

Jutta Ransmayr

Monolingual country? Multilingual society. Aspects of language use in public administration in Austria

Abstract

Austria's federal constitutional law states that German is the official language of the Republic of Austria. But how does Austria meet the linguistic needs and rights of its non-German-speaking or multilingual citizens? What is the status of indigenous ethnic minority groups in Austria regarding language use in the various areas of public administration?

This national report will set out these and other aspects of language use and language policy in Austria.

1. Language(s) in Austria

One might assume that Austria is predominantly German-speaking and therefore considered to be a monolingual country. However, a glance at the last census from 2001 proves differently and shows that languages other than German are being used in everyday communication.

Austria's official language is German, as stated in article 8 of Austria's Federal Constitutional Law.¹ Article 8, paragraph (1) of the federal constitutional law specifies the German language as the official language of the Austrian republic – additionally, in paragraphs (2) and (3), the languages of minority ethnic groups are officially recognised and given particular attention.² In addition, in an amendment added in 2005 Österreichische Gebärdensprache (Austrian sign language) was recognised as an official language.

Art. 8

- (1) German is the official language of the Republic without prejudice to the rights provided by Federal law for linguistic minorities.
- (2) The Republic of Austria (the Federation, Länder and municipalities) is committed to its linguistic and cultural diversity which has evolved in the course of time and finds its expression in the autochthonous ethnic groups. The language and culture, continued existence and protection of these ethnic groups shall be respected, safeguarded and promoted.

¹ Bundesverfassungsgesetz B-VG-BGBl. Nr. 1/1930, as last amended by BGBl. I Nr. 81/2005.

² Amendments BGBl. I Nr. 68/2000 and Nr. 81/2005.

- (3) The Austrian Sign Language (Österreichische Gebärdensprache, ÖGS) is a language in its own right, recognized in law. For details, see the relevant legal provisions.

Apart from these three major linguistic provisions, there are no further regulations stated in the constitution regarding Austria's official or national languages or the subject of language rights (BMUKK/BMWF/ÖSZ 2008a: 22). In the last census of 2001, 88.6% of the resident population stated that they use only German as an everyday language, 8.6% stated that they use German and another language, and only 2.8% said that they used a language other than German as their everyday language.

As shown below in table 1, the indigenous minority groups totalled 1.5%; about 4.3% of the resident population mentioned the languages of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnian, Croatian, Macedonian, Serbian); and about 2.3% mentioned Turkish and Kurdish. All in all, more than 60 different languages were counted³. If we interpret these linguistic statistics, we observe that Austria is a multilingual country, despite the dominant role of the German language (de Cillia 2012: 171).

However if only Austrian citizens are taken into account, the overall picture changes drastically to an even more dominant position for the German language. 95.5% are German speakers, while the number of speakers of other languages is below 4% and speakers of all the indigenous minority languages only amount to 1.1% (de Cillia 2012).

Everyday language	Resident population	Austrian citizens
	total: 8.032.926	total: 7.322.000
German	7.115.780 88,58%	6.991.388 95,48%
Languages of the Austrian autochthonous ethnic groups	119.667 1,49%	82.522 1,13%
Austrian sign language	approx. 10.000	
Languages of the former Yugoslav states	348.629 4,34%	41.944 0,57%
Turkish, Kurdish	185.578 2,31%	61.167 0,84%
World languages	79.514 0,99%	43.469 0,59%

Table 1: Resident population – everyday language – nationality (2001)

³ Statistik Austria (2002).

Within Austria's resident population, the actual number of speakers of languages other than German is relatively small, as figure 1 illustrates. Nevertheless, a number of legal provisions have been made to ensure and protect the linguistic rights of certain minorities.

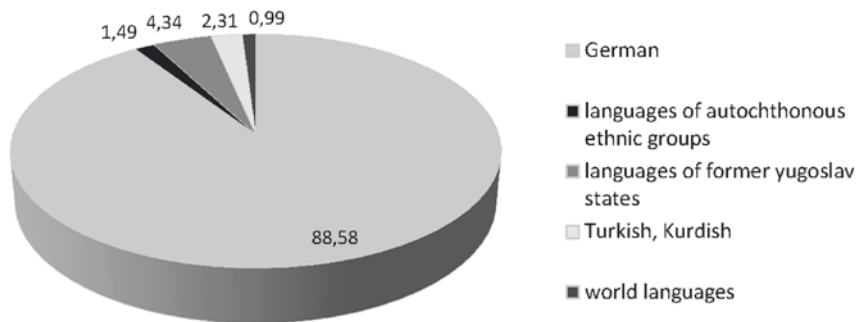


Fig. 1: Languages of resident population 2001 in %

2. Status and support of regional and minority languages

The basis for the protection of linguistic minorities in Austria dates back to the Austrian monarchy, which aimed to provide a legal framework to look after the rights of minorities (Haarmann 1993:110).

