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Sprechen Sie Deutsch? German Language and Revitalization of Ethnic Identity of the Germans in Bačka

This paper* analyzes the use of German language in the public and private spheres of communication among members of three local associations of Germans in Bačka. Their efforts to preserve native idiom, after decades of "ethnic mimicry" of German community in Vojvodina, and under the hardship of asymmetrical bilingualism favoring Serbian and Hungarian languages, are directed not only to preserve German language, but they also play a significant role in the process of (re) construction of their ethnic identity. German language is given the utmost importance by the local leaders of the German association, as a key symbol of "Germanship" in this region. It is used as a tool for drawing and highlighting the symbolic boundaries of the local ethnic German community in Bačka. The tendency of German community members in Bačka to communicate in German language in private communication, and during their gatherings, plus the imperative of raising the level of competition in their native language idiom – have a function of drawing symbolic boundaries in relation to other ethnic communities in the region.

Key words:

German language,
native idiom, ethnic
identity, Germans in
Vojvodina, Bačka

Introduction

A constitution of "Die Donau", the first non-governmental association to gather Vojvodina's Germans after WW II, in the city of Novi Sad in 1992, was a break point for the life of German community in Vojvodina. The constitution has ended a period of "ethnic mimicry", wherein German ethnic and cultural identity

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almost disappeared completely in this region. Soon to follow were similar associations in other urban areas of Vojvodina inhabited by Germans, with the identical task. Their leaders and activists have found themselves in front of a complex task - (re) constructing ethnic identity of the German community in their local areas, followed by a public manifestation of its most important symbols.¹

Interestingly, in all associations I have researched², there was a special attention directed towards preservation and use of German language, as one of the most important symbols of "Germanship" in this region.

Despite the fact that the term language is characterized by a wide range of meanings, this time the focus will be on sociolinguistics and Ethnology / Social Anthropology, namely, to its "ability to articulate the social system of communication through verbal signs that allow formation of thought and their content in the form of coherent transmission of voice messages" (Bugarski 2005, 10). Language plays a key role in the thinking process of human beings, specifically in their knowledge, interpretation and reflection of the world where they live.³ Humans use language to create their own social life, that is, as an important means to achieve their own social integration and interpersonal communication.

In addition to its primary function, by means it is used within social communities as a system of conventional signs for communication between its members or members of other communities, language often assumes the role of a sign recognition of ethnic and confessional, occupational or other group affiliation, and in that case, their members often develop a special emotional relationship to language or languages used (ibid 11). It is this ability of language, to express and transmit feelings of group members, by which they affirm their collective identity, that forms the basis of the symbolic connection of the group members, but it also strongly attracts and binds tightly their own collective emotions and subjective value judgments. That is why language is often used as an effective tool in the process of national emancipation and nationalistic manipulation (ibid 11), and because of that "language often make sense within one particular group" (Nedeljković 2007, 197).

¹ Based on previous experience – after each military conflict in the past century, they have voluntarily or not, changed ethnic strategy- soon after the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia, Vojvodina's Germans attempted to substitute their own identity strategy, aided by the official legislature regarding national minorities according to European standards (Крел, 2007, 440–441).

² During my studies of German ethnic identity in Bačka, in 2004–2008, I conducted a fieldwork among leaders and activists of these associations: "German folk association" (Deutscher Volksverband) from Subotica, "Adam Berenc" from Apatin and "Gerhardt" from Sombor.

³ Language is a system of conventional signs, which performs certain functions. It is estimated that in the present moment in the world there are about 6000 idioms, most of which are spoken by small communities where languages are in danger of extinction, although this number must be accepted with caution due to the complexity of accurately separating languages and their dialects. Languages are classified according to origin (genetic), spatial (areal), structure (typology), and functions (sociolinguistic). Languages are characterized by synchronic variation (territorial, social and functional) and diachronic structural changes at all levels. (ibid 11).

Since language is almost constantly in the process of transformation, synchronic and diachronic observations of these changes and their analysis often show they are caused by a change of identity strategies of ethnic communities that use that specific language. These features of language, in addition to religion, customs and cultural heritage, rank among the most important elements of the objective indicators of ethnic and / or national identity, so that their studies are often intertwined.

