

## Ocena / Review

Marko Jesenšek. *Slovenski jezik v visokem šolstvu, literaturi in kulturi*. (Zora 117.) Maribor: Mednarodna založba Oddelka za slovan-ske jezike in književnosti, Filozofska fakulteta, Univerza v Mariboru, 2016. 235 pp.

Marko Jesenšek's book *Slovenski jezik v visokem šolstvu, literaturi in kulturi* (The Slovene Language in Higher Education, Literature and Culture) is a collection of 17 chapters (one of which is an interview with the author, the others a selection of papers mostly from the last few years). They all deal with the Slovene language and are divided into two sections, the first one entitled *Jezikovna politika* (Language Policy), the second *Med literaturo in jezikom* (Between Literature and Language). The first focuses on the status/role of the Slovene language in higher education (and science), the second on Slovene in literary works, both original and in translation, as well as in film subtitles. Culture, which is intrinsically linked to language and literature, naturally runs as a common thread throughout the book, as does the issue of identity.

The publication of the book could not have come at a more fitting time, as last year saw the culmination of an extremely heated public debate about the language of instruction in the Slovene higher education system, triggered by the proposed amendment of the Higher Education Act<sup>1</sup>, more specifically Article 8, which refers to the language of instruction. The changes proposed by the Rectors' Conference and also supported by the Ministry of Higher Education would have allowed for a more liberal use of English in higher education, allowing each university to decide independently on the language of instruction in cases where, for instance, there were a group of foreign students (of unspecified number) or, simply, on the condition that part of the study program was implemented in Slovene. The proposal

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.mizs.gov.si/si/delovna\\_podrocja/direktorat\\_za\\_visoko\\_solstvo/sektor\\_za\\_visoko\\_solstvo/novela\\_zakona\\_o\\_visokem\\_solstvu](http://www.mizs.gov.si/si/delovna_podrocja/direktorat_za_visoko_solstvo/sektor_za_visoko_solstvo/novela_zakona_o_visokem_solstvu).

directly contradicted the existing Higher Education Act as well as the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, according to which the official language in Slovenia is Slovene. As such, the proposal was met with both dismay and protest, especially on the part of linguists and other intellectuals from the field of humanities, various institutions such as the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Institute of Humanities, associations such as the Slavic Society of Slovenia<sup>2</sup> as well as the concerned public. The opposition came as no surprise as the existing Higher Education Act already allowed for exceptions, whereby foreign languages could be used when that was warranted either by the nature of the process itself (foreign languages study programs) or by occasional necessity (visiting professors, joint mentorships with professors from abroad and the like). The proponents' claim that the mentioned changes were crucial to improving the quality of higher education and to opening the doors more widely to its internationalization was effectively repudiated by many, Jesenšek included. Rather, it was recognized as an attempt to gradually commercialize our public higher education system, which should, by definition, be available to all Slovene students in their mother tongue.

Jesenšek, as one of the most vocal critics of the proposed changes, argues very convincingly in the first part of his book that the quality of the envisioned pedagogical process (Slovene professors teaching Slovene students in a foreign language, i.e. English) could only deteriorate – and not the opposite. Teaching is a demanding process, especially at the highest level; it requires the highest possible level of linguistic competence on the part of professors, which can be achieved only in their mother tongue. While there may be a few exceptions (e.g. English teachers, those who have studied in English-speaking countries), for the great majority explaining complex ideas, expressing various shades of meaning and simply communicating fluently in English remains an unachievable goal. English promoted as a *lingua franca* of today's world may be suitable for basic, fairly restricted communication, but does not meet the standards of more sophisticated discourse. Not to mention that, by the same token, most students are not sufficiently competent in English either (most would likely be non-native speakers of English, as it is unrealistic to expect Slovene universities to attract students from, say, Britain or the United States), which would result in very simplified, limited exchanges, perhaps even communication breakdowns, consequently diminishing the overall quality of education.

His arguments with regard to internationalization are equally powerful: it borders on the absurd to expect that the internationalization of our higher education can be achieved simply through its Anglicization – this task is far more complex and involves both cooperation with scholars from other countries (joint projects,

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<sup>2</sup> This initiated a petition for the comprehensive development of the Slovenian language, which was, in a short period of time, signed by over 8.800 people. (<http://www.pravapeticija.com/za-vsestranski-razvoj-slovenskega-jezika>)

international conferences, dissemination of results and the like) and student exchanges, whereby incoming students to Slovenia should be provided an opportunity to learn (about) our language and culture. The latter is after all one of the goals of EU-funded exchange programs such as Erasmus; it is also in agreement with the guidelines of the Florence Resolution<sup>3</sup> that both research and teaching should be preferably carried out in the national languages of the member states so as to prevent their deficiency in the domain of scientific discourse and at the same time contribute to the linguistic diversity of the EU. Instead of trying to replace Slovene with English, therefore, the government should focus on providing sufficient funding for higher education as well as creating a stimulating environment for both research and teaching so that our universities can compete effectively on an international level.

In criticizing the attempt to give individual universities greater latitude in introducing more English into their study programs, Jesenšek points to the negative experiences from Germany and the Netherlands, where the detrimental effects of English instruction are already showing. He provides further support for instruction in the mother tongue by emphasizing the EU language policy of promoting multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Slovene has, for the first time in history, obtained the status of one of the official EU languages and while it may be at times difficult to use Slovene in Brussels<sup>4</sup>, we should nevertheless seize this opportunity and strive to use our mother tongue whenever possible – also outside Slovenia. That we should do so in our own country seems self-evident.

