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## **Revitalization of the Italian Language in the Slovenian Istria: the case of the position of the Italian language among students as viewed by language teachers**

A narrow coastal part of the Slovenian Istria is a bilingual region, where the Italian and the Slovenian language and culture coexist. In the coastal area Italian and Slovenian are official languages and are used for official purposes. Pupils learn both languages in school and can enrol in a primary or secondary school (at the age of 6, for the duration of 12 or 13 years) with the Italian or the Slovenian language of instruction. In both cases they are supposed to be, at least in theory, bilingual individuals when finishing school. The paper addresses the issue of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria. It focuses on the possibilities of revitalizing the current position of Italian language especially among pupils. The paper presents an overview of the position of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria focusing on the 80', when the position of Italian was different and better compared to the present (Kompara 2014). We also present the current position of the Italian language, as seen from the perspective of primary and secondary school teachers and students. The paper also focuses on the results of the final state exam (the matura examination) in the Italian language, because the results have been worsening year by year (RIC 2017). The paper suggests possible ideas for revitalizing the Italian language in bilingual areas of the Slovenian Istria, focusing mainly on the specific areas of revitalization, from primary to secondary school revitalization. The process of revitalization is oriented towards the strengthening of the position of Italian in the Slovenian society, towards the establishing of good relations with the Italian minority in Slovenia, and promoting the acquisition of the Italian language. The paper presents the general ideas for promoting and preserving bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria.

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### **1. Introduction**

Language is our home, the home where we have to feel good, for that reason it is worth to adapt it according to our needs, as we are going to live in it till our end, for that reason it is worth to discover and respect the homes of others in all their beauty and power (Grosman 2008). In other words, language plays a crucial role

in communicating values, customs, beliefs, and in forming identity. The paper addresses the issue of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria through the research done from 2013 up until 2017. In view of that especial attention is dedicated to the position of bilingualism, the influence of the Italian media, the decline in knowledge and interest in learning Italian, and the intergenerational perspective of bilingualism. Through the research done in the past years we discuss language loss and revitalization and present the possibilities of revitalizing the knowledge of the Italian language among the young individuals.

## **2. Methodology and purpose**

The purpose of the paper is to present the position of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria through the research done from 2013 up until 2017 and to address the current issue of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria, especially in the light of the decline in knowledge and interest in learning Italian. We focus on the possibilities of revitalizing the current position of Italian language, especially among students. The methodology used is based on the use of descriptive statistics and a survey questionnaire through which we examine the opinion of teachers of Italian concerning the possible approaches for the revitalization of the Italian language.

## **3. The importance of languages, the loss of a language and revitalization**

The loss of a language could be considered as a loss of cultural heritage and, language revitalisation is a global issue aiming at reviving an extinct language or halting the weakening of a language (Alshehri 2016). Alshehri (2006) argues that language is a vital tool and the loss of a language can be defined through language shift, gradual replacement of one language by another, and attrition, the loss of competence and fluency in the native language (Myers–Scotton 2002). The issue of revitalization of the Italian language in the Slovenian Istria is seen as the revitalization of one of the native languages or official language in the area – the Italian language. We are talking of the minority language revitalisation contexts. As argued by Elosua and Peñalba (2018), who were involved in the revitalization of the Basque language, defining proficiency in the minority language is a sensitive social issue affecting people regardless of their linguistic background. O’Grady and Hattori (2015) argue that the goal of almost all language revitalization programmes is bilingualism, in other words to acquire and use the community’s heritage language alongside the dominant language of the area. O’Grady and Hattori (2015) believe that there are hundreds of language revitalization projects around the world, e.g. Peter et al. (2008), Housman et al. (2011) but almost no published research on their outcomes. According to O’Grady and Hattori (2015) a full transmission of the language is best with very young learners, as their skills have not yet been affected by age-related decline. In view of that, these learners should receive appropriate

exposure to the heritage language. Due to the fact that language revitalization programmes have bilingualism as their goal, we should ensure appropriate amounts of exposure to both languages, this means that learners must have continuous opportunities to hear and use both languages.

