SLOVENE OR NOT SLOVENE? ISSUES ON TESTING SPEAKERS OF CLOSELY RELATED LANGUAGES

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In Slovenia the official system of the testing and certifying of Slovene as a second/foreign language was introduced in the early nineties. Since then the majority of test takers have been speakers of one of the other South Slavic languages. Testing speakers of closely related language poses specific challenges. Speakers' test performance in receptive skills is, as expected, at a high level; however, performance in productive skills is rated lower. The main question arises whether the testing procedure provides an appropriate rating of candidates' productive skills, respective of their *interlanguage* production. In this regard language testers cannot really represent the whole language community since they are trained to be tolerant. The level of comprehension on the one hand, and the level of acceptability of language production with South Slavic background on the other can – among speakers of Slovene as a first language – differ strongly. In addition, the usefulness of the CEFR in the search for solutions and improvements of testing procedures is going to be discussed in this article. A case study on scoring typical *interlanguage* production will

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be presented and some questions regarding the scoring procedures will be raised.

Key words: Slovene as a foreign language, language testing, CEFR, closely related languages

1 INTRODUCTION

In the Slovene linguistic situation assessing speakers of languages closely related to Slovene is definitely a pertinent problem. Until 1991, the majority of speakers of Slovene (either L1 or L2) and other residents of Slovenia were citizens of the same multilingual Yugoslavia. In 1991 the political situation changed significantly. New states were formed and new language requirements were introduced, at least in the Republic of Slovenia. Due to the political and linguistic situation in the former Yugoslav countries, the problem of testing speakers of closely related languages there is even more complex, since Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, and the newly christened Montenegrin (since 2007) languages are even more closely related to each other, with a long history of being common standard variety (Serbo-Croatian). A question to be raised is therefore: is testing speakers of closely related languages an issue specific to the region – due to its political and linguistic history – or can it also be recognized as a common problem in a broader European setting, e. g. Macedonian : Bulgarian, Czech : Slovak, Estonian : Finnish, German : Dutch, Catalan : Spanish, etc.? Furthermore, should the speakers of closely related languages be assessed (and consequently taught) in a specific way? If so, in what manner? It seems that in the scientific discourse on language testing these issues have not yet been raised.

1.1 Sociolinguistic background

There are over 100 legal requirements concerning language proficiency in Slovene in Slovenian legislation.[1] These requirements can be put into three main groups: 1) the one (the largest) concerning work (e. g. positions of public officers, medical staff, teachers), 2) the one concerning

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[1] Source: <http://www.iusinfo.si/Default.aspx>, May 2013.

integration, which mainly means citizenship, and 3) the one concerning higher education.[2]

Along with the language requirements, a language testing and certifying system was established in 1991[3] starting with Slovene tests for customs officers and applicants for Slovenian citizenship, and it has been updated since then (Ferbežar and Stabej 2002, Ferbežar and Pirih Svetina 2004, Ferbežar 2012a). In 1994 the Slovenian government established the Centre for Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language at the University of Ljubljana to set standards, administer tests and issue official certificates of proficiency in Slovene. In 2001 the three-level system of testing was introduced, taking into consideration the existing documents such as the *Threshold Level, European Language Portfolio* and first drafts (the *Swiss Entwurf*) of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*: Basic Level aiming at the B1 level according to the *CEFR*, Intermediate Level aiming at B2, and Advanced Level aiming at C1. Procedures of aligning Slovene language tests to the CEFR started in 2010 and were finished at the end of 2013 with a new language program and testing system similar to the previous one (2001) but more closely linked to the *CEFR*. Slovene language tests are general language tests (testing all four skills) and are also used for official purposes, meaning they all are high-stakes exams. Figure 1 shows the number of candidates sitting for one of the three exams for the last five years (2009–2013).

Figure 2 shows the language background of the Basic Level exam candidates over the last five years (altogether almost 7,000 candidates): the majority (70 %) of our test takers are speakers of one of the South Slavic languages. The numbers correlate with the Census data on language background: according to the Census of 2002 about 12 % of the population of the Republic of Slovenia declared themselves as non-

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[2] Universities and other higher education institutions are autonomous in setting their own language requirements.

