

LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AMONG SLOVENE IMMIGRANTS IN THE U.S.A.

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0. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to briefly present the linguistic situation among American Slovenes in Cleveland in general, and to determine the degree of Slovene language maintenance among members of the second generation immigrants¹ in particular.

The findings are based on the statistical analysis of data obtained through questionnaires about the use of Slovene and English from 103 subjects over a period of four years (1987-90). A distinction is made between pre-war and post-war immigrants (86 vs.17),² as the chi-square test for the relationship between the generational factor and other dependent variables selected for the study showed that this was in all cases highly significant (the level at which the null hypothesis was rejected was set at .05, but turned out to be .0000 in most cases). The pre-war immigrants came to the U.S. as part of a major immigration wave at the turn of the century and in the first few decades of the 20th century; the post-war immigrants arrived after 1945. The former group immigrated predominantly for economic reasons, while the latter consisted mostly of political immigrants who fled the communist régime in the then Yugoslavia (Trunk 1912, Balch 1969, Molek 1979, Van Tassel and Grabowski 1987: 540 - 545).

1 The term "immigrant/s" is used with reference to all participants in the study. Strictly speaking only those who immigrated to the U.S. from Slovene territories qualify as immigrants, whereas their descendants are already U.S.-born, i.e., U.S. citizens. The decision to adopt this less than perfect terminology was nevertheless made for the sake of economy and in order to keep in line with terminology used by other authors dealing with immigration issues. According to this terminology, the second generation immigrants are in fact the immigrants' children.

2 The comparatively low number of post-war immigrants participating in the study reflects the actual situation, where the second pre-war generation is the most numerous, while it is almost impossible to locate younger people who are still fluent in Slovene.

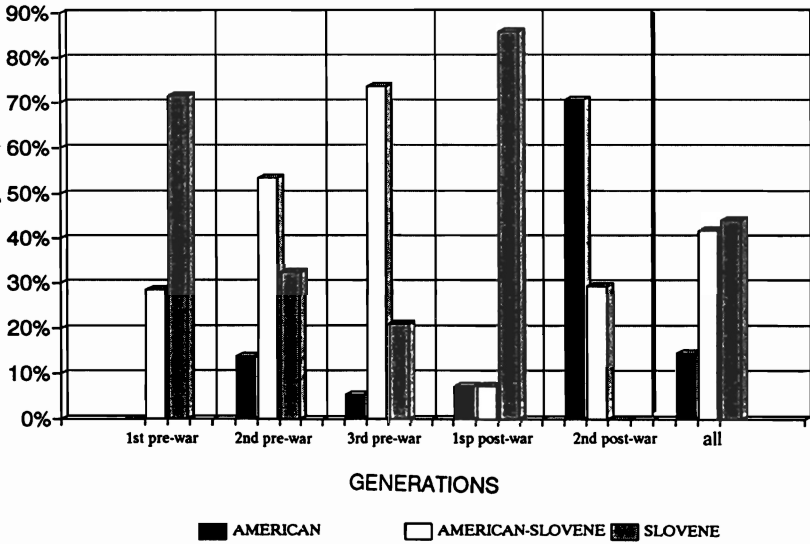


DIAGRAM I. 'NATIONALITY'

