

SELLING ONESELF, SELLING THE NATION: TRANSLATING SLOVAKS FOR THE EYES OF EUROPE

Jonathan Larson University of Michigan

© 2002 Jonathan Larson All Rights Reserved

The copyright for individual articles in both the print and online version of the *Anthropology of East Europe Review* is retained by the individual authors. They reserve all rights other than those stated here. Please contact the managing editor for details on contacting these authors. Permission is granted for reproducing these articles for scholarly and classroom use as long as only the cost of reproduction is charged to the students. Commercial reproduction of these articles requires the permission of the authors.

An important element of post-1989 projects of “transitioning” Eastern Europe is socialization to new, Western-oriented practices and the construction of new kinds of persons. Such practices might include learning how to consume “appropriately” (Berdahl 1999), engaging in new forms of political participation (Verdery 1996), reorienting how one conducts scientific research (Replika: Hungarian Social Science Quarterly 1996), and taking up new ways of conducting business (Wedel 1998). As I intend to demonstrate, it also demands particular skills of representation, of understanding oneself as a certain kind of subject and projecting a corresponding appropriate image into interactions with others. Moreover, learning such skills is as much about resituating one’s national identity as it is one’s person.

In June 2001 I attended a workshop in writing curriculum vitae that a Slovak NGO held in the public library of the city of Martin. One stated reason for such a session was the new economy of post-socialist East Central Europe: the existence of new kinds of employers, foreign and domestic, and the requirement they allegedly have of new linguistic genres for how employment seekers should represent themselves on the job market. Using tools of linguistic anthropology, I will analyze this instruction in writing a CV on two semiotic and pragmatic levels. First, in the act of representation described in this paper, it is supposed to translate “Eastern European” personhood into “Western” terms. The CV is a textual object that should facilitate new practices of the labor market particularly through semiosis, representing persons and even the nation iconically to diverse audiences. However, the construction of new individual subjects cannot occur without a realignment of the social relations in which those subjects are embedded. The CV thus acts in a second way of representing those social relations. It constructs new kinds of personhood

through referential, pragmatic, and metapragmatic rearrangements of the individual’s relations to past events and other actors.

Western-style CVs are supposed to “map” and “translate” both Slovak individuals and the nation into terms that Western investors or Slovak adherents to neo-liberal ideologies can comprehend. This act is an important part of creating faith and trust, critical components of these ideologies. Anthropologist Elizabeth Dunn has called the production of other types of texts, accounts and audits, “‘rituals of verification,’ tools that produce comfort (for investors, the polity, or the market) rather than critique” (Dunn 1999:43). The nationed-ness of those who engage with Slovak CVs is also critical to this paper. The new CV, as discursively constructed in the workshop, represents a neoliberal performance of an embedded nation.

My claim here is identical to one that Michael Kennedy has made about businessmen in Poland: their espousal of (neo)liberal ideology constructs the nation while it avoids naming it, and does so in terms of individual behavior. Increased efficiency of individual workplace behavior is not only supposed to enrich oneself, but also the nation (Kennedy 1999). While in this paper I am not able to explore in great depth such a link between Slovak attitudes toward work and the nation, I can note here that a program I viewed on Slovak National Television in the summer of 2000 argued in exactly these terms. In the discursive case study of this paper, marketing oneself is marketing the nation; mapping and translating Slovak personhood into Western terms helps the individual actor in the labor marketplace while it contributes to an image of a Slovak nation as mappable, translatable, and ultimately worthy of trust in investment. I do not have time to go into issues of reception and uptake, but point out situated terms in which Slovak persons, and the nation,

are currently constructed discursively in relation to Europe, America, and the West.

The instructor of the workshop, whom I will call páni Migašová, opened by citing the need for such a session because most secondary schools still teach methods of CV writing that are old in comparison to developed (“rozvinuté”) countries. A first important lesson is that in today’s era “everything is based on advertising” (všetko je založené na reklame). Her statement creates a vocabulary to articulate this new genre. This new *metalanguage* of the CV in Slovakia that refers to advertising is one that indexes changes in social fields such as business, in notions of meritocracy, and in local ideologies of language that impart knowledge of English with social capital.

