

# Intercultural Contact and Multilingualism in an Intimate Relationship in the Austro-Hungarian Littoral

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper presents a case study of multilingualism in private correspondence in turn-of-the-century Austro-Hungarian Istria. Language attitudes and use of German, Italian and Slovenian are analyzed, with results indicating the compatibility of national feelings with an appreciation of multilingualism, as well as the important role that intimate intercultural relationships play in this regard in a culturally mixed region.*

**Key words:** *historical multilingualism, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Istria, private correspondence, intercultural contact*

## Introduction

Private correspondence is a very important form of primary source in researching the historical development of languages, cultures and societies because it provides access to language use which, although in written form, is closer to everyday spoken language than that of more public and therefore more formal written genres such as newspaper articles. This allows researchers of language history to go beyond the relatively narrow limits set by formal styles of writing and to access a much broader, more diverse and less normatively structured pool of language use, which significantly changes our perspective on language, emphasizing actual use rather than a set of rules which define »proper« use. Apart from providing an opportunity to study more informal language as such, private correspondence also opens a window on the role of language in private life, more specifically in intimate relationships. When two correspondents are particularly close, such as in the case of romantic relationships, their use of language is likely to be even more free of usual formal or content-related restraints and marked by frequent expressions of strong emotion. This allows for a more prominent role of creativity and spontaneity in using and combining different linguistic means (such as different »national« languages or stylistic registers of the same language), which is a particularly fruitful object of study

in heterogeneous milieus, where individuals routinely engage in practices through which they partake in culturally and linguistically diverse spheres.

Multiethnic empires create these kinds of milieus and as such are interesting as a subject of historiographical, but also of anthropological research, with regard to the coexistence and everyday interactions between people of different cultural backgrounds and different first languages. The Austro-Hungarian Empire spanned a large area of Central and South-Eastern Europe, including in its borders people of German, Czech, Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, Serbian, Bosniac, Croatian, Slovenian and Italian cultural and language backgrounds, among others. However, this is a simplified way of putting it. In many parts of the empire, associating communities, families or even individuals with a single national cultural tradition was not a straightforward affair and many towns, cities and regions were very culturally heterogeneous (the concept of »cosmopolitanism« often appears, and is frequently contested or complicated, in texts about cities of the empire<sup>1-3</sup>). This was partly the result of intense migration, as a consequence of varying levels of economic development and prosperity in different parts of the Empire, as well as of the transferral of public sector employees. Predating these population movements, some regions, such as the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, had already had a long history of intercultural contact, during which lay-

ers of cultural traditions had accumulated and intertwined, creating new hybrid forms, which acquired further complexity through the inclusion of these regions in a multiethnic empire.

The correspondence that I will analyze in this paper can be loosely situated in the region of the Istrian peninsula in the north-eastern Adriatic, whose territory is now divided among Croatia, Slovenia and Italy. Istria was part of the crown land of the Austrian Littoral (Österreichisches Küstenland), belonging to the Austrian part of the empire and it was (and still is) a culturally and linguistically mixed region. Traditionally, historians have represented the cultural »divide« in Istria as overlapping with the urban-rural distinction: Italian cultural influence was dominant in urban centers, particularly on the west coast (as a result of centuries of Venetian presence in the area), while the rural Slavic (Croatian- and Slovenian-speaking) population mainly resided in the less economically and technologically developed inland area. However, D'Alessio<sup>4</sup> draws attention to segments of both the urban and rural populations which call into question the validity of this »divide«. He also points out the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between urban and rural settlements, particularly in Istria, and the relative nature of such distinctions and suggests instead a focus on the »cultural and social *urban* characteristics« of individual settlements and the »process of their urbanization«<sup>4</sup> (p. 135, original italics). In this paper I will attempt to support D'Alessio's point that »many areas, including the urban ones, were populated by bilinguals and people who could easily identify with either ethnic group« (p. 133; he's referring to the Croatian and Italian group, but I would like to think of cultural elements rather than groups and to include the German/Austrian and Slovenian element as well), by presenting the example of a multilingual couple whose everyday lives were constituted by a range of different cultural influences.

