

Anita Peti-Stantić

**The proximity of Slovenian and Croatian intellectual vocabulary**

---

objavljeno v:

Nataša Pirih Svetina, Ina Ferbežar (ur.): *Na stičišču svetov: slovenščina kot drugi in tuji jezik. Obdobja 41*. Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2022.

<https://centerslo.si/simpozij-obdobja/zborniki/obdobja-41/>

© Univerza v Ljubljani, Filozofska fakulteta, 2022.

Obdobja (e-ISSN 2784-7152)



# THE PROXIMITY OF SLOVENIAN AND CROATIAN INTELLECTUAL VOCABULARY

**Anita Peti-Stantić**

Filozofski fakultet, Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Zagreb  
anita.peti-stantic@ffzg.hr

DOI:10.4312/Obdobja.41.271-279

Prispevek raziskuje mero bližine in prekrivanja slovenskega in hrvaškega intelektualnega besedišča z vidika hrvaških govorcev, ki študirajo slovenščino. Teoretični utemeljitvi globine in širine intelektualnega besedišča s sociolingvističnega in psiholingvističnega vidika sledi analiza takšnega besedišča v ustreznih sodobnih besedilih ter predlog posebnih metod obravnave skupnega besednjaka, da bi se doseglo čim večjo globino njegovega razumevanja.

slovenščina, hrvaščina, intelektualno besedišče, širina in globina besedišča

This article investigates the proximity and overlap of Slovenian and Croatian intellectual vocabulary from the point of view of Croatian speakers studying Slovenian. A theoretical overview of the depth and breadth of intellectual vocabulary from the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives is followed by an analysis of intellectual vocabulary in relevant contemporary texts and a proposal for specific methods of dealing with shared vocabulary to achieve the best understanding of it.

Slovenian, Croatian, intellectual vocabulary, vocabulary breadth and depth

## 1 Introduction

Even though Slovenian and Croatian are closely related languages, this has rarely led to a comparative study of their vocabulary, especially what is termed »civilizational« or »intellectual« or »academic« vocabulary. This is the case despite the fact that Slovenian and Croatian share such vocabulary beyond internationalisms borrowed from Greek and Latin, as well as German and, to some extent, Hungarian and Italian. Based on their common history and status as neighboring languages sharing the immediate context of civilization deeply rooted in a common Slavic past and present, Slovenian should be much more of a second language than a foreign language for Croatian speakers. However, given systematic neglect of an intellectual vocabulary in education and public life, as well as neglect and negative attitudes toward common Slavic traditions and roots, it is not surprising that the majority of Croatian speakers claim they do not understand Slovenian without special training.

Hence, this article investigates the two languages' proximity and overlap by comparing Slovenian intellectual vocabulary in selected texts with Croatian. The article consists of three parts: 1) a brief theoretical overview of the depth and breadth

of intellectual vocabulary from the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives, 2) an exploration of intellectual vocabulary in relevant contemporary types of texts, and 3) a proposal for a specific approach to dealing with shared vocabulary to achieve the best understanding of it, in both recognition and recall.

I chose to concentrate only on vocabulary, rather than explore how people understand a text in its entirety, for two methodological reasons. First, academic or intellectual literacy, seen as »reading proficiency required to construct the meaning of content-area texts and literature,« as well as »the ability to learn new words from the overall context« (Torgesen et al. 2007), mostly relies on the depth and breadth of vocabulary, which at the same time are the best predictors of reading comprehension, especially in expository texts (Yildirim et al. 2011). Second, due to neglect in systematically teaching vocabulary starting in the upper grades of primary school, during the most intensive development of abstract thinking and abstract intellectual vocabulary (Gnjidić et al. 2021; Peti-Stantić et al. 2021), research needs to be directed toward this register.