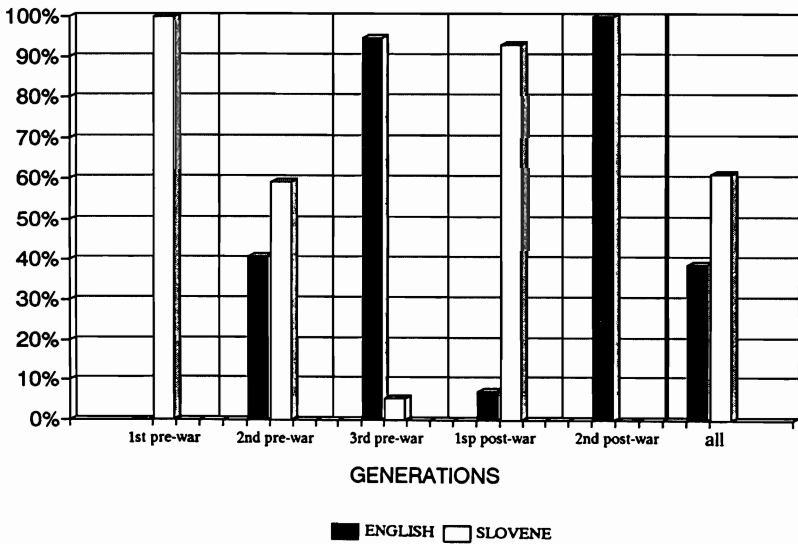


DIAGRAM II. MOTHER TONGUE

The questionnaires contained three major groups of questions. The first group focused on general demographic information about the respondents, the second on their language use and language attitudes, and the third on their socialization patterns and their involvement in ethnic organizations. This last group of questions was chosen in order to explore the likely influence of extra-linguistic factors on the respondents' linguistic behavior.

1. Analysis of responses

Analysis of the responses revealed the following differences between the pre-war and the post-war immigrants that are indicative of the future development in terms of language maintenance or shift in the community under investigation.

While the majority of the pre-war generation (see Diagram I) consider themselves "American Slovenes" (53%), and only some report their nationality as only "Slovene" (33%) or as only "American" (14%), the post-war generation opts for only "American" (70%) or "American Slovene" nationality (30%).

An even more drastic difference between the two groups is found in the category of mother tongue (see Diagram II). The pre-war immigrants choose either Slovene or English (59% vs. 41%), whereas the post-war immigrants all report English as their mother tongue.

There are marked differences in the marital status of the respondents (see Diagram III); note particularly the great increase in inter-ethnic marriages, and the great decrease in Slovene-only marriages, in the second post-war generation.

Another difference is in education (see Diagram IV). While the majority of the pre-war immigrants are high school graduates (66%) and only some went to college (27%) or have less than twelve years of education (7%), the ratio for post-war immigrants is quite different (18% graduated from high school and 82% are college-educated).