[3] In this article only the period of the last 20 years is going to be taken into consideration. However, testing Slovene has a much longer tradition (as stated by Golinar 2010): by the decree of the Austrian ministry of justice (1849) and the State Code (1850) public officers were required to be able to speak a regional language of the Austrian empire – if working in Carniola, this included Slovene. The candidates sat the exam at higher education institutions or at local high or secondary schools, and they were tested by a professor, dean or headmaster.

native speakers of Slovene, two thirds of those stating their first as is one of the other South Slavic languages.[4]
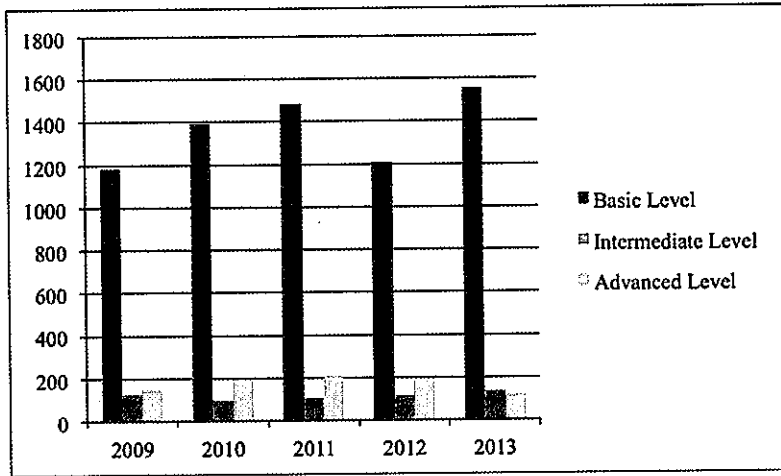

Figure 1: Number of candidates sitting for the Slovene language exams 2009–2013
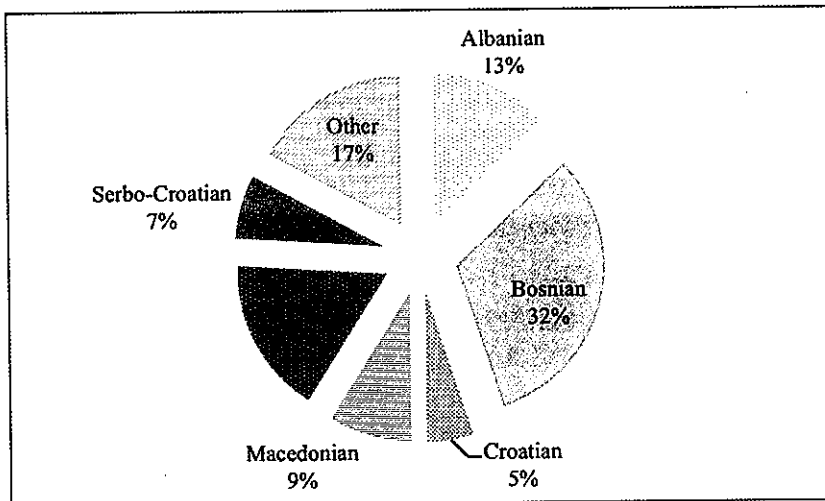

Figure 2: L1 of Basic level candidates 2009–2013

It is however worth mentioning that the 'language profile' of the Basic Level exam candidates changes from year to year. In the beginning of the millennium, the majority were speakers of Bosnian and Serbo-Croatian

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4 Source: <http://www.stat.si/popis2002/si/rezultati/rezultati_red.asp?ter=REG&st=7>, 14 September 2012.

(altogether 60 %).[5] Between 2007 and 2009 a significant increase of Albanian speaking candidates could be observed (about 25 % of all Basic Level exam candidates), whereas between 2010 and 2013 the group of Bosnian (34 %) and Serbian speakers (18 %) increased.[6] These facts bring us to the conclusion that the language profile of the Basic Level exam candidates reflects the socioeconomic and political situation in the Western Balkans.