## 2 Intellectual vocabulary

Labeling a subset of vocabulary as intellectual or academic involves two different but interrelated criteria. The term *intellectual* refers to how this vocabulary came into being; that is, to the fact that this vocabulary is the result of a long process in which people, out of a need to understand and comprehend phenomena, defined and named concepts. Research on intellectual vocabulary is usually couched in philosophy and psychology, in connection with critical thinking (Öhman 1953; Keller 1995; Gibson 1995). Since antiquity, the concept of intellect has referred to the highest human cognitive power, called reason or mind, and intellectual activity presupposes comparison, abstraction, reasoning, and inference in processing sensory reality by creating abstract concepts. In a narrower sense, the term *intellectual* is related to intellectuals, and in a broader sense to the abilities of the human mind. The term *academic* refers partially to the setting where this vocabulary is most often thought and used. Because the abstract character of this vocabulary, as well as its potential to drive the development of thought processes, is its most important feature, I use the term *intellectual*.

I do not delve deeper into the differences between general and specialized intellectual vocabulary here, or into the differences between general and intellectual vocabulary, because all of these registers function as a continuum within the vocabulary of a language, and it is practically impossible to establish a clear-cut and unambiguous separation between them, especially for determining the limits of general intellectual vocabulary. However, general intellectual vocabulary—pertaining to concepts needed to communicate in various fields of human thought and not restricted to only one field, unlike the setup of other areas of vocabulary (general and intellectual specialized)—mainly consists of abstract words. It is also important that there is not one general intellectual vocabulary for all. Instead, the perception of what belongs to this register largely depends on sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors. Namely, some words

might be part of one person's general vocabulary, and at the same time they might belong to another person's intellectual vocabulary, depending on the difference in their everyday lives. From the point of view of vocabulary as a continuum, the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives are much more relevant in dealing with intellectual vocabulary than vocabulary as a whole because of its specific role in the cultural evolution of the community as well as the growth of the individual (Heyes 2018: 175).

In psycholinguistics, the breadth and depth of vocabulary refers to the number of words that an individual recognizes and uses, as well as the number of meanings of those words and their connections to other words. Although such a two-dimensional approach is to some extent debated, it is frequently used. Many researchers find it useful: both those more oriented toward helping the dyslexic population (Wise et al. 2007) and those oriented toward theory and the non-dyslexic population (Perfetti, Hart 2002).

Given the adverse circumstances of modern (digital) life and the reading of numerous short texts in electronic form, both the breadth and depth of general vocabulary is declining, especially in young people. Both neuroscientists (Spitzer 2018) and researchers of reading (Barzillai et al. 2018) have already noticed this. This decline is particularly striking in the general intellectual vocabulary used in many facets of life, including investigative journalism. Although I am not aware of research on this decline in intellectual vocabulary in everyday communication, most university teachers anecdotally claim that every year their students understand increasingly fewer of what used to be common intellectual words.

Considering that the breadth and depth of vocabulary are the best predictors of the development of reading ability and success in intellectual activities such as education, as well as active participation in a democratic society, it is necessary to identify this problem and apply a targeted approach.

### **3 Method and analysis**

Together with students of Slovenian studies at the University of Zagreb, I analyzed what they considered intellectual vocabulary in three chapters selected from one literary text and two popular science texts. Among all the words that students did not understand in Slovenian and had to look up in a dictionary or elsewhere, the main criterion for extracting words belonging to intellectual vocabulary was predicting which words a young person entering high school would not necessarily readily understand in the text and use in an appropriate context. It was assumed that understanding these words requires a higher level of education and more abstract thinking, and therefore these words can be labeled as intellectual. In this, two competences were at play: competence in one's native language, and competence in the second/foreign language. The research question is to what extent these two competencies mingle in recognizing and understanding words that can be said to belong to intellectual vocabulary. I address this question with a systematic analysis of such vocabulary. Literary and popular science texts were chosen because the goal was to compare the density of intellectual

vocabulary in these different types of texts, with the assumption that the density of intellectual vocabulary would be significantly higher in popular science texts.

