Croatians in Western Australia: migration, language and class

Val Colic-Peisker
School of Social Inquiry, Murdoch University

Abstract

This paper explores the migration experience of two cohorts of Croatian migrants in Australia focusing on the fact that they are non-English speaking background (NESB) migrants. Central attention is given to the intersection of class and ‘living in another language’ (being NESB in Australia). The first cohort migrated in the 1960s and is predominantly working class; the second migrated in the late 1980s and is predominantly professional. It is argued that living in an English speaking environment affects Croatian migrants in practical, cultural, identity and status terms. It determines their life chances, employment prospects and the feeling of belonging to the Australian community. However, the two groups of migrants, being from different socio-economic backgrounds, are affected in different ways.

Keywords: class, identity, language, migration, social status

Introduction

This paper explores the migration and settlement experience of two post-Second World War waves of Croatian migrants in Australia. Being from non-English speaking background (NESB), they come to ‘live in another language’ and experience difficulties in their practical and emotional integration because of this fact. Practical integration (finding appropriate employment in the first place) is inevitably connected with emotional integration (feeling at home, feeling of belonging), although practical integration does not necessarily mean emotional integration, as will be shown in this paper.

The difference between the experience of NESB and English speaking background (ESB) migrants has been acknowledged in the Australian research on migration.¹ The aim of this paper is to further emphasize the difference in migration experiences of ESB and NESB migrants, prompted by a realization that this difference is often underestimated. The relevance of this topic stems from the fact that, since 1947, the Australian NESB population has been on a continuous rise as a proportion of the total population.² The onset of the ideology of multiculturalism in the 1970s, and the political and theoretical correctness that reflected it, somewhat blurred the importance of understanding the difference between the experiences of ESB and NESB migrants in Australia. For example, the rather popular phrase about the ‘nation of migrants’ – presumably an egalitarian phrase that expresses a benevolent and politically correct multicultural attitude on the part of the dominant Anglo majority – implicitly puts ESB and NESB migrants into the same category and also disregards the indigenous population (for example, Drury and Drury, 1976; Freeman and Jupp, 1992). I argue that specific integration problems of ‘culturally diverse’ NESB migrants did not necessarily lessen as Australia abandoned the ideology of assimilation and adopted multicultural rhetoric and policies.³

This paper presents the case study of two cohorts of voluntary Croatian migrants (non-refugees) who came to Australia as adults and at the time I conducted my fieldwork (1998–9) lived in Perth. The first group of respondents is part of the Croatian ‘working-class’ 1960s–70s’ wave, the largest that has ever reached Australia, and still predominant in numbers. The second group is part of the relatively large, late 1980s–early 1990s’ Croatian immigration of predominantly professional people.⁴

I collected data for this study in semi-structured interviews with two random sub-samples of 20 interviewees from each migrant wave. The same number of men and women were interviewed. It is interesting to note that 14 out of 20 interviewees from the recent professional wave were engineers. This is consistent with research that identified an enormous increase in the immigration of engineers to Australia after 1986, especially NESB engineers (Hawthorne, 1997: 396). As a participant observer, I attended gatherings in Croatian clubs, homes and other venues. Only two interviewees (professionals interviewed at their workplace) chose to be interviewed in English. The interview consisted of four clusters of questions pertaining to socioeconomic profile, involvement in the ethnic community, integration into mainstream society and values. In this paper, I am using data from the first three clusters.

The age of respondents, their socioeconomic profile and self-assessed English proficiency are presented in Tables 1–4.

Tables 2, 3 and 4 show three correlated characteristics of the sample that affect migrants’ socioeconomic position in Australia: education, the type of job they do (or did before they retired) in Australia and English proficiency.
As the tables show, the two subsamples of interviewees are sharply polarized in all three characteristics. Their class – working class vs middle class – is for the purpose of this paper, and relying on a Weberian analysis of class, determined by their education and type of job they held (cf. Giddens, 1993). The two characteristics that define their class are highly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Age of respondents</th>
<th>1960s’ wave</th>
<th>1980s’ wave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age brackets</td>
<td>43–64</td>
<td>28–49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Highest level of education</th>
<th>1960s’ wave</th>
<th>1980s’ wave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary school or less</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary vocational (12 years)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma or degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Type of job in Australia</th>
<th>1960s’ wave</th>
<th>1980s’ wave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home duties</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled/semi-skilled</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para-professional/office</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: English proficiency (self-assessed)</th>
<th>1960s’ wave</th>
<th>1980s’ wave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional level</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social level</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival level</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
correlated with their language proficiency and involvement with the ‘ethnic community’.