The use of German Language in Vojvodina until the end of World War II

A series of wars between Austria and the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 17th and beginning of 18th century caused the expulsion of the Turks from central and southern parts of Hungary, followed by annexation of these territories to Austria, and soon thereafter its colonization.⁴ Attracted by a number of benefits and tax incentives promised by the Austrian authorities, among the colonists were a number of German farmers and craftsmen, who then moved from German princedoms to the middle and southern Danube region in order to settle down.

Linguistic, religious and cultural differences of these colonists, immigrants from Baden-Wittenberg, Alsace, Lotharingia, Saxony, Tyrol, Silesia and Prussia and other parts of today's Germany, were so pronounced that a lot of time needed to pass in order for their descendants to reject the insistence of the differences, and to begin to turn to cultural similarities that could be linked to a single ethnic unit in the southern Danube area – the Danube Swabians.⁵

The ease with which the Danube Swabians were mobilized, deployed in a number of Austro-Hungarian regiments throughout Eastern Europe affected by the whirlwind of World War I, using their native German language in communication with soldiers from Austria and Germany, contributed to the impression that they belong to the German people, which in turn had great influence on the formation of national consciousness of their younger generations (Janjetović 2009, 82).

The literary form of the spoken German of these immigrants in the area of southern Hungary until the end of World War I performed two important tasks in

⁴ This grand project by the Austrian empire, in three main phases during 19th and 19th centuries, aimed at enforcing military presence and political influence of Habsburg Monarchy in this area, and to create favorable conditions for its demographic expansion and economic recovery. In addition to these goals, the colonization influenced a creation of an ethnic mosaic, still visible in the ethnic structure of these areas, especially so in Vojvodina, unique in its multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual features, with more than 25 different ethnic communities. (Jankulov, 1961).

⁵ This term was first used by German geographer Herman Rüdiger, who pointed out the difference between the Swabians in Swabia and those who have settled in Hungary (Transylvania and Satmar). (by: Janjetović, 2009, 15).

the social life of this community. Firstly, it served as a means of overcoming idiom⁶ differences among the German immigrants thus allowing smooth flow of communication, and then, over time, as the differences between the German colonists became uniformed, it served as an important tool in the process of their ethnic identification and the formation of a specific ethnic community.

Based on the Versailles Peace Conference decision, the Danube Swabians were, along the central and southern borders of the Danube, divided among the government formed borders after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There, this entity had acquired the status of national minority, as is the case with their compatriots in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.⁷ Here, all until the end of World War II, the Germans were able to lead a rich and continuous dynamic economic, political and cultural life, publicly manifesting their own symbols of national identity through a number of cultural institutions, while German language was one of the most recognizable symbols of their ethnic identity.

The Use of German Language among Germans in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia

Shortly after the end of World War I, the new government supported public use and operation of German language in German schools in areas where the Germans lived, wishing to strengthen their national awareness in order to help them to escape from the strong influence of Hungarian culture⁸ and to some extent, balance Hungarian nationalism.

Prolific publishing in German language was the second important factor which had helped the German minority, in between the two world wars, to preserve and develop native, that is, German language. Germans were cunning enough to use

⁶ The term idiom in this case means "all linguistic codes that community members (...) have in their repertoire"(Petrović, 2009, 29).

⁷ Shortly after the foundation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Germans made up its largest ethnic minority. According to statistical data, the first population census after the First World War of in 1921, in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, there were 505.790 members of the German minority, or 4,22% of the total population. (Binder, 2003, 124-125).

⁸ Within the Kingdom, the German minority was under a heavy influence of Hungarians. German municipality administration in Hungary, out of very pragmatic reasons, gave up surveillance over its schools, leaving them to the management of the state. This in turn caused a heavy influence of Hungarian culture even more prominent. The majority of Germans in Hungary, especially in urban areas, tried to learn Hungarian language, influencing thus the subsequent generations, in order to fit into Hungarian society, achieve economic prosperity and advance in the social ladder. Thus, German school underwent the influence of Hungarians while this tendency- education of Germans in the official, Hungarian language- was supported by teachers themselves, whose material wellbeing depended directly from the state (Janjetović, 2005, 233).

the previous knowledge from Austro-Hungarian Empire⁹ about publications and magazine publishings, hence by founding several new magazines of local character, they were able to cover almost the whole area inhabited by their ethnic minority.¹⁰

The publishing activity of the German educational and cultural institutions at that time, with its vast number of daily and weekly journals in German language testifies about their level of organization. At the same time, this, along with well-organized educational network, which allowed German pupils to attend curriculum in their native language, had played a key role in advances of German language into rural areas. Since their coming to southern Hungary, the majority of Danube Swabians had lived in rural areas, characterized as small, relatively closed agricultural communities, whose members were led by religious principles and respect of traditions. They were able thus to preserve a specific dialect of German language, known in these areas as the "Swabian dialect". This specific dialect united the language heritage of several different German dialects, characterized for the home areas of the immigrants. It was spoken in Vojvodina, inhabited by the greatest number of Germans until WW II.

