

Us and Them: Linguistic Human Rights of Them in Slovenia

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Abstract

Some considerations from a linguistic point of view in response to the session on Social Justice and Equality Beyond Violence.

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Vesna Požgaj Hadži presented the problem that Slovenia has been facing in the past few years, and especially today – of the necessity of providing interpreters to the community to ensure the linguistic human rights of immigrants. She focused on the economic migrations in the area of former Yugoslavia, which were most intense in the 1960s and the 1970s, and which have not decreased following the independence of Slovenia in 1991. She pointed out that one of the first barriers that immigrants face is language. The position of power at the level of language is manifested in the very first contact that immigrants make with state institutions. Seeing that South Slavic languages are related, basic communication is not an issue. However, problems arise when higher language proficiency is required, as well as when language is needed for specific purposes; from the language of administration and law to the language of medicine. In Slovenian state institutions, immigrants often have to deal with employees who are not willing to communicate with immigrants in ‘their’ language because of the changed social and political circumstances. Not knowing Slovenian puts immigrants in a disadvantaged position. In addition, they are denied their linguistic human rights when they cannot use their native language.

The turbulent social and political events of the 1990s brought about changes in the status of languages and the choice of language for communication that was adapted to new political ideologies. 1) In former Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croatian was the dominant language, and not only in the four republics (Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia

and Herzegovina, and Montenegro) where it was the official language, but also in Macedonia and Slovenia that had their own official languages (Macedonian and Slovenian). At the time, most Slovenian citizens were indirectly bilingual so immigrants could communicate with them without knowing Slovenian. 2) In contrast to that period, in the 1990s there was an extremely negative attitude towards Serbo-Croatian speakers, which is evident from the research of public opinion from 1991 that showed 24.8% polled citizens had a negative attitude towards immigrants from the south, and the number rose to 40.6% in 1994. The violence of the Yugoslav National Army (YNA) in Slovenia resulted in the hatred of Slovenes towards everyone from the south. There were heated debates in Slovenian journals about taking Serbo-Croatian out of the core curriculum in Slovenian primary schools, with the explanation that “the language of the enemy” should not be taught. In such circumstances, immigrants were afraid to use their language in public from fear of being stigmatized. 3) In the new millennium, it is possible to talk about a more tolerant approach of the Slovenian people towards speakers of Bosnian, Montenegrin, Croatian, or Serbian language. For example, research by Požgaj Hadži et al. from 2009 showed that almost half of the polled citizens had a neutral attitude (48.6%), which is a good and positive sign, considering the period of extreme intolerance in the 1990s.

Based on her research, Vesna Požgaj Hadži presented immigrants’ experiences with Slovenian public institutions (foreigners office, police station, health insurance companies, health centres, medical clinics) and their needs for interpreters in such situations. In conclusion, she pointed out that immigrants, due to various social, political and sociolinguistic circumstances, are still in a disadvantaged position and that they are afraid of publicly expressing their identity because the majority population is not sufficiently inclined towards them. In every society, including Slovenian, there are rooted stereotypes in which *We* are better than *Them*, *Others*, and there are issues that have not been resolved, there is even violence towards immigrants, especially in schools. It is the poor integration of immigrant students in the Slovenian education system, as well as insufficient training of Slovenian teachers, that remain the weak points of the Slovenian language policy.