

REVIEW

Tom Priestly. *From Phonological Analysis at My Desk to Linguistic Activism with Slovene in the Austrian Alps.* Kenneth E. Naylor Memorial Lecture Series, No. 8; Oxford, MI: Balkanistica. 65 pp.

This booklet summarizes three decades of distinguished linguistic scholarship in bilingual Austrian Carinthia, with emphasis upon the dialect of Sele—*selščina*. The author, Tom M. S. Priestly, first presented this text as a Kenneth E. Naylor Memorial Lecture on 28 April 2006—the first contribution by a specialist in Slovene language to this eminent lecture series dedicated to South Slavic and Balkan linguistics.

Tom Priestly presents formative decades of his career as a narrative about “conversion” from dispassionate observer to activist—a conversion driven by expansion of his initially narrow linguistic objective of describing a village dialect to much broader consideration of the social, psychological and historical circumstances effecting the use of that dialect as a minority language. This richly documented, expanded and updated manuscript exceeds the original lecture; it is an invaluable resource for anyone attracted to themes covered below.

From this reviewer’s perspective as a social anthropologist it appears that Tom Priestly eventually acknowledged, at least implicitly, that observation combined with long term participation in the daily lives of his informants evokes the inter-subjectivity intrinsic to data collection in human sciences. As subjects, each formed by the unique circumstances of their particular lives, both he and his informants have coalesced in the creation of an understanding of a dialect which compels each of them in quite dissimilar ways—he as the fascinated outsider looking in and they as

identity bearing vehicles of the dialect's reproduction. Recognition of his shared humanity with *Selani* (inhabitants of Sele) ultimately led Priestly to take a position with regard to the value of *selščina*—a dialect essential to *Selani*'s self-understanding and to his integrity as a professing linguist. Because of *selščina*'s symbolic potential in bilingual Austrian Carinthia neither it, nor Priestly's description of it, can be disassociated from the social and historical reality to which it belongs. Guided by these reflections I turn now to an account of this linguist's fascinating encounter with a Slovene dialect and its speakers.

Following professional training in linguistics at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Tom Priestly secured a permanent position at the University of Alberta. He was attracted to “empirical linguistics” practiced by his new colleagues. Combined with fascination for phonology, this field-oriented approach led him to seek a research situation where he could actually “observe people using language” (1). Experience in Central Europe as a schoolboy, serviceman and college student drew him to Slovenia. After participating in the Slovene Language, Literature and Culture Seminar in Ljubljana (1973) he first visited Sele. Attracted by the opacity of the local dialect, the hospitality of its speakers and the beauty of the region he selected Sele for fieldwork.

Five years later he returned for four months to learn the local dialect (*selščina*). His aim was “to write a description of the phonetics, phonology, and eventually the grammar of the dialect” (3). During this learning phase he resided with an elderly bilingual couple that became important informants and teachers. His protracted interaction with *Selani* soon revealed the “heterogeneity of competencies in the four language varieties available to most speakers” (5) in bilingual Carinthia. Variation became the *leitmotif* of his early research in Carinthia (5).

Although Priestly observed geographic, intergenerational and contextually stylistic variation among speakers of *selščina* he initially refused to accept the implications of this for his project to describe *the* local dialect. Furthermore he found local evidence of morphophonological variation that could not be explained satisfactorily by the above factors. This eventually led him to investigate *attitudes* held by *Selani* toward their dialect.

Before expanding his investigations into socio- and psycholinguistics, Priestly examined more purely linguistic variation unique to *selščina*. Rejecting the earlier assumption in traditional linguistics that “a linguistic system used in a local community should be described as if it were unitary” (11) he investigated in the 1980s diverse forms of variation—phonological, incidence of phonemes, morphological and syntactic. Among other results he discovered that “*selščina* is the first among *all* Slavic dialects to show *total* loss of the neuter gender—even in pronouns” (11).

(As a non-linguist this reviewer refers specialists to the original text, pages 8-19, for detailed evidence of the various forms of linguistic variation alluded to above.)

It became intuitively obvious to Tom Priestly that “the three factors of language usage, language attitudes and language competence are all interconnected” (20). But his training in the 1960s had not prepared him for sociological and psychological approaches to linguistics. His quest into this new territory began by investigating language use. He observed in diverse social contexts how *Selani* switched between the four codes (i.e., language varieties) available to most of them—standard and dialect Slovene, standard and dialect German. It became apparent that distinct social domains such as the home, parish church, and diverse public settings involving either Slovene or German speakers, or both, systematically affected language use.

In order to further qualify language use behavior he turned to an investigation of language attitudes. Early in his fieldwork Priestly discovered the generally low esteem *Selani* held for their dialect. Eventually he sought to unearth circumstances specific to Carinthia that affected this attitude. He states: “Attitudes to the language-variety one speaks reflect one’s personal attitudes to one’s own and one’s fellows’ identity, and this is highlighted in a multilingual region where the language variety symbolizes the community” (21–22).

For Slovene speakers living in Austria a heightened consciousness of belonging to a language community increased enormously with the rapid transformation of Austrian society beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Through an insightful historical excursus Priestly sketches this process in Carinthia. He recounts, in terms of historic confrontations beginning with the 10 October 1920 plebiscite, the Germanophone majority’s political and ideological manipulation of Slovene codes (standard and dialect Slovene) in its quest to subjugate and disqualify Slovene speakers as legitimate members of Austrian society. Priestly effectively illustrates this by considering how Germanophones utilized the term *Windisch* as an instrument for dominating and dividing speakers of Slovene codes. Germanization peaked under Nazi rule and especially during World War II, when Slovene speakers were systematically persecuted and deported from Austrian Carinthia.