First, Páni Migašová advertised and described the event as a “training” or “workshop,” a new class of educational event grounded in neo-liberalism. It is up to the guests to “sell themselves” on the job market. One has to learn how to “evaluate oneself as a product” (zhodnotiť sam seba ako produkt). Everything is a competition in which all have an equal chance, but only the best are taken. Writing a CV is a skill of “advertising” (reklama) and “self-presentation” (sebabpresentácia) that is democratically available to all (cf. Benakova 2000:4). Second, knowledge of English is crucial social capital. The “training” and its corresponding brochure made heavy use of English vocabulary even alongside Slovak equivalents: “fact sheet,” “job objective,” and “cover letter.” More particularly, the brochure provided mock CVs in English of Americans in Ohio and Connecticut as samples, followed by Slovak equivalents. The logic of this presentation is clear: one should learn how to translate the life experience of a Slovak into American or “Western” terms. English catalyzes this process.

This frame of neo-liberalism sets terms for a subsequent reconfiguration of Slovakia and Slovaks in time and space. Páni Migašová advised the group not to write whether one is from a “robotnická rodina” (working-class family). This reference to an important piece of personal data in the socialist era showed how the instructor sought to construct the new CV and the New Capitalist Man in relation to the past. Páni Migašová’s recommendation reflects ideologies of the New Labor Order. One’s social affiliations of age cohort, place, and family background no longer visibly matter on the CV. They no longer matter because of how ideologies

of the transition reorganize space and time in the creation of new national bodies and their subjects. The world outside of Slovakia does not evaluate potential employees by such criteria, and that world is the world that Slovakia will become. In similar fashion, the instructor asserted that “vonku vo svete” (outside in the world) one’s education is an on-going process. Therefore participants should dedicate space on their CVs to education, as “that era is also coming to Slovakia” (táto doba pride aj na Slovensko). “Outside” or “the West” represents an evolutionary point in time that Slovakia is soon to reach. This particular construction of space also collapses it: as the sample CVs in the brochure are all American (courtesy of the Peace Corps employee who assisted its construction), “outside” and “the West” melts into “America.”

The form that one uses for the CV also figures in this reconfiguration of national space. CVs (under socialism as well) contain a pressure toward standardization of form to facilitate standardized translation of subjects for decisions in human resources. Thus, while páni Migašová told participants of the workshop that the CV is supposed to reflect an individual’s unique abilities, the means for the construction of this textual representation themselves draw on preexisting texts (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996). Organization of information in the CV follows guidelines of captions, sequence, and syntactic and lexical presentation that others have used and that a reader expects to see: these characteristics are what make a CV recognizable as a CV. As I have already demonstrated, the workshop suggests that the text artifacts of the genre of the CV in which Slovak authors should embed their own textual representations of self are American. Thus, Slovaks translate these representations of themselves into American textual regimes as they are supposed to sort Slovak subjectivities into American categories of personhood, in turn re-contextualized as “Slovak.”

The presentation of how to write a CV that I discuss here also standardized the national and transnational communities of expertise in which these texts circulate. The categories that the brochure posits as examples of workplaces are “administration,” “management,” and “communication.” To speak to the community of “administration,” one should use in the CV verbs such as “monitor,” “lead,” “coordinate,” “organize,” and “be in the know.” For “management” one should use “coordinate,” “direct,” “motivate,” “organize,” and “plan.” The

construction of these communities based on occupational divisions of labor, and the creation of labels for the skills that such communities desire standardizes networks of labor and language use. Neither differences between Slovak, American, and “Western” administrators, managers, advertising agents, etc. are supposed to exist nor are differences among them within respective national bodies.

Another way the new CV semiotically and pragmatically reorganizes space and time is in terms of more immediate social relations. Páni Migašová noted in the attempts of workshop participants to construct their own CVs that they paid too much attention to “wheres” and “whens” and not enough to “whats.” I argue that many “whats” of claimed accomplishments depend more than “wheres” or “whens” on the positionality and cultural background of the observer. Making individual, agentive claims about “whats” is only possible by erasing the social relations that were a part of those events. Páni Migašová asked students questions such as “what were your responsibilities?” “What leading positions have you held?” “Did your employer take any of your suggestions?” “Everything that you do” can go into your CV, including temporary work, clubs, and professional associations.

