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The status of the German minority within the multi-ethnic educational system of the Banat region – a historical overview focusing on the multicultural character of the region

Andreea Rodica Ruthner*

"Politehnica" University of Timișoara, Faculty of Communicational Sciences, 300006 Timișoara, Romania

Abstract

It is widely known nowadays that pure monolingual cultures are exceptions rather than common occurrence and that Europe’s largest cities constitute the cradles of multi-ethnic and cross-cultural societies. This study would like to draw the attention to the today’s Romanian region of Banat, which housed over the last 200-300 years a multicultural avant-garde society, within which the Romanian, German, Hungarian, Serbian, Bulgarian or Jewish inhabitants successfully intermingled, granting the multilingual community an emancipated transcultural character, also reflected on the local educational system. The historical approach on this matter reveals a functional multicultural educational system that survived due to the open-minded and forthcoming attitude of the Banat population over two or three centuries, in spite of the numerous unfavourable governmental policies, and could serve as a basis of comparison to further studies on multi- or intercultural language teaching.

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1. The link to the modern European context

The present-day literature on foreign language teaching places great emphasis on the importance of the Intercultural Competence, which represents, along with the Communicative Competence, one of the key skills of the 21st century, in order to successfully adapt to the modern economical, cultural and political interdependent system of the European Union. It is widely known nowadays that pure monolingual cultures are exceptions rather than common occurrence and that Europe’s largest cities constitute the cradles of multi-ethnic and cross-cultural societies. Therefore, one of the main targets of the European Union is set on the increase of plurilingualism (Beacco & Byram, 2003, pp.30-77), aiming for a higher level of communicative and intercultural competence. Integration does not require the loss of one’s identity or origins, on the contrary intra-European exchange is based on the cultural and linguistic heritage of all source or target nations, encouraging the fusion of two or more nations, in order to highlight the main cultural and linguistic similarities and differences.

* Andreea R. Ruthner. Tel.: +40-744-326833.
E-mail address: arruth2002@yahoo.com.
As it has already been mentioned, the present European policy encourages plurilingualism as a fundamental principle of language education (Beacco & Byram, 2003, p.30), meant not only to favour language diversity, but also to protect linguistic and cultural communities and to enable the transition of the European society to a more tolerant and forthcoming attitude towards national minorities (Beacco, 2005, p.20), by overcoming prejudices and stereotypes. An important step forward was taken by the Council of Europe by publishing the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1995: The member States considered that “a pluralist and genuinely democratic society should not only respect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of each person belonging to a national minority, but also create appropriate conditions enabling them to express, preserve and develop this identity” (European Treaty Series – No. 157, p.2) and they agreed “to encourage a spirit of tolerance and intercultural dialogue” (Section II, Article 6, p.4).

Consequently, language acquisition does no longer strictly refer to attaining linguistic or communicative competences, it also implies the development of the intercultural competence. Being aware of Europe’s linguistic wealth represents the first step towards the acceptance of cultural and linguistic diversity (Beacco, 2005, p.20) and the non-discriminatory interaction, leading to the achievement of the supreme transcultural competence.

2. The Banat region – a multicultural avant-garde society

The Banat serves as an excellent example of a successful coexistence of several nations belonging to one society: even prior to Turkish domination the region was inhabited by Hungarians, Romanians, Serbians and Croatians, and, although the ethnic communities were organised in separate settlements, they managed to coexist in good terms, as there are no records of great disputes in the early history of this region (Seton-Watson, 1919, pp.335-346; Schmidt-Häuer, 2001).

Once the Ottoman administration ended and the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718) was signed, the region was incorporated in the Habsburg Monarchy of Austria (Kotzian, 1983, p.41). Almost two centuries of warfare during the Ottoman domination resulted, however, in a dramatic decrease in population, and in order to repopulate the land, the Habsburg administration sent German settlers, who were followed by large numbers of Hungarians, Bulgarians, Czechs, Ruthenians (or Rusyns) and even Italians, Spaniards, French people, Albanians and Jews (Kotzian, 1983, pp.42-44; Hockl, 1995; Holczinger 2009, p.22). The measures were taken for two reasons: on the one hand, the region represented the Eastern frontier of the Empire, a transit area (Holczinger 2009, p.22), which was however expected to serve as a defence against intruders, on the other hand, the new province was supposed to become a model to further conquered territories (Holczinger 2009, p.22).