The literary text was the title story from the collection *Čebelja družina* (The Bee Family) by Anja Mugerli. The author was awarded the European Union Prize for Literature in 2021. The story in the book covers pages 51 to 83 (comprising 9,159 words). The two popular science texts are the chapter »Če bereš, poznaš več besed, zato lahko razmišljaš o več rečeh« (If You Read, You Know More Words and So You Can Think of More Things) from the book *Berem, da se poberem: 10 razlogov za branje knjig v digitalnih časih* (Read to Breathe: Why Read Books in the Digital Era?) by Miha Kovač, and a chapter from Renata Salecl's *Človek človeku virus* (Man is a Virus to Man) titled »Koliko je vredno življenje« (How Much Life Is Worth). Kovač's short chapter covers pages 29 to 35 (comprising 1,312 words) and Salecl's chapter covers pages 45 to 54 (comprising 1,703 words); both are much shorter than the story by Mugerli.

First, the quantitative and qualitative differences in the sets excerpted from these three sources were characterized (see Appendix). Although these differences could probably be predicted from the types of texts, the value of this comparison is that it has not been conducted so far. Despite having the most pages, only twenty words that met the criteria were found in Mugerli, or one word per page. In Kovač's text, one can easily find sixty words of intellectual vocabulary, or more than eight words per page; this is similar to Salecl, with more than ninety words, resulting in almost ten words of intellectual vocabulary per page.

The first visible difference from the qualitative point of view is the number of internationalisms. In both Kovač's and Salecl's chapters, there are a number of internationalisms, ranging from one-third to half of all the words selected. The words in this group can be divided into at least two distinct categories.

First are words that are exactly same in Slovenian and Croatian, such as *procesiranje*, *kontekst*, *simbolizirati*, *homoseksualnost*, *interpretacija*, *konotacija*, *humanistika*, *dilema*, *filozofija*, *religija*, *tehnološki*, *teza*, *znanost*, *komunikacijski*, *pandemija*, *kodeks*, *znanstvenik*, *filozof*, *sociolog*, *definicija*, *psiholog*, *princip*, *literatura*, *diskriminirati*, and *invalidnost*.

The second group are the words obviously recognizable, but not identical. Some of them differ only in one or two systematic phonetic or morphological traits, such as *avtomatizacija* (*avtomatizacija*),<sup>1</sup> *identiteta* (*identitet*), *ludističen* (*ludistički*), *eleganten* (*elegantan*), *intuitiven* (*intuitivan*), *etičen* (*etički*), *rigorozen* (*rigorozan*), *pragmatičen* (*pragmatički*), *utilitarizem* (*utilitarizam*), *ruralen* (*ruralan*), and *luksuzen* (*luksuzan*).

These words belong to the larger set of internationalisms shared by Slovenian and Croatian. Although there is a tendency in both languages to translate some internationalisms with newly coined words of Slavic origin, all the concepts mentioned here would usually be expressed with internationalisms.

1 The first word is always Slovenian, and the word in parentheses is Croatian.

The second subset of words belonging to intellectual vocabulary in Kovač's and Salecl's texts, those with Slavic roots, is much more interesting. There are three groups of words there:

1) Meanings recognizable at first sight: *dolgoročen (dugoročan)*, *posledično (posljedično)*, *odklon (otklon, odmak)*, *pojem (pojam)*, *strokovnjak (stručnjak)*, *vztrajati (ustrajati, inzistirati)*, *zagovornik (zagovornik, branitelj)*, *postavka (postavka)*, and *ozdravitev (ozdravljenje)*;

2) Meanings not recognizable at first sight, but that with proper training can become part of active, easily recognizable vocabulary: *enačba (jednadžba)*, *zaslutiti (naslutiti)*, *ubesediti (pretočiti u riječi)*, *protislovje (proturječje)*, *vprašljiv (upitan)*, *enakopravnost (ravnopravnost)*, and *pojmovanje (razumijevanje, shvaćanje)*;

3) Almost non-recognizable meanings: *priklic (priziv)*, *odtenek (nijansa)*, *zaznati (primijetiti, uočiti)*, *prepričanje (uvjerenje)*, *dojemanje (shvaćanje, poimanje)*, *ponotranjiti (internalizirati)*, *osnutek (nacrt, skica, koncept)*, *ovira (zapreka, prepreka)*, *okvara (oštećenje, kvar)*, *preigravati (nadigravati, više puta odsvirati)*, *sloves (ugled, glas)*, and *poseg (zahvat, intervencija)*.