At the same time, in urban areas of Vojvodina, within public speech, German language gradually gave way to Serbo-Croatian and Hungarian languages, spoken by the surrounding ethnic groups. Even though this may seem as a paradox, viewed in the context of multi-cultural and multi-lingual Vojvodina's administrative units, in fact represents a logical consequence of power division within public communication. This is due to the fact that German language in the Kingdom had not acquired a status of official language, as was the case in Austro-Hungarian Empire. This may be viewed as a herald to a subsequent, later to follow decrease of its usage in this particular area.

The Absence of the Use of German Language Among Germans in Vojvodina in the Period of their Ethnic Mimicry

After WW II, the majority of Vojvodina's Germans were under extreme repressive measures put forward the new government; various inconveniences, their scope¹¹ and fear had brought about that they had opted for an ethnic mimicry, that is, a strategy of conscious unrevealing and even rejection of their own ethnic identi-

⁹ In southern part of Hungary, there were ten German magazines, eight were of a national character. After the constitution of the Kingdom, three of them continued to be published within this state (Bešlin, 2001, 17-20).

¹⁰ Among these, especially important was "„Deutsches Volksblatt" (DVB), due to its skilled journalists and important covered subjects. It soon had overgrown its local framework and became the most important printed magazine of the Yugoslav Germans in between the two wars (ibid, 26-30).

¹¹ After WW II ended, the German minority was exposed to a number of repressive measures in 1944-1948, as a consequence of war-related activities by some members who supported the Third Reich (Janjetović 2009, 232–346).

ty.¹² The application of this mimicry among Germans from Bačka is illustrated by the words of a respondent from Sombor:

When we got out of the camp, my mom and I talked in German but as soon as someone would approach us, we would switch to Serbian. German language could not be heard on the streets, not even a word of it (male, 1939, Sombor).

In Vojvodina, this situation had caused that German language disappear from the public but also from private communications to a good extent, all until 1990's. During the time German language was suppressed from public communication, members of the German community attended schools in one of the official languages, Serbo-Croatian or Hungarian. At their work, whether in communication with members of the surrounding ethnic communities or among themselves, they also used Serbo-Croatian or Hungarian.

This is testified by accounts from two members of "German folk association" (Deutscher Volksverband), from Subotica:

It was totally appropriate for us to have a conversation in Serbian and Hungarian, mostly due to technical reasons since we couldn't work undisturbed in the company otherwise. There were 20-3-Serbs, Hungarians, Bunjevac, different...we had to know how to communicate with them, this was everywhere, if a Serb would speak to me, I spoke Serbian in response, and if a Hungarian spoke to me, I spoke Hungarian with him (male, 1943, Subotica).

When we were at work together, I spoke with some colleagues in Hungarian and with some in Serbian. That was the usual thing (male, 1951, Subotica).

Fear was omnipresent among Vojvodina's Germans, that they avoided their native language even when communicating with relatives or close family members. Instead in German, they spoke in language or languages of the surrounding ethnic groups. Regarding this period, here is what a German from Sombor says:

My father never spoke German with us, only Hungarian (male, 1951, Sombor).

His co-citizen, who also declares as a German, was born in a mixed marriage: his father was German, while his mother was also of a mixed origin, having German father and Hungarian mother. I asked him in which occasions German was spoken in his family. This is his response:

¹² This is characterized by conscious, temporary or constant, hiding and expression of symbols and /or markers of one's own ethnic identity, accompanied by conscious acceptance and public expression of symbols and markers of surrounding ethnic groups' identity with a better social position ((Крел 2006, 319–332; Крел 2008, 155–168).