One possible way of approaching the study of intercultural contact in a historical context is by focusing on language practice, which can be particularly fruitful since a large part of historical sources are texts of various kinds. Multilingualism was common in cities of the empire, but the main subject of research so far has been its presence on the institutional level, with a focus on official language policy<sup>5,6</sup> and its effects in the education system<sup>7,8</sup>, administration<sup>9</sup>, practices of professional translators and interpreters<sup>10</sup> etc. Although it is clear that intercultural relationships in the private family sphere play a great role in the formation of hybrid cultural identities and practices, there is an obvious lack of research on language practices in informal, non-institutional settings, especially in private life, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In contrast to research on contemporary intercultural relationships, this is clearly a result of the difficulty of finding appropriate sources. A good place to look are archival collections produced by individuals or families and it is one such family collection, that of the Wruss family (HR-DARI-1086), held by the State Archive in Rijeka (DARI), Croatia, which has provided the material for this study.

## Biographical Notes

A specific segment of the collection which will be analyzed is the correspondence between Rudolf Wruss and Emilie Uršič (Emilie would be the German version of her name, which Rudolf uses on the envelope when addressing the letters to her, and Emilija would be the Croatian/Slovenian version). Rudolf Wruss was born in 1871 in the village of Planina, near the town of Postojna in present-day south-western Slovenia (biographical information about Rudolf Wruss is taken partly from Prosen 2013<sup>11</sup> and partly from personal communication of the author with his grandson Dušan Vrus). He spent most of his childhood in a small town, now called Pivka, which at the time was known as Šent Peter na Krasu (German: St. Peter in Krain). His father, of humble origins, obtained the rank of non-commissioned officer in the Austrian army during its campaigns in Lombardy, which subsequently ensured him a good pension. He also took on the unpleasant job of tax collector and with these sources of income he provided a higher education for his sons. After graduating from high school in Ljubljana, Rudolf continued his studies at the Accredited Technical College in Graz, but never completed them. He eventually came to the burgeoning seaside and spa resort Opatija (then known mainly by its Italian name Abbazia) in present-day Croatia, where he was trained to become a postal worker. He became head of the post office in the town of Ilirska Bistrica in present-day Slovenia and on the weekends he would visit Abbazia, less than 30 km to the south. There he met Emilie Uršič, from the nearby town of Volosko (Italian: Volosca), daughter of school inspector Franc Uršič and Antonija Rovis, the latter from a family of lower nobility from Žminj (Gimino) in central Istria. Mr. Uršič was quite well-off and he had two boarding houses built as dowry for his two daughters. Emilie and Rudolf were engaged and spent about two years living apart, as Rudolf was transferred several times to different towns, before they married in 1900 and moved in together and Rudolf became head of the post office in Abbazia. I have not been able to find any information about Emilie's life before meeting Rudolf and there is unfortunately only one letter from her to him in the collection, the rest are his letters to her (the whole collection of correspondence within the Wruss family collection consists of several dozens of letters, the largest part of them being Rudolf's letters to Emilie).

Their correspondence spans the period 1898-1901. Most of the letters are entirely in German, but some include segments in Italian and/or Slovenian and these are the letters which the analysis will focus on. As far as their content is concerned, they are mostly love letters, where Rudolf fantasizes about their future life together, inquires about Emilie's everyday life and writes about his own, etc.

## The Letters and Language Use

Rudolf might be labeled as Slovenian and Emilie as Croatian, but that would be a simplification, since both of them come from very culturally mixed regions and cul-

tural diversity was very much a part of their everyday lives, which we can see in the languages they use in their letters and the ways they mix them. Apart from this, their relationship introduces an additional level of complexity, as it motivates them to use and improve the knowledge of a third language (Italian for Rudolf and German for Emilie), apart from the two they already regularly use. Emilie was most probably bilingual Croatian-Italian, since her father was Croatian-speaking and her mother spoke mainly Italian. In one of Rudolf's letters to Emilie, there is a paragraph written to her in Italian by her sister Marietta, which shows that it was a common language of everyday use in their private family sphere (there are indications in the letters that they spoke Croatian at home as well). At the time in Istria, Italian was generally the language of urban life, business, higher education and social prestige (although Croatian and Slovenian were also gradually gaining ground in this respect). Since she came from a relatively wealthy family, Emilie would have had a good education and it would almost certainly have been in Italian (schools in her hometown of Volosca were in Italian at the time). From the single letter in the collection written (in German) by her to Rudolf, we can see that, although she is relatively fluent, German is obviously a foreign language for her (unlike Rudolf's, her style is relatively simple and closer to spoken language).