The fact that each ethnic group of the region was represented by an approximate equal number of members, all interested in the economic, educational, religious and cultural development of their community, preserved the tolerant attitude towards the neighbouring communities (Hockl, 1995) and, although the communities preferred to keep their ethnic unity unaffected by the multicultural pattern of the province, they would not discourage personal contact to other communities on matters of trade or other economic or public affairs.

The lack of warfare and the successful intercultural economic cooperation transformed the Province of Banat to Europe’s “granary” (Schmidt-Häuer, 2001) and to one of the very few European regions that accepted and even embraced multiculturalism. In addition to that, the Viennese administration also exerted a powerful influence on the attitude of the local citizenry, by granting them equal rights, regarding language, culture and education, no matter what ethnic group they belonged to, in order to provide each cultural community with an incentive to free development, next to the German language and culture. This lead to the emancipation of the Romanian, Serbian and even Jewish communities, without causing interethnic or religious conflicts, on the contrary, it resulted in an utmost prolific convergence of all cultural communities, producing the interference of beliefs and customs from one ethnic group to another, particularly in matters of religion. Timișoara, the capital city of the Banat, was converted into a
cosmopolitan city, similar to the most Central European cities, as Prague, Krakow, Bratislava, Budapest, Lviv etc. (Neumann, 2009, p.23).

The society developed in fact a “border identity” (Neumann, 2009, p.23), marked by cross-border and transcultural features, and due to the coexistence, to the relatively similar social and material living circumstances, satisfactory to most parties, and to the later great number of mixed marriages, it succeeded in avoiding the ethnic nationalistic tendencies during the interbellum or the Second World War, and even in the period of the Romanian communist totalitarianism (Neumann, 2009, p.23).

3. The German regional educational system

Once the Banat region had become part of the Habsburg Empire and had been planned to function as a model province, one of the priorities of the new administration was to create the structure of a new German educational system, without undermining or brutally eliminating the existing Hungarian, Romanian and Serbian educational systems (Holczinger, 2009, p.30, 31). The newly born province was expected to develop rapidly and progress was to be obtained foremost by educating the subjects of the Monarchy. The system was highly influenced by the principles of the French Enlightenment (Holczinger, 2009, p.31), and thus, it promoted the intellectual emancipation of the common people and tried to minimise the influence of the Roman Catholic religious authority.

Although the first school that was established in 1725 by the Jesuits, was a Latin School and was administered under the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church (Eberl, 1989), the Habsburg administration established at the same time German schools in the province, in order to attract German colonists to this region. Among the colonists were also teachers, who had already learned a trade (Kotzian, 1983, p.170; Eberl, 1989) and were able to offer a proper and complete education to the children of the newly arrived colonists. Kotzian (1983, p.169) confirms that 20 German schools had already been established until the outbreak of the Austro-Ottoman War (1737-1739).

The first educational reform, the Theresian “Studienordnung”, was initiated in 1752 (Holczinger, 2009, p.34) and it represented the fundamentals of several measures, that were planned to be implemented in the new educational system of the Monarchy, as it revoked the Church’s prerogatives to a considerable extent. Maria Theresa continued her work, promulgating further reforms, with the assistance of Gottfried van Swieten and later of Johann Ignaz von Felbinger (Holczinger, 2009, p.36), culminating in the most important educational reform, the so-called “Allgemeine Schulordnung für die deutschen Normal- Haupt- und Trivialschulen in sämtlichen kaiserl. königl. Erbländer” (1774) (Kotzian, 1983, p.171). These new school regulations represented a clear and precise description of the duties of both the religious and the lay authorities, within the new educational system, sharing powers and obligations in an almost equal manner. The “Trivial” schools were the equivalent of today’s primary schools and they would grant free access to education to all subjects of the Monarchy, their ethnicity being of no importance (Kotzian, 1983, p.171), in the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment.

Part of the “Allgemeine Schulordnung” reform was a later regulation, the “Ratio Educationis” (1777), which concerned the Hungarian territory and the Banat region, and which declared two aspects as being compulsory, the school attendance and the use of the German language as teaching language (Holczinger, 2009, p.38; Kotzian, 1983, p.171). The schools continued nevertheless to hold classes in their native language and introduced the German language simultaneously. It would have been impossible to eliminate the native language from the school system, as there was a considerably large number of pupils belonging to other ethnicities, who would have experienced difficulties in using only the German language on such short notice.

On 4 March 1849, Franz Joseph confirmed by means of a new royal edict (“Kaiserliches Patent”) the acknowledgement of the religion and of the cultural identity of each ethnic group that inhabited the Monarchy, without however granting them the right to being taught in their native language (Holczinger, 2009, p.43).
years later another decree stated the German language as teaching language, disregarding the other existent native languages.