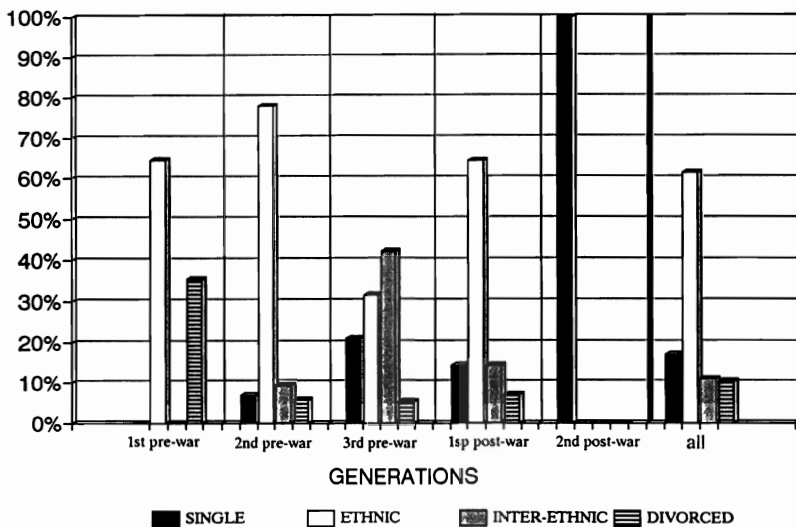


DIAGRAM III. MARITAL STATUS

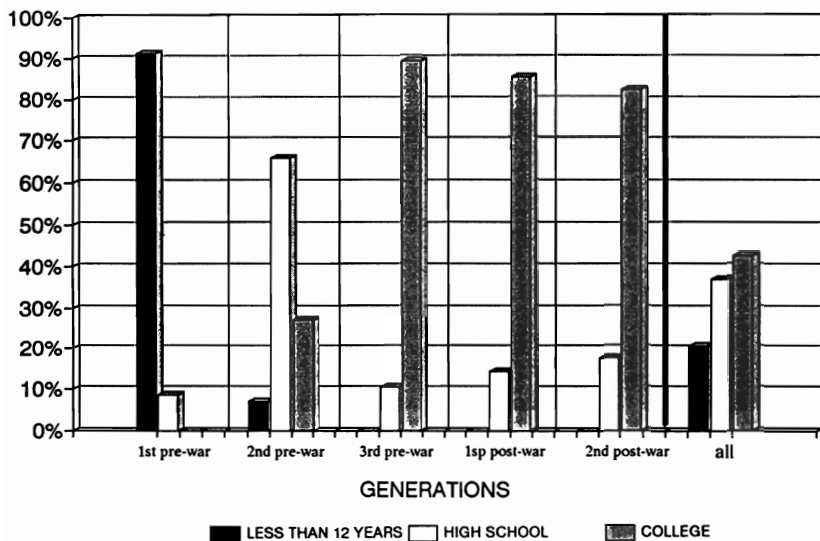


DIAGRAM IV. EDUCATION

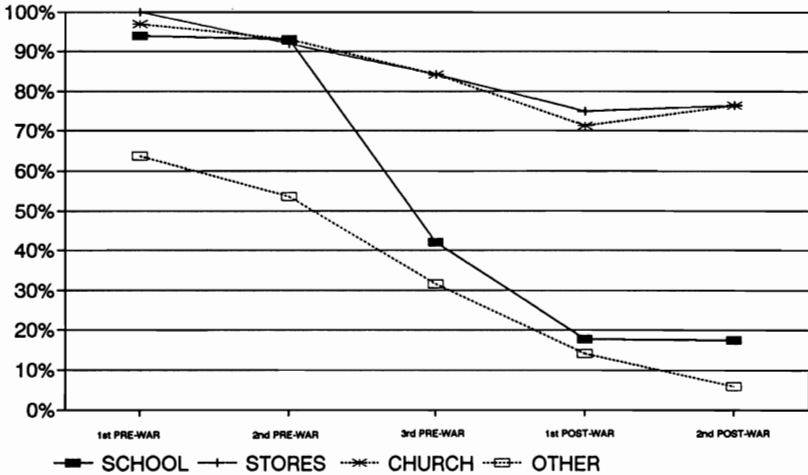


DIAGRAM V. RESIDENCE IN SLOVENE NEIGHBORHOODS

As is evident from Diagram V, the pre-war immigrants report their neighborhoods to be still relatively Slovene in character with a strong influence of ethnic institutions and organizations, whereas for the post-war immigrants these factors rank very low.

As for language, both pre-war and post-war immigrants learned Slovene and English in the U.S.A. Members of both generations learned Slovene at home and before the age of ten. The same applies to English, where it is of some interest that many pre-war immigrants learned the language only upon entering kindergarten or grade school. In the case of post-war immigrants English is learned at a much earlier age.

The differences are very apparent, also, in the respondents' self-evaluation of their speaking, reading and writing skills (see

Diagram VI). For the pre-war generation the competence in speaking is reportedly about the same for both Slovene and Eng-

