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Carinthia – Burgenland. The different historical-cultural backgrounds of two minority situations and their impact on inter-ethnic relations and bilingual place naming

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This paper examines the reasons why the representation of place names in the public space acquires a special meaning for linguistic minorities, both generally and from a cultural-geographical perspective. It begins by describing and explaining the rather different minority situations that prevail in the Austrian provinces of Carinthia (German: Kärnten) and Burgenland. In both provinces there reside autochthonous cultural/linguistic minorities, communities that have inhabited these territories for many generations: the Slovene minority in the case of Carinthia and the Croatian and Hungarian minorities in that of Burgenland. However, different attitudes towards the representation of minority toponyms in the public space prevail, attitudes that are attributable primarily to their diverging historical backgrounds. While interethnic relations in Carinthia were from the early Middle Ages characterized by social stratification with the minority as the social ground layer and after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy burdened by nationalist excesses on both sides, the Croatians in Burgenland were in the same socio-political position as the Germans from their settlement in the 16th century up to the end of the Hungarian Kingdom in 1918 and much less exposed to nationalist attitudes. The public recognition of minority place names has met therefore with much less resistance in Burgenland than in Carinthia.

Key words: symbolic power of place names, bilingual place naming, minority situations, inter-ethnic relations, Austria, Carinthia, Burgenland

L'article tracta d'esbrinar per què el paper dels noms de lloc en l'espai públic té un significat especial per a les minories lingüístiques, tant des d'una perspectiva general com des d'un punt de vista geograficocultural. Seguidament, aborda la descripció i explicació de la divergència de situacions pel que fa a les minories de les províncies austríaques

de Caríntia [Kärnten] i de Burgenland. L'una i l'altra són, per excel·lència, les províncies d'Àustria amb minories –en el sentit de comunitats residents a la regió des de fa moltes generacions– lingüístiques i culturals autòctones: la minoria eslovena a Caríntia i les minories croates i hongareses a Burgenland. La divergència de situacions és una conseqüència, també, de la diferència d'antecedents històrics: mentre que les relacions interètniques a Caríntia es van caracteritzar des dels inicis de l'edat mitjana per l'estratificació social, amb la minoria a l'estrat inferior (i exposada, a més, als excessos nacionalistes d'un costat i de l'altre), els croats a Burgenland es trobaven en la mateixa posició sociopolítica que els alemanys des de la seva arribada al segle XVI i fins al final del Regne d'Hongria el 1918; i, en tot cas, molt menys exposats a les preses de posició nacionalistes. En aquest context, el reconeixement públic dels noms de llocs minoritaris va trobar per tant molta menys resistència a Burgenland que a Caríntia.

Paraules clau: poder simbòlic dels noms de llocs, noms de lloc bilingües, situacions de les minories, relacions interètniques, Àustria, Caríntia, Burgenland

1 WHY IS THE PUBLIC REPRESENTATION OF PLACE NAMES IMPORTANT FOR LINGUISTIC MINORITIES?

Before entering into a comparison of the Austrian provinces of Carinthia (German: Kärnten) and Burgenland, I wish first to address the following question: Why is the public representation of place names of such importance to linguistic minorities?

When linguistic minorities or non-dominant identity groups seek to have their place names represented in the public space (for example, on signposts and on street signs), they wish to document their presence; that is, they seek to express their share in the identity of the place. If this is to occur without conflict, then it is only possible if such claims are accepted by the majority; in other words, the majority needs to feel comfortable with a shared or common identity of place. Conflicts — as have occurred and continue to occur in many places (see Eller, Hackl & Ľupták 2008; Horn 2004) — indicate that such acceptance has not been (sufficiently) given and the dominant group is not ready to share this identity of place (Fig. 1).

It also needs to be stressed that the dispute over place names is merely a symbolic expression of deeper conflicts. Names would not be regarded as so important or offensive, if there were not some other underlying problem. It is usually more important for the non-dominant group than it is for its dominant counterpart to see its presence recognized by place

Fig. 1: Damaged bilingual Italian/Resian signposts in the Resia Valley [Val di Resia], Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy (Photos: Peter Jordan 2008)

names. This is because the former typically finds itself in a defensive position, from where it has to defend its rights against the stronger group and so it strives to boost its levels of self-assurance. While a majority has all the means at its disposal to preserve its identity, a minority has to be highly attentive in this regard.