In my family, after WW II, German language was absolutely a taboo. No one was allowed to speak in German. My mother didn't know Hungarian well, but she had to learn it in a short time in order to assimilate among Hungarians. My folks so started to declare as Hungarians, while relatively soon they changed affiliation in favor of German ethnicity (male, 1966, Apatin).

Total elimination of native idiom by the German community from the dominant public communication, in favor of idioms used by the surrounding majority communities and its partial retention in the sphere of private communications - that is, this refers only to communication within the family - has led that German language, all until 1990's, has completely disappeared from the streets of Vojvodina. This process is primarily caused by the change in power relations between the German minority and majority groups in the region and a negative attitude towards the values of the German minority group and its language, as expressed by members of majority groups, and members of minority communities.¹³ Its course and the outcome were facilitated by a large number of exogamous marriages, which with their bilingual nature facilitated an easier acceptance of majority idioms.

Reluctant and gradual "breakthrough" of German language from the sphere of private communications, and its appearance on the streets started simultaneously with the beginning of the process of "awakening" of the Germans from the period of "ethnic hibernation" at the end of the last century.

German language could not be heard in Sombor after 1945, no way. This was the case all until 1990's. That was the first time I have heard spoken German on the streets of Sombor. There were two older ladies in front of a grocery store, and they spoke in German. Even though I knew both of them personally, I didn't know they were both German. I was very surprised, and pleased at the same time (male, Sombor, 68).

The Role of the German Language in the (Re) Construction of Ethnic Identity of the Germans in Bačka

The evident absence of German language within public and private communications in the past five decades impacted the level of the language competency among the Germans in Vojvodina and in addition, the language almost ceased to exist. The leaders of various German associations in Bačka were well aware of this

¹³ The most important factors that positively or negatively affect the conservation of native idioms of minority communities and ways determining their sociolinguistic situation, Reitz cites: maintaining strong relationships with one's ethnic group, identification with a group of migrants, endogamy and religious affiliation (Reitz, 1974, 14-122). In contrast, Fishman emphasizes the importance of the three groups of factors that influence language exchange: changes in lifestyle that result in the weakening of social networks, changes in power relations between minority and majority groups, negative attitudes towards minority values and its language, among members of the majority and minority members of the community (Fishman, 1964, 32-70).

fact, and upon foundation of their associations, they have decided that knowledge of the language should not be deciding factor of membership. This decision was supported by the majority members. They also expressed their opinion about what would be the most appropriate criteria of membership: one's objective background-by birth, or one's subjective feeling about certain cultural values and freedom to express oneself freely. They opted for the latter.

Since a consensus was reached about whether one can declare as a German without knowing German language, in all local associations in Bačka several measure were undertaken to preserve and revitalize German language. This refers to increasing the language knowledge and its usage among the members. This is how Rudolf Weis, president of "German folk association", commented on the issue:

The primary requirement to join our association is that a person declares as a German, with German roots, background, while the language knowledge is not so important. Language is easily learned in some language courses. So, German language knowledge is not the primary criteria, since we take into account everything that was happening in this area in the last 60 years, and what has our people been through. We accept one's declaration about being German even if that person does not speak well German language. So, many of our people do not know German language well, but in their hearts and in the way they live, they are true Germans. A person with a German background, who declares as a German, will easily learn the language, it's just a formality.

One of the first activities of all local associations upon the formation was to organize language courses, free for all members but also to other interested parties, regardless of their ethnicity. These courses were divided into beginners/elementary language, middle and for advanced adults. Adults were assigned the courses based on their respective level of knowledge. Lectures were found among high school German language professors. Since their engagement was on a voluntarily basis, they perceived their enrolment as a contribution to revitalization of the local German community. Courses last one school year, with a possibility of continuous enrolment upon completion one or the other. All course attendees, after a course completion, took final tests awarded by certificates accordingly. The courses were often funded by German Cultural Centre "Goethe". In addition, all associations, in order to promote German language and culture, organized literary meetings, where German writers and poets were able to present their work. In the beginning, all associations' activities were similar, but some have enriched their activities by additional actions. For instance, the first German association in Vojvodina, "German folk association", was the first to launch a radio show in German language, and in this way took advantage of information dissemination in native language, guaranteed by the Constitution (Krel 2006, 329). In addition, this association acquired a rich open library for all interested parties, connected with German spoken television programs, and organized drama sections for the youngster. These enabled all interested to improve German language competency and to acquire knowledge about German culture. It appears that the association should take the most credit for pre-

servicing and renewing German language in this area. Interestingly, another, Sombor based association, joined the local administration and has founded, in a preschool "Vera Gucunja", an entertainment and educational didactic program for learning German language. This program was created by Institute of Pedagogy, Novi Sad, and it is completely adjusted to children's needs. It is also supported by the authorized Ministry. By participating in this program, children, through songs, play and recitation, are able to learn basics of German language. Mister Anton Bek, president of the association says this program is very beneficial for all kids involved, since they are able to learn the language and understand that a second language is a plus, especially since Sombor is multi-lingual environment.