Today, apart from the German-speaking majority in Austria, there are six officially recognised indigenous minorities, as well as migrational minorities who have come to Austria for work reasons over the last 40 years. Additionally, there are approximately 10,000 deaf people in Austria using Austrian sign language as their mother tongue. The six recognised indigenous minority groups are the Croatian ethnic group in Burgenland; the Slovenian group(s) in Carinthia and Styria; the Hungarian group in Burgenland and Vienna; the Czech group in Vienna; the Slovakian group in Vienna; and the Roma ethnic minority group in Burgenland (BMUKK/BMWF/ÖSZ 2008a: 23). Table 2 shows the numbers of speakers amongst Austria's resident population and Austrian citizens respectively:

Everyday language	Resident population	Austrian citizens
Hungarian	40.583	25.884
Slovene	24.855	17.953
Burgenland-Kroatisch	19.412	19.374
Czech	17.742	11.035
Slovakian	10.234	3.343
„Romanès“	6.273	4.348
„Windisch“	568	567
Austrian Sign Language	6.273	no numbers

Table 2: Languages of the Austrian autochthonous ethnic groups⁴

Whereas Slovene, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak are languages of Austria's neighbours, Burgenland Croatian is the language spoken by the descendants of the Croats who emigrated to Burgenland in the 16th century, and is different in certain respects from the variety spoken in Croatia. It should be noted that according to the 2001 census younger members of these groups increasingly tend to assimilate into the majority population, giving up their distinctive linguistic and cultural identity (BMUKK/BMWF/ÖSZ 2008b).

Apart from the legal provisions in the constitutional law mentioned earlier, there are other essential legal documents concerned with the status and protection of ethnic minority groups as defined by law. These are Article 7 of Austria's state treaty⁵ (Vienna 1955) and the *Volksgruppengesetz* (1976)⁶.

Article 7 of Austria's state treaty explicitly refers to the Slovenian minority ethnic group in Carinthia and Styria, and the Croatian minority in Burgenland. It lays down their right to primary school education in their respective mother tongues, and to a number of secondary schools commensurate with their numbers. The *Volksgruppengesetz* of 1976 stipulates, among other things, the establishment of *Volkgruppenbeiräte* (advisory councils for ethnic minority issues), which resulted in the official recognition of several more minority ethnic groups later on (BMUKK/BMWF/ÖSZ 2008: 23).

⁴ Statistik Austria (2002).

⁵ <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=10000265>.

⁶ https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblPdf/1976_396_0/1976_396_0.pdf.

As stated in Austria's federal constitutional law, German is the language of teaching and education in Austria's schools⁷, unless there are differing legal provisions for schools for linguistic minorities. These exceptions mostly concern schools of the Slovene, Croatian and Hungarian minorities in Carinthia, Burgenland and Styria (de Cillia/ Wodak 2006: 31).

Language laws for Carinthia (1959) and Burgenland (1994) provide regulations for Slovene, Burgenlandkroatisch and Hungarian. There is a substantial number of bilingual classes at primary school level, whereas the opportunities at secondary schools can still be considered unsatisfactory; there are more bilingual facilities at some academic secondary schools and at upper secondary level (Klagenfurt/ Celovec and Oberwart/ /Felsöör/Borta). Some language regulations concerning education for minorities in Burgenland date back as far as the 1930s. For the Czech and Slovakian groups, the *Komensky-Schule* in Vienna, a private school, provides schooling opportunities (BMUKK/BMWF/ÖSZ 2008: 24).

There are differences within Austria from federal state to federal state and between different languages as well, outlined in the language education policy profile. (2008b: 38): The organisation of kindergartens, which in Austria are not within the purview of the federal government but are the responsibility of the Bundesländer, varies within the regions. In Burgenland "kindergarten law" regulates bilingual care and education at kindergarten level and sets a minimum time-frame for children to receive care in the language of their own ethnic group. In Carinthia, however, a *Kindergartenfondsgesetz* lays down guidelines for language teaching for the managing bodies that run bilingual or multilingual kindergartens. At the compulsory schooling stage, children are registered automatically for bilingual tuition in Burgenland, but their participation may be cancelled by their parents. This is provided for through a law which regulates schooling at primary and secondary schools as well as teacher training, the "Minderheitenschulgesetz" (the minority school law), which applies to both the Hungarian and the Croatian minorities in Burgenland (Fischer 2003). In Carinthia, on the other hand, all children have a right to bilingual schooling but their parents must take the initiative in registering them. The number of primary schools that provide bilingual education, the number of children in bilingual classes, the percentage of children from ethnic minorities in bilingual classes, and the supply of secondary schools are all evidence that in both federal states provision works well for Croatian and Slovene. In Carinthia, language regulations and laws for schools have been causing conflicts since 1945. Nevertheless, there is wide acceptance of bilingual schooling in Carinthia with two thirds of pupils coming from German-speaking families, despite the problematic status of minorities.