German had a similar role at the time in present-day Slovenia as Italian did in Istria and Rudolf's education and employment in the postal service resulted in his Slovenian-German bilingualism. His writing style in German is more sophisticated than Emilie's and he occasionally inserts lyrical passages in his text. He is aware that his Italian is not perfect, but he does his best to impress Emilie and her family by inserting paragraphs in Italian, such as a funny »description« (in a letter sent from St. Peter in Krain to Volosca on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1900) of his future meeting with Emilie's aunt in Trieste, where he elaborates in an intentionally exaggerated way how well he will speak Italian and what a good impression he will leave on her aunt, for example: »Parliamo tanto in italiano, mi bene e mal, come a mi ubidisce mia lingua a mie geniouse idiee, ma mi guardero, e parlero come un dotore della gramatica italiana« (»We speak Italian a lot, I speak well and badly, as my tongue obeys my genius ideas, but I will be careful and I will speak like a doctor of Italian grammar«; Fig. 1). At the

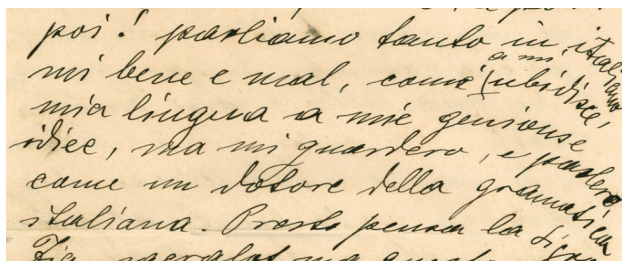


Fig. 1. »Parliamo tanto in italiano, mi bene e mal, come a mi ubidisce mia lingua a mie geniouse idiee, ma mi guardero, e parlero come un dotore della gramatica italiana.«

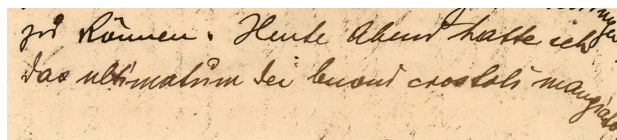


Fig. 2. »Heute abend hatte ich das ultimatum dei buoni crostoli mangiato.«

same time he shows his imperfect knowledge of Italian spelling and grammar (not using correct forms *dottore* and *grammatica*).

Rudolf switches from German to Italian in his letters for different reasons. The most obvious reason is when addressing someone other than Emilie, such as her sister Marietta, who presumably doesn't speak German. Even just mentioning someone or something that he associates the Italian language with seems to be a reason for Rudolf to switch to Italian, such as in this example (from a letter missing its envelope and therefore impossible to date): »Heute abend hatte ich das ultimatum *dei buoni crostoli mangiato*« (»This evening I ate the last of the good *crostoli*«, Italian in italics; Fig. 2). In a previous letter he mentions that Emilie's mother sent him some *crostoli* (a sweet crisp pastry, also known as angel wings), so we can presume that mentioning the *crostoli* makes him think of her and, as a result, he spontaneously switches to Italian.

He also often seems to switch to Italian for no apparent reason. He obviously enjoys using Italian in a playful and creative way and I believe that the reason for this, apart from perhaps his own affinity toward linguistic creativity, is the fact that it is a language which Emilie and her family like and use regularly. He appears to be using Italian as an expression of affection toward her and her family, and, as a result, developing an affectionate relationship with the Italian language itself. This is also apparent in both Rudolf's and Emilie's use of Italian words to address each other affectionately in a German text (mein *bel tessoro* [sic], mein *angelo*), while Rudolf also uses his first language, Slovenian, for this purpose (*zlato*, gold and *srček*, heart).

One letter (sent from St. Peter in Krain to Volosca on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1900) is particularly interesting for several reasons, one of them being that it is the only letter with whole paragraphs written in each of the three languages, German, Italian and Slovenian. Rudolf starts in Slovenian, writing in large, calligraphic letters, as if to emphasize the fact that he is using his first language, which, due to its infrequent appearance in the correspondence, acquires the status of a marked language. Apart from a way of showing his national feelings, we can see his unexpected use of Slovenian as an expression of particular sincerity or strong emotion: »Zlati moj Pippin, oj dušica mojga srca! Le Ti si moja! na vekomaj! s gorečim srcom ljubim Te! kod prav slovenski sin.« (»My golden Pippin, oh soul of my heart! You are mine! forever! with a burning heart I love You! like a real Slovenian son.«; Fig. 3)

It is interesting that he makes a connection here between his national feelings and his feelings for Emilie and