Hence, the efforts put forward to preserve and revitalize German language within the local associations in Bačka imply that German language is not just "technical issue" but an issue of the utmost importance for survival of "Germanship" in this area.

All interviewed informants I have encountered during my research among activists and members of local German association in Bačka, declared German as their native language. This reflects their subjective attitude, as one of the strongest foundation on which they build a sense of membership in German minority; objectivity regarding native language is of secondary importance. Namely, during my research, I have not registered a case of ideal/type model of Vojvodina's German¹⁴; this is exacerbated by a high level of ethnic exogamy¹⁵ and rarity of Germans in Vojvodina¹⁶; hence, individuals who can consider German as a native language, in the classical sense, i.e., both parents are German speaking, are very few in number. However, German language is not at disadvantage in spite that the language is not the only one and often not even the first spoken language¹⁷ within families, and that children do not have an option to attend school in German. Regardless, German

¹⁴ This is a person who feels and publicly declares as a German, comes from an ethnic endogamous marriage, was baptized in the Evangelical and Roman Catholic church, with good commands in German language (reads and writes), and both of whose parents meet the above requirements.

¹⁵ Numerous studies from the former Yugoslavia show that between 1953-1989 mixed ethnic marriages were on the rise. Botev questioned these studies based on their limitations. He conducted a research wherein ethnicity and educations were among the variables and argued against the previous finding about rise of ethnic exogamy in the former Yugoslavia after WW II. Interestingly, in his research, Vojvodina was the only region which showed a constant rise in mixed ethnic marriages. In 1962-1965 the percentage was 22.5% while in 1987-1989 it was 28.4% (Botev, 2002, 285–290).

¹⁶ According to the 2002 census, 3901 members of the German minority live in Serbia. Of these, the largest number are in Vojvodina, 3154 of them, while the rest 747 live in other parts of Serbia. When compared to the 1991 census., the total number of Germans, 5.172, decreased by 1271 members. They participate in the ethnic structure of Vojvodina with 0.16%. (Domonji, 2003–2004, 151).

¹⁷ The first language of communication is the first language learned in childhood, not necessarily the one used as the first language at present, since there is a possibility that "one's first language may, under certain circumstances of life, change over time, giving way to another language" (Bugarski 2010, 22). It is a common belief that one's parents' respective native language is the native language, regardless whether it is the first language or not.

language has served as an important means of group identification to members of local German associations. The language impact is based on its subjective value.¹⁸

The majority of my informants agreed that their level of competency in German language is very limited. Only few have a good competency in speaking, reading and writing German language. This insufficient knowledge of the majority Germans in Vojvodina is justified and explained by historical and other influences and lack of support from Germany, whose influence is more evident only lately.

In general, our people have very limited knowledge of German language; most try to learn by attending language courses. This is not a surprise, because in the past period, some 40-50 years, no one has send to us, Germans in Vojvodina, a book, magazine or daily journal, or a record with Christmas songs, so that we could learn German language. It's more surprising, though, that when you want to return to Germany, the officials require a perfect knowledge of German language. Nothing else interests them (male, 68, Sombor).

Only one informant from Apatin claimed to know the Swabian dialect because he had an opportunity, encouraged by his mother and grandmother, to speak on the dialect with several older members of the local German community. He is aware that the dialect is almost completely forgotten.

All that participated in my survey are bilingual and/or multi-lingual: aside from the German, they also speak Serbian language (or Serbo-Croatian, as they emphasize) and they use Hungarian language as well.¹⁹ The informants assessed their respective language competency²⁰ in all three languages, and they claimed to speak

¹⁸ Tanja Petrović makes a distinction among objective and subjective factors that determine the sociolinguistic situation of minority communities. The objective factors include religious affiliation, number of speakers, social status and density of interaction networks, while subjective factors include values that the speakers attach to the idiom or idiom of the majority, their attitudes towards language and interpretation of their own linguistic behavior. In addition, the author pays special attention to language and behavior of certain ethnolinguistic communities, or "strategies that are used in everyday communication, their linguistic competence in the use of native majority language and idioms, as well as their linguistic repertoire" (Petrovic, op. cit. 44).

