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Identity (trans)formation in Croatian community in Burgenland

Burgenland Croats are members of a Croatian minority whose ancestors left their homeland 500 years ago and settled in former West Hungary, Lower Austria, southern parts of Moravia and southern areas of today's Slovak Republic. Today they mostly live in the Austrian province of Burgenland. Although they managed to preserve their language and culture for several centuries, in the last few decades the number of speakers has significantly decreased. Burgenland Croatian is listed in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, and the current situation poses many challenges for Burgenland Croats regarding their future.

In our study of German-Croatian language contacts in Burgenland we have focused, among other things, on the question of identity in this Croatian community. The main objective was to examine the possibility of drawing some general conclusions regarding Burgenland-Croatian identity by means of reconstructing language biographies/narrative interviews of individual speakers. The elicited data indicate that the age, place of birth and family background, together with language, i.e. mother tongue, are the parameters which play the crucial role in the process of identity formation and the realisation of attitudes towards (multi)cultural identity. Language biographies proved to be a useful methodological tool when analysing the construction of (double) identity because both implicitly and explicitly, they reveal subjective reflections of the informants, since we wanted the study to elicit the real situation in Burgenland as much as possible.

Key words: Burgenland Croats; minority; multicultural identity; language biographies; domains.



1. Introduction

Burgenland Croats¹ are members of a Croatian minority whose ancestors left their homeland 500 years ago and settled in former West Hungary, Lower Austria, southern parts of Moravia and the south of today's Slovak Republic. A large number of them now live in the Austrian province of Burgenland where they have preserved their language and culture for several centuries.

As a part of a larger research project on German-Croatian language contacts in Burgenland, we focused on the question of identity in this Croatian community, since language and identity are concepts which are closely intertwined. Our main objective was to analyse how Burgenland Croats express their personal experience and attitudes towards cultural and lingual identity as a minority group. Rather than focusing on a single language biography or conducting an in-depth analysis of only few language biographies, in this paper we will present relevant parts of twelve language biographies of our informants from Burgenland in order to give an insight into the current situation and recent sociolinguistic developments in the language community in question. This paper aims to show that by reconstructing language biographies of individual speakers it is possible to draw some general conclusions regarding Burgenland-Croatian identity. In the analysis we will illustrate and discuss how Burgenland Croats construct their minority identity and how this identity is being transformed, mostly by younger generations. We will also highlight some characteristic aspects of Burgenland-Croatian community which are relevant when discussing the process of identity (trans)formation.

2. Methodology

The main methodological tool used for corpus analysis in this paper was the reconstruction of language biographies, a method that is a relatively recent area of interest in linguistics. Language biographies have developed from narrative and language interviews. A detailed overview of their development can be found in

¹ A historical overview and more about Burgenland and Burgenland Croats can be found in Ernst (1987: 201–202; 249), Tobler (1995: 38–42), Ujević (1934: 8–9), Valentić (1970) and Vranješ-Šoljan (2005).



Küstners (2006: 18). The theory of narrative interviews² was initiated in the late 1970s by the sociologist Franz Schütze who later founded the methodology of the biographical interview. These approaches are based on the assumption that social processes cannot be observed isolated from individual human stories. In the context of narrative interviews, autobiographical stories are analysed using methods from text linguistics and discourse analysis in order to obtain an insight into both individual and collective processes.

Franceschini (2004: 228–229) defines the narrative interview/language biography as the story of an informant's life with a special attention given to the language dimension. As Nekvapil (2001: 149) points out, language biography can be a useful method for the completion of data obtained from various documents such as literary works, newspapers, video-recordings, questionnaires, and other sources.