This career should be linearly mappable and predictable. The workshop’s brochure opens with a remark of how the CV itself “speaks” like an advertisement: “Invite me to an interview because I am worth your investment of time in me. On the basis of what I have demonstrated in the past, I am a prospective employee for your company into the future” (Benakova 2000:4). This predictability, of course, turns on notions of transparency and human agency, that the individual really *is* representable on paper in her own words, and that an individual’s lifecourse is subject to acts of will. Thus, one should build into the CV a list of tasks approached and completed:

“Recommendation and implementation of an educational program for new employees of the organization”

“Creation and introduction of a new system of communication for the firm with computer networking” (Benakova 2000:13)

These tasks appear as events isolated in time and space from ongoing social processes and actors. The separation is a pure heuristic (although not posited as such) that is both subjective and embedded in specific cultural assumptions about individual agency: the

individual author of the CV makes claims on the boundedness and resolution of these tasks that only certain notions of factuality can support.

In sum, the training session constructed a new basis for personhood semiotically in a variety of ways. First, it grounded the CV as an agent of a new era, a meritocratic age in which individuals must aggressively sell themselves. English is an important resource for translating “Eastern” personhood into “Western” terms. The new CV makes a break with socialism in content and form. It reconfigures in national time and space both social relations and the position of the individual in social action. It justifies neo-liberal ideologies of transparency that claim that individuals, and therefore societies, can be mapped and translated in standardized, Western terms. It thereby seeks to instill both Slovaks and Western investors with a faith that Slovakia is in fact on a path to joining Europe or the “normal” countries.

These last comments of course beg further questions of what is made transparent or perhaps *obfuscated*, to whom, and with what consequences. How are current social relations and persons really not as represented in the form of the CV discussed here and what problems or opportunities does this disjuncture present? This paper did not consider such questions of reception. I have tried instead to locate one particular discursive construction of personhood and the nation within a broader trend of processes in post-socialist Europe. If some aspects of this discourse do not sound particularly unique to that milieu, that is partly my goal. In an anthropological tradition of “familiarizing the foreign” and “de-familiarizing the familiar,” I seek to throw the analyst’s gaze back upon the West, and raise questions of who or what constructs the categories that are a model for “integrating” Eastern Europe.

Note

Thanks to Terry Woronov, Alaina Lemon, and the seminar “Monographs in the Ethnography of Speaking,” Fall 2001 at the University of Michigan for early feedback. The author thanks as well the participants of the SOYUZ Symposium for their comments, many of which helped with work on a longer version of this paper that has been submitted for publication to the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. The longer version includes comparative images of CVs that may be of interest to readers of this shorter, conference piece.

References

- Bauman, Richard, and Charles L. Briggs 1990.
Poetics and performance as critical
perspectives on language and social life.
Annual Review of Anthropology 19:59-
88.
- Beňáková, Nora 2000. Ako napísať životopis a
sprievodný list. Bratislava: SAIA-
SCTS.
- Berdahl, Daphne 1999. Where the World Ended:
Re-Unification and Identity in the
German Borderland. Berkeley, CA:
University of California Press.
- Dunn, Elizabeth 1999. Accounting for change:
Accounting, finance, and changing
methods of economic regulation in post-
socialist Eastern Europe: Unpublished
manuscript.
- Kennedy, Michael D. 1999. The Labilities of
Liberalism and Nationalism after
Communism: Polish Businessmen in
the Articulation of the Nation. *In*
Intellectuals and the Articulation of the
Nation. R. G. Suny and M. D. Kennedy,
eds. pp. 345-378. Ann Arbor:
University of Michigan Press.
- Replika: Hungarian Social Science Quarterly
1996 Colonization or partnership?
Eastern Europe and Western social
sciences.
- Silverstein, Michael, and Greg Urban 1996.
Natural Histories of Discourse.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Verdery, Katherine 1996. What Was Socialism,
And What Comes Next? Princeton:
Princeton University Press.
- Wedel, Janine R. 1998. Collision and Collusion:
The Strange Case of Western Aid to
Eastern Europe, 1989-1998. New York:
St. Martin's Press.