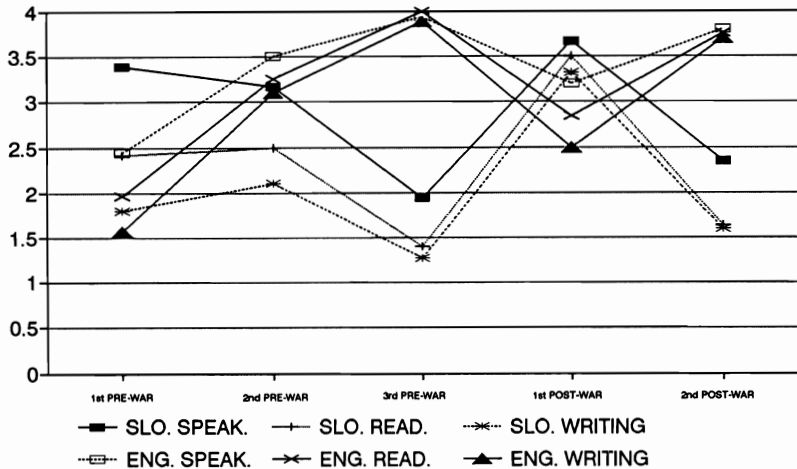


DIAGRAM VI. SELF-EVALUATION OF PROFICIENCY IN SLOVENE AND ENGLISH

lish, although more say they are excellent in English than in Slovene and there are only a few cases of only fair competence in Slovene, but not in English. Most rate themselves as excellent and good, however. The differences between the two languages become more noticeable in the case of reading and writing, where a lower level of competence in Slovene can be attributed to the more demanding nature of the skills in question. Compared to the pre-war immigrants, members of the post-war generation rate themselves considerably lower. They mostly assess their Slovene speaking skills as fair and poor and their reading and writing skills even lower. In view of such assessment it is understandable that the relatively balanced bilingual group of pre-war immigrants chooses as their preferred conversational language either English or both English and

Slovene, whereas the entire post-war generation sample feels more comfortable speaking English.

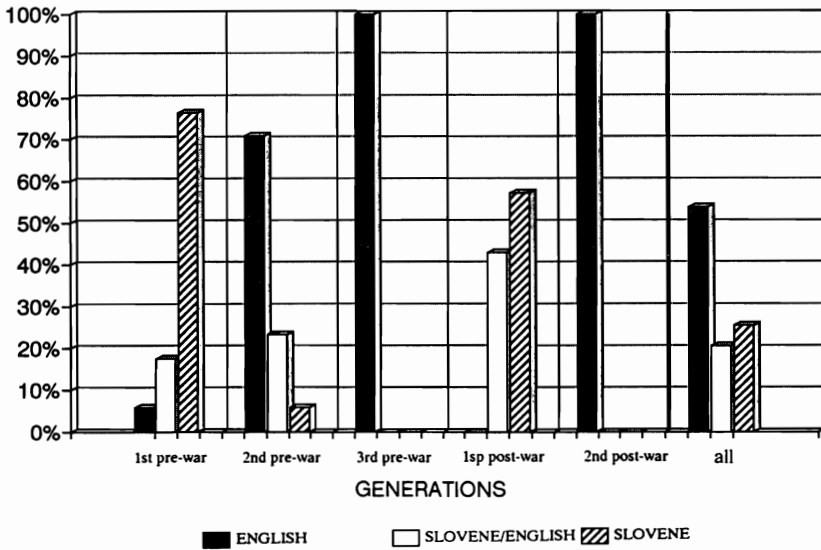


DIAGRAM VII. PREFERRED CONVERSATIONAL LANGUAGE

Their linguistic preferences are reflected in their choice of language in different situations, settings, with various interlocutors and in discussing various topics (see Diagram VII above). The pre-war immigrants choose either of the languages most of the time. Slovene is their first choice mostly in conversations with a spouse, relatives, ethnic contacts, at home, at ethnic events and in discussing Slovenia and childhood memories. For the post-war generation immigrants the frequencies with which they choose Slovene are significantly lower. The fact that the pre-war immigrants mostly attribute a very high degree of importance to the preservation of the Slovene language, whereas the post-war immigrants believe that preserving mother tongue is of only moderate importance, is another indicator of the diminishing role of Slovene in the lives of the younger generation.