2 ISSUES ON TESTING SPEAKERS OF CLOSELY RELATED LANGUAGES IN SLOVENIA

Testing speakers of closely related languages poses specific challenges. First, they are *positively biased*: the speakers are enabled to understand Slovene, at least in everyday communication and without any systematic learning, therefore obtaining high scores in receptive skills. Yet they often fail in productive skills, specially writing. This is often due to the fact that they acquire Slovene mostly from the milieu they live and work in and not systematically. The Basic Level exam candidates seem not to be very interested in learning Slovene, and *positive transfer* is definitely not the only reason for this. There are many other reasons, among them historical and political ones: until 1991 many of them were citizens of the same multilingual state which had no specific (Slovene) language legal requirements. Financial reasons are also to be taken into consideration: the Basic Level exam candidates are very often people with a low socioeconomic status and in Slovenia free language courses for integration purposes were not introduced until 2009. Many of test takers are poorly educated and have no awareness of the advantages of learning the language of their new environment. In fact, they often have restricted competence in their own first languages. Although convinced that the new language they speak/write is Slovene (they know it is not their own), they are also aware of certain disadvantages in using it. The community does not really accept them as equal members of the society since the native speakers of Slovene do not consider their Slovene as 'proper one'. At this point we would like to refer to the title of this

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[5] It is maybe interesting to point out that after the year 2000 less and less candidates have been identifying themselves as the speakers of Serbo-Croatian, Montenegrin being the newest language listed (since 2007).

[6] Montenegrin speakers were included in 2008; since then their number has been below 10 each year.

article: to what extent is such *interlanguage*[7] Slovene, where is the boundary between (already) Slovene and not Slovene (yet) and, last but not least, who has the right to set these conditions and in what manner? Language testers seem to be qualified to do this, but are they really? Can they be recognized as adequate representatives of the Slovenian language community? After all, they are trained to be tolerant. However, experience shows that qualified language testers tend to give non-native performances better scores if the speaker is not from the Western Balkans, with the argument that non-South Slavic speakers have made a much greater effort to learn Slovene. And this might happen even if the test taker's production is on a lower level and less comprehensible. Therefore, where is the border between comprehensibility and acceptability of non-native language production?

In this article we use the terms *comprehensibility* and *acceptability* according to their general meanings and not as specific and defined linguistic concepts. For our purpose we can define *comprehensibility* as the level to which the reader/listener understands/comprehends a text. Acceptability is here defined according to de Beaugrande and Dressler (1992: 84) as the level to which a reader accepts a text as a (coherent) text. *Prima facie*, comprehensibility seems to be an objective characteristic of the text and it has to do with its coherence and cohesion, whereas acceptability seems to be more subjective: it is up to the reader whether s/he accepts a text – or not. As stated in Stabej (2008: 92), the complex relationship between the two might be seen as 'compensation': a reader can accept the text even though s/he doesn't understand it (well), and *vice versa*: s/he might not accept it even if s/he understands it (well).[8]

Regarding expectations about the level of Slovene language proficiency, testers seem to represent the Slovenian language community quite adequately. According to an opinion poll carried out in 2002 by the Public Opinion and Mass Communication Centre at the University of Ljubljana, the majority of respondents expect 'foreigners' living and

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[7] The phenomenon of *interlanguage* can observed from two perspectives: as a phase in the process of learning a target language or as a rather stable system of language proficiency with some characteristics of the first, target and/or other (learned) languages. As such it is closely related to the concept of fossilization (see Selinker 1992 and O'Grady et al. 1997).

[8] The reasons for (non)comprehension and (non)acceptability can vary from more 'surface' features, such as language errors or other deviations from the general language norm, to the attitude towards content and/or the author or the text (see also Ferbežar 2012b).

working in Slovenia to be able to communicate in Slovene not only in everyday situations but also about more demanding topics (Ferbežar and Pirih Svetina 2004:17). It is true that the word 'foreigner' was not defined (in Slovenia, sometimes the former co-citizens are not quite considered foreigners). But speaking about the comprehensibility and acceptability of *interlanguages,* it seems that in Slovenia the community is more in favor of speakers with a language background other than South Slavic.[9] One of the possible reasons has already been given: more effort is needed to learn the language. The fact is that in some cases the text production of speakers with a South Slavic background could be recognized as 'Slovene' if written, but if it is spoken there are many perceivable differences only on the prosodic level (stress, intonation...). Does this mean inaccuracy in pronunciation or can it be seen as a deficit in vocabulary range? The reasoning of our testers for lower scores in written production is sometimes very irrational: 'it would be wrong and more difficult to understand if spoken'.