¹⁹ Inhabitants of Vojvodina and Bačka are all bilingual and/or multilingual, and within Eastern Europe, so possess the greatest potential to fulfill the EU proclaimed aid: every EU citizen should, to some extent, in addition to his/hers native language, use at least two of the languages use in EU (Bugarski 2009, 24).

²⁰ These were my questions:

How well do you speak Serbian language? a) good, without problems 32%; b) mostly good, but sometimes I cannot express myself in the right way 68%; c) so- so 0%; d) I do not speak well 0%.

How well do you speak Hungarian language? a) good, without problems 22%; b) mostly good, but sometimes I cannot express myself in the right way 78%; c) so- so 0%; d) I do not speak well 0%.

How well do you speak German language? a) good, without problems 4%; b) mostly good, but sometimes I cannot express myself in the right way 9%; c) so- so 13%; d) I do not speak well 84%.

Serbian and Hungarian languages equally well. Whether they speak Serbian or Hungarian better depends on their respective environments: those in an environment where for example, Hungarians make the majority speak better Hungarian than Serbian and vice versa. Thus, the level of competency in each language depends on social interaction within a given environment but also of the respondents' own needs and cultural preference. A lot of the respondents claim to know Serbian language better than the rest two, then Hungarian, while their native tongue, German language, was assessed as the least. This testifies in favor of asymmetrical linguism, that is, diglosia in favor of Serbian and Hungarian languages.

All respondents attach a great value to their bilingualism and multilingualism hence the emphasized asymmetrical bilingualism within their environment should not be an obstacle to learn German language. Most inhabitants of Vojvodina consider multilingualism as a part of cultural and historic heritage, rating it as a very valuable feature. This is confirmed by the words of a male informant:

There is a campaign in EU which proclaims as desirable and necessary to speak one's neighbor's language. We have grown in this way, we speak the language of our neighbors. That is a politically correct and modern in Europe now. "In" as they say. According to this Brussels criterion, our grandfathers were politically correct for they spoke their neighbors' languages (male, 1964, Subotica).

In the majority of cases, the communication within a family was and/or is in different languages simultaneously (in German, Serbian and Hungarian) - this is logical, since the respondents originated within mixed marriages- some of the informants could not tell whether they first spoke in Hungarian or Serbian language, nor they could determine with certainty when did they spontaneously and unconsciously adopt the both languages. Out of these, there are only few who spoke first in German language, and as a rule, these are the oldest respondents, born before WW II.

At present, there are noticeable efforts to restore German language into family communication within the Germans in Bačka. However, these efforts despite the initial enthusiasm, are lingered due to low language proficiency of the Bačka Germans themselves. The respondents are well aware of this fact: due to their low language proficiency, or inability to express themselves in German language, they are forced so to continue, after initial conversation in German, in Serbian or Hungarian languages, depending on circumstances.

On the contrary, I met several families wherein one of the parents declares as a German and insists on speaking German language exclusively with his/hers respective children. Within such family, the German parent expects the children to communicate in German, while his/hers respective spouse communicates in his/hers native language. An increase of such cases, even though they do not make a rule, and to most community members used to bilingualism/multilingualism they appear as radical, make a step forward regarding preservation and revitalization of German language in this area. There are numerous reasons causing phenomenon. Firstly, the phenomenon corresponds with foundation and initial activities of the local German

associations. Out of the activities, perhaps the most important is a launch of free German language courses, which allow all the members, especially the youngest ones, to improve the language proficiency, that is, to learn the language. The acquired language is then furthermore developing in drama sections, language camps, and fellowships for language learning in Germany. All these aid to apply the acquired language knowledge within one's native family. Leaders of certain associations and prominent activists, especially those with pre-school children, in an attempt to serve as an example for the rest of their communities, decided to communicate within their families exclusively in German language. Hence, within the Germans in Bačka, some parents consciously motivate and direct their young children towards communication in German language, insisting at the same time, in the children's participation in various activities organized by the local associations (summer language camps, drama sections etc.), school and out-of-school activities (foreign fellowships), in order that the children can master the language.