The words in the first subgroup—like those in the first group, which dealt with internationalisms—are phonetically and morphologically almost identical in both languages. However, concerning the translation, in this subgroup one can identify three other subtypes, all with more than one translation option in Croatian: 1) one parallel to Slovenian and one international, 2) one parallel to Slovenian and one with a broader or narrower meaning than in Slovenian, and 3) one parallel to Slovenian and a synonym or near synonym in Croatian. The real concern with words belonging to this subgroup, as with all intellectual vocabulary, is the depth and breadth of students' general knowledge of this type of vocabulary in their first language. However, even when the word is not part of their active vocabulary, they will mostly recognize its meaning in the text.

The second and third subgroups are the most interesting for the approach proposed in the next section. These groups resemble each other in that they differ for different speakers (see Dąbrowska 2012: 220–221).

The rather small second group depends on the associative capacity of the language user, and it generally consists of three types of words: 1) words derived from common and well-known simpler words; that is, words that can be broken down into recognizable constituents: *zaslutiti – slutiti*, *ubesediti – beseda*, and *vprašljiv – vprašati*; 2) words in which one part of the word is the same or almost the same in both languages, whereas the other needs reinterpretation: *enakopravnost < Sln. enako + praven – Cro. jednako/ravno + pravan*; *Sln. protislovje < proti/u + slovo – Cro. protu + slovo/riječ*.<sup>2</sup> Some vocabulary cannot be translated with one word, but only with a phrase. Because the students that took part in this survey are future translators, all such challenges were discussed and this exercise was used as a learning experience.

2 In the HrWac corpus there are 2,222 instances of *proturječan* (1.59 per million), and there are 192 instances of *protuslovan* (0.14 per million).

The third group consists of words in which Slavic roots developed differently in these two closely related languages. From the synchronic point of view, therefore, the only option for better understanding is building broader and deeper networks of relational connections within a language and between languages (see Jackendoff, Audring 2020).

#### **4 A proposal to avoid future misunderstandings**

Considering educators' endeavors, it is important to understand the systematic nature of vocabulary to implement a targeted approach. The limited analysis presented here shows that the approach to intellectual vocabulary requires at least two actions, primarily because one can claim that vocabulary is a semantic continuum of complexity (see Peti-Stantić 2019; Stantić, Peti-Stantić 2021). These actions are 1) increasing the depth and breadth of everyday vocabulary because most intellectual words consist of common roots transformed by prefixes or other forms of creative change and 2) building the associative capacity of all individuals within their mental grammar, which encompasses the mental lexicon.

To achieve this, it is necessary to create a learning environment for targeted enlargement and strengthening of vocabulary. The breadth and depth of vocabulary in a second or foreign language depend on the same dimensions as in a first language. Therefore, when thinking about strategies and methods for vocabulary, these two sets should be constantly compared to find ways to enrich them from both the inside and the outside.

The expression »from the outside« refers to the influence learning a foreign language has on speakers' capacity in their first language. In this case, this is the effect of learning Slovenian intellectual vocabulary on one's command of Croatian. Slovenian and Croatian have a relationship of mutual multiplication of linguistic knowledge with regard to intellectual vocabulary. First, they share not only international vocabulary inherited from non-Slavic roots, but also vocabulary inherited from Slavic roots. This vocabulary, more than general vocabulary, comes in three forms: completely identical words in both languages, systematically minimally altered words, and words that are the result of the individual histories of each of the languages. Consequently, the main teaching efforts should be directed to the second and third subgroups. This means that Slovenian teachers in countries with closely related languages, such as Croatian, should pay special attention to the systematic overlap in intellectual vocabularies of the two languages and develop particular types of exercises to draw awareness to similarities. Based on developing the capacity for generalizations, such an approach would enable students to become capable users of both languages at as high an intellectual level as possible, as well as skilled translators of any type of text.

