handbooks in Routledge's Colloquial series. Because the first *Colloquial Slovene* by Albretti appeared in 1995, this book is labeled "second edition." This is very misleading, for Albretti's book has been largely rewritten and—to anticipate my comments below—enormously improved. The improvement was very necessary. Both the first *Colloquial Slovene* and Albretti's (1998¹) *Teach Yourself Slovene* language course are "not recommended" on the web page of the Society for Slovene Studies;² and Marta Pirnat-Greenberg (2004; hereafter MPG) in her review of the first *Colloquial Slovene* quite justifiably wrote: "Albretti's textbook has too many factual mistakes to be recommended either for self-learning . . . or for the classroom setting. . . . It is particularly regrettable that Slovene did not get a competently written textbook in the widely popular Colloquial series, since for most English speakers who want to learn Slovene on their own, Albretti's book is the only choice." Indeed, in the early 1990s some non-English textbooks appeared (see Priestly 1994³), but both still the only ones available in English were, unfortunately, Albretti's, and because of their unreliability there was indeed nothing suitable that could be used by a speaker of English (apart, of course, from course materials such as those prepared in the Filozofska fakulteta for students studying there; see the Society for Slovene Studies web page referred to above). The brief sections in the booklets prepared for tourists and travellers by Hladnik & Hočevar (1994) and in Snoj (2005) are far preferable, but they do not pretend to actually teach the language. We can only be thankful that MPG has repaired this lamentable lacuna, for, while Albretti's book was in too many respects incompetent, the new *Colloquial Slovene* is, as far as I can tell (not having taught Slovene!—see below), a model of competence.

¹ A second edition, revised by Natasha Stanic, appeared in 2006: this is probably an improvement, but I have not seen it.

² <http://www.slovenestudies.com/index.php?lan=en&pg=13&height=1080>.

³ This also reviews the egregiously, indeed risibly, weak English-language book by Carcas.

The instructional part of *Colloquial Slovene: The Complete Course for Beginners*, which comprises sixteen lesson units, is preceded by a brief introduction on Slovenia, the Slovene language, and the use of the book (vii–xi), and a guide to pronunciation (1–5). This introductory material is followed by a grammar summary (239–54), a key to exercises (255–72), two-way glossaries (273–307), and a grammatical index. Each unit includes one, two, or three dialogues that present everyday situations, most of them in the life of an American visitor, Ben, who is in Slovenia to do research and lecture. Each of the first eight dialogues—which are livelier and more realistic than Albretti’s—is followed by an English translation, but the second eight are not; all include lists of new vocabulary, grammatical explanations (with the non-daunting label of “language points”), and a series of exercises. Some units also include “vocabulary building” sections, which combine important topics for visitors (e.g., transport) with their most relevant lexicons. Most also include reading passages, some of them realia from everyday life—business cards, advertisements, menus, and the like; some similar to Albretti’s “dialogues for comprehension”; and some of them short passages of cultural information (on, for example, Jože Plečnik, home remedies, the habit of offering slippers to guests). Indeed, I was very impressed with the insights into Slovene culture afforded in these sections. MPG’s new version has a greater variety of content and more illustrations (but usually not good ones, see below) than Albretti’s, and together these features make interesting and informative changes of pace to the more formal pedagogical flow of the units.

The degree to which “colloquial” and “literary” variants differ varies greatly between languages. For Slovene, as MPG writes, “The gap between standard and everyday spoken language can be considerable” (ix). The blurb on the back cover of *Colloquial Slovene* glosses over this difference: “The course offers a step-by-step approach to written and spoken Slovene,” without mentioning the existence of a written Standard Literary Slovene [SLS, *zborni jezik*] and both a spoken SLS and a spoken Colloquial Slovene [*splošnopogovorni jezik*]; hence, it is unclear which of these is the material of the book. The two good modern grammars of Slovene make this difference explicit. Herrity (2000, 3) states that “the aim of this grammar is to describe the standard language . . . [and] where necessary reference [is] also made to the colloquial standard.” Greenberg (2008, 13) likewise writes that “there is a wide gap in the structural characteristics of the written and spoken language.” Some colloquial languages have indeed been fully and properly described, especially those used in diglossic situations, where the difference between the written standard and the spoken is enormous and well-established; thus, most notably Colloquial Arabic in any of its manifestations (e.g., Levantine Arabic) and Demotic Greek address this issue (for the *Colloquial* series books treating these, see McLoughlin 2009 and Harris 1976, respectively). Czech, a language that exhibits well-known and well-described varieties, is also an interesting case because the language happens to be spoken in a country that is famous for its centuries-old tradition of first-class linguists. Note that *Colloquial Czech* by Naughton (1987) is a course book on spoken and written

Standard Czech (*spisovná čeština*), which may be contrasted with spoken conversational Czech (*hovorová čeština*) as described by Townsend (1990). Clearly, the books in Routledge's Colloquial series are inconsistent about whether or not they are aimed at teaching colloquial languages.