The concept of language biographies is well described by Barth (2004: 76) who claims that the analysis of language biographies is an important methodological procedure that strives to complete the subjective data obtained from informants with more or less objective situation descriptions by the researcher.³

In the course of data analysis we applied our own slightly modified approach, thereby differentiating between language biographies and language biographical texts. In this paper the term language biography is applied to more extensive biographies in the form of recorded interviews, whereas shorter ones that were obtained mainly in a written form are referred to as language biographical texts. Because most of the younger informants were not so keen on their interviews being recorded, and consequently they were not so eloquent, we decided to apply a different methodological approach, when necessary, and allowed our informants to compose their language biographies in a written form. In that way we were able to obtain all the information that they did not include in the recorded interviews. More importantly, our informants were more relaxed when writing about themselves and their lives.

² The theory of narrative interviews is presented in greater detail in Ebert, Hester, Richter (1985: 5–6; 13–15), Schütze (1987: 49) and Treichel (2004: 74).

³ A more thorough description of language biographical approach and methods of analysis can be found in Franceschini (2004: 123–125; 131, 137) and Fix, Barth (2000: 20–64).



3. The notion of (minority) identity

At this point the concept of identity should be observed from a theoretical perspective. The identity is a very complex phenomenon that is the focus of attention in different disciplines ranging from psychology to sociolinguistics, and in each discipline it acquires a different meaning. There are also various types of identity such as individual, collective, national, linguistic, ethnic, racial identity, and other.

As Haarman (1996: 219) claims, there is no unified definition of identity, especially since the identity is closely connected to the idea of culture, language and ethnicity.⁴ Most researchers focus on the relationship of language and identity, but it would be much more precise if language itself was seen as one of the components of identity.⁵ Fishman (2010: 28) also points out that “language and ethnicity are highly contextual, but identity is the most contextualised term of all. It depends essentially on circumstances and concepts that play upon it, modify it, and create or recreate it.”

Both on individual and collective level, our identity is in constant flux; we construct and negotiate our identity across our lifespan in the interaction with others. We can thus say that the identity is a multi-layered construct liable to change depending on the situation or context we find ourselves in, as well as on other parameters such as age or social group and class.

For minority groups, the process of identity (trans)formation is even more complex since their members have to “define” themselves both in terms of their own culture and the dominant culture. In the analysis we will see how the members of Burgenland-Croatian community refer to the issues and problems this process is posing for them.

⁴ The question of ethnic and minority identity as well as different aspects of identity are found in Zimmermann (1992: 108–112).

⁵ Identity is also discussed in Ivanetić, Palašić (2007: 228), Kalogjera (2007: 262) and Kresić (2006: 224–236).



4. Informants

Our informants mainly come from the central part of Burgenland because in these areas the Croatian language and culture are best preserved, as compared to the northern and southern areas of Burgenland. Three informants are the members of older generation, whereas other informants represent a younger generation between the ages of 17 and 28. The younger group has been our focus of attention because their beliefs and attitudes may be indicative of current and future trends in the entire community.

Since many people in the Burgenland Croatian community know each other very well, we decided to leave out names and even initials, in order to preserve the anonymity of our informants. Instead, we randomly assigned our informants letters in alphabetical order.

Our informants A, D, E, F, I and K come from the central part of Burgenland; informants B, C and G were born in villages in northern Burgenland; informants H and J were born in the southern part; and only one informant, informant L was born in Vienna. At the time of writing their biographies or giving interviews our younger informants were still students. Informants D, F, G, I and J attended their undergraduate and graduate studies in Vienna; informant H studied in Graz and worked part-time for one of the Burgenland Croatian cultural societies; informant K was high-school student; and informant E finished her undergraduate studies in Vienna and started to attend graduate studies in England. Only informant L had already been working as assistant at Humboldt University in Berlin. As for our older informants, informant A has been working as director in bilingual secondary school in the central part of Burgenland; informant B, a former foreign languages teacher, was retired; and informant C, a winegrower by profession, has been working in one of the Burgenland Croatian cultural institutions.

Later in this paper we will state the age of our informants and present abstracts of language biographies of seven male and five female informants.