A characteristic of all place names, but one that is especially important for minorities, is that they underpin the emotional ties of a group to a place (see Jordan 2009a, b, 2012, 2014; Ormeling 1983; Reiterer 2003). If members of non-dominant groups are able to read place names in their own language (on signposts and street signs), this generates a sense of familiarity and a feeling of attachment to that place.

Since only those groups that have been settled in a place for generations will have developed their own place names, they regard the public representation of these names as a recognition of their longstanding presence and of the fact that they have contributed to the shaping of the culture and landscape of this place.

It is wise for the dominant group to recognise these claims and to grant the non-dominant group the right to represent their place names. Not

only does it boost the self-esteem of the non-dominant group, it is also a way of winning its co-operation and loyalty. Having understood this, many countries grant this right to their minorities.

2 COMPARISON OF TWO QUITE DISTINCT MINORITY SITUATIONS IN AUSTRIA: CARINTHIA – BURGENLAND

In what follows I compare attempts to represent public place names in two minority situations in Austria: Carinthia and Burgenland.

2.1 Bilingual Slovenian-German parts of Carinthia, Austria

The great migration of Slavs in the 6th and 7th centuries brought a Slavic population (later known as "Slovenes") to the eastern Alps. They established their own principality, but in the middle of the 8th century they had to acknowledge Bavarian/Franconian domination and were by the end of that century fully integrated into the political system of the Franconian Empire. This resulted also in their Christianization in the Latin sense and in their Bavarian (German-speaking) colonization. The Bavarian newcomers became politically and socially dominant, while the Slavic population remained the rural substratum (see Lukan & Moritsch 1988). Nevertheless, from the end of the Middle Ages up to the present day, an ethnically/linguistically mixed situation has persisted in shaping Carinthian culture. This is also true for its namescape, which presents itself as a mixture of Slavic and German elements throughout the province (see Kranzmayer 1956, 1958; Pohl 2009a, b, 2010; see also Fig. 2).

However, linguistic assimilation towards German-speakers, the dominant group, proceeded. Social ascent was only possible by using the German language. By the end of the Middle Ages, a distinct language boundary had developed within Carinthia [Kärnten]. Later, on the Slovenian side of this boundary, Slovenian consciousness would be eroded substantially. According to the 2001 census (by colloquial language, the last one conducted in Austria; see Statistik Austria) ca. 12,000 people claimed to speak Slovene, i.e., 4.7% of Carinthia's population (see also Fig. 3).

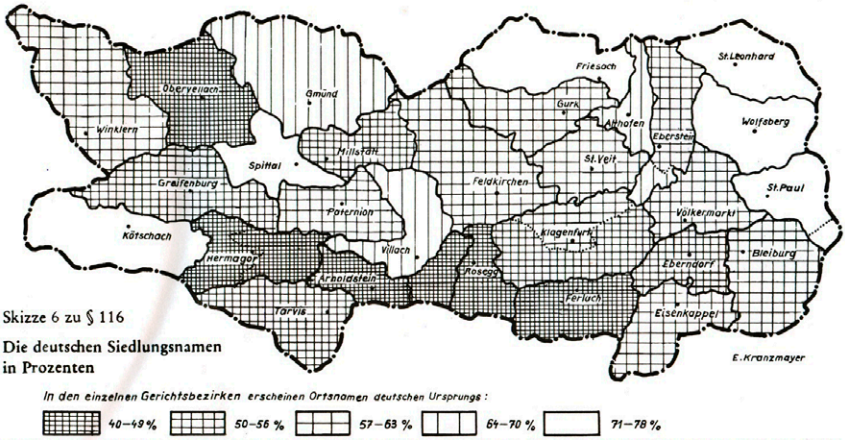

Fig. 2: Toponyms of Slavic origin in Carinthia: the darker the field the higher the share of Slavic toponmys (Source: Kranzmayer 1956)