#### **4. Overview of bilingualism**

As argued by prominent linguists bilingualism may be defined as an individual possession of linguistic competence or proficiency in at least two languages (Baker 2011; Moradi 2014). Moradi (2014) argues that a bilingual individual is able to equally speak, interact, read, and understand two languages, but between the two languages, there is a predominant one, meaning the speaker has a better knowledge of one of the two languages. Bilinguals may be classified by the degree of fluency, competences in the spoken language, and also by age, context, manner of language acquisition, and types of mechanisms. Moradi (2014) classifies bilinguals as (1) early/late, (2) simultaneous/successive, (3) formal/informal, (4) acquired/learned, (5) additive/subtractive, and (6) compound/co-ordinate/subordinate. In the present survey, we observe bilingualism in the frame of (1) early/late perspective, defined as the acquisition of languages in the pre-adolescent phase (early) and the acquisition of one language before the other after the age of 8 (late) (Beardsmore 1986). A question arises with regard to bilingualism: when are we characterized as bilingual individuals and what defines us as bilingual individuals. According to Baker (2011), we refer to bilingualism when we think of children who become bilingual because they are in constant contact with two languages. Bilingualism may be defined as the speaker's ability to use two languages on a daily basis (Knaflič 2010), this means that we are bilingual if we understand others and others understand us in more than just one language (Siraj, Blatchford and Clarke 2010). We may be defined as bilinguals if we express our thoughts in two languages in a natural and spontaneous way. Intercultural communication, better focus, and the ability to quickly change activities compared to monolingual speakers (Marian and Shook 2012) are just some of the advantages of bilingualism, but motivation plays a key role, since it facilitates language adoption. Among the motivating factors is the appearance of bilingualism due to family matters, e.g. families using two languages to communicate with one another or families moving to a new linguistic environment. Bilingualism is not only present in children, but also in adults whose first language is no longer used in communication in a new working or learning environment. At this point, we ask ourselves how bilingualism is measured by individuals or whether the measurement is really questionable (Auer and Wei 2007). Being aware that bilingualism is categorized as ideal or partial and parallel and composed (Weinreich 1953), initial (Diebold 1964), acceptable and partial (Hockett 1958), Knaflič (2010) argues that we do not have appropriate instruments for measuring the level of bilingualism. In this perspective, we wonder when the individual

is bilingual and how we can define the level of bilingualism. According to Pavlenko (2007), language determines affiliation. There are cases where the mother tongue of the speaker has a lower social status and reveals the roots and consequently the speaker often does not use it, but in cases of the equivalence of language status bilingualism has the advantage of being a means of accepting differences.

#### **4.1. Bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria**

The Slovenian Riviera lies in the south–west of the Slovenian Istria along the 46–km–long coastline of the Adriatic Sea. The area is particularly interesting as it represents a strategic point, where a Slavic language and culture (the Slovenian language) coexists with a Romance culture and language (the Italian language) (Zerzer 2009). The coastal area or mixed territory (Novak–Lukanovič 1998) has about 120 settlements, of which the largest urban centre is Koper. The Slovenian Coast is a cultural crossroads, a migration space, where cultures and languages meet and where both Slovenian and Italian are official languages. This also means that all public notifications are in both languages and that both languages are used in everyday context and in all public offices: in administrative units, and in the context of public education, in kindergartens, and in primary and secondary education. Parents can enrol their children in a Slovenian or Italian school and in both cases, either Slovenian or Italian is taught throughout the schooling period (Kompara 2013, 2014, 2019).

#### **4.2. The position of the Italian media on the preservation of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria**

There are quite a few researchers dealing with the position of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria (Novak–Lukanovič 1998, 2010, 2014; Furlan 2010; Kompara 2013, 2014, 2015, 2019) and the drop in linguistic competences in the Italian language in the Slovenian Istria (Čok 2006, 2008, 2009; Zudič–Antonič and Malčič 2007; Zorman 2005; Sedmak 2009), a similar decline in linguistic competences is observed also in the Croatian Istria (Matticchio 2016). The influence of the Italian media on bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria was mentioned in the works of some prominent authors (Čok 2001, 2009; Mikolič 2014, 2016; Kompara 2015). In the 2015 survey Kompara addresses the importance of the Italian media for bilingualism and upgrades her survey in 2017, proving that the Italian media had a strong influence on Slovenians living not only in the bilingual area of the Slovenian Istria, but along the Italian border. Kompara (2015, 2017) argues that in the 80s and 90s, inhabitants from the Slovenian Istria (at that time part of Yugoslavia), as well as those who lived along the border with Italy followed the Italian media, because the Italian programmes were more interesting, picturesque, and the reception signal was often better compared to the Slovenian media. The Italian programmes were not only followed by young people, but also by other generations. According to

Kompara (2015), the phenomenon of Italian television had a key influence on the development and knowledge of the Italian language in the Slovenian Istria.