5. Burgenland Croatian community

Before the analysis of selected language biographies and language biographical texts we should mention several facts in order to give a general idea of the minority group in question.



Although in many minority groups the process of language attrition can be observed already in the second generation, Burgenland Croats managed to preserve their language, i.e. their own variety of the Croatian language, and culture, for more than 500 years. One of the main reasons was isolation. In the past, Burgenland was an isolated area. Although not very far from Vienna, the inhabitants of Burgenland rarely left their homes. They had their own schools, and since their main occupation was agriculture, they worked at home. In winter, some of them would go to work to Vienna, primarily women. They founded numerous groups and institutions that even today serve as community gathering places. Significant changes caused by modernization and well-developed transport system, among other things, can be traced back some 50 years ago. Many Burgenland Croats attend universities or work in Vienna and other cities. Although they spend most of their weekends in Burgenland, some sold their houses to Austrians. People from other parts of Austria come to Burgenland because it is cheaper to live there than in larger towns and their children attend schools in Burgenland.⁶ Bearing all this in mind, Burgenland Croats are now experiencing changes typical for the minority groups in the second or third generation.

Another fact worth mentioning is that a large number of Burgenland Croats left Burgenland after the Second World War and moved to the United States. In our study we obtained language biographies of several “American” Burgenland Croats to compare results. When analysing these language biographies, we recognized a distinct notion for which we coined a new term *double identity shift* (cro. ‘dvostruki identitarni odmak’). As opposed to Burgenland Croats who consider Croatia “their old homeland”, these informants claim that Burgenland was their homeland, and in their language biographies do not mention Croatia. Moreover, these informants do not find themselves in identity conflict and they do not reflect identity quandaries like Burgenland Croats; they are already assimilated into the dominant culture and claim to be Americans of Burgenland Croatian roots.

6. Analysis of the collected language biographies

In our analysis we focused primarily on individual language biographies and language biographical texts. But after having examined all the collected texts,

⁶ This problem will be addressed in the section on education.



we noticed some common patterns and realized that informants tend to speak or write about topics that are similar. As expected, members of the older generation mentioned some problems and issues that the younger ones were not aware of or saw these in a different way. But, generally speaking, in the analyzed texts we were able to recognize common features that we call domains. Language biographies were thus grouped and analysed on the basis of a particular topic and domain, with special attention given to the question of language and (ethnic) identity that can, implicitly or explicitly, be found in all biographies and discussed topics. Although some other important considerations may be found in each biography, in this paper we will present only the most relevant parts that illustrate our main points. Language biographies were originally written in Burgenland Croatian and then translated into English by the author.

6.1. *Language and (ethnic) identity*

The question of language and identity may be seen as one of the crucial issues for most minority groups. Since this question is a constituent part of everyday life of this minority group, the language-identity relation will also be present in all aspects of our analysis.

Based on the analysed biographies, we can conclude that most of our informants have “double identity” – Burgenland Croatian and Austrian. This can be observed as two sides of the same identity.⁷ Burgenland Croatian is for most informants closer to their emotional life, whereas the Austrian part is inseparable from their everyday life. It is important to mention that one of the conclusions is also that the younger the informant, the stronger the Austrian identity. This is best illustrated in the biography of our informant K (15). She learned German in nursery school. She says that, although all the communication in school is conducted in German, she speaks Croatian at home, and she considers Burgenland Croatian her mother tongue. But she also says the following: “My grandparents are Burgenland Croats, my parents are Burgenland Croats, but I am an Austrian”.

⁷ It has to be pointed out that in this paper we are discussing a rather general picture. Had we focussed on each language biography from a different point of view, we could have easily drawn much finer conclusions on a more personal level.



Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004: 21) discuss three types of identities in multi-lingual contexts: imposed (not negotiable in a particular time and place), assumed (accepted and not negotiable) and negotiable (contested by groups and individuals). We modified these concepts for our analysis, especially for the biographies of younger informants, and applied our own interpretation.

