

THE PEOPLE OF PREKMURJE: SLOVENES WITH SUBTITLES

Darja Kerec

The people of Prekmurje have for centuries perceived themselves as Slovenes (although in the past they involuntarily replaced this name with the controversial term *Vend*); however, with the exception of some intellectuals, few knew anything about Slovene history, the boundaries of the Slovene ethnic territory, or even where Ljubljana, Maribor, or Trieste were located. This was because education in Hungary was subjected to magyarization, an assimilatory policy that was even intensified in the decades preceding World War I. On the other hand, Hungarian government attempts (until August 1919) to root out ethnic awareness among Slovenes living beyond the Mura River failed, at least from the linguistic point of view. The people of Prekmurje have managed to preserve their dialect until today. The Hungarian language did not take hold in this territory, as is evident from the numerous articles in the Slovene newspapers of that time, which were secretly read by the people of Prekmurje. The purpose of this paper is to show that today linguistic features play a major role in Slovene perceptions of these people; dialect is the distinguishing feature in Slovene-Slovene relations.¹

On 15 January 1992, Hungary recognized the newly established Republic of Slovenia. Apart from recognition of Slovene statehood, this act also opened the bilateral issue of national minorities. Before Slovene independence, relations between Slovenes and Hungarians were good, even exemplary, in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. However, the recent situation of the Hungarian minority in eastern Slovenia (i.e., Prekmurje) and the Slovene minority in Hungary (along the Rába River) differs substantially from the situation during the past seventy years. Among the countries neighboring Slovenia, Hungary was second to last to recognize its independence. The reason for this can probably be attributed to the democratic changes that took hold after 1989 and different interpretations of respective national histories in the European states created after World War I, whereby the Treaty of Trianon (4 June 1920) played a very special role. Because of this treaty, Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory

¹ There are about forty dialects in Slovenia. To the majority of Slovenes the dialect spoken in Prekmurje is least comprehensible. The general perception of its speakers is that their speech is “funny” and perhaps substandard. Such perceptions are based on indifference to diverse cultural phenomena, media inconsistency, and historical facts about the incorporation of Prekmurje into Yugoslavia in 1919. There are debates about diversity of Slovene dialects in the media, but most contribute little to understanding linguistic diversity.

but gained territory along the Rába River (Sln. *Porabje*) inhabited by Slovenes, whereas Prekmurje was annexed to Slovenia. In the 1990s, the term *Vend* began to be used again as a kind of pejorative name for the Slovenes living in the (now Slovene) territories that had belonged to Hungary until 1919 and during World War II. Numerous Slovene intellectuals (including those abroad) publicly expressed their disapproval, among them the ethnologist Vilko Novak in particular. Novak offered a critical response to the book *Muravidéktől Trianonig* (From the Mura Valley to Trianon, 1996) by the Hungarian Tibor Zsiga, in which the history of the people of Prekmurje was presented in a superficial and inaccurate way, and the Slovene people referred to as the *Vends* (Novak 2004).

Some basic historical facts are summarized here to clarify this situation. Along the Slovene-Hungarian border, almost 100,000 people have been living in an area that was a part of the Kingdom of Hungary for more than 1,300 years. With the exception of the occupation years following 1941, this territory had been a part of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (i.e., Yugoslavia) since 1919, except for the 94-km² border zone along the Rába River, which used to be called *Slovenska krajina* 'Slovene land'. Officially there are now nine villages or towns in the Rába Valley with a Slovene population of about 4,000.²

The Slavs in the extreme north of the Pannonian lowlands (i.e., Prekmurje) preserved their kinship with their fellow Slavs (later referred to as Styrians, Carniolans, and Carinthians) in their language, speech, and above all collective memory. This memory had been passed over from generation to generation, from century to century.

This collective memory was also kept alive by the Slovenes in Carniola, Styria, and Carinthia. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the newspaper *Slovenski narod* published several articles on the people of Prekmurje as Slovene brethren, the descendants of Prince Kocelj of Pannonia. In 1881 one could read about "our people by birth and speech, our Slav brothers," or in 1883 "the Prekmurje Slovenes within ancient Pannonia" (Keric 2004: 91).