In bilingual Carinthia, under the domination of a Germanophone elite, Slovene dialect came to symbolize inferiority. This situation drew Priestly to scholarship on minority languages. He compared the situation in Austrian Carinthia with the Welsh in Britain and Frisians in the Netherlands. His attention was drawn to, among others, the “Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale” developed by Joshua Fishman (1991). With this instrument Priestly was able to estimate and compare degrees of

language-loss in local settings, both within Carinthia and between Carinthia and other minority language sites in Europe and North America. He also familiarized himself with problems intrinsic to taking language censuses in Austria, as well as the challenge of creating realistic typologies depicting diverse minority language situations in Carinthia and elsewhere in Austria. Bilingual education and language revitalization also attracted his attention as aspects of the minority language situation.

Twentieth century modernization transformed Sele from a relatively isolated and self-contained agrarian community to a base from which to participate in Austria's increasingly complex and extensive socio-economic order. In 1920 all *Selani* were employed locally, primarily in agriculture and lumbering. By 1990 over seventy percent of the population commuted to jobs outside the village where they participated in highly diverse language environments. Priestly's adroit observations of *Selani*'s language behavior in this new social order led him to point out an "enormous and obvious potential not only for increases in language-variation, but also for changes in language competence" (31).

In order to investigate these potentials Priestly initiated in 1999 a project to assess language maintenance and loss throughout bilingual Carinthia. Six bi-lingual locations were selected for comparison, stretching from Dob/Aich in the east to Šmohor/Hermagor in the west. In 2000 and 2001 the project research team surveyed 200 informants in these locations. Questionnaires were created to determine individual informant's language use in diverse social domains. Using the concept of "subjective ethno-linguistic vitality" (32) informants were also queried about their affinity for diverse aspects and institutions of the minority language environment available to them. And by asking informants to tell two stories, using standard Slovene and standard German, language competence was tested.

Positive correlations were discovered between patterns of use, attitudes and competence. The *interdependence* of language use, attitudes and competence was thereby statistically confirmed. With confidence it was concluded that "for a minority's language and ethno-linguistic identity to be maintained... members of an ethnic minority must be competent in the use of their language, must use their language in several important domains and must have positive attitudes to their language and identity" (33). With this project Tom Priestly combined the diverse perspectives of sociolinguistics, psycho-sociolinguistics and educational psychology—his intellectual quest springing from an initial focus on "traditional linguistics" was fulfilled.

Priestly concludes with reflections over his conversion from observer to participant and then, to activist. Already during the first decade of research he asked *Selani* if he could speak to the local *Krščansko prosvetno društvo* (Christian Cultural Society). He sought to counter *Selani*'s negative opinion of their dialect. His talk, given mostly in *selščina*,

was entitled “*Hubrajtajte se ud svoiji špraši*” (Be proud of your [Sele] language). Familiar with local values and affinities he argued effectively for Selani to be proud of their language as essential to their local identity as members of what affectionately is called *selska republika*—Sele Republic. The response was positive. The following year he lectured again to the same society. This time the title was: “*Qaqu se šriba selsqa špraha [z hānu sāmu vaju]*” (How to write the Sele language in just one lesson). Again he received a positive response—during his presentation listeners assisted in establishing a mutually agreed orthography. And a few Selani began corresponding with him in their dialect. This early engagement confirms the commitment and affection that is readily generated between fieldworker and interlocutor as they gain each other’s trust.

Through everyday participation Priestly was drawn ever closer to the Sele community. One day he noticed memorial plaques on the old church wall where he read that eight *Selani* had been executed by guillotine in Vienna for cooperating with the partisans during World War II. After visiting the site of these executions he was prompted to write “one of his few serious poems.” Thus he came to share profoundly *Selani*’s still fresh collective memory of the Nazi period.

On the basis of this experience and knowledge of *Selani*’s suffering during World War II it was indeed disturbing to observe how the Germanophone majority in Carinthia was strongly under the influence of right-wing groups with roots in National Socialist Austria. Following the Allies departure from Austria in 1955, disbanded Nazi Associations were formed anew (36). Xenophobic German nationalism of the Nazi era was perpetrated by the *Kärntner Heimatdienst (KHD)*—the direct descendent of the wartime *Heimatbund*. Priestly traces how the activity and ideology of German nationalists, organized in or promoted by the KHD, have influenced Carinthia’s post-war politics. He recounts the context for the destruction of bilingual place-names in 1972 (*Ortstafelsturm*) and the rise of the right wing politician Jörg Haider whose deft exploitation of populism and German nationalism as Provincial Governor and Party Leader ultimately made him “a symbol of everything that denied Slovenophone rights and that lessened the chances of maintaining ‘*Slovenskost*’” (47).

After surveying positive developments in the Slovenophone community regarding primary and secondary education and the growth of cultural institutions, Priestly also notes setbacks and deficiencies affecting the community—the absence of bilingual judicial and administrative services and a reduction in public funding for Slovene language media and cultural institutions. Priestly concludes by lamenting the political division of Slovenophones in Carinthia suggesting that greater political unity would have been more advantageous for their overall situation and language preservation. Although he understands, he does not support Slovenophone

priests who refuse to perform German mass in parishes including monolingual Germans.

As an “activist” Tom Priestly has enjoyed both failures and successes. An avid collector of sugar packets, he failed to convince Slovene coffee shops and restaurants to adopt bilingual sugar packets. But he was more successful in soliciting Carinthian Slovene participation in the annual “Liet-Lávlut” song contest featuring choirs that sing in “lesser used languages” (51). In conclusion I would suggest that Tom Priestly’s activism for the benefit of the Slovenophone community in Austrian Carinthia has much less to do with sugar packets than with his dedicated documentation and promotion of *selščina*, something for which he has been honored on numerous occasions.

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