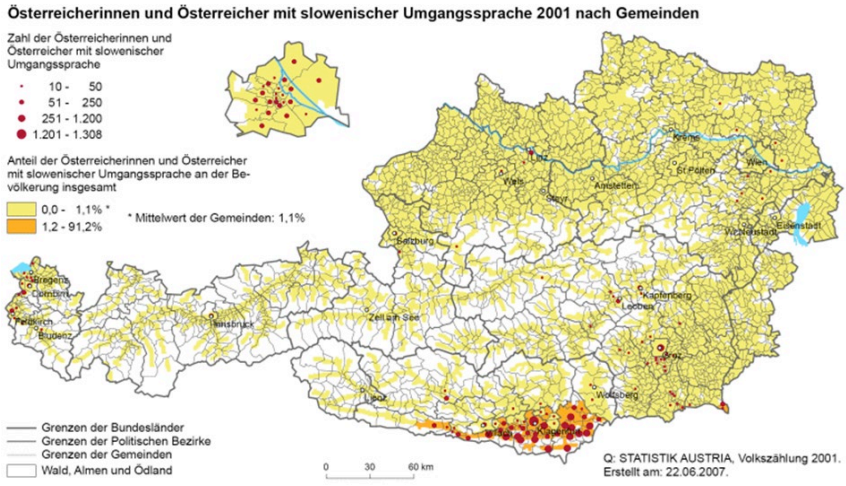

Fig. 3: Austrian census 2001: Slovene speakers (Source: Statistik Austria 2007)

This marked decline is due not only to the social stratification that provoked assimilation towards the dominant group (as mentioned above), but also to more general social changes (the conversion from rural to industrial and service-oriented societies) and the peripheral location of the areas inhabited by Slovenes in Austria in socio-economic terms, which also resulted in some out-migration.

In addition to this, various political events have had a considerable impact on the relations between majority and minority: the rise of nationalism during the 19th century; national homogenization after World War I; and the fact that, after that war, Austria lost parts of Carinthia, settled predominantly by Slovenes, to the first Yugoslav state, giving rise to the attitude that the parts retained were "ours", which served as a justification for their further Germanization. There were also attempts on the part of the first and second Yugoslav states (after World War I and II) to occupy larger parts of Carinthia and, by no means least, the National-Socialist regime 1938–1945 discriminated against, fought and expelled Slovenes. All these events generated severe animosity between majority and minority and aggravated a relationship that had earlier been characterised by social stratification.

Until very recent times, German-speakers considered themselves superior to the Slovenes, while the Slovenes felt they were inadequately recognised as the old autochthonous population that had essentially shaped the culture of the region. At the same time, they felt their language was not granted the same importance as German and that being a German-speaker conveyed greater prestige.

When efforts were made to establish and improve minority rights after World War II, the Slovenian group was small and declining in number (see Jordan 1988, 1992; Land Kärnten 1990; Veiter 1980). The driving forces behind these attempts were the "international community" (as we would call it today) and the Austrian federal government, but they came up against what was (at times) fierce opposition from the majority population in Carinthia (or, at least, from their political representatives). After a number of largely unsuccessful attempts, it was not until 2011 that a compromise could be achieved. This would appear to have satisfied all parties and it has essentially eased the tensions in what was at times a highly delicate political situation (see Hren & Pandel 2012).

This compromise means that 164 villages and towns in southern parts of Carinthia now have official bilingual names, given that the Slovene-speaking community represents 17.5% of the population, according to the 2001 census (Fig. 4). Minor deviations from this benchmark were admitted, when accepted locally.

Why then was it so difficult to erect official bilingual place names in Carinthia? In short, inter-ethnic relations in Carinthia were handicapped

Fig. 4: New bilingual German/Slovene signposts according to the 2011 compromise in southern Carinthia. (4a: Photo: Maciej Zych 2014; 4b: Photo: Peter Jordan 2015)

by the insufficiently acknowledged primacy of the Slovenes in the province's settlement history and their insufficiently acknowledged contributions to common culture. This was exacerbated by the social stratification that had become so marked over the centuries between dominant German-speakers and non-dominant Slovenes resulting in clearly defined images of self and the other. These images have persisted up to the present day, although their intensity has declined somewhat. Yet, they still give rise to attitudes of superiority (in the case of the majority) and inferiority (in the case of the minority) which contrasts starkly with minority situations elsewhere in Europe, e.g., Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania, who rarely hesitate to use their language; the French in French Jura even though, like the Slovenes in Carinthia, they are in an economically peripheral position; and, perhaps, also German speakers in South Tyrol [Alto Adige/Südtirol].

However, the situation is not unlike that of Slovenes in Italy, where Venetian (and later Italian) was always the language of social ascent. Furthermore, inter-ethnic relations in Carinthia were later poisoned by successive Yugoslav occupations after the two world wars as well as by the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime.