### **4.3. Present position of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria**

The present position of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria was observed thanks to the survey involving primary and secondary school teachers of the Italian language in the Slovenian Istria (Kompara 2013, 2014, 2019). The teachers participated at structured interviews and based on the results of the interviews young individuals born after the year 1990 are no longer characterized as bilingual individuals. This is also proved by numerous language courses as well as help that students perceive in the form of private classes (internal correspondence, 2018). We also have to mention the Plan of measures of the government of the Republic of Slovenia for the implementation of regulations in the bilingual area 2015–2018 (Načrt ukrepov 2015) aiming at promoting bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria (e.g. in the form of language courses for employees, promotion and preservation of bilingualism in regular annual cultural programmes etc.).

According to the opinion of the teachers the knowledge of the Italian language is progressively decreasing each year, in view of that it is necessary to take action (Kompara 2013, 2014, 2019). Moreover, the results of the secondary school final exams in Italian (RIC 2017) usually taken by the students with a good knowledge of Italian are worsening. The threshold for obtaining a positive grade kept the average of 55 % from 1999 to 2006 and reached 60 % in 1999 and since 2007 dropped to 50 %. Outstanding results were obtained in 2000, when the threshold for a positive grade was 55 % and 30.59 % of the students reached the maximum number of points (8) and 45.88 % achieved 6 points. In the last ten years, not only the threshold has decreased to 50 % but only a handful of pupils reached the highest number of points, usually less than 10 %. From the survey from 2013 and 2014 (Kompara 2019) that involved 86 Slovenians, 88 % of respondents believe that they are bilingual and 81 % think that the Slovenian Istria is bilingual, but only 37 % of respondents correctly solved the language test, which included simple exercises on the use of language, some translations, grammar exercises, etc. The worst results are recorded with respondents aged between 20 and 25, that is, during the period when the Italian media lost its power and the Slovenian media began to develop. 50 % of respondents confirmed that they were more closely connected with the Italian culture than with the Slovenian culture. The current state of bilingualism is nothing promising, since the knowledge of the Italian language is decreasing, if we do not do something, we will be a bilingual community only on paper.

### **4.4. The intergenerational position of bilingualism in Slovenian Istria**

The position of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria was researched also in connection to its intergenerational position. With regard to the results from 2014, when 89 % of the respondents said to be bilingual, in the survey from 2017 (Kom-

para) 84 % of the respondents believed the Slovenian Istra is bilingual, 63 % had the opinion that they are bilingual, but the percentage is still high, especially in connection to the results of the language tests. The results of the research are still inclined towards bilingualism both in terms of family circumstances and personal view on bilingualism, but the results of language tests are still worrying. Among the types of exercises, covering translations, correction of mistakes and knowledge of common phrases and sayings there are no big gaps and deviations among different groups of respondents. The worst results were among the group of young adults up to 20 years of age, where in terms of translations the percentage of correct answers goes from 18 up until 22. With those who are over 40 years of age, the situation is a bit better, as they achieve almost half of the correct translations. In the examples covering the correction of mistakes, the position among those of age up until 20 is not favourable, but it is a bit better among those over 40 years of age. The biggest decline is seen among the usage of phrases and sayings, as the group of those up to 20 years of age achieved the best results, 25 % of correct answers, the best results were also achieved by the group over 40 years of age, as they achieved 70 % of correct answers. We can conclude that with regard to phrases and sayings, there is a previously obtained knowledge of the phrase and the respondents had to finish the phrase correctly, which is why we have seen a difference in the percentage. From an intergenerational point of view, we cannot talk about bilingualism in young individuals up to the age of 20, as the language test shows a modest knowledge of the Italian language. Respondents over 40 years of age can be characterized as bilingual individuals, as the results of the language test show that they are still capable of an active use of the Italian language.

## **5. Survey on revitalization of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria**

There are 16 primary schools in the Slovenian Istria (age of students from 6 till 15) and 5 secondary schools (age of students from 15 to 19) with Slovenian as language of instructions where the Italian language is thought. In total, the overall number of teachers of the Italian language, teaching only the Italian language is 2 per school (some teachers in addition to Italian teach other subjects) (private communication, 2018). In total, there are 42 teachers. In the survey on the revitalization of the Italian language in the Slovenian Istria, focusing on the position of the Italian language among students as viewed by the language teachers 16 (38 %) primary and secondary school teachers from the Slovenian Istria were involved in the online questionnaire on the revitalization process. The survey was conducted from March 2018 through May 2018 and involved teachers of Italian in primary and secondary schools with Slovenian as language of instructions. In the survey the position of the Italian language among students was viewed by the language teachers who teach students from age 6 to 19. We decided to invite primary and secondary school teachers as experts in language acquisition of the Italian language