In the biographies of our informants we can discuss inherited, assumed and negotiated (or negotiable) identity. Some younger informants whose parents and grandparents are very active members of the community, especially when it comes to the preservation of language and culture, “inherited” their identity and are under great pressure because they do not want to let down their families and tradition and values they foster. Their identity can still be negotiated, but this probably happens at later stages of their lives. At the beginning of their language biographical texts they usually “apologized” in advance for their potential mistakes, but were still keener on writing than speaking. These are randomly chosen parts:

I must apologize for my mistakes. I speak Croatian very well, but I have never learnt to write. This means that I do not have a clue about grammar. I have written this in Burgenland Croatian, but rather poorly... I hope you can understand it. I am sending you my text. I hope there are not many mistakes and that you will understand it.

Many informants simply accepted the identity of their parents and they do not contemplate on it. They are neither going through some special formation process nor are their identities being transformed, at this point. In their language biographies they speak and write about the same issues in a very similar way as the older ones. In such cases we can apply the term assumed identity that can be negotiated, but usually is not.

In most cases we can talk about negotiated (and negotiable) identity. These informants inherited and accepted the (collective) identity of their parents and the community, but are not indifferent; they (trans)form their identity and critically (re)think all the layers and aspects of it. Our informant E (24), for instance, is ashamed of certain parts of her Burgenland Croatian identity because in her opinion Burgenland Croats are not presenting themselves in the right way. She is our only informant that openly expresses such an attitude.

80 percent of my friends are not Burgenland Croats because many Burgenland Croats are very conservative. They play *tamburica* or dance in one of the Burgenland Croatian societies, and I have aversion to it. For me, it does not represent the



Burgenland Croatian culture. I am ashamed of it because most of people “outside” have an impression that we are all like that. We are always smiling, we are a bit silly, we are singing and dancing and that is it... I am convinced that many Croats who come to Burgenland think that we are “slow” and funny caricatures. I do not blame them – I would share their opinion.

In most biographies the emotional value of Burgenland Croatian identity is evident. As we will also mention in the section on the mother tongue, informant G (25) says that every weekend she comes home to her village where Burgenland Croatian is spoken, that for her represents her homeland.

Informant C (57) says that for him and his family their mother tongue is Burgenland Croatian. German is also an important language that every Burgenland Croat should know, but at the same time they should prefer Burgenland Croatian, “it should be closer to their hearts”. He says that he is both an Austrian and a Croat.

For most informants there is an interconnection between language and (ethnic) identity. We can almost recognize the formula: “I speak Burgenland Croatian, *ergo* I am Burgenland Croat”. An interesting example of how identity can be transformed and re-transformed or revived afterwards is the case of a policeman from Burgenland who almost completely forgot his mother tongue and with it important parts of Burgenland Croatian identity. But later in his life he started to attend language courses in both Burgenland Croatian and standard Croatian, and now he is back to his roots. (Compare interview in *Glasiło*, 2/2008, <http://www.hkd.at/glasilo/2-10/Glasilo201002.pdf>, last visited August 19, 2011.) As we will see in further analysis, the process of minority identity transformation in Burgenland Croatian community is influenced by various factors. The selected parts of individual biographies will not only illustrate the attitudes and beliefs of the informants in question, but also give a general overview of the situation in this community.

6.2. *Mother tongue – citizenship – nationality*

All of our informants⁸ consider Burgenland Croatian to be their mother tongue.⁹ Some tend to bring the question of mother tongue into close connection with na-

⁸ Including the other informants who participated in our study, but their language biographies are not discussed in this paper.



tionality. Informant G (25) even mentions having two mother tongues. This means that for her German and Burgenland Croatian are of equal importance. Although she considers herself an Austrian citizen, Burgenland Croatian is not her second language but her second mother tongue:

Although they [Austrians and other Austrian citizens] have heard about Burgenland Croats, they could not understand what it means to be an Austrian, and at the same time to have a second mother tongue or two mother tongues.