The result is a very marked change in the responses with respect to language used in the household, as can be seen in Diagram VIII:

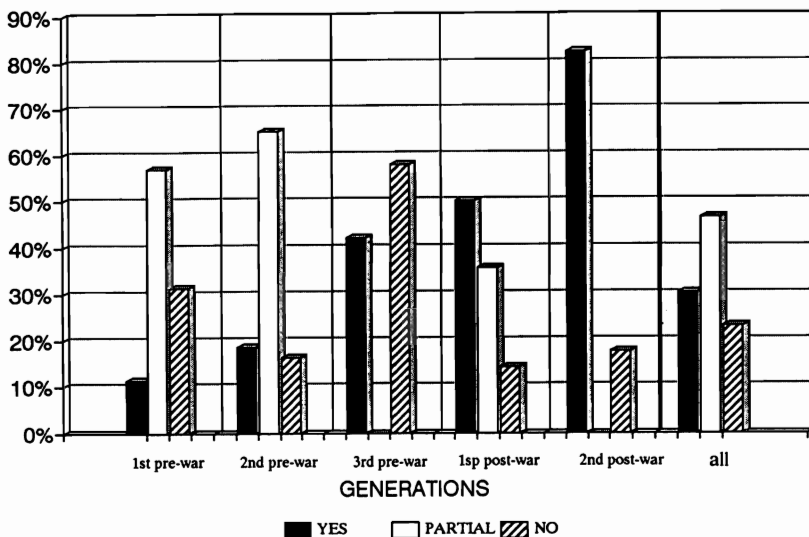


DIAGRAM VIII: HOUSEHOLD LANGUAGE SHIFT

The responses to the third group of questions, about the subjects' involvement in ethnic activities, further emphasize the differences between the two groups. As one example, see Diagram IX. While the pre-war immigrants are among the most numerous members of Slovene ethnic organizations and actively participate in ethnic events, there are among the post-war immigrants already those who are not members or, if they are, they remain to a large extent passive. The same difference is observed in the subscription rate to American Slovene periodicals as well as to those published in Slovenia. There are many more among the pre-war generation that subscribe to them than there are among the post-war generation.

As for their socialization patterns, the overwhelming majority of the pre-war immigrants report that they have over 50% of friends who are of Slovene descent. For the post-war generation this percentage is significantly lower. Their contact with Slovene friends is only occasional or even rare and limited

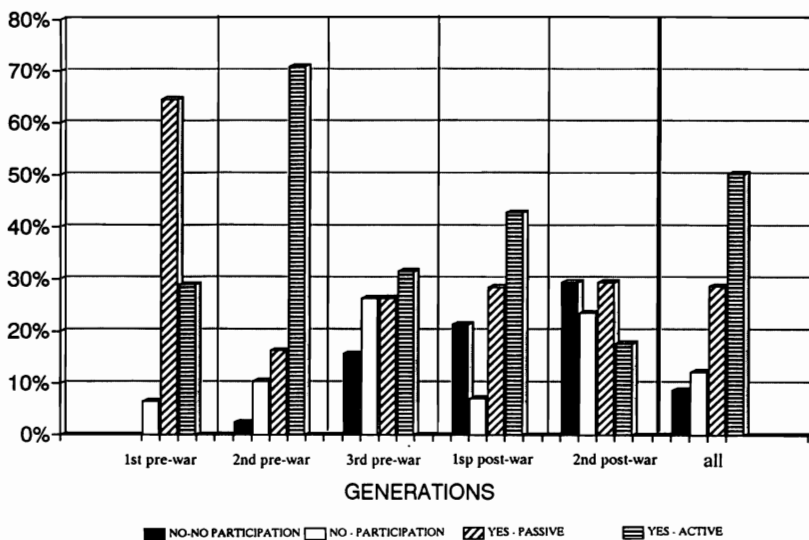


DIAGRAM IX. MEMBERSHIP IN AMERICAN-SLOVENE ETHNIC ORGANIZATIONS

to ethnic events, whereas the pre-war immigrants meet on a fairly regular basis. A considerable number still have Slovene neighbors, whereas for the post-war immigrants the percentage is decreasing. A similar phenomenon is observed in the area of contact with Slovenia. While all report having relatives in Slovenia, the pre-war immigrants' contacts with them are much more frequent than is the case with the post-war immigrants.

