

Augustin Malle
Slovenian Scientific Institute
Klagenfurt/Celovec
Austria

UDC 376.744(436.6=863)

ANNOTATIONS CONCERNING THE BILINGUAL SCHOOL SYSTEM IN CARINTHIA*

The current public discussion concerning the continuation of the bilingual elementary school system in Carinthia reduces at first sight the critical situation of the minority school system to one of the many problems of institutionalized education. Yet, any reduction with regard to territory and contents would eventually bring about the complete breakdown of the minority school system in Carinthia, and would constitute a violation of Article VII of the Austrian State Treaty issued on 15 May 1955.

In administrative as well as judicial areas of Slovene or mixed population, there exist bilingual, German-Slovene classes for the first three years of primary school for all those pupils who have been enrolled by their parents. Then again, all those pupils who have been enrolled by their parents are taught the Slovene language as a subject of instruction in all the remaining classes of compulsory education.

The Slovene ethnic group in Carinthia has always accorded utmost importance to the educational formation of its members and still stresses the role of the compulsory elementary school - as it existed up to 1959 - as a mediator; this form of school had been established in the geographically clearly defined region of Carinthia and was created with the mutual consent of the three political parties that founded the second Austrian Republic as well as of the representatives of the minority. The representation of the Slovene ethnic group has emphasized in numerous memorandums, petitions and comments on drafts for bills or decrees, the necessity for an organized and organically constructed school system for its continued existence and development, and at the same time has given evidence of its constant openness and willingness to discuss it.

The present, already historical, form of the compulsory bilingual elementary school was based on the wish to stabilize and enlarge the mastery of the respective mother tongues of the pupils and at the same time to introduce the second language. Circumstances which were of practically no importance 40 years ago, today influence the early bilingualism of members of the Slovene minority in Carinthia. Firstly, there are mass communications, which are overwhelmingly in the hands of the majority and are dominated by it linguistically and in terms of content. Secondly, the economic situation of the Southern Carinthian area and the concentration of places of work, which, due to planning, are located in the so-called Carinthian central area, bring about the fact that the Carinthian Slovenes spend only a part of their

* Original: Slovene

active time in linguistically familiar surroundings and are obliged to carry out a language switch, starting with their commuting to their places of work and most of all with their arrival there. This is true also for most of the professional and higher secondary schools, not taking into consideration the **Bundesgymnasium für Slowenen**. The Slovene culture and in particular the Slovene language have a low social status in Carinthia. The estimation of the language ranges from mere under-estimation of its range of application to the attitude of saying that knowledge of its dialectal variety is sufficient and its academic form unnecessary; sometimes it is even met with overt refusal, which culminated a few years ago in the statement that it was the language of the enemy of a free, independent and undivided Carinthia.

In order to support the argument against learning the Slovene language, it is often argued that too much time is invested in learning it that could otherwise be spent learning a more important language, a world language. This argument can be questioned as there is no evidence for a qualitatively greater mastery of languages of the Carinthians in comparison with the rest of the Austrian population.

In our opinion the low social status of the Slovene language has been affected by the actions taken by the legislative authorities and further aggravated by the territorial limitations on Slovene as an official language.

Naturally this situation has its negative impact on education. Now as ever it can be argued that a considerable percentage of Slovene-speaking children have no access to education in their mother-tongue because they are not enrolled in bilingual classes by their parents.

For a statistically surveyed part of the pupils, education in Slovene language ends when they reach the age of ten. About 25-30% of the pupils who are taught in Slovene in the compulsory school, do have Slovene in different ways (as a compulsory subject, a language used in class) once they continue their schooling.

The school system in Austria has been improved and expanded by reforms to a considerable extent. The Carinthian minority school system has only insignificantly taken part in this process. Almost all proposals made by the Carinthians were doomed to failure because of the missing political consent of the parties represented in Parliament and the Regional Assembly. Above all, the Carinthian Slovenes call for a regulation concerning the preparatory education, that is, the nursery school system; they call for organizational and pedagogical improvements within the bilingual elementary school, for a similar development in secondary schools and for improvements in teacher-training as well as in further in-service training of bilingual teachers.

In our opinion the Slovene ethnic group could improve and further develop its educational situation on the basis of generally acknowledged pedagogical experiences and the agreed-on legal criteria. Yet, because of the missing political will, the necessary agreement with the representatives of the majority does

not come about. The desired development of the bilingual school system can hardly be reached through legal steps as it is highly unlikely that judicial authorities should decide against the displayed consent of the parties in Parliament.

Apart from the urgently needed settlement of preparatory education, which is acknowledged also in semi-official documents as being an unresolved question, the situation in secondary education remains extremely unsatisfactory. Because of its type of school, the graduates of the *Budessgymnasium für Slowenen* are rather limited in their choice of a career. It can be observed that this fact was of no major importance until recently, as the Carinthian Slovenes were considerably disadvantaged in all professions. This is especially true of teachers of compulsory schools, as Slovenes had been practically excluded from the teacher-training school in Klagenfurt from 1920 to 1945. In the meantime, the Slovene ethnic group has gained ground considerably in some professions, whereas it still lags behind in others. The reason must be seen also in the inadequate structure of the secondary school system for the Slovene ethnic group. This can also be regarded as an indicator of the degree of the emancipation reached so far. The Slovene ethnic group bases its claim to an adequate school system on paragraph II of Article VII of the Austrian State Treaty. The claim to the elementary education in the Slovene language is the very prerequisite which secures the existence of the Slovene ethnic group. A structured secondary education is to ensure its development. The bilingual elementary school as well as the minority school system on the whole render the bilingualism of the members of the ethnic group possible. Yet a functional bilingualism can only grow and develop if the greatest possible number of the population of a mixed region is taught both languages in school and is able to use them in everyday life.

The bilingual school system is suitable for reducing the existing prejudices separating the majority and minority group and the peoples. It serves well the international understanding. The collective education of school-age children from a mixed region helps them to get to know each other and constitutes a supporting element for the strengthening and growth of mutual respect and amicable co-operation. Yet the bilingual elementary school in Carinthia fulfils the orders of paragraph II of Article VII of the Austrian State Treaty, which guarantees elementary education in the Slovene language to Austrian citizens of the Slovene minority in Carinthia.

In bilingual instruction pupils do not learn the Slovene language as a "foreign" language. In the Southern parts of Carinthia it has been a means of communication from its earliest days on and considered a "public" language as far as the population's attitude towards it is positive.

Bilingual education promotes and develops the linguistic competence of the pupils and introduces them to the cultural heritage of two peoples.

Some fundamental problems have to be pointed out briefly. Firstly, there are those concerning the majority and the minority: bilingual education makes greater qualitative and

financial demands upon all participants in the formative process. In order to cope with the demands made on it, bilingual education requires a sound theoretical and organizational basis. Although, at least in our case, one of its most significant functions is the education of committed members of the ethnic group as good citizens it also needs a public safeguard against any form of infringement.

Secondly, I would like to draw your attention to problems which particularly concern the Carinthian Slovenes: apart from the generally existing concern for the school system, methods of procedure must be found which enable both parents and pedagogues to take an active part in the development of the syllabus and to decide about the necessary reforms of the minority school system. It will be necessary to devote more attention to the students and graduates of intermediate and secondary schools. In recent years, the Slovene ethnic group has increasingly taken into account the experiences and findings of the educational sciences to underline its demands. In future, it will be necessary to take into account also the experiences of other ethnic groups to help in decision-making, despite the fact that the Slovene ethnic group has to decide about its school system in co-operation with the federal authorities.