After the mid-sixteenth century, the territory of Prekmurje was increasingly threatened by the Turks. Religious conflicts (which by that time had reached a peak in other parts of Europe) hindered development and administration. Nonetheless, cultural progress was robust. Slovenes can pride themselves on the Freising Manuscripts, Trubar's *Catechism* and *Abecedarium* (Primer), both published in 1550, and Dalmatin's translation of the Bible (1584). The people of Prekmurje had to wait for their first book

² For more on these statistics and census results, see: www.ukom.gov.si/slo/slovenija/kratka-predstavitev/prebivalstvo/manjsina-madzarska/. An example of a study of Slovenes within Hungary is Munda-Hirnök 1994.

for another century and a half. In 1715, the Protestant author Franc Temlin published the first printed book in the Prekmurje dialect: *Mali katechismus . . . na szlovenszki jezik preloseni* (Small catechism . . . translated into Slovene).

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, more than half of the Hungarian population declared themselves Lutherans or adherents of some other Protestant sect. The situation was similar in the extreme west, in Prekmurje. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the golden age of the Hungarian language, culture, and art. It was ironic that the seventeenth (and even more so the eighteenth) century was the time of the rise of the Slovene language and the use of the Prekmurje dialect in literature. If ever, it was in 1867 that the people of Prekmurje had a historic opportunity to become closer to the Slovenes of Carniola, Styria, and Carinthia. With the agreement on the dual monarchy, they received the same emperor. In the years preceding World War I, the strong affiliation of the people of Prekmurje with Slovenes living beyond the Mura River was also evident from articles published in the major Carniolan and Styrian newspapers of that time. The readers of the newspaper *Domoljub*, for example, sent the message: “Our beloved native language . . . ; also us, the people of Prekmurje love this mother tongue of ours . . .” (2 January 1913: 12).

For the people of Prekmurje, the nineteenth century was a crucial period in terms of national awareness. For example, in 1881 Božidar Raič, who frequently contributed newspaper articles on this topic, wrote: “The people of Prekmurje represent the green core of the Slav linden tree; their mother tongue and their literature clearly show that their native land is Slovenia” (*Slovenski narod* 263, 18 November 1881).

After 1867, the Hungarians launched an intensive denationalization or “deslovenization” program that was even based on corresponding legislation. In 1879, a law was passed under which the study of Hungarian became a compulsory subject in non-Hungarian schools (Kokolj and Horvat 1977: 214). A cultural society for Prekmurje was also established in 1897, its main focus being to spread Hungarian literature and establish libraries, schools, and daycare centers (Kokolj & Horvat 1977: 232). In spite of all these measures, the Slovene dialect did not cease to exist. Instead, until Prekmurje’s incorporation into Yugoslavia in 1919, it represented a basis for national awareness.

During this time, the main Hungarian premises regarding the language and the nationality of the people of Prekmurje were the following:

- 1) The Slovenes in Prekmurje speak the Vend language;
- 2) This language is similar to Slovene, but the large vowel inventory clearly show it to be a Slovenization of Hungarian;

- 3) Based on this theory, in the educational system, the official media, and within the administration, the people of Prekmurje are not referred to as *Slovenes* or *Slavs*, but as *Vends*. The only true Slovenes (referred to as *Slavs*) live outside the boundaries of Prekmurje, but within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

Confusion about the names of non-Hungarian nations can also be seen from a Slovene propaganda leaflet from the right side of the Mura River, dating from spring 1919: “The Hungarians gave us different or other names so that we wouldn’t be able to recognize ourselves as brothers: the Pole became a *Lengyel*, the Slovak a *Tót*, the Serb a *Rác*, and the Slovene a *Vend*” (Kokolj 1981: 118).