In the same language biographical text one can easily detect the problem of what can be called a “double identity”. As already mentioned, our informant claims to be an Austrian, but at the end of her text she says the following:

In the weekend I like to come home to Uzlop.¹⁰ The main reason is definitely the fact that in Uzlop Burgenland Croatian is spoken – in the family, at the playground, in the church, in the local pub, and elsewhere. At home I speak Croatian with everyone – to me this means homeland.

Informant L (28) speaks Burgenland Croatian with her parents and brother and sister almost exclusively, although when her parents speak to one another, they do so in German. She says that Burgenland Croatian was her mother tongue, but admits that she feels much more confident when using German. Still, she describes herself as bilingual and considers German her second mother tongue.

At home we have always spoken Burgenland Croatian. It is interesting that my parents speak German to each other, but with us the children only Burgenland Croatian. Even today I find it difficult to speak German with my parents or brother and sister...

I consider Burgenland Croatian my mother tongue. This is simply the language of my family and everything around it. But I have to admit that, since my whole education was in German, I feel more confident when speaking German because in German I can express myself in every situation. I am still bilingual; German is in a way my mother tongue.

⁹ It has to be mentioned that we noticed that some younger informants did not completely understand the concept of “mother tongue”. They thought that “mother tongue” meant the language that their mothers speak. However, it is also often the case that one’s mother tongue is really the same as the language spoken by the mother.

¹⁰ Uzlop is a village in the northern part of Burgenland.



Our informant E (24) also talks about German as her first language, but feels the need to underline her Burgenland Croatian roots:¹¹

In my dreams I speak German, when I think about something, I think in German [...]. I find Burgenland Croatian to be my mother tongue, but the first language that always crosses my mind is German. This does not mean that I am less Burgenland Croatian than the others. I am a Burgenland Croat with all my heart, maybe even bigger one than the ones who do not come from a bilingual family.

6.3. *Family*

This domain represents the key part of all language biographies. Our informants are aware that parents, families and the values one learns at home can be of crucial importance in the process of language preservation, but also one of the main causes of language attrition and assimilation into the dominant culture.¹²

Most of our informants mainly speak Burgenland Croatian at home. Both the members of younger generation as well as the older ones admit that it was not always easy. Informant C (57) describes this situation as a constant struggle. The most difficult period for him and his wife was the time when their children started to attend nursery school and were constantly in contact with German-speaking children. Their children started to speak German at home and they had to find a way to avoid German. They found a method that our informant claims to be very useful – when the children asked something in German, he and his wife refused to answer and insisted on Burgenland Croatian. Today, his children have children of their own and they do the same with them.

In some of the other language biographies and language biographical texts we can see that even the younger ones approve of the method mentioned by informant C. They are grateful that their parents did not allow them to speak German at home, and they criticized those families that do not care about Burgenland Croatian, even though both the father and the mother are Burgenland Croats who speak Burgenland Croatian. Most of them think that Burgenland Croatian is of no use for their future career and that they should invest their time in more lucrative languages.

¹¹ This biography also shows a close connection between language and identity.

¹² More on the role of parental attitudes in bilingual development can be found in De Houwer (1999: 75–78).



In many families children speak Burgenland Croatian with one parent and German with the other one because one of them comes from a “German” home. Our informant E (24) speaks German to her mother and Burgenland Croatian to her father and grandparents. When she was younger, she spoke Burgenland Croatian with her sisters but now they almost exclusively speak German. She also points out that her mother and father only speak German to each other, as is the case in the family of informant L.

Most informants, like informant D (25), mention that there are many families in which both parents are Croats but with their children speak only German. In these families parents transformed their minority identity and completely adopted the majority identity. They are afraid that this will eventually lead to language loss and this makes them sad.