Can comprehensibility therefore really be the basic criterion for rating language production? Should we, especially in cases of assessing speakers of closely related languages, focus on the concept of acceptability of the text (or tolerance for it) rather than its comprehensibility? Why would the community be in favor of specific non-native production and reject (or make fun of) the other? Historical reasons? Prejudice and stereotypes, as discussed in Ferbežar (2007) and Balažic Bulc (2009)? What could and should be done to change this attitude? These issues are still waiting to be touched on in an adequate way.

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[9] As shown in a pilot survey by Požgaj Hadži and Balažic Bulc (2009) and another by Balažic Bulc (2009) speakers of Croatian and Serbian speaking Slovene were labelled in more negative way, whereas speakers originating from the West or far East were labelled positively. The attitude of raters towards Bosnian speakers was shown positive; it is, however, not clear if the raters really heard the difference between Croatian, Serbian or Bosnian native speakers.

It should maybe be mentioned that Bosnian speakers in Slovenian films, TV-series, etc. are often ridiculed because of their Slovene language production. The attitude towards them can therefore be positive, negative or neutral.

2.1 Rating comprehensibility and acceptability: a case study

Presuming that the comprehensibility and acceptability of the text, in our case non-native production, are interwoven, a short preliminary survey was carried out in 2008 (Ferbežar 2012b). 220 university students of various faculties of the University of Ljubljana (native speakers) and 33 students of the Slovene language courses at the Centre for Slovene as a Second/Foreign Language, University of Ljubljana (non-native speakers), were tested in reading comprehension and their attitude towards the comprehensibility and acceptability of chosen texts. Among other reading tasks[10] the respondents were expected to read a short text produced by a non-native speaker of Slovene. The text was published on the State Portal of the RS in February 2008 (filed under frequently asked questions):

Pozdravljeni! Najprej bi se opravičila, ker ne znam dobro govoriti slovenščina.upam da me boste razumeli. prihajam iz xxx, imam en problem. moj moš ima sp firma v bistvo ima delovno odovolenje in družinska viza.Moi otroci imajo tud družinsko vizo.jas tud ,ali moj muš hoče da se ločiva in zaradi to noče da naredi spet za men vizo. Način da jas ostanem v Sloveniji je da dobim kakšno delovno odovolenje,in vrs tista osnova da si naredim in vizo.Ne delam, ker nimam dokumentacijo.do zdaj noben noče da mi naredi delovno odovolenje.Prosam vas če mi lahko poveste če ima še kakšan način da dobim sledno vizo in službo,ker moi otroci se v Sloveniji.Oni bi hotli da ostanem tukaj.Prosam vas za pomoč! Najlepša hvala za razumevanje![11]

1) Firstly, the respondents were asked to summarise in short what kind of problem the author of the text would like to solve. They were given two points for a full answer ('to get a job and to obtain a visa'), and one point for a partial answer ('to get a job' or, 'to get a visa').

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[10] The described task was one of altogether seven tasks; this should be taken into account when interpreting the results (for details see Ferbežar 2009).

[11] Source: <http://e-uprava.gov.si/euprava>, February 2008. The text was copied without any corrections or adaptations. Summary: a jobless woman from one of the former Yugoslav countries has been living in Slovenia on the basis of a temporary family residence permit provided by her husband. Going through the divorce proceedings, her husband does not want to extent her permit. The only way she could therefore stay in Slovenia with her children is to get a job and consequently a residence permit. She asks for help.

2) Secondly, they were asked to determine the level of i) comprehensibility of the text and, ii) its level of acceptability on the four-grade scale, a score of 1 meaning an easy to understand and highly acceptable text, and a score of 4 meaning a very difficult to understand and barely acceptable or non-acceptable text.

