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LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY: THE CASE OF THE VANCOUVER SLOVENE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between mother tongue maintenance on the one hand and the sense of ethnic identity in immigrant contexts on the other represents one of the more intriguing issues for researchers. Some see language as a determining feature of ethnic identity, while for others language does not play a central role at all. It is the purpose of this article to explore this very complex and intricate relationship in the case of a small Slovene Canadian community in Vancouver. The findings are based on empirically gathered data; both the instrumental and literary functions of the language are taken into account.

Keywords: mother tongue maintenance, ethnic identity, literature, Slovene Canadians, Vancouver

LINGUA, LETTERATURA E IDENTITÀ ETNICA: IL CASO DELLA COMUNITÀ SLOVENA DI VANCOUVER

SINTESI

Lo studio dei rapporti tra la conservazione della lingua madre e il senso di appartenenza etnica rappresenta una vera sfida di ricerca scientifica. Alcuni ritengono che la lingua determini in modo decisivo l'identità etnica dei parlanti, mentre altri non le attribuiscono un ruolo così centrale. Il presente articolo esamina questa tematica complessa sull'esempio di una piccola comunità slovena di Vancouver. Le conclusioni presentate si basano su un'analisi di dati raccolti mediante una ricerca empirica e tengono conto sia della funzione strumentale sia di quella letteraria della lingua.

Parole chiave: conservazione della lingua madre, identità etnica, letteratura, gli sloveni del Canada, Vancouver

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between mother maintenance of immigrants and their descendants on the one hand and their ethnic identity on the other is one of the more intriguing issues for researchers. The answer as to whether language is a crucial marker of one's ethnic identity is all but straightforward, as it depends on a number of personal, social, economic, cultural, historical and other factors, and may vary across immigrant communities. A survey of the literature thus reveals different results pertaining to these questions: those who claim that language is an intrinsic and determining feature of ethnic identity (e.g. Smolicz, 1992; De Vries, 1990; Schimdt, 2002), and those who feel that language, even though intricately related to ethnic identity, does not play a significant or even central role in its construction (e.g. Renan, 1990; Myhill, 2003). Others, still, believe that the relationship between the two is being constantly redefined (e.g. Fishman, 1998, 2001; Fishman, Garcia, 2010). It is the purpose of this paper to examine the link between language and ethnic identity in the case of Slovene Canadians in Vancouver in order to see whether and to what extent language is a core value for them.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITY AND METHODOLOGY

Slovene immigrants and their descendants living in Vancouver on the West Coast of Canada represent a relatively small community. There are approx. 2000 of them according to Census data, of which some 400 are active members of their sole ethnic organization The Slovenian¹ Society. They meet regularly in the Slovenian Hall for various meetings, to celebrate holidays such as Christmas, Mother's Day, and so-called Slovenska trgat-ev (Grape Harvest); they have a choir, a folklore group and a Slovene language class. At first sight, Vancouver seems a somewhat unlikely candidate for studying Slovene-English language contact. Having previously conducted research in Toronto (Šabec, 1999, 2011) with the largest number of Canadians of Slovene descent and a very rich network of ethnic and cultural organizations, I felt, however, that Vancouver might be just the place to gain a better insight into whether small groups of immigrants² are, despite unfavorable circumstances, able to maintain their mother tongue and a sense of ethnic identity and, if so, to what extent.

Slovene immigration to Vancouver goes back to the second half of the 20th century, with the first political refugees (after World War II) and then economic immigrants (from 1951 on). During my fieldwork in Vancouver (November 2009), I was interested in the differences between those who were born in Slovenia and who had immigrated to Canada and their Canadian-born children and grandchildren. In order to obtain comparable data, I prepared a questionnaire with 66 questions about the participants' language use, socialization patterns, ethnic activities as well as their attitudes toward language and ethnicity³. 87 participants responded, but due to space limitations, only the most relevant responses to a few selected questions will be analyzed here.

