

MULTILINGUALISM IN BRATISLAVA AND THE ADVENTURE OF ITS RESEARCH

Jozef TANCER: *Rozviazané jazyky. Ako sme hovorili v starej Bratislave (Loosened Tongues. How We Used to Talk in Old Bratislava)* Bratislava: Slovart 2016, 303 pages, numerous photos.

Jozef Tancer, Head of the Department of German, Dutch and Scandinavian Studies of the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, has long been dealing with multilingualism. His most recent book contains the recollections of Bratislava citizens about the languages spoken in the city in the inter-war period and, in particular, about the language they spoke, and about how they talked with their families at home, at school or with authorities. This topic is based on the research conducted by Jozef Tancer and his colleagues in the project “Slovak in the Context of Multilingual Communities”. Bratislava in the inter-war period became an excellent laboratory in which the author could explore multilingualism. It should be noted that the research was a historical one, as Jozef Tancer focused on the period of the 1st half of the 20th century. At that time, as described by his respondents engaged in the research and mentioned in several historical materials, people communicated in various languages both in the public and private spheres, mainly in German, Hungarian and Slovak, though we can also add Czech, Yiddish, as well as Croatian and Bulgarian in Bratislava’s wider surroundings.

The twenty interviews out of the seventy ones conducted in the framework of the research represent a good selection through which Jozef Tancer managed to produce a linguistic, ethnic and confessional mosaic of the inhabitants of former Bratislava. The author drafted his work so as to present the results of his research to the general public. He edited the interviews, gave them a form suitable for

readers, shortened them where needed, or selected parts of full interviews. Even though he was required to keep the language standard, he sought to preserve, to the largest extent possible, the dimension bringing the text closer to the spoken form. He aimed to capture in writing the natural oral communication as much as possible. In my opinion, he coped well with this task, as the reader can easily see. By reading the interviews aloud the reader can feel that the text runs naturally smoothly.

The effort to share his research results with the public did not prevent Jozef Tancer from analysing expert issues related to the scientific research on multilingualism. In addition to the well-founded Foreword and the introductory essay on “What Is Multilingualism”, he included, after the interviews, chapters explaining some of the issues related to his research, such as linguistic ideologies, the trilingualism of Bratislava citizens in the inter-war period, etc. The book **Loosened Tongues** thus acquires a new dimension. It is becoming a description of the adventure called scientific research. Jozef Tancer makes the reader familiar with his research kitchen. He discusses with the reader the ways he perceives multilingualism. We can read the following sentences: “A multilingual person is anybody considering himself multilingual [...] Multilingualism is not only the matter of real competence, but also the matter of attitude.” (p.15). Tancer seeks to view multilingualism through the perspective of those who used/use it. He wants to explore not only how and what languages are spoken by people, but also what they think about multilingualism, and he seeks to present this view of research. I think he managed it well. I fully agree with Tancer’s opinion that we all are – or, more precisely, can be – multilingual; what matters is the attitude we take towards the linguistic competence, the value we attribute to such competence, and what language(s) mean(s) or can mean to us. This expert opinion represents an innovative and inspiring approach to the scientific research on multilingualism.

With a great portion of humour, Jozef Tancer guides us through the devious footpaths walked by almost all researchers who choose to use interviews as a research method. Yet, through these often amusing stories, the author readily presents to the reader the most important principles of the research ethics. For example, he analyses the fact that researchers and their respondent are not or should not be in a hierarchical position. They are partners in a dialogue. As respondents reply the researcher’s questions, they also have the right to ask questions from Jozef Tancer. And certainly, respondents have the right to privacy and integrity which the research must not violate.

The book captures the historical recollections of Bratislava citizens, as well as the changes in the use of languages under the influence of the political events in the 20th century. The first change was largely manifested in 1939 when Czechs

were forced to leave the city and Jews as well as other nationalities or ethnic groups, including the Roma, began to be persecuted. It also reflects the second important change that occurred after World War II, as lived and described by Bratislava citizens, respondents in Tancer's research. The period after 1945 was marked by the expulsion of Germans and Hungarians from Czechoslovakia, and the then form of multilingualism in Bratislava was gradually disappearing.

The twenty interviews represent twenty life stories of people who spent their childhood – and some of them also their youth – in the inter-war Bratislava during the period which was tolerant in terms of ethnicity, confession and political attitudes. It was not easy for Bratislava citizens to remember the past events, as the joys of their childhood were in many cases soon affected by the traumas, horrors and consequences of the historic catastrophes of the 20th century. Thanks to the recollections of concrete people, the events of this turbulent period acquired a form that the reader can better understand and imagine, seeing the faces and lives of the respondents in their background. This is the power and strength of the interviews in the book.

If I am to summarise the content of the book **Loosened Tongues**, I get to following knowledge. Firstly, the book narrates a fascinating story of how people used to talk in old Bratislava. Secondly, the narratives bring forth the stories of people living in this city and depict the dramatic events of the 20th century through these human fates. Thirdly, it clarifies both in a joyful and serious manner the ways it is possible to explore multilingualism. Fourthly, it points out what researchers may face both in good times and in bad times once they choose to conduct such research. These four stories in one book represent an interesting, attractive and balanced whole.

Gabriela Kiliánová