Figure 3 shows the results from reading comprehension and the difference between native and non-native speakers.
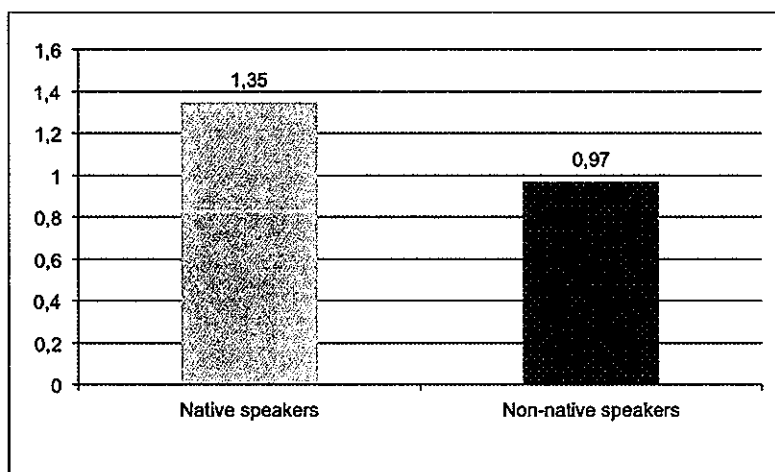

Figure 3: Reading comprehension of non-native production – results of native and non-native speakers (max. 2 pts.)

We are very well aware of the fact that an incorrect or a partial answer does not necessarily mean that a person did not understand a text or that they understood it partially.[12] Nevertheless, the native speakers, as expected, performed the task significantly better.[13]

Consequently, we expected the non-native speakers to consider the text less comprehensible and therefore less acceptable, therefore scoring its comprehensibility and acceptability higher than the native speakers. However, the results show otherwise, as shown in Figure 4.

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[12] Not only because of the fuzzy border between receptive and productive skills but also because of the fact that our respondents generally gave only partial or very short answers to open-ended questions. One of the possible reasons is most probably students' poor motivation to answer the questionnaire.

[13] The results were analyzed according to the Classical Test Theory with the program SPSS. The relatively low numbers the results are to be taken into account in their interpretation.
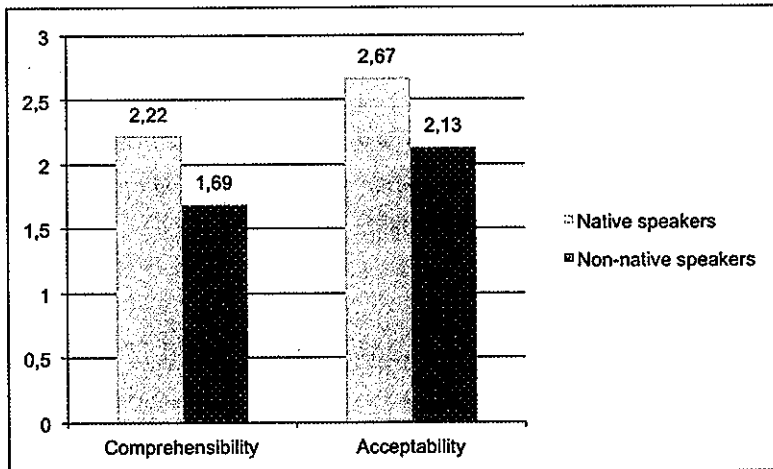
Figure 4: Comprehensibility and acceptability of the non-native production – the difference between native and non-native raters (1 highly comprehensible / acceptable, 4 barely/non-comprehensible/acceptable)

According to our scale the acceptability of the text was generally scored higher than its comprehensibility, which leads us to the conclusion that even if the reader understands the text and finds it comprehensible he/she may recognize it as hard to comprehend and therefore barely acceptable or even non-acceptable – in our case this is due to the fact that the text is full of irregularities[14] in structures, spelling, etc., as stated by many respondents. However, tolerance for non-native production seems to be higher among non-native speakers, as shown in Figure 4. With an average score of 2.13 they seem to recognize the text as more acceptable than native speakers (average score of 2.67). They are probably aware of their own deficiencies in language production in Slovene. Moreover, the group of non-native speakers with a South Slavic background scored the text as more comprehensible and acceptable than other non-native respondents, although their task performance was not better. This leads us to the conclusion that speakers of a similar language background might have more tolerance for each other and/or they really comprehend better.