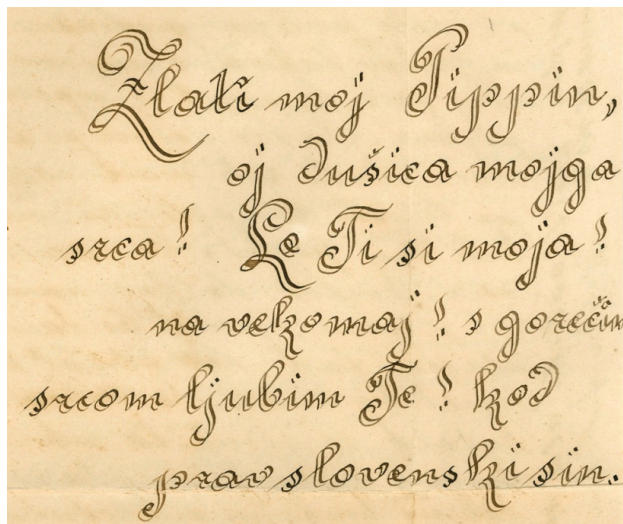


Fig. 3. »Zlati moj Pippin, o j dušica mojga srca! Le Ti si moja! na vekomaj! s gorečim srcom ljubim Te! kod prav slovenski sin.«

it can be taken as an example of the merging of the private and public sphere, of individual and collective identity. He touches on this theme again on the next page of the letter. After this visually attractive introduction, he continues in Slovenian for a page or so and then abruptly asks, anticipating Emilie's question and underlining it for emphasis: »Zakaj slovenski sem začel?« (»Why have I started writing in Slovenian?«, Fig. 4). After expressing once more his national pride with the words: »Bog! te živi slovenski sin! ker poštenjak si le ti edin!« (»God! long live the Slovenian son! for you are the only honest one!«), as an answer to his own question he launches into a series of rhyming sentences which stand out stylistically from the rest of the text and are reminiscent of children's rhymes or other forms of oral literature. (This might imply that he associates to an extent his first language, Slovenian, with his childhood and with spoken language, rather than writing.) He proceeds to tell a short »story of his life« in rhymes, starting from his birth to a Slovenian mother (her nationality is explicitly mentioned) and culminating in his meeting Emilie, which is presented as the purpose of his life and whom he now plans to marry and live with. By formulating his life story as a meaningful and teleological development from his birth as an ethnic Slovene to his relationship with Emilie as the purpose of his life, he establishes again the connection between his patriotic feelings and his romantic feelings for her and these two levels of emotional commitment seem to feed each other in a productive loop. Considering the strong Panslavistic tendencies within various Slavic national movements at the time, we can safely assume that this merging of levels was

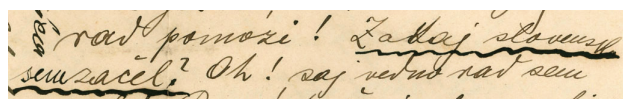


Fig. 4. »Zakaj slovenski sem začel?«

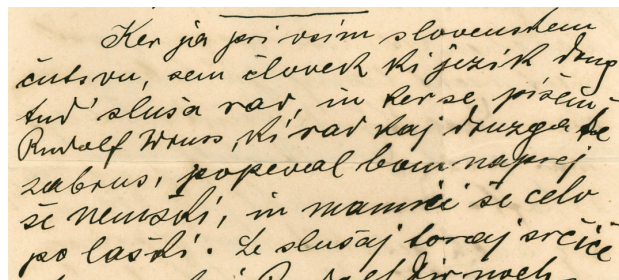


Fig. 5. »Ker ja pri vsim slovenskem čutstvu (sic), sem človek ki jezik drug tud' sluša rad, in ker se pišem Rudolf Wruss, ki rad kaj družga te zabrus, popeval bom naprej še nemški, in mamici še celo po laški.«

encouraged by the fact that Emilie spoke Croatian and had a Slavic family name (perhaps even Croatinized Slovenian, since it is spelt the Slovenian way, with č instead of ć). Whether she considered herself Croatian and to what extent Croatian ethnicity constituted an important part of her identity and way of life is, unfortunately, all but impossible to reconstruct based on the available sources.

After this »interlude«, halfway through a sentence Rudolf spontaneously switches back to German, the habitual language of his correspondence with Emilie, and continues in his usual tone and style, but before that he adds a sentence explaining why he is about to do so: »Ker ja pri vsim slovenskem čutstvu (sic), sem človek ki jezik drug tud' sluša rad, in ker se pišem Rudolf Wruss, ki rad kaj družga te zabrus, popeval bom naprej še nemški, in mamici še celo po laški« (»Because I with all my Slovenian feelings, am a man who enjoys hearing other languages as well, and because I spell my name Rudolf Wruss, and he'll send you flying for anything else, I will sing on in German, and to my mother even in Laški«; Fig. 5; Laški is a subdialect of Slovenian, spoken in the Sava river valley in present-day eastern Slovenia).