and ask them for potential options in the revitalization process. The questionnaire was composed of 23 questions, among them we recall 5 types of questions (1) concerning the position of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria and its meaning for the society, (2) monitoring the position of bilingualism among the students and their language competences, (3) presenting the decrease in language competences and its reasons, (4) viewing at the influence of the media on language competences, and (5) presenting the possible ways of language revitalization. According to their results, 75 % of respondents believe that the Slovenian Riviera is bilingual but only 8 % of them affirm that their students are bilingual (75 % believe that just some are bilingual). Almost all of them (92 %) agree that the knowledge of Italian was on the decrease in the past 10 years. According to their opinion, the assessment of the present average knowledge of students equals 2 (58 %) and the assessment of the past average knowledge of students equals 4 (73 %). All respondents agree that there are gaps in knowledge, bilingualism is an advantage and they would like to preserve it. Among the reasons for the decrease in knowledge 83 % of respondents deem the influence of English and low interest for Italian language for such result, but also the problem that students do not come from bilingual families and there is no interest for the Italian media (67 %). 33 % of the respondents affirmed that students do not see Italian as a useful language, and they have low knowledge from primary school. According to their opinion, there is a lack in vocabulary knowledge (83 %) and in general knowledge (58 %).

### **5.1. Ideas of revitalizing bilingualism**

Within the survey, the teachers were asked to provide ideas for revitalizing bilingualism and the knowledge of the Italian language in the bilingual territory. Teacher would apply changes to the syllabus, 58 % would update primary school syllabus and 42 % secondary school syllabus. 75 % of the respondents would increase the contact hours of the Italian language. Among the methods for revitalization they mentioned the following programmes: school exchange programmes in Italy (92 %), scholarships for studying in Italy within a student exchange programme (83 %), programmes aimed at promoting events connecting Slovenian and Italian schools (83 %), programmes promoting events (76 %) e.g. *La settimana della lingua italiana nel mondo*. Among other forms of revitalization, the teachers suggested programmes aiming at establishing intercultural cooperation, e.g. the preparation of bilingual magazines, participation at common projects, e.g. Erasmus plus, preparation of bilingual cultural events, hosting guests from Italy, organizing more trips to Italy. The involvement of secondary school level students could be seen in the implementation of the acquired language knowledge in the form of writing Italian books for young learners, preparing cartoons in Italian for younger students and exhibitions in Italian language for older students. Among the ideas is also a professional experience in Italy for technical secondary school students.

## **5.2. Discussion**

Among the actions for promoting and preserving bilingualism on governmental level, we recall the Plan of measures of the government of the Republic of Slovenia for the implementation of regulations in the bilingual area 2015–2018 (Načrt ukrepov 2015) which is oriented towards the preservation of the Italian language in the bilingual area. The plan promotes language courses for governmental employees (the Slovenian police forces) as well as bilingual cultural events, annual programmes, translation of official documents, and also ensures translated forms (in the Italian language) used by the police authorities, rises language competences among the teachers in the bilingual context, and prepares programmes for the improvement of language competences among adults. We need to bear in mind that the preservation of bilingualism is a cultural heritage of a language and thus revitalizing the Italian language in the bilingual area of the Slovenian Istria is seen and perceived in a positive frame among scholars and teachers. Moreover, we should follow the ideas for the revitalization of the Italian language the teachers of the Italian language in primary and secondary schools mentioned in the survey and implement them following as an example of good practice the Plan of measures of the government of the Republic of Slovenia for the implementation of regulations in the bilingual area 2015–2018 (Načrt ukrepov 2015). The ideas should be gathered in content groups, e.g. cultural events, publication of bilingual sources as implemented within a timeframe in the classroom of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **6. Conclusion**

The position of bilingualism in the Slovenian Istria is undoubtedly changing, as evidenced by the research conducted from 2013 to 2017, and the results of secondary school final exams in the Italian language, which have been on the decline year after year (RIC 2017). The teachers of the Italian language in primary and secondary schools share the same opinion concerning Italian – less knowledge, consequently resulting in a fake bilingual society. From the presented results in the 80s enormous numbers of children from the bilingual area of the Slovenian Istria learned Italian through Italian television even before starting primary school. According to the surveys (Kompara 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019) concerning the knowledge of the Italian language in the past, there was a general positive tendency towards the language and satisfactory knowledge compared to the present situation when the knowledge diminished drastically at all levels. Due to the fact that the present position of Italian language in the bilingual region is not positive, we presented ideas for revitalizing bilingualism, being aware of language loss and language acquisition. In line with the steps presented in the paper, we would like to act promptly in order not to lose the potentials of being bilingual individuals and to preserve our linguistic heritage – the knowledge of two languages.