Even if readers understand a text, they may consider it hard to comprehend. They might indeed have some difficulties understanding it, but they might, determining the level of its comprehensibility, also refer

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[14]   Irregularities   in   the   sense   of   disregarding   general   language   norms.

to a 'less proficient' or 'weaker' reader than themselves – this is true mostly for the native speakers.[15]

Whatever the results of our survey may mean, the fact is that the 'original' addressee understood the question and gave a complete answer to the author of the above text.

2.2 *Simulated rating procedure*

In our further preliminary surveys (March and April 2011) we simulated the test situation thus: we asked a group of approximately 40 testers involved in administering and rating Slovene language exams to rate the text in question/the above quoted text according to the Basic Level exam criteria for written production.[16] 14 out of 40 raters responded and although they do represent the group of raters well, this must be taken into account when interpreting the results.[17] According to 10 testers the author would pass the Basic Level exam, according to four the author would fail. It is important to point out that all testers scored low on accuracy and many of them stated that they had understood the text because they understand the author's first language. If the text really is comprehensible, why would four out of 10 testers then score it with a 'fail'? The answer might be in their poor tolerance for typical non-native production in Slovene. Our sample text can be considered as somehow typical: as already stated, most of the non-native speakers in the Republic of Slovenia come from the countries of the former Yugoslavia. The issues regarding this fact have already been given. Regardless of the small number of respondents, these results show that – along with taking into consideration the experience with rating procedures during live test administrations –we will have to work more on raters' reliability. In the training on inter- and intra-rater reliability, it is already very difficult to

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[15] It is maybe interesting to point out that our text was the least comprehensible and the least acceptable for the group of linguists (there were also some testers among them). They scored its acceptability 2.68 and comprehensibility 2.47. Since there were only 24 and they also scored comprehensibility according to different parameters, the results are to be interpreted with caution.

[16] Written production (guided writing) is rated according to the analytic scale, the maximum of five (5) points can be given for the following categories: Task and style, Text structure, Vocabulary and Accuracy. For the purpose of our survey we adapted the first parameter as Purpose of the text and Style because our text was written in a real-world context.

[17] Such a small number of responses is probably due to the fact that the text was sent by e-mail to the testing institutions and not to the raters directly. There was also a time limit (one week) to rate the text and some of the raters missed the deadline.

achieve consensus on how important accuracy should be or if other categories (e. g. task performance, style, coherence, vocabulary, text structure) should be considered as important as accuracy. Rating productive skills, stricter testers tend to put an emphasis on accuracy rather than on other categories, whereas more lenient testers seem to consider other categories more important. But generally it seems that an inaccurate text is more 'disturbing' when produced by a speaker with a South Slavic background than speaker of language other than South Slavic. We already pointed out that our professional testers tend to give non-native speakers originating from countries other than the Western Balkans better scores.

2.3 Usefulness of the CEFR in testing speakers of closely related languages

If the Basic Level exam aims at the B1 level of the *CEFR* (the linking procedures for the Basic Level exam were completed in May 2011), our example should also reflect a B1 performance. Thus we decided to 'benchmark' it according to the *CEFR* descriptors for reading production, as suggested by the *Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR* (2009:187). In June 2011 we asked 25 experts in teaching Slovene as a foreign language to benchmark the text according to the following five categories: Range, Coherence, Accuracy, Description and Argumentation and to give an average 'score' by putting the text on one of the *CEFR* levels (Overall). The group of nine teachers responded and Table 1 shows how many of them benchmarked the text according to each of the five categories.

Only one of the raters benchmarked all five categories consistently at the same (A1) level and therefore put the text as a whole at the A1 level. Other raters were less consistent and benchmarked separate categories between A1 and B2 as seen from the table above. Most of them, however, decided between adjacent levels, e. g. A2/B1, as it is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of benchmarking non-native production

CEFR level	Range	Coherence	Accuracy	Description	Argumentation	Overall
B2	1	1	0	0	1	1
B1	3	3	2	1	4	2
A2	3	4	3	6	1	5
A1	1	1	4	1	1	1

We are aware of the very low number of raters who additionally were not very well skilled in benchmarking procedures (during training they were only familiarized with the process and they only benchmarked four spoken performances). Maybe the reason for our results is the raters' inexperience but on the other hand it is also possible that results would be 'scattered' anyway, even with an experienced group of raters. As can be seen from Table 1 consensus was achieved for the categories Description and Overall but for all the other categories differences among our raters can be observed. Generally, our example was benchmarked at the A2 level; however, it seems that the profile is not 'flat' across the categories listed.[18] One of the raters even considered the text as inadequate for benchmarking. The fact is that the text is quite complex in its content and its author has succeeded in creating a meaningful message, however inaccurately and with some deficiencies in coherence.