The Slovene *splošnopogovorni jezik* is not as fortunate as the examples above, of course. A course book on Slovene, like one on any colloquial language that has not been fully described, has only one organizational option: namely, to base the materials on the literary variant and, as often as is practical, point out the ways in which the colloquial variant differs from it. The dialogues in MPG's book are by definition conversational, and they are indeed couched in a very everyday conversational style, but they are necessarily presented in the SLS orthography. MPG might have exemplified the difference between *zborni jezik* and *pogovorni jezik* with special texts, as was done in Toporišič's pioneering course book over forty years ago,⁴ and also in a chapter following the last lesson unit in Routledge's *Colloquial Czech* (Naughton 1987, 172–76).⁵ Although such a section for a Slovene language textbook might have been a distracting—and perhaps even discouraging—diversion, the example in *Colloquial Czech* shows that it can also be very informative and extremely useful. Once learners acquire enough skill to begin conversing with live speakers, they may well be faced with having to understand examples of non-standard, *real* colloquial Slovene. What MPG does do, on the other hand—and what Albretti spectacularly failed to do—is to point out several salient examples of the colloquial usage: for example, vowel reduction (2), conversational words for greetings (9), *a* as opposed to *ali* to introduce yes/no questions (15), *ja* rather than *da* for “yes” (16); and later, the use of the *-t-* extension in oblique cases of names like *Marko* (109). There are not very many opportunities for information of this kind, but MPG properly uses those that avail themselves.

Two CDs accompany the book, that include (a) soundtracks for all the dialogues, some of the “language points” and vocabulary building sections, and all the reading passages; and (b) other materials (see below). The book and the CDs may be bought separately, but are essential complements to each other. North Americans who use this course may be disconcerted that the English spelling and vocabulary in the book belong on the Western side of the Atlantic (*colorful; elevator; highway; apartment block*), but the English speaker on the CDs is British and has an “Estuary English” accent. Moreover, not only may some of his pronunciations be strange for North Americans—for example, [rɪnɛjsənts] rather than [rɛnesænts],⁶ but he

⁴ There is one conversation in *zborni jezik*, lesson 11, of Toporišič's textbook, which is identical in *pogovorni jezik* in lesson 12, that has a page of explanation of the differences between the two varieties (1969: 45, 50–51). Example: *Če vam je vsèno, pa vzemite črnega* vs. *Če vam je vsèen, pa vzênte črnega*.

⁵ In this case (cf. the preceding note), Naughton provides a separate full chapter in *hovorová čeština*, with no opportunity for a direct comparison between texts in the two varieties.

⁶ The speaker also uses [lɔːkətɪv] for *locative*. This pronunciation is not in the Oxford English Dictionary and is probably idiolectal.

was not properly coached on how to enunciate Slovene proper names; hence *Andrej*, *Prešernova*, *Kreslin*, *Jože Plečnik*, [the river] *Reka* are [ándrej], [préšərnòva], [kréšlín], [jóʷše] pléčnik], [ɪrɪka]. Mistakes like these are more than simply disconcerting; they may well be confusing.

The dialogues on the CDs are faithful renditions of the printed dialogues; in them, Ben, the American character (who, admittedly, is described as speaking Slovene well), and characters who are native Slovenes are read by a native speaker of Slovene: this may not be true to life, but it is a necessary choice. The commentaries on the CDs depart quite frequently, but never confusingly, from the written text; they often make neat complements to the written “language points” and sometimes add useful extra information. The exercises on the CDs include comprehension questions that are sensibly graded—the earlier ones have prompts in and partial translations from English, while the later ones do not. Some of the other oral exercises are rather or very different from those in the book, but all are (as far as I can tell) well thought out and appropriate. Occasionally, however, these exercises are not well coordinated with the text. For instance, after unit 2, dialogue 3 (29–30) learners need to read the language points on pages 30–31 before being able to do the oral exercises that follow the relevant CD track, and they have to work out this sequence of tasks for themselves. Another example: in unit 3, the CD has a section on expressions of politeness (track 35) preceding a list of numerals (track 36); in the book, these sections are reversed (they appear on pages 43 and 42, respectively). There are indeed some cross-references in the text to tracks on the CDs, but not enough; and none of the book pages are cross-referenced on the CDs.