In the period since my fieldwork in Vancouver I have had a number of questionnaires returned by e-mail which, in general, do not differ from the ones obtained on the ground. Sample responses from these questionnaires will be used for illustration purposes. Recently, I have also become interested in the literary dimension of language and its impact on the immigrants' feeling of ethnic identity, which is why I had asked them to share their thoughts and views about the role of literature in their lives with me. As expected, I only received a few responses (after all, dealing with literature requires a very high level of language proficiency and a certain degree of sophistication), but these were highly relevant, as they revealed interesting aspects of the relationship between language, literature and ethnic identity.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Mother tongue and preferred conversational language

The responses to the question about the immigrants' mother tongue predictably show that all Slovene-born participants (35 or 40 % of the entire sample) cite Slovene. After all, most of them spoke no English at the time of immigration. The answers about their preferred conversational language, however, are already more diverse. Only 32 % choose Slovene, while 78% opt for English and 3 participants cite both languages. The following responses best illustrate the complexity of living in an English dominated environment:

- *Materin jezik mi omogoča boljše izražanje sebe, zlasti še tiste najbolj globoke delce sebe. Kadar se izrazim v slovenskem jeziku se zdi da dobim več empatije od poslušalca, prinaša olajšanje ...*⁴

1 The terms Slovene and Slovenian mean the same and can be used interchangeably. Some institutions and/or individuals prefer one over the other (e.g. Society for Slovene Studies vs. Canadian Slovenian Congress), which explains the different usage in this article. Personally, I am in favor of either term as long as it is used consistently, which is why I have adhered to the use of Slovene, the term that I have been using since I first started to research the topic of Slovene immigration.

2 The terms "immigrant/s" and "generation/s" are used in reference to all participants in the study for convenience sake. Technically speaking, only those who were born in Slovenia and had immigrated to Canada are immigrants, while their children and grandchildren are already Canadian citizens.

3 The questionnaire was first used in my Cleveland study (Šabec, 1995, 265–272).

4 The participants' responses are given in their original form. English translations are provided in parentheses when necessary.

(Mother tongue enables me to express myself better, especially to express my innermost thoughts. When I speak Slovenian, I have a feeling that I receive more empathy from the listener and also that I'm relieved to be speaking in my mother tongue ...)

- *Now I feel more comfortable speaking English, as my husband who is Slovenian, but was born in Canada, also finds it easier to speak English, although when he was young he learned to speak Slovenian.*

For the majority of younger, Canadian-born generations, both the mother tongue and the preferred language is already English. They learned some Slovene from their parents as children, but came into contact with English in school and have since then felt more comfortable speaking English. Some still remember some Slovene sayings and phrases, especially those related to food and tradition, and use them occasionally in conversation with parents and grandparents. These, on the other hand, tell how, at the time when their children were growing up, Slovene carried a stigma of immigration, which is why they often chose not to teach their children Slovene, but rather encouraged them to learn English as best as possible in order to succeed in mainstream society.

- *Doma smo prva leta govorili slovensko. Ko so otroci začeli hoditi v šolo in dobili prijatelje v soseščini, so začeli govoriti angleško tudi doma. Ko je prvi sin začel hoditi v vrtec, je znal recitirati Cicibana (Oton Župančič) in učiteljica mi je rekla, da ga v šoli ni hotel nihče poslušati. Ker pač ni bila njihova krivda, da smo živeli v Kanadi, sem spoznala, da je pač to njihova dežela in sem zato kupila angleške "Nursery Rhymes", saj sva tudi midva imela službe, kjer je znanje angleščine bilo potrebno.*

(During the first years we spoke Slovene at home. When our children started school and made friends with the neighborhood kids, they began to use English also at home. When our first son went to kindergarten, he was able to recite Ciciban (Oton Župančič) and his teacher told me that nobody at school would listen to him. I realized that it was not their fault that we lived in Canada, that this was their country, so I bought him English "Nursery Rhymes". My husband and I also needed English at work.)