Children today speak German already in nursery schools, and much better than we used to when we were of their age. Today there are “modern” parents who speak only German claiming that this is easier for their children. I know a family where both parents are Croats, and the father started to speak German with his children because he did not want to “torture” them. I was very sad when I saw that.

6.4. Education

When discussing the language issue, one cannot neglect the role of educational institutions. This can be also seen in the language biographies of our informants. Although most of our informants mention positive influence of education with regard to the preservation of Burgenland Croatian, there are many problems that have to be addressed on both sides. One of the biggest problems is the status of Burgenland Croatian in schools. In many schools it is not a required subject, and consequently it is only taught for two or three hours per week. The second problem is the great demographic change that can be observed in Burgenland in approximately the last four or five decades, which was discussed in section five. The “new inhabitants” of Burgenland, Austrians, speak only German, and when they send their children to Burgenland Croatian schools, this poses a new problem for teachers and for Burgenland Croatian students. In some schools teachers could teach other subjects in Burgenland Croatian if their students had a decent command of the language. But today, if there is only one student who does not



speak Burgenland Croatian,¹³ they cannot switch to it, and they have to speak only German.

The same problem can also be found in everyday life. Our informant F (23) says that in their Burgenland Croatian clubs, choirs and institutions there are Austrians who only speak German. If only one person is an Austrian, everyone else has to switch to German instead of taking advantage of the opportunity to speak Burgenland Croatian with the members of their community.

Although he is very young, even our informant D (25) has noticed that the situation in schools has changed:

I attended elementary school in the village where I was born [...] In this school the students were taught bilingually – in both Burgenland Croatian and in German. Since there were only 25 to 30 students in the school, we were separated into two classes: one for the first and second, and another for the third and fourth graders. Almost all the students spoke Burgenland Croatian because this was the language they spoke at home. But I think that in the last couple of years the situation has unfortunately changed. Today there are more children who speak German and not Burgenland Croatian. As I have already mentioned, at the time I attended elementary school it was easy to teach in Burgenland Croatian because we all spoke to each other in Burgenland Croatian, and it was in fact much closer to us than German.

This informant also discusses the role of teachers; if they care about Burgenland Croatian, if they are devoted to their culture and profession, their students will certainly be motivated to learn and improve the language most of them call their mother tongue.

This informant also mentioned his experience regarding language in grammar school:

When compared to elementary school, the situation in grammar school was a bit different. Burgenland Croatian was not a required subject, and for those who had chosen it, it was taught for three or four hours per week. I have to point out the fact that the teaching of Burgenland Croatian was of pretty poor quality because there were students with a different level of competence in the same class. The student with the lowest level of knowledge was always the “starting point”, and he was the measure of the quality and the content in the classroom. I am convinced

¹³ This is not only the case with the Austrian children, but also with Burgenland Croats whose parents do not speak Croatian at home.



that it would be a scandal had German or English been taught in such a way, but since it was Burgenland Croatian, no one complained. In my opinion this is also one of the reasons why the quality of teaching Burgenland Croatian keeps falling. Another reason I should mention is the fact that parents expect teachers to raise their children, and this is not their job.

Being a teacher himself, our informant A (61) discussed the situation in schools from a different point of view. Apart from all the problems already mentioned, he says that fortunately the majority of students and teachers in his school spoke Burgenland Croatian very well. Although German was the main language in their school, they could have additional classes of Burgenland Croatian. Since 1993 their school has the status of a bilingual school. But since the bilingual character has not been legally defined, each teacher decides how much of his teaching is conducted in Burgenland Croatian and how much in German. This also depends on the competence of the teacher and the students in a particular class.

6.5. Minority language, culture and identity: experience, feelings and attitudes

Although this is not the case with all the younger members of the Burgenland Croatian community, our informants claim that knowledge of Burgenland Croatian can only be an advantage, and that it is worth to learn it and to improve it. They also want their children to learn Burgenland Croatian and hope that it will be their mother tongue as well.