Again, he expresses openly his Slovenian national feelings, but also his interest in foreign languages, especially his strong affinity toward, even preference for, the German language, without subscribing to the purist idea that as a self-conscious Slovene, he must strive whenever possible to speak Slovenian. This was a period when the Slovenian and Croatian national movements were very strong and this kind of purist attitude was not uncommon among their adherents. However, as Novak<sup>12,13</sup> has convincingly shown in his reconstruction of the language biographies of the most prominent figures of the Croatian national movement, the use of a »foreign« language, even in cases where mastery of it was superior to that of one's »native« or »ethnic« language, certainly does not preclude patriotic feelings or intense engagement on behalf of the »national cause«. Rudolf, as far as it could be inferred based on available information, was not a national activist and he certainly cannot be considered nationally indifferent<sup>14</sup> either, but rather a Slovenian patriot who also appreciates his multicultural and multilingual surroundings and the role that different languages play in his everyday life. It's important to point out that, in spite of

growing nationally-based political struggles during the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there were also individuals like Rudolf, with broader and more inclusive views, which could be termed cosmopolitan nationalists.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to present two multilingual individuals shaped by multiple »national« cultural influences, which was very common in Istria during the Austro-Hungarian period and still is today. Their correspondence serves as an example of multilingual communication of a relatively informal nature in the private sphere. Several aspects of Rudolf's language use and attitudes are interesting in this regard. He seems to take great pleasure in using Italian, although he is aware of his imperfect mastery of the language, and the development of his positive attitude toward it has three aspects (or stages): he associates Italian with particular people in his social/family circle (Emilie and her family), he uses Italian as a sign of affection for these people, and in the process he seems to develop an affectionate relationship with the language itself.

He uses his first language, Slovenian, very rarely in the correspondence, so that when he does, it appears as a marked language, expressing sincerity and strong emotion, as well as, of course, his Slovenian national feelings. This contributes to maintaining a higher level of multilingualism in his everyday life, since he is motivated, at least occasionally, to keep using his first language, in spite of the social prestige of German and his own preference for it.

His explicit statement of his language attitudes shows that, even though the view on the »national language« as a key element of political ideologies and strategies was perhaps dominant in the public sphere during the height of nationally-based political struggles in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (specifically in Istria), further research of sources pertaining to private communication could potentially reveal a greater diversity of nuances in feelings and opinions.

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In spite of this apparent discrepancy between the private and public sphere regarding language attitudes and use, the way he creates a link between his national feelings and his romantic feelings for Emilie is very interesting and it indicates the merging of the private and public sphere and of individual and collective identities. This has important implications for language attitudes and use and it contributes to formulating a question for further research: how and to what extent can communication in an intimate relationship affect the use of particular languages in the public sphere (and vice versa)? It has been already shown that multilingual practices, such as code-switching, code-mixing and receptive multilingualism could be found as everyday phenomena in urban life throughout Istrian history, and that individuals pursue a variety of different linguistic strategies at the intersection of private and public spheres that are not linearly related to their identification processes.<sup>14</sup>

Another question has also been opened up by the findings presented: what kind of effect can intercultural intimate relationships have on people's language attitudes and the emotional value that certain languages have for them? Further research on this topic should be placed within the context of a more general question: what is the role of changing language attitudes in the dynamics of cultural exchange on a broader social scale and identification processes? In conclusion, this paper has shown that in order to get a more complete image of the role of different languages and language practices in a certain community, we need to include the private sphere as well, particularly where intercultural relationships are involved.

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## **INTERKULTURNI KONTAKT I VIŠEJEZIČNOST U OKVIRU JEDNOG BLISKOG ODNOSA U AUSTRO-UGARSKOM PRIMORJU**

### **SAŽETAK**

Rad izlaže studiju slučaja višejezičnosti u privatnoj prepisci u kontekstu austrougarske Istre na prijelazu stoljeća. Analiziraju se jezični stavovi i upotreba njemačkog, talijanskog i slovenskog jezika, a rezultati ukazuju na kompatibilnost između nacionalnih osjećaja i pozitivnog stava prema višejezičnosti, kao i na važnu ulogu koju intimni interkulturalni odnosi u tom smislu igraju u jednoj kulturno miješanoj regiji.