The importance and reasons for preserving Slovene

The way in which all the generations look at the importance of preserving their mother tongue today has since then largely changed and the majority professes that language is an important part of their identity. The Slovene-born, naturally, rank it higher in terms of ethnic identification than the Canadian-born, who often give

priority to ethnic music, cuisine, old traditions and culture. Nevertheless, they all feel that Slovene is something to be cherished and valued.

- I feel that it is important to preserve the Slovenian language, as that will also preserve the Slovenian culture, and knowing your roots and where you came from is very important.
- Very important. When I was young, I had the opinion of why should I learn/speak Slovenian because no one else could especially at school and it is such a small country. In adult life, I have had many experiences and encounters regarding Slovenian that made me realize that this world is small; that even though Slovenia is small, it has reached far & wide.

Self-evaluation of proficiency in Slovene

The responses with regard to their proficiency in Slovene, however, are telling and reveal a discrepancy between the declared love of the mother tongue on the one hand and the actual state of affairs on the other. The fact that only three respondents filled out the questionnaire in Slovene, even though they were given the choice of either language, only confirms that.

The following statement from an eminent and very active member of the community, who among other things, teaches Slovene language classes is very telling:

- *Stanje slovenskega jezika v našem društvu ni razveseljivo. Pogovorni jezik na naših prireditvah je angleščina. Celó v odboru društva na sestankih vedno govorimo angleško, saj nekateri sploh ne znajo slovensko. Jaz vedno skušam govoriti slovensko s člani, ki znajo slovensko, vendar skoraj vsi kar hitro preidejo na angleščino. Še težje je komunicirati v slovenščini po elektronski pošti. Društveno pismo še vedno pišem v v obeh jezikih, čeprav sem prepričan, da praktično nihče ne bere slovenskega dela. Slovenske knjige in filme, ki jih imamo, uporabljam v glavnem pri pouku slovenščine. Včasih si kdo kaj izposodi. Tu in tam predvajamo slovenske filme na kakšni družabni prireditvi, vendar na žalost ni prevelikega zanimanja.*

Starejših članov je manj in manj, mnogi so že pomrli, drugi so bolehní in prešibki, da bi prihajali na naše prireditve. Člani bolj srednjih let pa imajo večinoma mešane zakone in doma govorijo angleško. Nekateri še pripeljejo svoje otroke ali vnuke na slovenski folklorni ples, za jezik se pa ne zanimajo prav veliko. In tako se slovenstvo pri nas redči ... Je še živo seveda: na proslavah Materinskega dneva in na božičnih prireditvah imamo precej deklamacij, petja in iger v slovenščini. Trudimo se, da ohranjamo, kar imamo, in razvijamo ...

(The state of Slovene in the Slovenian Society is not particularly promising. We speak English at

our functions. Even our board meetings are always conducted in English because some don't speak Slovene at all. I always try to speak Slovene with those members who know Slovene, but they all soon switch to English. It is even more difficult to use Slovene in e-mails. I still write the society newsletter in both languages even though I am sure that practically nobody reads the Slovene part of it. We have Slovene books and films and I use them mostly in language classes. Sometimes somebody borrows a book. Every now and then we play Slovene films at a social event, but there is little interest.

There are fewer and fewer older members, many had died, others are ill or too weak to come to our functions. Those middle-aged ones are mostly in mixed marriages and speak English at home. Some still bring their children and grandchildren to the Slovene folklore dances, but show less interest in the language. And thus our Sloveneness is declining ... It is still alive, of course: we have plenty of recitations and songs and plays in Slovene at the celebrations of Mother's Day and Christmas. We are trying our best to preserve what we have and to keep it going ...)