It is interesting that the Hungarians started to refer to Slovenes as *Yugoslavs* after they became part of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, although they distinguished the Slovenes from the Serbs, whom they rather mistrusted. The first time most people in Prekmurje heard anything about the existence of Yugoslavia was in 1918 and 1919 (*Slovenski narod*, 30 May 1920: 4).

The image of the people of Prekmurje in the media

Interpretations of the people of Prekmurje as they appear today seem neither justified nor in the European spirit. Even in the twenty first century, it is quite common for both state and commercial Slovene television networks to subtitle the Prekmurje dialect in documentary and feature films. One typical example is the sitcom *Naša mala klinika* (Our Little Clinic), which is produced by one of Slovenia’s most popular commercial television networks, with the highest ratings since 2004. The series is particularly popular among teenage viewers and those over fifty. Episode 14 of the fifth season features a couple from near the northeast Slovene town of Ptuj (as stated in the television program) that visit the clinic. They are dressed as peasants: the man wears a hat, and the woman wears a kerchief and carries a basket. To top things off, there is also a live rooster, gypsy music, and a Roma called Babo. They dialect the characters spoke was not explicitly Styrian (although Ptuj is part of Styria); it instead resembled the Prekmurje dialect. Through the “gypsy” characters, the creators of the series probably wanted to indicate that the couple actually came from Prekmurje because their speech resembled the Prekmurje dialect and Prekmurje is known for its peaceful coexistence of Roma and non-Roma. After the episode was broadcast, critical remarks were received that the people of Prekmurje had been presented as provincial or peasant-like (due to their costume and speech), implying that they had not yet reached the linguistic and civilization level of other Slovenes.

From 1994 to 1997, another sitcom called *Teater Paradižnik* (Tomato Theater) was produced and aired by Slovenian state broadcasting.³ This also featured a Prekmurje character whose dialect led to much confusion in communication between the theater employees.

Another television series, also produced by state broadcasting in 1984, *Strici so mi povedali* (What my uncles told me), was based on a novel by the Prekmurje writer Miško Kranjec. The story portrays the life of the Kranjec family and the author's uncles during the period from World War I until the first years after World War II. The dialogs were subtitled in standard Slovene. Due to the specific features of the Prekmurje dialect and its colorful vocabulary, this gesture seems justified because otherwise many viewers would not have been able to understand the story. Nonetheless, this particular novel was familiar to many elderly and young Slovenes because it had been part of their required reading in secondary school.

From today's perspective, however, Kranjec's work is perceived as distinctly dated and regional, and not of contemporary interest. In recent years, attention has shifted to the best-known contemporary Prekmurje author, Feri Lainšček,⁴ whose works of fiction also focus on Prekmurje and its people. He writes for both children and adults, and is the writer with the most films based on his works since Slovene independence: *Halgato*;⁵ *Petelinji zajtrk* (Rooster's breakfast⁶); *Mokuš*; and *Traktor, ljubezen in rock'n'roll* (Tractor, love, and rock 'n' roll). Another film based on his short story *Hit poletja* (The hit of the summer) was released in 2008. In his work, Lainšček frequently uses (sometimes newly-coined) words that even the people of Prekmurje do not understand. Nonetheless, along with some other Prekmurje artists (especially the singer Vlado Kreslin⁷), he has managed to bring the proverbial Prekmurje soul to other Slovenes in a way that no longer requires subtitles.

Two years ago, another Prekmurje native managed a media breakthrough: Jože Činč, the host of a show from a local television station based in Murska Sobota. There were hardly any media that did not react to this show. The main characteristic of Činč's *Lejt šov* (Late show) was his consistent use of the Prekmurje dialect, which made it impossible for many viewers to understand even the title of the show. This show was not broadcast on national television, but could be seen on several local channels. Regarding the permanent "collision" between the people of Prekmurje and other Slovenes, and the use of dialect as a force for creativity, Činč remarked:

³ See: http://sl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teater_Paradižnik.

⁴ See: http://sl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feri_Lainšček.

⁵ See: www.film-sklad.si/html/festival2003/si/dogodki/retrospektiva/halgato/.