Apart from conscious and organized systematic work on vocabulary by establishing comparable word roots, and shifts in meaning caused by standard processes such as prefixation and suffixation, it should not be forgotten that knowledge of a language, both a first language and any other, greatly depends on experiences. Some of them happen in the »real« world, whereas others occur via texts; some of them take place

only in a first language, whereas some are shared between languages or occur only in a second or third language. Some experiences are embodied in the ability to perceive, construct, and embrace the world—but, on the other hand, people also understand and accept the worlds offered by reading. In this context, guided by many years of research and analysis of experiences in other education systems (primarily American and Finnish), as well as the results of working with students on the specific examples presented in this article, I wish to emphasize the justification for insisting on reading popular science literature. Along with deep reading of functionally different texts—especially popular science texts, in which the students encounter numerous words and phrases (see Appendix) belonging to intellectual vocabulary that they will have to learn to understand the meaning of the text—students build an analytical and logical way of thinking. Building on a system of concentric circles, this helps them understand new words and new meanings they have not encountered, while encouraging and empowering them to read, and eventually to translate even more complex texts.

## Sources

- KOVAČ, Miha, 2020: *Berem, da se poberem: 10 razgovor za branje knjig v digitalnih časih*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.
- MUGERLI, Anja, 2020: *Čebelja družina*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba.
- SALECL, Renata, 2020: *Človek človeku virus*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.

## Bibliography

- BARZILLAI, Mirit, THOMSON, Jenny, SCHROEDER, Sascha, VAN DEN BROEK, Paul, 2018: *Learning to Read in a Digital World*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- DAJBROWSKA, Ewa, 2012: Different speakers, different grammars: Individual differences in native language attainment. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism* II/3. 219–253.
- GIBSON, Craig, 1995: Critical thinking: implications for instruction. *RQ* XXXV/1. 27–35.
- GNJIDIĆ, Vedrana, KERESTEŠ, Gordana, PETI-STANTIĆ, Anita, 2021: Mjerenje širine i dubine akademskog vokabulara učenika viših razreda osnovne škole. *Croatian Journal of Education = Hrvatski časopis za odgoj i obrazovanje* XXIII/4. 1043–1085.
- HEYES, Celia, 2018: *Cognitive gadgets: The cultural evolution of thinking*. Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University.
- JACKENDOFF, Ray, AUDRING, Jenny, 2020: *The Texture of the Lexicon: Relational Morphology and the Parallel Architecture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- KELLER, Rudi, 1995: »The epistemic weil«. Dieter Stein, Susan Wright (eds.): *Subjectivity and subjectivization: Linguistic perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 16–30.
- ÖHMAN, Suzanne, 1953: Theories of the »Linguistic Field«. *Word* IX/2. 123–134.
- PERFETTI, Charles A., HART, Lesley, 2002: The lexical quality hypothesis. Ludo Verhoeven, Carsten Elbro, Pieter Reitsma (eds.): *Precursors of Functional Literacy*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company (Studies in Written Language and Literacy, 11). 189–213.
- PETI-STANTIĆ, Anita, 2019: *Čitanjem do (spo)razumijevanja: od čitalačke pismenosti do čitateljske sposobnosti*. Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak.
- PETI-STANTIĆ, Anita, KERESTEŠ, Gordana, GNJIDIĆ, Vedrana, 2021: Can Textbook Analysis Help Us Understand Why Croatian Students Seldom Read Their Textbooks? *Technology, Knowledge and Learning* XXVI/2. 293–310.
- SPITZER, Manfred, 2018: *Digitalna demencija: kako mi i naša djeca silazimo s uma*. Translated by Boris Perić. Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak.