All these new regulations pursued one ultimate objective: the Germanisation (Holczinger, 2009, p.38) of the different ethnic groups, in order to unify and consolidate the Empire (Hügel, 1978, p.51). The result, however, embodied the exact opposite of what had been expected, as the population of Banat chose to rather embrace the idea of multiethnicity, which generated a new kind of identity, the above mentioned “border identity”, than to fight or accept assimilation. This fact generated a unique situation for the 19th century, of interethnic tolerance (Gschwandtner, 2005, p.66).

3.1. The consequences of the Magyarisation

The Hungarian nobility expressed without delay its discontent regarding the unitary and absolutist policy of the Empire, by protesting against the use of the German language in administration and education and requesting the implementation of the Hungarian language instead. At first the request concerned only the Hungarian region of the Empire; however, towards the end of the 18th century, they insisted that the Hungarian language should also be taught in the Banat schools (Holczinger, 2009, p.69), even if the local population was at that time mostly of German, Serbian and Romanian origin (Kotzian, 1983, p.176).

Unfortunately, large numbers of German priests and teachers accepted and even embraced the process of Magyarisation, simultaneously being granted all sorts of privileges. Therefore, the process culminated, when the Apponyi laws (1907) came into force and no one was allowed any longer to make use of any other language, except the Hungarian one, in educational institutions or other public places (Holczinger, 2009, p.75).

After the Treaty of Trianon (1920) was signed, a great part of the Banat was assigned to Romania. The number of German schools grew rapidly, most of all after the German educational system was granted autonomy by the Law for Private Education (1925). An important part in the revival of the system was played by the Roman-Catholic Church (Holczinger, 2009, p.115, 162) and the German Ethnic Group (“Deutsche Volksgruppe in Rumänien”) (Gabor, 2007, p.47), which managed the religious and the lay educational institutions.

3.2 The communist period

Under false pretences of governing in a democratic unity, the Romanian Communist Party (P.C.R.) promulgated a law (no. 86/1945) in 1945 regarding the Statute of the Minority Nations (Monitorul Oficial, no. 30/7 Feb. 1945), which granted to the minority communities the right of being educated in their native language, if there was a sufficiently large number of requesting pupils. At the same time a highly subjective system of “exposure” and “purification” of the people’s democratic regime from its enemies (Holczinger, 2009, p.240-241) was elaborated, which affected a great number of German teachers: During 1944-1945 they were dismissed, forced to join the army forces, deported to the U.S.S.R. or imprisoned on political grounds (Holczinger, 2009, p.246-247). The result was that the German educational system was close to a state of collapse.

Although the acts of “exposure” and “purification” continued up to 1958 (Holczinger, 2009, p.264) and even much later, in the late 50s 47.66% of the Banat school population was still of German origin (Holczinger, 2009, p.275). This number and the fact, that the Communist Regime was still interested in keeping up the appearances of a democratic governance for the great public benefit, forced the regime to initiate in 1968 an educational reform, which encouraged the birth of a new generation, educated in the spirit of the Socialist Humanism, after having already reintroduced in 1965 the secondary schools (Kotzian, 1983, p.388-389). The minority nations were again allowed to benefit from attending classes in the native language at all levels. The “Nikolaus Lenau” Secondary School was therefore established in 1971 (Kotzian, 1983, p.390).
The next educational reform (1973) was probably meant to entirely eliminate the minorities’ educational system: The communist leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, spoke of the homogenisation of the nation by means of bilingualism (Kotzian, 1983, p.406). However, he intended to offer the minority groups the chance to learn the Romanian language in a rather profound manner rather than to promote a mutual exchange of knowledge. Consequently, most of the German schools were reduced to sections of the Romanian schools (Gabor, 2007, p.47) and the survival of the German educational system depended on the influence of interpersonal relationships on higher or even lower levels of the Romanian administration and simultaneously on the need of the government to preserve the image of an egalitarian society (Holczinger, 2009, p.295, 321).

4. Conclusion

The Spanish philosopher, George Santayana (1863-1952), once said that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. That is why, the present paper aims at presenting, by means of a historical overview, a positive example of a multicultural social system, which managed to overcome all sorts of difficulties, caused by ethnic and religious differences or by governmental policies. The answer to interethnic co-existential problems lies at the same time in a functional multi-cultural educational system, which, in the case of Banat, survived due to the open-minded and forthcoming attitude of the Banat population over two or three centuries, in spite of the numerous unfavourable governmental policies, and could serve as a basis of comparison to further studies on multi- or intercultural language teaching.

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