THE SLOVENE LANGUAGE IN THE EUROPEAN INFORMATION SOCIETY

3.1 GENERAL FACTS

It has been estimated that around 2.5 million people around the world speak or understand Slovene, with a vast majority of them living either in the Republic of Slovenia or in the neighbouring areas in Italy, Austria and Hungary. In 2002, during the last national census in Slovenia, 87.8% of the population – of a total of just under 2 million at the time – declared Slovene to be their mother tongue, and another 3.3% claiming that they use Slovene as the language of their everyday communication at home. This amounts to 91.1% of the population using Slovene as their first language and this number puts Slovenia in the group of EU states with the most homogeneous linguistic situation. Among other linguistic groups, native speakers of languages used in former Yugoslavia are by far the largest, with 3.3% of them using a combination of Slovene and their mother tongue for everyday communication and another 1% using only their mother tongue – Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian or Montenegrin. Other smaller communities include speakers of Albanian, Macedonian and Romani.

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Similar to many cases in European history, rather complex developments in the past led to the situation where relatively large Slovene minorities now live in the region Friuli-Venezia Giulia in Italy, in Austrian federal states Kärnten and Steiermark, as well as in the bordering area with Hungary and in Croatian Istria. On the other hand, Italian and Hungarian minorities live in the bordering regions in Slovenia. The constitution grants the right to use their mother tongue to both minorities declaring that the official language in Slovenia is Slovene while “in those municipalities where Italian or Hungarian national communities reside,” Italian or Hungarian are also official languages.

In the world, significant communities of immigrants from Slovenia can be found in the USA, Canada, Argentina and Australia. The first due mainly to large waves of economic emigration in the second half of the 19th century and up to the First World War. The other three are predominantly due to political emigration after the Second World War when Slovenia became part of the socialist Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia. Both communities of Slovenes in the neighbouring countries and those around the world are supported by a government office with the Minister for Slovenes Abroad as the head of the office, which – with the ministerial level of the office – shows high level of concern for Slovene population around the world.

While the first written resources identified as Slovene date from the late 10th century, the language was standardised and described for the first time during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. In 1550, Protestant reformer Primož Trubar published first two
In addition to the often precarious political circumstances hindering the use of Slovene in all spheres of life – throughout history the region had been part of larger political entities, usually with centralisation and unilingual tendencies – the development of standard Slovene was further complicated by the unusually large number of dialects in Slovene given the relatively small number of speakers and the density of the area where dialects are spoken. There are now more than 40 dialects recognised in seven larger dialect groups, a circumstance encapsulated in the popular saying that “every Slovene village has its own speech”. Modern standard Slovene is therefore, to a large extent, still considered as a written standard while spoken Slovene consists of a large variety of spoken idioms determined by region, local dialect, age group, education and other demographic factors. Regional standards do exist and are used in general public speech; however, the highest form of Slovene pronunciation – the equivalent of Received Pronunciation in English – is predominantly spoken by professionals at the National Radio and Television or on formal occasions.

3.2 PARTICULARITIES OF THE SLOVENE LANGUAGE

A distinctive feature of Slovene which also has important consequences for computational processing of natural language is the existence of dual grammatical number in the declension of nouns, adjectives, pronouns and numerals, as well as in verb conjugation. Slovene is one of the very rare Indo-European languages where this feature has survived from the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European language. Therefore, in almost all nouns, the dual grammatical number is expressed with different inflections as shown in Table 1 on page 46. Slovene nouns also show six grammatical cases and three genders with several inflectional paradigms which leads to an explosion of different inflectional forms as shown in Table 2 on page 46.

The situation is even more complex with adjectives which – in addition to case, number and gender – can also express degree and definiteness. One single Slovene adjective pameten can therefore show no less than 164 different inflected forms where English, for instance, would only have three: “wise”, “wiser”, “wisest”. It is easy to imagine what kind of workload this imposes on an aspiring learner of Slovene and, from technological point of view, on part-of-speech taggers and parsers dealing with a tag set containing almost 2,000 different grammatical tags. No wonder that the language has been called “something between mathematics and language” by English foreign learners who are not used to having to calculate the inflections for three genders, three numbers and six cases before being able to utter a single word in Slovene. Of course, this is taken into account in courses where Slovene is taught as a foreign language, and teaching strategies have been developed to alleviate the morphological exertion.

Examining the issue from a different angle, it is interesting to observe frequency data on the use of word forms with a particular grammatical number. Studies