The comparison between the Slovene-born participants on the one hand and the Canadian-born on the other thus shows a rapid decline in Slovene language competence among the latter. The language shift toward English is understandable in view of extra-linguistic factors discouraging the use of Slovene (social and economic advancement, little time and few opportunities to socialize with other Slovenes, ethnically mixed marriages) and is happening despite individual efforts (e.g. Slovene language classes) to stop or at least slow down this process. The feeling that language matters nevertheless prevails. Among the reasons for preserving the language, they list both practical and/or symbolic ones.

- *Heritage and to communicate with relatives in Slovenia.*
- *Although from an economic point of view it may not seem very relevant to speak Slovenian in Canada, speaking another language is always beneficial for one's own enrichment, and of course for Slovenians it will put you in touch with another nation.*
- *To communicate with visitors and not have others understand you.*
- *Mogoče se bodo preselili nazaj v Slovenijo. (Maybe they will move back to Slovenia.) – a recent immigrant about her young children.*

The role of literature

Having observed the immigrants' use of Slovene (or lack of it) in everyday life as well as their attitudes toward Slovene and English, I wondered whether this en-

vironment, no matter how unfavorable to bilingualism, allowed for more complex and sophisticated (perhaps even elevated) uses of language. I had in mind the role of literature among the immigrants and its possible impact on their feeling of ethnic bond with the old homeland. I realized, of course, that there would be at best only a few participants sufficiently competent in Slovene to be able to read literature or even endeavor to write themselves, but I decided to explore this dimension of their immigrant experience as well.

The replies came from a few participants who share a love of Slovene books and from three persons who have even tried their hand at writing themselves (one for a Slovene magazine and two at amateur poetry). In all cases the respondents belong to the first generation and it is clear that literature holds an important place in their lives. One writes how she feels more "at home" when reading Slovene books, how these are not only a source of new information, but also remind her of the old homeland. From other excerpts, too, we see how they feel that literature not only broadens their horizons and triggers their curiosity, but also creates a feeling of closeness with all things Slovene. They mention names of Slovene authors, regretting that shades of meaning often get lost in translation, which is why reading the original works is a more authentic experience. This is unfortunately very often unattainable for the younger generations and certainly for children. Nevertheless, two describe how they read children's books to their children when they were little and even kept some as a souvenir after they had grown up. One mentions how their parents brought books as presents from Slovenia when they came to visit and how disappointed they were when reading them was too hard a task for the children. Finally, one writes about how she donated books to the Slovenian Home so that other readers may borrow them. All are also aware of other larger Slovene Canadian communities such as Toronto, where there is more cultural activity, some subscribe to their publications (occasionally contributing to them) as well as to Slovene publications, thus keeping in touch with the homeland.

- *Berem bolj angleško, slovenske knjige le, kadar so na razpolago, ali če jih prinesem iz Slovenije. Literatura je zame predvsem vir razširjanja obzorij, pomirila, razvedrila in, če govorim o slovenski literaturi, tudi vir informacij o domačem kraju in objujanje spominov nanj. Ko berem slovensko knjigo, se počutim bolj "doma" in lepo mi je pri duši.*

(I read more in English, Slovene books only when they are available or when I bring them from Slovenia. Literature broadens my horizons, calms me, cheers me up and, when talking about Slovene literature, it is a source of information about my home country and a way of reminiscing about it. When I read a Slovene book, I feel more "at home", it is like balm for the soul.)

