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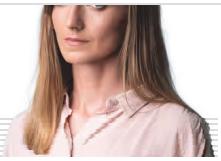

I'm one of the 2.5 million users of Slovene – and English and German speakers would do well to be curious about us

Wed 24 Apr 2024 07.00 BST

Street life in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Photograph: RossHelen editorial/Alamy

A couple of years ago, I received an invitation from a German cultural institution to present my debut short story collection, which was translated into German that year. The terms and

There was one diplomatically laid out request, however. The producers wanted me to speak German at the event. They heard me speak it *fluently* in a video interview and figured I could easily do it again. As a rookie, and the greenest author to have ever walked the Earth, I swallowed my anxiety and agreed to it. I kindly asked them to send me the host's questions in advance, so I could prepare for this premiere of mine. I didn't mention that I'd never spoken German in front of a live audience, nor that I intended to translate my answers from Slovene to German and learn them by heart. I had done that for the video interview as well. I wasn't only industrious, you see, I also had an excellent memory.

Two weeks before the event, I met two remarkable poets at a festival in Ptuj, Slovenia. I shared my gnawing fear with them: that I would not in fact be able to memorise my replies because I still hadn't been sent an outline of the planned discussion at the literary evening.

They were baffled. "But they invited *you*!" they exclaimed. "You can set some conditions too!"

"I don't want to be a diva," I answered shyly.

"Diva? You are a writer who writes in *Slovene* and whose mother tongue is *Slovene*. They invited you as such! You can actually claim your language," said the pierced one.

"You can actually," added the tattooed one, "claim your *identity*."

On my way home, I decided that they were right. I might have been a rookie, but I had already learned to heed the insights of wise women. I wrote a short email, explaining that I would need an interpreter after all. Sorry for the late notice, I said, I don't feel ready to speak German in a stressful situation. *Bitte, haben Sie Verständnis*.

And understanding they were - after a couple of are-you-sures and ah-this-is-truly-short-notices. Nonetheless, suddenly the evening I dreaded became an evening I managed to savour.

Savour *fully*. After I left the stage, I was so elated, I reportedly smiled, as we say in Slovene, like *a roasted cat*. I must have appeared less introverted than usual, because people kept approaching me and congratulating me, as well as commenting on my book. The last person to speak to me was a lady who wore a luxurious red scarf. She held my elbow and said: "Schnabl - that is German, I suppose?"

"It's Austrian Carinthian actually," I replied.

"So you must speak German then?"

Here we go again, I thought, yet politely answered: "Well, yes, but -"

"*Ach*," she interrupted me, "it would have been so impressive if you'd spoken German up there!"

I froze or - to use a fine Slovene idiom - *I stood there like a linden god*. My thoughts, however, propelled by the lesson I had received from those wonderful poets, were racing. You know, I wanted to say, what would be impressive *to me*?

I wanted to ask this woman if she knew that Slovene is one of the very few Indo-European languages that still uses the dual form. We are actually able to refer to "us two" - *midva* - or "you two" - *vidva* - or "those two" - *onadva* - directly, without ever confusing the listener or the reader.

its speakers and writers have sustained the language despite centuries of colonisation, especially by the speakers of her language, among others.

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These *small language speakers* have somehow managed to resist the pressures of imperialism, and they celebrate this perseverance almost manically. Each year, 800 to 1,000 titles of Slovene fiction or poetry are published; I'm only one grain of sand in a sandstorm of authors and poets, a grain that nevertheless stood before the woman in the flesh and could offer her an opening into a new cultural realm.

No language, be it *majhen* ("small") or gigantic, has any intrinsic value; its value is bestowed upon it only by its speakers who, perhaps, call those languages a home or, as it is with me, *a love* - which, I'd add, doesn't make me a linguistic purist. On the contrary, I believe Slovene survives by loaning and expanding instead of refusing and enclosing. It's just as impossible to imagine Slovene dialects without their Germanisms or Italianisms as it is to imagine Slovene speakers never gladly stumbling upon certain internet-English expressions - like the beautiful "cringe" - that force us to at least think of our own equivalents, if not directly invent them.

I have noticed, though, how much easier it is for me to say *obvi* (short for "obviously") than *očitno* and how sometimes full, consecutive sentences in English fall out of my mouth.

Does this worry me? Does this mean Slovene is not only on the move, but on the run from new twin juggernauts - English and the internet?

No, it doesn't. The language I love is a game. I can approach it playfully and unconcernedly, but if ladies with red scarves encroach on my space, I will react fiercely, defensively.

What worries, or rather annoys, me is the lack of basic curiosity among large-language speakers towards small languages, their very common inability to consider small languages as realms and not mere deserts in which strange sounds travel from one dune to another. This bothers me, not because I want Slovene speakers to be graced with the attention of, say, English speakers or because I expect people to learn Slovene. No, this annoys me insofar as any type of ignorance of the privileged annoys me: I dislike seeing people *choose* to remain small.

Ach, *meine Güte*. I wanted to say *all of that*, but couldn't, I had to chisel my response.As I admitted, speaking German in stressful situations doesn't come easily to me. I struggled to answer her in German, yet I'm afraid the lady was ultimately unimpressed with my language skills. I suspect this because she frowned as I spoke and after I finished, she walked away, as we say in Slovene, *as quickly as a lightning bolt*.

Ana Schnabl is a Slovenian novelist, editor and critic

This article was amended on 24 April 2024. An earlier version referred to the use of the dual "case", rather than form, in the Slovene language.

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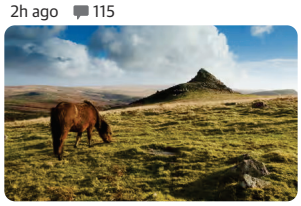

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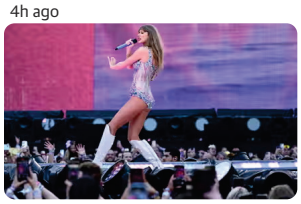

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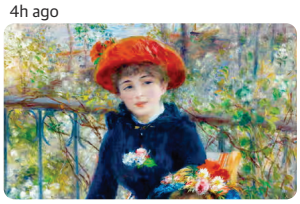

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