⁶ For more about this movie, see: www.petelinjizajtrk.com/.

⁷ For more on this artist, see: www.kreslin.com/.

This is the only way I can function as an improviser, whatever improvisation might be like. I am only able to improvise quickly in dialect. I have never been burdened by the fact that people from Ljubljana (who cannot understand me) might watch my program over the cable network. Some of them may have even watched my program because my dialect seemed exotic to them. (Gačič 2005)

The exotics mentioned by Činč are a kind of a *perpetuum mobile* in Slovene entertainment. Of course, other Slovene regions with their people and dialects have also appeared in such productions, especially the people of the Littoral and Styria, yet they are far less subject to misunderstanding and wondering about their exoticism than are the people of Prekmurje. The dialects of the Littoral and Styria are deeply rooted in the consciousness of Slovenes and positively accepted by them. In this “battle” with the media, the people of Prekmurje seem to have come off badly: although they are popular, they are constantly misunderstood. Characters in feature films are presented as peasant folk, although the people of Prekmurje can pride themselves on a respectable bourgeois or middle class tradition dating back to the mid-19th century (especially in the towns of Murska Sobota and Lendava). The characters portrayed by Miško Kranjec thus seem to have done a bad turn to today’s people of Prekmurje who—like all other citizens of Slovenia—are only a mouse click away from the rest of the world. Is this only a consequence of the fact that Prekmurje was not annexed to the rest of Slovenia until 1919, or due to the still nonexistent freeway towards Prekmurje, or perhaps because of a well-rooted stereotype also conditioned by superiority and a kind of linguistic hierarchy? In the media, such a stereotype, together with Prekmurje’s rural identity, is particularly evident from the use of slang. Similar slang can be heard on the streets of Ljubljana, and it even prevails in programs on the state television network. It is paradoxical that this dialect is expected to be understood throughout Slovenia, but if a non-Carniolan dialect is used the usual comment is “Speak Slovene, I cannot understand you.” Nonetheless, most expressions that one hears in the Prekmurje dialect are not of Hungarian origin, but Slavic (or Slovene). There are also numerous words of German and Latin origin; the latter are mostly due to the influence of religious literature. This is also evident from the recent publication of a comprehensive dictionary of the old standard Prekmurje language (Novak 2006), issued with the support of the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts. This rich dialect has distinctive historical value. In 2007, Primož Trubar probably would have found it easier to communicate with someone from Murska Sobota than with a person from Ljubljana.

Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana

Works Cited

- Gačič, Siniša. 2005. Novo klovnovstvo: Jože Činč, lokalna tv-zvezda. *Mladina* (30 May). Available at: http://www.mladina.si/mednik/200522/clanek/kul--mediji-sinisa_gacic/.
- Kerec, Darja. 2004. Sobota na prelomu 19. in 20. stoletja. *Borec. Revija za zgodovino, antropologijo in književnost* 61(617–20): 71–171.
- Kokolj, Miroslav. 1981. Prekmurje v prevratnih letih 1918–1919. In *Revolucionarno vrenje v Pomurju v letih 1918–1920. Zbornik razprav*, ed. Janko Liška. Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba.
- Kokolj, Miroslav, and Bela Horvat. 1977. *Prekmursko šolstvo od začetka reformacije do zloma nacizma*. Murska Sobota: Pomurska založba.
- Munda-Hirnök, Katerina. 1994. The current situation of Slovenes in Hungary. *Slovene Studies* 16(2): 83–97.
- Novak, Vilko. 2004. *Zgodovina iz spomina. Polemika o knjigi Tiborja Zsige Muravidéktől Trianonig Történelem emlékezetből. Polémia Zsiga Tibor Muravidéktől Trianonig című könyvéről*. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC SAZU.
- . 2006. *Slovar stare knjižne prekmurščine*. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC.
- Zsiga, Tibor. 1996. *Muravidéktől Trianonig*. Lendava: Magyar Nemzetiségi Művelődési Intézet.