I have, apart from my regrets for the lack of a section exemplifying the *pogovorni jezik*, only a few negative comments. One is a simple assumption, and should not be considered a criticism: namely, that there do not seem to be enough exercises for the learner. Unit 4, for example, introduces the plural and dual morphology in nouns and adjectives, and also the “fleeting e.” Each point receives one exercise of eight and six lines each, respectively. Unit 6 introduces unidirectional versus non-unidirectional verbs and gives five examples; of these, only the unidirectional *iti* and *leteti* are practiced (not the non-unidirectional *hoditi*, *letati*) and the other three (*peljati se/voziti se*, *teči/tekati*, *nesti/nositi*) do not appear in exercises, except the form *teče* incidentally and occasionally in later units. In these two examples and elsewhere, there is simply not enough chance for learners to repeat and practice material. As mentioned above, I have not taught Slovene (but I have taught two other languages). Moreover, a book of this nature can be properly assessed only after extensive use (a) in the classroom and (b) for individual study; thus, any review can at this stage be only a preview. Further, this kind of handbook has extraordinary, but necessary, limitations: there is no space for the kind of exercises that language learners are subjected to in university classrooms and laboratories. This renders the author’s task of presenting material and providing opportunities for both acquisition and learning extremely difficult. For these reasons, although I detect insufficiencies, judgment must be deferred.

Similar comments pertain to the extent of the grammar selected for instruction, and the order in which it is presented. All I can say is that the order appears very practicable, and the grammar selected (and summarized on pages 239–54) covers all the basic regular morphology, plus the most common exceptions, followed by a note on clitic order. Only those with extensive experience in teaching Slovene, or someone prepared to make a thorough comparison of different textbooks, can throw light on these two very important questions.

I do have five criticisms, here listed in order from slight to serious:

- (i) Very occasionally, MPG's non-native English is evident, as in, for example, "the singular forms of verbs are used . . . , like in the following conversation" (p. 13, substitution for "as in"); "going by the stairs" (p. 175, substitution for the much more common "going up [or, down] the stairs.")
- (ii) One translation is, at best, misleading, namely one in unit 5, dialogue 2: the person paying the waiter hands him ten euros and says *Je že v redu*, and this is translated as "Keep the change." In this context, this is what the phrase means, but the phrase *v redu* has not yet been introduced, and its meaning in other contexts deserves exemplification and emphasis.
- (iii) In the entertaining "Letni horoskop" on page 161, under "Pomlad," we read: *flirtali boste bolj kot običajno. Nekaj časa boste sedeli na dveh stolih, kar se bo slabo končalo—na koncu boste obsedeli na tleh*. Not only is *obsedeti* not glossed, but *sedeti na dveh stolih* is an idiomatic expression without an exact English equivalent. Learners will very probably wonder what "sitting on two chairs" means,⁷ and the phrase should have been explained. Since MPG makes the excellent point of warning learners against translating "word-for-word," on page 57, the omission on page 161 is unfortunate.
- (iv) MPG finds no space to mention that the digraphs *lj*, *nj* are normally pronounced [n] and [l] in prepausal and preconsonantal positions. True, she tends to avoid vocabulary and grammatical features with *lj*, *nj* in these positions—other than a mention of *Kranj* on page 5 (and, it may be noted, on CD 1, track 10), I could not spot any other such words or any such features before the last unit (unit 16), where the *-nj* and *-lj* forms in phrasal words like *zanj* and comparatives, including *daljši*, *manjši*, are given in the language notes. I believe this point of pronunciation is too important to be omitted.
- (v) Most seriously, the vast majority of photographs are, however well selected and appropriate, poorly defined and, quite simply, dull. The two that illustrate a trip to Maribor, for instance (the ancient vine and the water tower in Lent), are in several shades of uninteresting gray and can hardly attract visitors to that city. Maybe a second edition can repair this deficiency.

⁷ Although, interestingly, "(to fall) between two stools" must surely derive from the same original idea, but how many speakers of English know this phrase?

To offer what must be a preliminary assessment of the value of this course book—since a reliable one can not yet be made, as I have stated above—I shall quote and comment [in square brackets] on the Routledge online description:⁸

“COLLOQUIAL SLOVENE is easy to use and completely up to date! [yes]

Specially written by experienced teachers [*sic!*; *singular required*] for self-study or class use, the course offers a step-by-step approach to written and spoken Slovene [*correct, but see my previous comments*]. No prior knowledge of the language is required [*true*].

What makes COLLOQUIAL SLOVENE your best choice in personal language learning?

Interactive—lots of exercises for regular practice [*yes, given the space limitations*]

Clear—concise grammar notes [*yes, concise and very clear*]

Practical—useful vocabulary and pronunciation guide [*yes, precisely so*]

Complete [*completeness is a vain boast for a book this compact; see my previous comments*]—including answer key and reference section [*yes*]

Whether you're a business traveller, or about to take up a daring challenge in adventure tourism, you may be studying to teach or even looking forward to a holiday—if you'd like to get up and running with Slovene this rewarding course will take you from complete beginner to confidently putting your language skills to use in a wide range of everyday situations.” [*This is also true; what jars is the presumably formulaic, but in this instance misleading, phrase about the “daring challenge in adventure tourism:” it is very hard to imagine tourists returning from modern Slovenia with tales of derring-do.*]

In sum: MPG has done what Albretti so notably failed to do: she has designed and composed a textbook that lives up to its billing, and which can be unreservedly recommended to people who wish to teach themselves or others Slovene.

⁸ <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415559829/>

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