Finally, the respondents were asked to evaluate how important Slovene was in maintaining their ethnic identity compared to other factors such as culture, music, religion, work ethic, and cuisine; see Diagram X. The pre-war immigrants rank culture in the highest position, followed by religion, cuisine, work ethic, language and other factors. For the post-war immigrants the order of ethnic identification factors is almost identical, except that language is the third and not the second least important factor (religion precedes it). It is interesting that, despite the relatively high degree of bilingualism of the pre-war immigrants, language scores so low. This points to a discre-

pancy between the degree of language maintenance and the sense of ethnic identity. While the former is obviously on the decrease, the sense of belonging to a specific ethnic group is undoubtedly very strong. The answers about the overwhelming majority observing some ethnic tradition, about their improved perception of ethnic heritage over the years and about the importance of being Slovene support this observation.

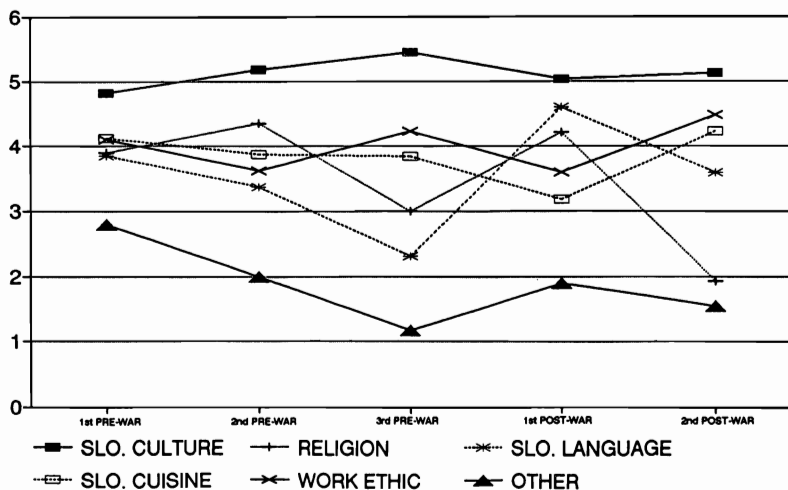


DIAGRAM X. PERCEIVED ORDER OF IMPORTANCE OF ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION FACTORS

From the characteristics of the two groups that were presented above we can single out those factors that work toward preserving the Slovene language and those that discourage its use. In order to present them from a broader perspective I will make use of the data obtained from the immigrants belonging to other generations as well (the first pre-war and post-war generations and the third pre-war generation).

2. Factors Encouraging Slovene Language Maintenance

There are basically two such factors: the respondents' relatively high degree of proficiency in the Slovene language and

their relatively positive attitudes toward preserving the language. These factors in turn depend on a number of other variables, which will be examined below.

2.1. *A high degree of proficiency in the Slovene language, which depends on:*

2.1.1. The respondents' relatively high linguistic competence³ in Slovene

This is higher if the language was learned in Slovenia and before the age of ten (the first generation). Also important is the manner in which it was learned. Formal instruction as compared to informal acquisition not only gives the respondents the advantage of mastering the standard rather than just the dialectal and regional varieties, but also of having reading and writing skills as opposed to mere speaking. The higher the level of education, the higher the competence. Also, while attending Slovene language classes in the U.S. has undoubtedly a very positive effect on the respondents' linguistic competence, this is obviously much higher when the respondents have had the opportunity of earning their education in Slovenia (the first post-war generation). With those respondents who were born in the U.S., we observe a higher competence in Slovene, when their household language during their childhood was Slovene (the second pre-war generation). With those who were born in Slovenia, the general rule is that their competence in Slovene is diminishing with the length of their residence in the U.S.. More recent immigrants, therefore, have a better command of Slovene.

It should be noted that the respondents' self-evaluation of their proficiency in Slovene does not always reflect the actual state of affairs. The older generations, especially, often overestimate their proficiency in Slovene. On the other hand, some res-

³ The term "competence" is used in a narrower sense than the term "proficiency." The latter covers not only linguistic competence, but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence.

pondents show too little confidence in this respect and are at times almost too apologetic about their Slovene. Such responses are understandable in view of the fact that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to be objective about one's own linguistic behavior. Regardless of their accuracy, such assessments are valuable as they tell us also a lot about the respondents' attitudes toward the language.