Most of our informants have pointed out the problem of language attrition and language loss among the younger members of their community. Informant H (23) says that in his village Burgenland Croatian is slowly fading. If an Austrian marries into a Burgenland Croatian family, all the members tend to adapt and speak German, both at home and in public. Children from such families are usually confronted with Burgenland Croatian when they come to school. In the light of the situation in schools, that we have already discussed, they do not learn Burgenland Croatian well enough to be able to communicate. Besides, their mother tongue is German and this is also the language predominantly spoken in their community. Our informant is also very critical toward his friends and colleagues who know Croatian but speak German.



Informant I (22) is very proud of Burgenland Croatian language and culture, but, like many others, he fears for the future of the Burgenland Croatian community in Austria. He also describes the current situation in Burgenland and mentions the fact that the number of speakers of Burgenland Croatian among members of the younger generation has decreased.

Informant D (25) also thinks that the Burgenland Croatian language and culture are endangered because of the members of Burgenland Croatian community and their attitudes.¹⁴

If there are ten Burgenland Croats and only one Austrian (I am talking about language, not nationality), we Croats want to be polite and we speak German. No one expects an Austrian to adapt and to learn Burgenland Croatian if he wants to hang out with us. This is not the right attitude and it certainly does not favour the survival of our language.

It has to be mentioned that this informant also talks about some members of their Burgenland Croatian clubs who were born and raised in Vienna. They mostly understand Burgenland Croatian, but do not feel comfortable enough to speak it. Still, in their presence everyone speaks Burgenland Croatian, and they are, as our informant claims, able to identify with the Croatian culture.

Informant J (23) thinks that his life without Croatian culture would not be the same and he says that he will do his best to contribute to the survival of his community:

I am very interested in old stories and customs. Have you ever been young if you have never sung the song *Ja sam junak* ('I am the hero') with your friends? Every weekend I come home from Vienna because I miss my village and that way of life. That is why I am trying to show everyone that Burgenland Croatian is something beautiful and natural in our village.

Our informants, especially the younger ones, usually do not see themselves as members of a minority group. But they are still aware of the fact that Burgenland Croats are considered as an Austrian minority, and they mentioned certain situations in which they were reminded of this fact. In their biographies they admit that they are sometimes frustrated when they realize that some Austrians know very little about the Burgenland Croatian community. Some of these

¹⁴ The problem of assimilation is explicitly mentioned in the language biography of informant J (23) who is aware of the assimilation and its consequences.



younger informants mentioned a few negative experiences, but fortunately positive experiences prevail.

Though she has never felt stigmatised or an outsider, our informant L (28) best describes her attitudes towards this topic in the following part of her biography:

I consider myself to be an individual, and I do not define myself only as a member of a minority group. But I was never ashamed of my roots and I always point this out. Most people (“ordinary Austrians”) do not know Burgenland Croats and their community very well, so you have to explain everything to them. I find it very interesting and even amusing. Sometimes, after they had heard the whole history, they tend to ask: “And when did you grandparents come to Austria?” It is a bit strange that Austrians do not have a sensibility for their minority groups. I am sure that the members of other minority groups have similar experiences, with the exception of the Slovenian minority in Carinthia, since the political and general atmosphere there is much different.

I also remember that I had problems when filling in the necessary forms for the secondary school in Vienna. My mother insisted that we write both Burgenland Croatian and German as my mother tongues. No one knew what to do and how to react. But that was 20 years ago and hopefully the situation is better now.

Our informant E (24) is sometimes ashamed of certain aspects of Burgenland Croatian mentality¹⁵, but she has never experienced any problems due to her Burgenland Croatian background:

I do not remember having any problems because of my Croatian roots [...] Knowledge of the Croatian language is very useful when you meet someone from a Slavic country. I am currently living in England, and I find it easier to get around in Polish stores, and I can easily communicate with my Slovakian friends.