- *Rada berem slovenske knjigice vnučkom in prebiram mesečne publikacije kot so npr. Ognjišče ali Glasilo kanadskih Slovencev. Tukaj na zahodu smo bolj oddaljeni od Toronta, kjer je več literarne ustvarjalnosti in kjer izdajajo nekatere publikacije. Pri njih včasih sodelujem s članki o življenju naše skupnosti.*
(I like to read Slovene books to my grandchildren. I also read monthlies such as Ognjišče or Glasilo kanadskih Slovencev. Here in the West, we are far away from Toronto, where there is more literary production and publications. I sometimes contribute to those publications with reports on the life in our community.)
 - *Izseljenci smo ponavadi precej iztrgani od svoje dežele. Vsako leto se tudi čustvena distanca veča. Seveda imamo sanje pa stare spomine. Sama ima nekaj knjg v slovenskem jeziku. Odkar obstaja internet, preberem kakšno zanimivost iz domovine tudi po spletu.*
(Us immigrants are usually cut off from our country. With each passing year the emotional distance grows. Of course we have dreams and old memories. I own some books in Slovene. Since the introduction of the Internet, I also use that to read about goings-on in the old homeland.)
 - *Z možem še vedno bereva slovenske knjige ali večina bereva angleške knjige. Nekatere slovenske knjige ki so bile prevedene iz drugih jezikov niso preveč dobre ker se dostikrat pomen izgubi če niso pravilno prevedene. Tudi slovenščina se izgublja, ker je preveč tujk (popačenih) rabljenih.*
(My husband and I still read Slovene books, even though we read mostly English ones. Some Slovene books translated from other languages are not too good because the meaning often gets lost in poor translation. Slovene, too, is being lost because of an excessive number of words contaminated with a foreign influence.)
 - *Seveda nama je slovenska literatura pomembna. Pri nas doma smo mnogo brali. Moj oče je imel obširno knjižnico doma sestavljeno iz domače in svetovne literature. Brali smo Levstika, Tavčarja, kot otroci tudi Otona Župančiča, pa druge avtorje kot so Dostojevski, Voltaire, Balzac, Cervantes. Ko sva prišla v Kanado, sva to čitala seveda v angleščini. Torej prvo smo bili izpostavljeni slovenski literaturi, katera nama je zbudila čut za svetovno literaturo, ki je prevedena v angleščino*
(Of course, Slovene literature means a lot to us. Back home – in Slovenia – we used to read a lot. My father had an extensive library with Slovene and world literature. We read Levstik, Tavčar, as children also Oton Župančič, also other authors, Dostojevski Voltaire, Balzac, Cervantes
- etc. When we came to Canada, we reread them in English. We were first exposed to Slovene literature and that triggered in us an interest in world literature that had been translated into English.)
- *Knjige, ki sem jih prinesla v Slovenski dom, so darilo in za dobrobit vsem članom. Imam še nekaj otroških knjig, katere je v glavnem prinesla moja mama najinim otrokom in vem, da hočejo nekatere obdržati za spomin.*
(The books which I donated to the Slovenian Hall are a gift at the disposal of all members. I still own a few children's books that my mother had brought to our children when they were little and I know that they would like to keep some of them as a souvenir.)
 - *V teh letih so nas obiskale naše mame (obedve učiteljici), ki so prinesle mnogo slovenskih knjig: otroške, literarna dela kakor Cankarja, poezija od Franceta Prešerna itd. Tako čtivo je bilo nedosegljivo za naše mlade. Lahko so se pogovarjali v slovenskem jeziku, seveda z veliko slovničnimi napakami, kar je bilo silno hudo, posebno za Janitovo mamo.*
(In those years my husband's mother and mine (both school teachers) came to visit and brought a lot of Slovene books: children's books, literary works by Cankar, Prešeren's poetry etc. These were too difficult for our youngsters to read. They could hold a conversation in Slovene, with numerous grammatical mistakes of course, which was very difficult, especially for my husband's mother⁵.)
- Finally, we need to turn our attention to the two elderly ladies who use Slovene to express themselves through poetry and plays. One writes poems for various celebratory occasions that take place in the Slovenian Hall (I personally witnessed one such occasion when her grandchildren recited one of her poems, having learned the Slovene lyrics by heart), while the other does the same, but also writes more personal, intimate, and often very profound poems. In a scanned letter written in neat handwriting and with an occasional slightly archaic word, this over 80-year-old lady describes how she finds inspiration and how she writes in Slovene, which to her sounds beautiful. She realizes how Slovene has lost its practical value, but she refuses to give it up, as it is the only means through which she can express her true emotions. In an excerpt from a poem she addresses the dilemma of immigrants, who are torn between the two countries and no longer feel at home in either.
- *Navdih pisanja se je ojačil, lotila sem se pisati igre in razne poezije za odrasle in tudi za otroke, katere so nam služile pri raznih prireditvah in programih.*
V tem (pisanju) sem našla vir ustvarjanja, kar mi je olajšalo življenje ... začela sem iskati nekakšno