Addressing the language issue from the EU perspective and placing it into a broader, global context naturally leads to the discussion that exceeds the narrow, short-term pragmatic issues related to the use of Slovene (whereby it can be assumed that the initiative to Anglicize our higher education was likely motivated by expecting material gain through attracting a large number of tuition-paying foreign students). What is at stake is long-term language development and its significance for our historical, national, and cultural identity. Jesenšek reminds the reader of the long path of Slovene to becoming a full-fledged language, fit to be used in all its social functions and domains (scientific discourse and terminology included)<sup>5</sup>, as well as of the pivotal moments in history when its existence was at risk of being displaced by the more “prestigious” and widely spoken languages such as Latin, German and also Serbo-Croatian. In such moments, Slovenes, despite the adverse circumstances, acted with wisdom and courage, managing to preserve their mother tongue and with it their culture and identity, ultimately achieving sovereignty. The current situation presents us with a similar, though slightly different challenge.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.efnil.org/documents/resolutions/florence-resolution/english>

<sup>4</sup> The 24 official languages are treated as equal, but mostly on a declarative level, while in practice mostly English, and to some extent French, prevail as working languages.

<sup>5</sup> This did not happen until mid-19th century, with Franc Miklošič.

English is undoubtedly the most influential language of international communication and it is only reasonable that we should learn it (as well as other languages, especially those of the neighboring countries), but nobody is forcing us to give up speaking our own mother tongue because of it. Even in times of overt pressure to do so we did not consider that option, that we should do so now voluntarily would be short-sighted, downright foolish, incomprehensible and totally unacceptable. Moreover, replacing Slovene with English in our higher education would, in the end, mean precisely that: Slovene would lose its vitality; it would lack the terminology and sophistication for expressing more demanding concepts, ultimately becoming good only for informal use in the limited domains of personal life. The parallel that comes to mind is that of restricted vs. elaborated code (Bernstein 1971) or low vs. high variant in diglossia (Ferguson 1959), where Slovene would be the former and English the latter.

The chapters that make up the second part of the book present Jesenšek's views on the way language is used in literary works by three Slovene authors (Zofka Kveder, Prežihov Voranc, Ivan Potrč), in the translations of two foreign authors (Selimović, Lermontov) and (perhaps somehow misleadingly, since this section of the book is about literature) in the Slovene subtitles in a film in which actors speak in the Prekmurje dialect. In all cases, the analysis shows how very expressive, flexible, subtle and stylistically rich Slovene is. In the case of Zofka Kveder, the author points out how she remained faithful to her mother tongue even though in real life she lived in constant contact with other languages. He also defends Potrč, who had in the past been criticized for his use of dialectal expressions. The way we see standard vs. regional language varieties has changed; the norms have loosened, regional and dialectal varieties are equally valuable and should not be judged as "ugly." Rather, they are a sign of language vitality when used in appropriate contexts. In a similar vein, he argues that there is no need for subtitles in the case of the Prekmurje dialect. He is more critical in the case of translations, where he detects some choices that do not adequately reflect the original. Translating is a difficult and responsible task, demanding great linguistic and cultural knowledge on the part of the translator<sup>6</sup>.

I see the greatest value of Jesenšek's book in that it presents a very persuasive apologia and a very vigorous defense of the Slovene language at a time when this is obviously imperative if we are to survive as a nation. For him language loyalty is both a moral and an ethical issue; language is the one value on which we have always based our culture and identity, it is a fundamental national, social and personal value, not an

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, in Chapter 3 (p. 59) Jesenšek writes that it perhaps makes more sense to invest in so-called translation technologies than to translate Slovene texts into English, believing that, in the near future, machines will be able to translate very effectively. His criticism seems to contradict these expectations. Personally, I am convinced that translation machines will never be able to replace human translators (as is painfully evident in the case of Google Translate). They may be useful tools, of course, but still unreliable, except for the most basic tasks.

obstacle, but a necessary requirement for progress. As I write in my own article on the issue, “by abandoning our own language we would cut off our roots, concede to marginalization and give up everything that defines us positively as a culturally specific community in relation to others and (along with the current ideology encouraging individualism) we would thus be subsumed into global irrelevance. As a consequence we would, with a weak sense of self-worth lose the ability to cooperate with others on an equal level, i.e. we would have less and less of our own to contribute to the treasury of world knowledge and culture.” (Šabec 2016: 76).

Jesenšek is fully aware of that and does not shy away from expressing his views very clearly, not only in the style that we usually associate with academic writing, but also in stronger, less formal terms when he deems it necessary. At times he resorts even to humor or irony bordering on satire in order to achieve a greater effect. In all cases, however, his arguments are very strong, supported by his expertise from the fields of diachronic and synchronic linguistics and literary history. His comprehensive knowledge of the topic allows him to present it from various perspectives as well as to foresee, with confidence, the long-term consequences of our (in)action in this respect. While the controversial Article 8 has been withdrawn since the book was published and the attempt to Anglicize Slovene universities brought to a halt, largely due to public outrage and to Jesenšek’s “fight” against it, it crucial to remain alert to stop any similar attempts in the future.

Praising the book, especially its message and the thoroughness with which it is presented, we cannot avoid mentioning one shortcoming as well. It has to do with the format of the book: a collection of chapters/previously published papers involves, by its nature, some repetitiveness. Had the chapters been re-written into a more coherent whole, it would certainly make for an easier read. On the other hand, of course, the papers in the chosen form represent a valuable document about the engagement of both the advocates and the opponents of the proposed changes. As such it will be an interesting matter to study for future scholars of Slovene.

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