Our informant B (72), as a representative of the older generation, also talks about positive experiences even though he is aware that in every country one can find people who discriminate against minority groups. He remembers that in elementary school other pupils sometimes mocked Burgenland Croats because of their language deficiency. But as soon as they acquired similar level of competence in German, they were treated as equal. He has never been ashamed of being Burgenland Croat, and Burgenland Croatian helped him both at university and in his future career.

¹⁵ This was mentioned in the section on language and identity.



7. Conclusion

In this paper we presented some general conclusions regarding the identity of Burgenland Croatian community, a Croatian minority group in Austria, based on the texts of twelve informants and on our own observations and notes made during our fieldwork. Using methodology developed by prominent linguists in the field in question, we reconstructed language biographies of our informants. Special attention was given to the topics that were mentioned by most informants. In this analysis we did not discuss the complete language biographies of all the informants. Instead, we focused mainly on the parts relevant to this paper. Although it may seem that some informants were given more attention, language biographies for this paper were intentionally selected to illustrate our main points in the best possible way.

In our analysis we singled out five areas that we find most important both for the presentation of identity issues and for understanding Burgenland Croatian community. On the one hand, we tried to show that language and identity are closely intertwined, as stated in the introduction, and we also highlighted the meaning of these concepts since they are to be found, explicitly or implicitly, in all the other domains. Moreover, we wanted to show how both our informants and other members of Burgenland Croatian community reflect upon the issues in question.

The selected parts of language biographies were meant to give a general insight into the current situation in Burgenland Croatian community, especially regarding the (minority) identity. Nevertheless, we must underline the fact that each member understands and interprets identity in his or her own way, and that from an in-depth analysis of every language biography emerges a whole array of issues to be discussed more thoroughly. On the example of texts of younger informants we tried to illustrate different stages in the process of identity (trans)formation which takes places under the influence of the majority group, and is finally a result of a gradual assimilation.

This analysis and interpretation of the collected material is only the first part of a longitudinal study of language biographies that may eventually describe this complex process of identity transformation in Burgenland-Croatian community in greater detail. In a broader (political) framework this study may contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between language, identity, culture and ethnicity, both in general terms and in individual cases, which is, as



it is often mentioned, crucial for improving the position of minority languages and preserving them.

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(TRANS)FORMIRANJE IDENTITETA U HRVATSKOJ ZAJEDNICI U GRADIŠĆU

Gradišćanski su Hrvati potomci Hrvata koji su prije pet stotina godina napustili svoju domovinu i naselili područja zapadne Ugarske, Donje Austrije, južne Moravske i jug današnje Slovačke. Danas najveći dio živi u austrijskoj saveznoj zemlji Burgenland (Gradišće). Iako su uspjeli očuvati svoj jezik i kulturu, posljednjih se desetljeća broj govornika gradišćanskohrvatskoga jezika znatno smanjio, a s obzirom na to da i dalje pada, gradišćanskohrvatski je jezik ušao u UNESCO-v atlas ugroženih jezika.



U našem smo se istraživanju njemačko-hrvatskih jezičnih dodira u Gradišću usmjerili i na pitanje identiteta ove hrvatske zajednice. Glavni nam je cilj bio ispitati mogućnost donošenja nekih općih zaključaka o gradišćanskohrvatskom identitetu na temelju analize jezičnobiografskih tekstova i jezičnih biografija individualnih govornika. Analizom smo utvrdili da su dob, mjesto rođenja, podrijetlo i (materinski) jezik ključni parametri u procesu razvoja i oblikovanja (multikulturalnog) identiteta. Budući da jezičnobiografski tekstovi i implicitno i eksplicitno otkrivaju razmišljanja i stavove naših ispitanika, jezičnobiografska nam je metoda pružila dobar uvid u načine konstrukcije (dvostrukog) identiteta, kao i u trenutačnu situaciju u Gradišću.

Ključne riječi: gradišćanski Hrvati; manjina; multikulturalni identitet; jezične biografije; domene.