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### *Rivitalizzazione della lingua italiana nell'Istria slovena: la posizione della lingua italiana tra gli studenti vista dagli insegnanti di lingue*

Nell'articolo presentiamo il problema del bilinguismo nel territorio dell'Istria slovena, e ci concentriamo sulle possibilità di rivitalizzare l'attuale posizione della lingua italiana, specialmente tra gli studenti di scuole medie e superiori (in media dai 6 ai 19 anni di età). Nel presente saggio viene presentata una panoramica della posizione del bilinguismo nell'Istria slovena che si concentra sulla posizione del bilinguismo negli anni '80, quando la posizione dell'italiano era migliore rispetto ad oggi (Kompara 2014), così come l'attuale posizione della lingua italiana vista dalla prospettiva di docenti e studenti delle scuole medie e superiori e i risultati dell'esame di maturità in lingua italiana (RIC 2017). Secondo le attuali ricerche il fenomeno della televisione italiana negli anni '80 ha influenzato lo sviluppo e migliorato la conoscenza dell'italiano tra gli sloveni dell'area bilingue (Kompara 2017), ma attualmente i docenti percepiscono un declino della conoscenza della lingua italiana, una tendenza negativa verso la lingua ed anche la realtà bilingue dei nati dopo il 1990 (Kompara 2014). Sulla base dei risultati di Kompara (2013, 2015, 2017, 2019), ci siamo concentrati sulle possibilità di rivitalizzare la lingua italiana nell'Istria slovena. La metodologia utilizzata nella presente ricerca è un questionario online che ha coinvolto 16 docenti di lingua italiana dell'Istria slovena. Tra i risultati mirati verso la rivitalizzazione della lingua italiana ci sono l'aumento di ore di lingua italiana, programmi scolastici aggiornati, scambi in Italia e borse di studio per studiare in Italia, nonché gli eventi che coinvolgono scuole slovene e italiane. Al fine di promuovere il bilinguismo, gli insegnanti hanno suggerito anche progetti comuni volti a stabilire una cooperazione interculturale, ad es. riviste bilingue, eventi culturali bilingui, ecc. Per non diventare solo una comunità bilingue sulla carta dobbiamo agire immediatamente con l'obiettivo di preservare il bilinguismo nell'Istria slovena.

**Parole chiave:** bilinguismo, apprendimento della lingua, competenze comunicative in italiano, rivitalizzazione, lingua italiana

## *Revitalizacija talijanskoga jezika u slovenskom dijelu Istre: položaj talijanskoga jezika među učenicima iz perspektive nastavnika jezika*

Uski obalni dio slovenskoga dijela Istre dvojezična je regija u kojoj koegzistiraju talijanski i slovenski jezik i kultura. U obalnom području talijanski i slovenski jezik su službeni jezici i koriste se u službene svrhe. Učenici uče oba jezika u školi i mogu se upisati u osnovnu ili srednju školu (u dobi od šest godina, u trajanju od 12 ili 13 godina) s talijanskim ili slovenskim jezikom nastave. U obama bi slučajevima, barem teoretski, trebali biti dvojezični pojedinci nakon završetka školovanja. U radu se obrađuje pitanje dvojezičnosti u slovenskom dijelu Istre i pritom se ukazuje na mogućnosti revitalizacije postojećeg položaja talijanskog jezika, posebice među učenicima. U radu je prikazan položaj dvojezičnosti u slovenskom dijelu Istre s naglaskom na osamdesete godine 20. stoljeća, kada je položaj talijanskog bio drukčiji i bolji u odnosu na danas (Kompara 2014). Predstavljamo i trenutni položaj talijanskog jezika, promatran iz perspektive nastavnika i učenika osnovnih i srednjih škola. U radu su predstavljeni i rezultati državne mature iz talijanskog jezika jer su rezultati iz godine u godinu sve slabiji (RIC 2017). U radu se predlažu moguće ideje za revitalizaciju talijanskog jezika u dvojezičnim područjima slovenskog dijela Istre, s naglaskom uglavnom na specifična područja revitalizacije, od osnovne škole do srednje škole. Proces revitalizacije orijentiran je na jačanje položaja Talijana u slovenskom društvu, uspostavljanje dobrih odnosa s talijanskom manjinom u Sloveniji i promicanje usvajanja talijanskog jezika. U radu su predstavljene opće ideje za promicanje i očuvanje dvojezičnosti u slovenskom dijelu Istre.

**Keywords:** bilingualism, language learning, communicative competence, language revitalization, Istria, Italian language

**Ključne riječi:** dvojezičnost, učenje jezika, komunikacijska kompetencija, revitalizacija jezika, Istra, talijanski jezik