2.1.2. The respondents' relatively high frequency of opportunities to use Slovene

These opportunities are the highest for those who are married to partners of Slovene descent (this is demonstrated especially in the case of the second pre-war generation). Ethnic marriages therefore exert one of the most positive effects on Slovene language maintenance. The presence of grandparents in the household (or at least frequent contact with them) represents an equally strong factor in this respect. I was told on more than one occasion that grandparents were the only reason for the continuing use of Slovene.

In general, the opportunity to use Slovene increases relative to a higher percentage of Slovene-speaking persons known to the respondents and relative to their regular or frequent contact with them. Those who, for example, are actively involved in ethnic organizations are much more likely to find more opportunities to speak Slovene than those who are not. Living in neighborhoods where there is a relatively large percentage of American Slovenes and, especially, associating with Slovene-speaking friends and acquaintances generally provide a fertile ground for using Slovene. Also positive in this respect are frequent contacts with Slovene relatives, either in the U.S.A. or in Slovenia; and visiting Slovenia.

Furthermore, a higher proficiency in Slovene is observed in those respondents who have the opportunity to not only speak, but also to write or at least read in Slovene (e.g., subscribing to Slovene-language publications, or correspondence in Slovene).

2.2. *Positive attitudes toward the Slovene language*

While positive views on the part of the immigrants toward the Slovene language are by no means a guarantee that they will actually preserve it, such views do act in favor of the language maintenance. This is best illustrated by the case of the second pre-war generation immigrants. When they were growing up, the political atmosphere was such that the immigrant languages were considered inferior to the dominant English. As a result, the majority of them decided not to teach their children Slovene. With the 1960s and the ethnic revival — when all that was ethnic was no longer a stigma, but rather a source of pride — many in the third generation began to search for their roots and generally expressed regret that they had not learned Slovene. It could be argued that the first post-war generation immigrants, who live in a period when being ethnic is seen as an enrichment rather than as an embarrassment, also do not teach their children Slovene. The low level of competence in Slovene in the case of the second post-war generation case, however, is more likely to be the result of their more pragmatic orientation and in their living in neighborhoods where there are few opportunities to associate with Slovenes, than of any negative attitudes toward Slovene on their part. It is no doubt important how the respondents see the language in terms of its pragmatic value. Those who see it not only as a vehicle of preserving their ethnic identity, but also as a means of communication (with friends and relatives, and visiting Slovenia) are more likely to go to the trouble of learning it.

The respondents' attitudes toward the preservation of Slovene are further reflected in their view of the role of the Slovene language in their ethnic identification. The higher they rank it, the more proficient they are in it (e.g. the first post-war generation immigrants, for whom the Slovene language is the second most important factor in preserving their ethnic identity). And finally, the disapproval of code-switching, i.e., concern about the purity of the language and its not being mixed with English, is also found to be associated with higher proficiency in Slovene.

As mentioned, the fact that the respondents attribute a high degree of importance to the preservation of the Slovene langu-

age, does not necessarily mean that they put this into practice. Discrepancies and contradictions are often found, both in the responses to this particular question and their actual linguistic behavior, as well as in the area of the preferred conversational language and language choice under certain circumstances. Despite such contradictions we can conclude that positive attitudes toward the Slovene language in general seem to be conducive to its at least temporary maintenance.

3. Factors Encouraging Language Shift from Slovene to English

These factors are the opposite of those that encourage its maintenance, and will be briefly discussed.

3.1. *A low degree of proficiency in the Slovene language*, which depends on:

3.1.1. The respondents' relatively low linguistic competence in the language

The respondents that show low linguistic competence are usually the ones that learned Slovene in the U.S.A., often after the age of ten. Slightly exceptional in this respect are the second pre-war generation immigrants, whose competence in Slovene is relatively high, but even in their case their competence is lower than that of the Slovene-born immigrants. Lower competence in Slovene is also associated with no formal instruction in the language, with English being the household language during the respondents' childhood (in the case of those born in the U.S.A.) and with longer rather than shorter periods of residence in the U.S.A. (in the case of Slovene-born immigrants).