⁷ §16 Abs. 1 SchUG.

The Croatian Centre for Culture and Documentation in Eisenstadt has produced language courses not only for Croatian but also for Hungarian and Romani. Some vocational schools close to the border with the Czech Republic and Slovakia offer courses in Czech and Slovak respectively. As regards Romani, a project was launched in 1993 to codify Burgenland Romani and to develop teaching materials. Romani is taught in schools on a voluntary basis, and not all Roma pupils attend Romani lessons since parents sometimes consider English and German to be more important than Romani.

3. Status of other languages

Among the non-German-speaking resident population, immigrant minorities play an important part in Austria's linguistic landscape. They are strongly represented in Austria's schools. The percentage of speakers of languages from the former Yugoslavia has doubled since the 1991 census and the percentage of Turkish speakers has increased by 50 percent (de Cillia 2006: 22). Figure 2 below shows the most common first languages of residents whose first language is not German:⁸

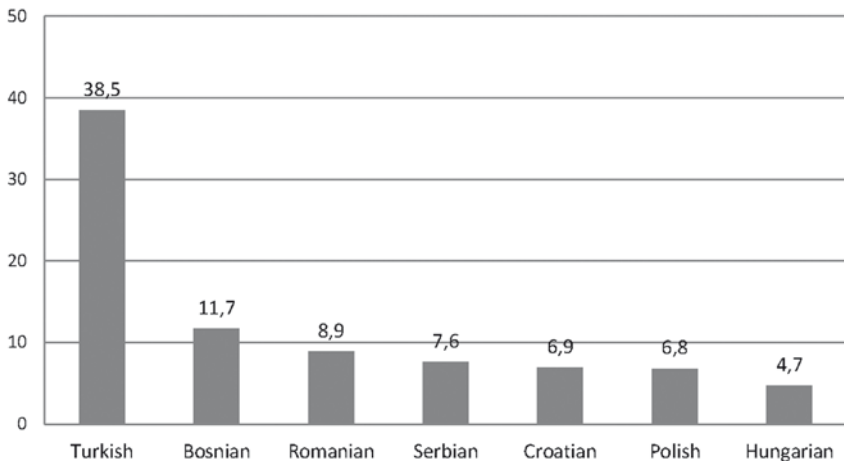


Fig. 2: Most common first languages if German is second language (%)

3.1 Dealing with multilingualism at schools

The percentage of students with first languages other than German is strikingly higher at primary schools and at general secondary schools, compared to academic secondary schools. Vienna has the highest percentage of school students whose first language is not German. This is illustrated in figure 3:

⁸ Statistik Austria (2002).

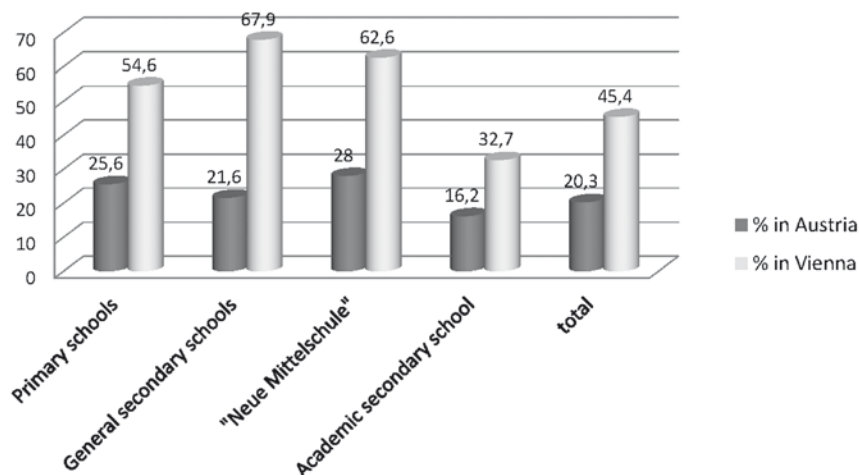


Fig. 3: School students with other first languages than German (%)

The situation at Austrian schools can therefore be characterised as one of multilingualism. In terms of numbers, school students at Austrian schools who are not part of an indigenous minority far outnumber the pupils who come from one of the recognised minority groups. To provide for the (linguistic) needs of these school students, there is mother tongue teaching in migrants' languages at Austrian schools. Pupils whose mother tongue is not German may attend „Muttersprachlicher Unterricht“, which aims at broadening and strengthening those children's mother tongues. In the academic year 2005/06, approximately 26,000 pupils attended „Muttersprachlicher Unterricht“. In 2007/08, 19 different languages were taught by 316 native speaker teachers. Among the languages taught were Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (BKS), Bulgarian, Chechen, Chinese, Hungarian, Italian, Macedonian, Persian, Polish, Romani, Romanian, Russian, Slovakian, Spanish and Turkish (de Cillia 2010: 10).