In the process of linking Slovene language tests to the *CEFR* we had to find appropriate illustrative examples for written and spoken production. Our short case study showed that in this process we will probably, and paradoxically, have to avoid 'typical' non-native production since the 'illustrative examples should show a performance with a relatively "flat profile" across the categories of CEFR' as suggested by the *Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR* (2009:43). As discussed above, our example cannot be considered as such. The question therefore was: Can we find a more 'flat' example at

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[18] 'Flat' in this context means that all the categories are marked at approximately the same level respectively: none of them departs downward nor upward.

the basic level that will also reflect typical production?[19] If not, can typical test performances in written/spoken production then be comparable with such an atypical example?

3. CONCLUSIONS

In discussing issues on testing speakers of closely related languages it seems that more questions have been raised than satisfactory answers given. But when looking for possible solutions even more questions have still to be addressed. Should testers and raters with no competence in other South Slavic languages be trained? Should they be native or non-native speakers? Can we find such raters since one of the preconditions to become a tester is a diploma in Slovene studies? Or rather, should additional standard setting be carried out and separate cut-off scores set – taking into account the specific target population? Or should the test specification be updated on the basis of corpus data instead? Would not such tests then be considered biased?

All these emerging questions lead us to the conclusion that the issue of testing speakers of closely related languages should not remain unnoticed. On the contrary, it needs – at least in the case of Slovene – to be addressed more in-depth by a representative survey which could provide us with more relevant data and consequently, with possible solutions.

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[19] Such a typical production is, as stated above, characterized by interference from the speaker's first language (in our case one of the South Slavic languages) which is mostly due to the fact that the speaker has acquired Slovene from the environment and has not learned the language systematically.

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SLOVENSKI ILI NESLOVENSKI? PITANJA TESTIRANJA GOVORNIKA (SLOVENSKOMU) SRODNIH JEZIKA

Sustav testiranja i certificiranja znanja slovenskoga kao drugoga ili stranoga jezika u Sloveniji se uvodi u ranim devedesetima. Od tada većina kandidata kao svoj prvi jezik navodi jedan od srodnih (južnoslavenskih) jezika. Budući da njihova receptivna kompetencija obično dostiže puno viši stupanj nego produktivna kompetencija, kod tih je govornika testiranje znanja slovenskoga jezika poseban izazov. Pritom se otvara pitanje je li u Sloveniji razvijen primjeren sustav provjere i u prvom redu ocjenjivanja produktivnoga znanja slovenskoga kao drugoga ili stranoga jezika. Ocjenjivači koji na ispitima iz znanja jezika ocjenjuju produktivnu kompetenciju ispitanika osposobljavaju se (i) za to da budu tolerantni, zato ne mogu predstavljati cjelokupnu jezičnu zajednicu. Međutim, iskustva pokazuju da govornici slovenskoga kao prvoga jezika vrlo različito ocjenjuju stupanj razumljivosti jezične produkcije s takozvanom »južnoslavenskom« interferencijom i, što je još važnije, različito ocjenjuju stupanj prihvatljivosti takve produkcije. U radu su prikazani rezultati pilotnoga istraživanja razumljivosti i prihvatljivosti u slovenskome međujeziku te se razmatra nejasna granica između obaju koncepata. Pritom se razmišlja i o (ne)primjerenosti Zajedničkoga europskoga referentnoga jezičnoga okvira za traženje boljih rješenja u testiranju tako specifične populacije kao što su govornici slovenskomu srodnih jezika. Studija primjera poslužit će za razmišljanje o ocjenjivanju tipične produkcije na ispitima iz slovenskoga kao stranog/drugog jezika.

Ključne riječi: slovenski kao strani, jezično testiranje, Zajednički europski referentni okvir za jezike, srodni jezici.