3.1.2. The respondents' relatively low frequency of opportunities to use Slovene

The most detrimental factor for the maintenance of Slovene is perhaps intermarriage. With marriages where the spouses are of different ethnic origins, the use of Slovene is normally ruled out and English adopted as the only language. This effectively eliminates any chance of transmitting even fragmentary know-

ledge of Slovene to the children. It goes without saying that those respondents who do not have either Slovene grandparents or Slovene older relatives, or frequent contact with them, are also more susceptible to the language shift and its eventual loss.

The second factor that contributes most to the language shift is the respondents' moving out of neighborhoods with a large percentage of American Slovenes. This makes it more difficult for them to participate in the ethnic events or be active members of ethnic organizations. This is especially true for the younger generations, who move away for reasons of social and economic mobility and base their relationships, both professional and personal, on criteria other than ethnicity. Rare or no contact with Slovene-speaking persons and with Slovenia are therefore almost a sure sign of the Slovene language rapidly disappearing. It seems almost redundant to say that the lack of interest in subscribing to Slovene-language periodicals is just one more factor that accelerates the loss of language.

3.2. Negative or indifferent attitudes toward the Slovene language

Just as the respondents' positive views of the Slovene language work in favor of its maintenance, their perceiving it in a negative or even in an indifferent way normally contributes to its attrition. The second pre-war generation immigrants who wanted their children not to be in any way associated with speaking a "foreign" language, are again the best example of such attitudes. The unfavorable political situation, in which anybody that is different in culture, language or ethnicity from the dominant population is unacceptable, only accelerates the trend whereby the immigrants disassociate themselves from their ethnic origins. Language as a very powerful external symbol of their being different from the rest of the society is a source of the immigrants' being negatively stereotyped and is obviously one of the first things that they give up.

Another factor that works against preserving Slovene is the perception on the part of the immigrants that the language has no practical value in terms of communication. They therefore attri-

bute only a moderate degree of importance or, in some cases, none at all, to its preservation. As only a very peripheral, almost “decorative” part of their ethnic heritage, where almost anything else from folk music to work ethic ranks higher in their ethnic identification, it has almost no chance of survival.

In the current situation we observe not so much a negative view of the Slovene language, but rather indifference to it. The result — language shift from Slovene to English — remains the same in both cases.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, we see that the situation in the community under investigation is that of a very unstable, transitional bilingualism. In the sense that Slovene can be used only in ethnic contexts, but not in the broader society, we could even speak of a diglossic situation. The fact, however, that even there English is rapidly gaining ground over Slovene precludes such a label. The most striking feature is the greatly accelerated pace at which the second post-war generation is being integrated, both linguistically and culturally, into the mainstream society if we compare it with the second pre-war generation. We can in fact say that the second post-war generation has its counterpart in the third and not in the second pre-war generation. The language shift from English to Slovene, which in families of pre-war immigrants took place over the course of three generations, has occurred in just two generations in the case of post-war immigrant families. With no significant influx of new immigrants, prospects of maintaining the Slovene language are practically non-existent.

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POVZETEK**STOPNJA OHRANITVE SLOVENSKEGA JEZIKA MED
AMERIŠKIMI SLOVENCMI**

Namen prispevka je določiti stopnjo ohranitve slovenščine med pripadniki 2. generacije ameriških Slovencev v Clevelandu. Identificirani sta dve skupini dejavnikov, ki glede na svoj pozitivni ali negativni predznak vzpodbujata ali ovirata proces ohranjanja maternega jezika. Gre za stopnjo obvladanja slovenskega jezika pri priseljencih slovenskega rodu in za njihov odnos do slovenščine in do angleščine. Poseben poudarek je na razlikah med predvojnimi in povojnimi priseljenci, pa tudi na odnosu med stopnjo ohranitve materinščine in občutkom etnične pripadnosti pri sodelujočih v raziskavi.