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Bilingualism between Nationalist Politics and Daily Experience: The Case of Ljubljana-Laibach

Ever since an urban settlement had been established on the banks of Ljubljanica, ist inhabitants have used several languages. The majority spoke a Slavic vernacular as their first language, while some form of German was the first language of a significant minority. Yet, as a written language, German was predominant in education, administration, and commerce. It was also the preferred spoken language of the upper class, although Carniolan burghers and nobles also used the Slavic vernacular in certain situations.

With the advent of nationalism, the use of Slovene became a political act and the Slovenification of Ljubljana-Laibach an important goal of Slovene nationalists. However, despite their efforts established patterns of language use changed slowly. Only after they secured a majority in the municipal council in 1882, Slovene replaced German in local administration, established itself more firmly in schools, and bilingual or Slovene-only signs started to dominate the linguistic landscape. Gradually, Slovene became the primary spoken language of all the social strata. However, German was still too important to be relegated to a purely secondary role of a minority language. Despite nationalist propaganda about the grave danger of bilingualism, most Slovene speaking inhabitants of Ljubljana-Laibach had at least some familiarity with German; many were fluent, especially the educated. Some Slovene speaking parents were still sending their kids to German-language schools. Despite the efforts of nationalist purists, the influence of German on the spoken language, the Slovene you heard on the streets, in the markets, workshops, coffeehouses, and inns was still enormous. A glass was still glaž and not kozarec, a stove was šporhet and not štedilnik, etc. In short, there were limits to people's willingness and ability to adapt to a strict and unrealistic code of conduct the nationalists tried to impose.