5 The respondent's husband was a professional actor before immigrating to Canada.

jedro ... v trenutku ko se je v mislih sprožilo jedro, so se besede kar same od sebe izlivale v stihe kakor bi mi nekdo tiho šepetal na uho. Pisanje mi je polnilo čas in dušo in srce, saj slovenska beseda lepo zveni.

... tudi na prireditvah še vedno pomagam, če je potrebno. Sicer v slovenskem jeziku se nič več ne obnese.

(The inspiration grew stronger; I began to write plays and also poems for adults and also for children, which were used for various functions and performances.

In writing I found a source of creativity, which made my life easier ... I began to search for some inner-self ... at the moment when this inner-self became present in my thoughts, words began to pour out unprompted as if somebody were whispering them softly in my ear. Writing filled my time and soul and heart because of the beauty of the Slovene words. ... I still help with functions if asked; of course, very few still understand the Slovene language.)

- Sem tujec v tujini in tujec doma,
Kar je bilo znano, druge obrise ima ...
(I am a stranger abroad and a stranger at home
what was familiar now has different contours⁶ ...)

It is impressive, but perhaps not surprising, that all those who shared their views about literature with me, did so in Slovene (as opposed to the majority of those who filled out the questionnaire in English). I believe that this can be taken as a sign of their being more deeply rooted in the Slovene heritage and more emotionally attached to their mother tongue.

The importance of being Slovene and changed perception of ethnic identity

Yet another question asked about the importance of being of Slovene descent. Regardless of the immigrants' (in)ability to speak Slovene, however, their perception that being of Slovene extraction enriches them both personally and culturally persists.

- *Biti Slovenka mi pomeni vse: spoštovanje do mojih staršev, dediščine in kulture.* (To be Slovene means everything: respect for my parents, my heritage and culture.)
- *It defines who I am, my life values, and my work ethic. It defines my childhood and my life experience, being brought up in a Slovenian home.*
- *Le s spoštovanjem svoje rodne domovine bom lahko spoštovala tudi svojo novo domovino.* (Only by respecting my own homeland can I also respect my new homeland).

Asked about whether their ethnic awareness had changed over time, most answered in the negative,

while some went even further, as illustrated by the following response:

- *Yes, my view has changed, when you are young there are other things that seem more important to you, but as you grow older and have more time to reflect you realize how important it is to keep your roots strong and how important it is to keep your traditions which enrich your life and also bring stability to your life in this fast changing world.*

DISCUSSION

The findings show a close connection between mother tongue maintenance and a sense of ethnic identity in the case of the 1st generation of immigrants. In the case of the younger generations, however, there are very few who still speak Slovene. For these who are still able to speak the language of their parents and grandparents, this competence no doubt represents an added value both in terms of being able to communicate with other speakers of Slovene and in terms of feeling a special bond with the cultural traditions of their ancestors. Those who do not, nevertheless report taking pride in their ethnic and cultural heritage.