3.2 Other laws and regulations concerning other languages than German

On the subject of language rights, there are scarcely any other regulations or legal provisions, apart from the ones mentioned in sections 1 and 2. There is no general regulation in consumer law making it mandatory to use the German language for product descriptions or warnings (except for children's toys). Moreover, there are no quota regulations in Austria's media law (e.g. to provide for a certain percentage of Austrian productions on TV or radio) which would amount to indirect support of the German language (BMUKK/BMWF/ÖSZ 2008: 22). Austria's pub-

lic broadcasting company (ORF) broadcasts about 5 hours of radio programmes per week, and 30 minutes of television programmes per week are broadcast in the official minority languages.⁹

As for other situations in everyday life, such as communication with authorities, there are some authorities (e.g. school boards, social and health security services, revenue offices) which offer forms and information brochures in foreign languages, including the two main migrant languages (Turkish and BKS). Apart from this, there are no laws or regulations guaranteeing further language rights (e.g. for administrative bodies and authorities) or translation services (e.g. at hospitals). There is one notable project „video interpretation for non-German speaking patients“ at Vienna hospitals, which has been successfully implemented.

3.3 Integration agreement

Special regulations concerning the official language (German) were laid down in the last decade (1998 and 2005, respectively), involving knowledge of the German language and citizenship. In amendments to legal provisions regarding nationality and citizenship in 1998, knowledge of German was stipulated for the first time for persons applying for Austrian nationality. Because of the so-called “Integrationsvereinbarung” (integration agreement), applicants need to prove German language skills corresponding with their circumstances, plus (since 1998) basic knowledge of Austria’s democratic structures and history and (since 2006) to pass an exam (level A2) in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). For third-country nationals, attendance at an „integration course“ in German language was made mandatory in 2003 and a level of A1 needed to be demonstrated; this was raised to A2 in 2006. Before moving to Austria, language knowledge at levels A1 and A2 is required for temporary residence; B1 has been necessary for permanent residence since 2011.¹⁰

The integration agreement and its amendments were severely criticised by experts and committees in Austria, as the necessary language course provisions were not adequately available. Furthermore, the costs were not fully covered by the state, making it hard for applicants to meet the necessary requirements on economic grounds. In addition, from an educational viewpoint, the linking of learning to punishment (losing one’s residence permit) is seen as highly counter-productive and a major barrier to successful learning (Krumm 2002: 39).

⁹ <http://volksgruppen.orf.at/>.

¹⁰ <http://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20004468>.

4. Austria's treaty of accession to the EU (1995)

Austria became part of the European Union in 1995 after a referendum held in 1994. Prior to Austria's European Union accession, language and Austrian identity were the subject of highly emotional public and media debates. Fears among the Austrian population of a loss of Austria's linguistic identity, which underpinned these debates, led to the development of an additional document, Protocol no. 10, which is part of Austria's accession treaty. This protocol, on the use of specifically Austrian expressions in the German language within the framework of the European Union, lists 23 "typically Austrian expressions" for foods (e.g. *Marille*, *Erdäpfel*, *Topfen*) which must be included in an appropriate way in German language legislation within the EU (i.e. *Hackfleisch/Faschiertes*). Of course, this was mainly a way of managing the insecurity and doubt among Austria's population concerning EU membership prior to the referendum held on 12 June 1994 (de Cillia/Wodak 2002: 21). Despite the small number of „typically Austrian terms“ listed in this document (which has more symbolic value than anything else) Protocol no. 10 still has some linguistic significance as it officially emphasises that Austrian Standard German is a variety of German in its own right. It is therefore unique in the European Union as such, as no other EU member state has a similar linguistic contract document.

5. Conclusion

This report has tried to provide a brief overview of some of the most important aspects of language use in public administration in Austria, discussing the existing legal framework and the language situation of linguistic minorities in Austria. Summing up, it can be stated that Austria – in fact a multilingual country – has successfully developed a language policy for schools and for education aimed at doing Austria's plurilingualism justice. There is, however, still room for finding more profound and beneficial (rather than restrictive) ways of dealing with languages other than the official languages which are in use in Austria in everyday life and in particular in Austria's education system, especially as there are further challenges to be met in view of the current refugee crisis in Europe.

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