Interestingly, all the respondents try to influence their children to master German language; they believe that this knowledge, along with all other skills and knowledge that the children will eventually acquire during education, will be a key condition to enable the young to continue their education and training in one of the German-speaking areas, which will in turn, facilitate an access to European Union and thus allow a way out from economic and social hardship in Serbia.

The current practice, characterized by conscious efforts of parents to encourage their children in their emotional attachment to German language and developing the awareness of Germanship- something absolutely unimaginable from the end of the Second World War to the present day- must be interpreted in the context of pro-European policy of the Serbian government, which, to some extent, contributed to change in the media image of Germany as a host country of the Vojvodina Germans, but also in the needs of a certain number of the Vojvodina Germans. In media as well as in the Serbian politicians' public appearances, the images about "historical hostility between Germany and Serbia" and alleged key role Germany had played in the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia, gradually became reduced. In contrast, in anticipation of a significant political support from Germany, seen as an informal leader of EU, supposed to aid Serbia in joining EU, along with Germany's possible role in helping to rebuild destroyed Serbian industry, Serbian media are emphasizing joint interests of the two countries regarding economy and cultural cooperation. Hence, a beneficial climate was created within Serbian society, which allows a public manifestation of the Vojvodina Germans ethnic and cultural symbols; at the same time, German language became an important communicational code, facilitating communication with potential partners from Germany, expected to cooperate in numerous projects of the state, regional and local interests. Therefore, the unemployed members of the local German associations in Bačka, view German language knowledge as a skill that can significantly improve their chances of getting new jobs in the future; at the same time, for those that are employed, a knowledge of one's native idiom is experienced as a possible pre-condition to keep the job or getting a promotion.

Translated by Jelena Čvorović

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Sprechen Sie Deutsch? Немачки језик и ревитализација етничког идентитета Немаца у Бачкој

У овом раду анализирам употребу немачког језика у оквиру јавне и приватне сфере комуникације међу члановима три локална удружења Немаца у Бачкој, доводећи је у везу са процесом (ре)конструкције њиховог етничког идентитета.

Улога немачког језика у неговању и манифестовању етничког идентитета југословенских / војвођанских Немаца била је такође значајна у периоду између Првог и Другог светског рата.

У току периода "етничке мимикрије" – готово у читавој другој половини 20. века, и све до његове последње деценије – када се највећи број војвођанских Немаца због сплета историјских и политичких околности свесно определио за одбацивање или прикривање сопственог етничког идентитета, немачки језик, као један од његових најпрепознатљивијих симбола, уступа своје место у јавној и приватној комуникацији језицима већинских етничких заједница из окружења.

Суочени са присуством асиметричног билингвизма у корист српског и мађарског језика, као и са слабом конкуренцијом матерњег идиома међу Немцима у Бачкој – као последицама вишедеценијског периода "етничке хибернације", а у настојању да (ре)конструишу сопствени, али и етнички идентитет својих сународника, руководство и активисти новоформираних

Кључне речи:

немачки језик,
матерњи идиом,
етнички идентитет,
Немци у Војводини,
Бачка

локалних немачких удружења поклањају посебну пажњу повратку немачког језика у јавну и приватну сферу комуникације. Немачки језик је од стране њихових челника препознат као кључни симбол немства на овим просторима. Он се користи као средство за исцртавање и наглашавање симболичних етничких граница локалних немачких заједница у Бачкој. Тежња њихових чланова у Бачкој да међусобно комуницирају на немачком језику, у приватној комуникацији и приликом боравка у својим удружењима, као и императив подизања нивоа језичке компетиције матерњег идиома, у функцији су "исцртавања" симболичких граница у односу на етничке заједнице из окружења.

Упркос уложеном труду локалних удружења, процес ревитализације немачког језика међу бачким Немцима додатно отежава чињеница да законски прописи, с обзиром на изразиту малобројност Немаца у Војводини, не предвиђају могућност да они могу користити свој матерњи језик приликом комуникације у званичним ситуацијама. Због тога његово "оживљавање" зависи од међусобног односа са осталим симболима етничког идентитета војвођанских Немаца, али и од мотивације чланова локалних заједница. Но какав ће бити крајњи исход овог подухвата – показаће време.