Interpreting the link between mother tongue maintenance and ethnic identity is therefore more complex than we would expect. Language shift does not automatically equal a loss of ethnic identity and the relationship between the two is not fixed. Rather, both language and ethnicity are dynamic social phenomena that may keep changing over time and according to the demands imposed on immigrants by their new circumstances. The literature offers various models of the ways in which immigrants handle the dilemma of adapting to new environments. Berry's acculturation theory (1990), for instance, focuses primarily on acculturation processes. He identifies four alternative acculturation strategies that minorities can use when they come into contact with the majority: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. They imply various degrees of adjustment that members of minority groups make in relation to majority groups. Assimilation thus means that original cultural features (language, religion etc.) are given up completely in favor of those of the majority; in separation, no features of the majority culture are accepted and only the original minority culture is valued; in marginalization, neither the majority nor the minority can offer a satisfactory identity, which in terms of language can mean the loss of the original language without the simultaneous sufficient acquisition of the dominant language. Neither of these three strategies apply in the case of Vancouver Slovenes. Their experience both on individual and community levels can be much more accurately described as integration, a process in which one

6 Excerpt from Vera Uršnik's poem *Neizbrisni vtisi*/Indelible Impressions.

works toward becoming an integral part of mainstream society, but at the same time maintains a degree of original cultural integrity.

From the very beginning, Slovene immigrants showed a considerable degree of adaptability, as in most cases they began with little or even no knowledge of English and in low-level jobs. Realizing that English proficiency is however crucial to obtaining equal opportunities for their children in society, they did not hesitate to invest every effort to ensure adequate education for them. Each consecutive generation thus progressed, gradually moving up the social and economic ladder. Their ambition to become part of mainstream society, however, did not prevent them from feeling Slovene.

As soon as they settled in the new world, they did everything they could so as to not forget their origins. In larger communities such as Toronto or, in the case of the U.S.A., Cleveland, they set up ethnic organizations such as fraternal benefit societies which provided mutual help in times of hardships, but also served as centers of cultural activities. They gathered on a regular basis, organized various events, sang in so-called singing societies, played in polka bands, even performed in theater groups. They had Slovene churches and Sunday schools, they printed newspapers in the Slovene language and engaged in many other activities that bonded them as an ethnically distinct group. The intensity with which they engage in these activities, of course, then and now depend on the size of each individual community and consequently, the resources available to them. Thus, Vancouver Slovenes have a single Slovenian Society, but are active and keep track of the events in Slovenia. Their identification with Sloveneness, for instance, came to the fore in 1991, when Slovenia gained independence from former Yugoslavia. Individuals from the immigrant community and the Slovenian society as an organization stood shoulder to shoulder with their fellow Slovenes when they wrote to its members "We must ensure that all our members are aware of the Census and why it is essential that they identify themselves correctly. Make sure your children and grandchildren know how to accurately fill in their Census forms with 'Slovenian' if they are asked about their ethnicity" (Plut, 2008, 124). It thus comes as no surprise that practically all maintain contact with their relatives in Slovenia and have visited or plan to visit their parents' homeland, while many of the younger generation also keep in touch through the Internet. They may have less and less time and fewer opportunities to actively participate in ethnic events, but that has not diminished the general level of their ethnic awareness. On the contrary, the Vancouver Slovene community, despite its size, shows admirable signs of ethnic vitality and awareness (illustrated by one the responses: *My mother always used to say that Canada was a good step-mother, but not the real mother*). The prospect of mother tongue maintenance is, due to covert pressure by external circumstances, quite another matter.