- STANTIĆ, Vedrana, PETI-STANTIĆ, Anita, 2021: *Znati(želja): Zašto mladi trebaju čitati popularno-znanstvene tekstove, i to odmah?* Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak.
- TORGESEN, Joseph K., HOUSTON, Debra D., RISSMAN, Lila M., DECKER, Susan M., ROBERTS, Greg, VAUGHN, Sharon, WEXLER, Jade, FRANCIS, David J., RIVERA, Mabel O., LESAUX, Nonie, 2007: *Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents: A Guidance Document from the Center on Instruction*. Portsmouth: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.
- WISE, Justin C., SEVICK, Rose A., MORRIS, Robin D., LOVETT, Maureen W., WOLF, Maryanne, 2007: The Relationship Among Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Pre-Reading Skills, Word Identification Skills, and Reading Comprehension by Children With Reading Disabilities. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 50. 1093–1109.
- YILDRIM, Kasim, YILDIZ, Mustafa, ATEŞ, Seyit, 2011: Is Vocabulary a Strong Variable Predicting Reading Comprehension and Does the Prediction Degree of Vocabulary Vary according to Text Types. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice* XI/3. 1541–1547.

## Appendix

### Words

Anja Mugerli, Čebelja družina	<i>aktovka, atelje, izdajalski, koprena, niansa, obvladljiv, paleta, pokroviteljski, pribežališče, ravnotežje, razlagati, razločen, spoznanje, ubežati, urok, usklajen, vzhičenost, vzvaloviti, zasledovalec, zasledovati</i>
Miha Kovač, <i>Berem, da se poberem</i>	<i>antičen, atom, avtomatizacija, črkovalnik, dilema, dojetanje, dolgoročen, eleganten, enačba, enopomenski, filozofija, fizika, homoseksualnost, humanistika, identiteta, igrivost, interpretacija, intuitiven, izobrazba, izum, komunikacijski, konotacija, kontekst, latenten, logičen, ludističen, metafora, miseln, mojstrstvo, nakazovati, naravoslovje, obvladovati, odklon, odtenek, podoživeti, ponotranjiti, posledično, preboj, prepričanje, priključ, procesiranje, protislovje, raziskava, religija, simbolizirati, sklep, sredinski, tehnološki, temelj, teza, ubesediti, ustvarjati, utrjevati, vzdevek, zadoščati, zagovor, zaslutiti, zaznati, zmožnost, znanost</i>
Renata Salecl, Človek človeku virus	<i>abstrakten, analizirati, arbitraren, astronomski, bioznanost, brutalizem, celica, debata, definicija, delikatesa, destrukcija, dilema, diskriminirati, dostop, ebola, ekološki, ekspanzija, emocionalen, enakopravnost, epidemiolog, etičen, filozof, filozofija, glorificirati, institucija, invalidnost, kampanja, kodeks, konzilij, korporacija, literatura, logika, luksuzen, magičen, marketinški, monokultura, mutirati, nadomestljiv, nekrokapitalizem, obravnavati, okvara, optika, osnutek, ospredje, ovira, ozdravitev, pacient, panaceja, pandemija, pojem, pojmovanje, poseg, poskus, postavka, pragmatičen, preigravati, princip, privatizacija, produkcija, profit, psiholog, radikalen, raziskava, raziskovalec, respirator, resurs, rezervoar, rigorozen, ruralen, samohranilec, sloves, smrtnik, sociolog, sodoben, soočati se, spopadati se, status, storitev, strokovnjak, subjekt, teoretski, triaža, utilitarističen, utilitarizem, varianta, ventilator, vidik, virus, vprašljiv, vztrajati, zagovornik, znanstvenik</i>

### Phrases

Miha Kovač, <i>Berem, da se poberem</i>	<i>besedni zaklad, bralna zmožnost, dolgoročni spomin, nabor besed, besedna igra, bralna kilometrina, miselna pravila, globoko branje, kvantna mehanika, miselni izziv, miselne povezave</i>
Renata Salecl, Človek človeku virus	<i>zdravstvena oskrba, vidik razvoja, matične celice, spolne celice, klinična slika, filozofija izbire, življenjska doba, kvaliteta življenja, tržna vrednost, nalezljiva bolezen</i>