2.2 Burgenland with its Croatian and Hungarian minorities

The factors prevailing in Carinthia contrast significantly with those prevailing in Austria's easternmost and youngest province Burgenland with

its Croatian and Hungarian minorities — our second case study. This province was incorporated by Austria as late as 1921 after having formed part of the Hungarian Kingdom for about a millennium. In the Hungarian Kingdom, the Hungarians were the social elite, while German-speakers as well as Croats constituted non-dominant groups and — at least after the rise of national ideas in the middle of the 19th century — were discriminated against by law. Thus, Germans and Croats shared the same status (and problems) under Hungarian domination. In this regard, it made no difference that the German-speakers had been present for longer, while the Croats had arrived only in the 16th century, after being evacuated by their Hungarian landlords from the endangered borderlands near the Ottoman Empire (see Breu 1970).

A further circumstance that might have contributed to the closer relationship between Germans and Croats was the mosaic-like dispersion of Croat settlements among the Germans: just some villages presented a clear Croatian majority, while they dominated no large compact region (Fig. 5).

Moreover, the number of Croats has fallen significantly due to assimilation, especially after their incorporation within Austria. Today, Croat is much less frequently used as a family language. But the Croats have — especially after World War II — become a kind of identity marker for the new federal province (see Haslinger 2001; Richnovsky 2013). Previously, it had comprised several historical units and sought a common identity within the new state (Austria). It has opted to style itself as the "Pannonian province" of Austria and exploits this identity (very successfully) as a tourism brand (see Haslinger 2001; Richnovsky 2013). For this image of self, the Croatian as well as the Hungarian minority have proved most opportune.

When bilingual signposts were officially introduced in 2000 (Figs. 6 and 7), the move met with no objection and went — in stark contrast to events in Carinthia — very smoothly. Today, 48 villages and towns have bilingual German/Croatian signs, and four have bilingual German/Hungarian signs.

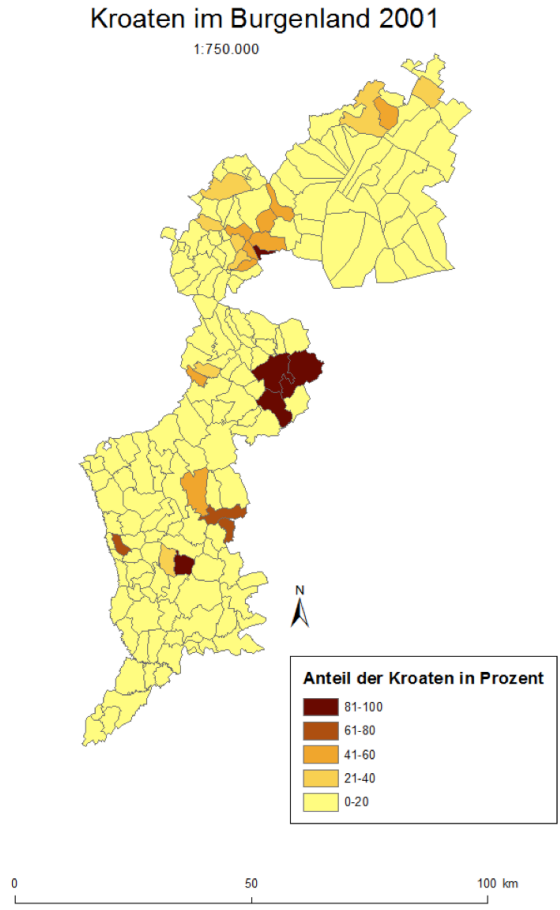

Fig. 5: Burgenland-Croatian speakers in Burgenland according to the population census 2001 (Source: Richnovsky 2013, p. 66)

Fig. 6: Bilingual German/Croatian signpost in Burgenland (Photo: Peter Jordan 2008)

Fig. 7: Bilingual German/Croatian street-name plate in Burgenland (Photo: Peter Jordan 2008)

3 CONCLUSION

Thus, in the same country (Austria) we find two very different situations. The main reasons for this difference can be summed up as follows:

- Burgenland did not suffer the burden of historical social stratification between the present-day majority and minority.
- In Burgenland, the majority accepts the Croatian and the (very small) Hungarian, minorities as constituent parts of the province's history and culture as well as of its image of self.

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