The logical question that arises here has to do with the definition of this sense of ethnic belonging and the role of language in it. Obviously, if the feeling of ethnic identity remains high, while at the same time this cannot be said about language maintenance, language cannot be considered as the necessary, most salient or even central feature of ethnic identity. It certainly was extremely important for the first generation of immigrants, who went to great lengths to keep it alive, but this has changed over time. Nevertheless, even younger members who no longer speak or understand Slovene report that they are Canadians, but also feel Slovene. If it is not the language, then it has to be something else. From their responses we see that the determining factors are connected to culture. This is understood in the ethnic sense of the word, i.e. as a set of characteristics that distinguish one ethnic group from another (Mikolič, 2000, 174). In the participants' view, these include values such as hard work and honesty, as well as more concrete features such as customs, traditions, music, cuisine and a general feeling of having a valuable heritage. Language is also listed as important, even very important, but the actual state of affairs is proof that language has practically lost its communicative function. Its value has become largely symbolic and while many (with the exception of the younger generations who pragmatically realize that language maintenance in an English dominated environment is not a viable option) attribute a high level of importance to it, proficiency in it is fast decreasing. Another notable exception are those rare individuals who report about reading or even writing Slovene prose and poetry. They seem to have a deeper, more emotional bond with their heritage, hence the overwhelmingly positive impact of literature both on the maintenance of Slovene language and the sense of ethnic identity in the community.

CONCLUSION

In our final evaluation of language as a marker of ethnic identity, we have to conclude that language, even though it is often cited as extremely important for ethnic awareness, is in fact not essential to it. Rather, we see that the criteria for ethnic awareness which is, according to Edwards (1984, 1994) sustained by shared objective characteristics such as language and religion, or by more subjective contributions (feeling of who one is), or by some combination of both, does not apply in all cases. Instead, these criteria may "alter as groups adapt to confronting social forces. In such situations, a group's original language need not remain as an objective marker of identity" (Edwards, Chisolm, 1987, 393). As a result, language shift commonly occurs and "language as a key feature in identity is demoted to a symbolic feature or replaced entirely with other cultural features" (Edwards, Chisolm, 1987, 393). My findings confirm precisely that, as regardless of language attri-

tion, the great majority professes pride in their heritage. They identify themselves not only as Canadians, but also as Slovenes. Being of Slovene descent adds to their positive self-image, and is generally perceived as cultural enrichment. The prospects of maintaining their sense of ethnic identity are therefore bright. It does not seem to depend vitally on their mother tongue maintenance, which is why in the long run it is perhaps more accurate

to describe Slovene Canadians as bicultural rather than bilingual. Or, as one of the participants wrote: "Canada is a 'melting pot' and I love that, but there is something to be said for the love and support of your own people. We understand each other, from food to culture to religion. Not that we don't appreciate diversity, we celebrate it a lot in Canada, but we still have a need for the understanding of our people."

JEZIK, KNJIŽEVNOST IN ETNIČNA IDENTITETA V VANCOUVERSKI SLOVENSKI SKUPNOSTI

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POVZETEK

Proučevanje odnosa med ohranjanjem materinščine in občutkom etnične pripadnosti predstavlja precejšen raziskovalni izziv. Nekateri menijo, da jezik odločilno določa etnično identiteto govorcev, medtem ko mu drugi ne pripisujejo osrednje vloge. Pričujoči prispevek se loteva te kompleksne problematike v primeru majhne skupnosti kanadskih Slovencev v Vancouvru. Ugotovitve, ki temeljijo na analizi podatkov, zbranih v empirični raziskavi, kažejo, da za ohranitev občutka etnične pripadnosti izseljencev jezik ni ključnega pomena. Kot del procesa uspešnega vključevanja izseljencev v kanadsko družbo namreč že v toku dveh generacij opažamo premik od slovenščine k angleščini. Predvsem pripadniki mlajših generacij jeziku ne pripisujejo več praktične, ampak le še simbolno vrednost. Ne glede na to ostaja občutek etnične identitete živ, pri čemer je odločilnega pomena kultura (katere del je tudi literatura). Udeleženci v raziskavi dojemajo slovensko dediščino kot kulturno obogatitev, ki dopolnjuje njihovo kanadsko identiteto in pozitivno prispeva k njihovi samopodobi. Identificirajo se torej ne le kot Kanadčani, ampak hkrati tudi kot Slovenci.

Ključne besede: ohranjanje maternega jezika, etnična identiteta, književnost, slovenski Kanadčani, Vancouver

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