**The importance of being English speaking**

After the Second World War, the English language became the world’s lingua franca (cf. Crystal, 1994). In the world where it is understood that international communication – from political negotiations to academic conferences – is conducted in English, being non-English speaking is a serious handicap for anyone who aspires to communicate beyond the spatial and cultural boundaries of their native country. Knowledge of English is nowadays a necessary condition to being internationally mobile, as well as being ‘information rich’, especially after the communication revolution brought about by the English-language-based Internet. English is a sine qua non for access to global economic and cultural resources. NESB professionals across the globe are expected to have at least a working knowledge of English (Crystal, 1994: 358–9). A grasp of English is increasingly becoming a basis for a class distinction in non-English speaking countries. English proficiency opens many doors in the job market, especially to attractive – and in the case of Croatia – much better paid jobs with foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the media and businesses. It also opens the door to emigration, an escape widely used by Croats (Nejasmic, 1994). After the early 1970s, when western European countries closed their borders to non-EEC immigration, English speaking Australia and Canada remained the only realistic options for Croatian emigrants. Over the past decades, English has taken more and more space in foreign language tuition in Croatian schools, starting from primary school up to university level where foreign languages are taught as a part of the requirement for a degree.

Ironically, the postmodern narrative of globalization and cosmopolitanism is told in English and firmly embedded in Anglo-dominated cultural discourses. Those who do not realize the importance of English are doomed to be marginalized in the ‘global village’ of the 21st century. Itinerants searching for opportunities across the globe are people who speak English. Needless to say, English native speakers are privileged in this respect.

In Anglophone but multi-ethnic Australia, every minority language has its approximate status rank (Collins, 1991: 203, called it the ‘ethnic pecking order’, derived from the status of the respective ethnic group in Australia and the global status of the migrants’ country of origin). In such a set-up, English spoken with a particular accent becomes a social marker. A non-Australian accent is perceived as a symbol of otherness – the accent is a ‘cultural characteristic which is held in low esteem by dominant groups in the society’ (Castles and Miller, 1993: 26). However, some foreign accents, such as American or French, may be prestigious, connecting the speaker with
places of ‘popular desire’, while some others may associate the speaker with places commonly perceived as ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilized’. A Croatian accent – after the origin of the accent is established in a social situation – associates a speaker with a small and unimportant country and with a, so far, predominantly working-class migrant group. Many Croatian Australians perceive this as lowering their status, as will be shown in more detail later. Croatian was until recently one of the most widespread ethnic languages in Australia (Kipp et al., 1995: 26) so it has some relevance in the Australian context, but it is a small and unimportant language compared either to English or to ‘languages of wider communication’ such as French, German or Spanish (cf. Clyne, 1991: 89–90).

Two waves of Croatians in Western Australia in a class perspective

My research indicates that moving outside the comfort zone of migrants’ native language impacts on all aspects of their life, from employment and job promotion to formation of intimate relationships. Although Forrest and Johnston’s (2000: 282) argument that ‘merely linking economic disadvantage among immigrants to a broad distinction between ESB and NESB is an oversimplification’ is plausible, the importance of English proficiency for the success and life satisfaction of migrants can hardly be overestimated. A great majority of my interviewees expressed awareness that the use of their professional, social and interpersonal skills depended on their English ability. Yet, for the two cohorts of Croatians, the experience of being NESB in Australia is significantly different, because of their different class backgrounds.6

Croatians who migrated to Australia as a part of Australia’s import of labour up to the early 1970s had limited education and usually no English on arrival. They took low-status jobs, representing the ‘factory fodder’ of the Australian post-war industrial boom (Evans, 1984; Collins, 1991). Professionally educated Croatians started coming to Australia from Croatian cities in the second half of the 1980s. Most of them spoke rather good English on arrival.

In the 1980s, Australia’s economic needs, and consequently immigration policies, changed in favour of skilled migration (Collins, 1991). At the same time, Croatia had much more skilled labour to offer (Meznaric, 1991). The Croatian ‘education boom’ during the 1970s created a surplus of professionals who could not fulfil their aspirations in their native country stricken by a deep recession that started in 1980. A large number of professionals emigrated during the following decades, joining the ranks of the highly mobile, English speaking ‘global professional middle class’ (Stubbs, 1996).

While the 1960s’ migrants usually migrated very young, some of them in their teens, most people from the 1980s’ wave migrated in their late 20s or
30s. The earlier migrants rarely learned English in a formal setting for any significant length of time. They usually took jobs very soon upon arrival in Australia. In addition, large-scale language tuition that developed into a comprehensive government-funded programme (Adult Migrant English Service: AMES) was introduced in Australia only in the late 1970s (Clyne, 1991). For the recent professional cohort, English proficiency was one of the requirements of the points test for a permanent Australian visa (Castles et al., 1998: 10–12). In addition, my respondents were highly motivated to further improve their language in order to secure professional employment, and were able to do so through AMES. However, as a comparison between migrant children and adults clearly shows, age is an impediment in foreign language acquisition that can only partly be compensated by motivation and aptitude for learning (Crystal, 1994: 372–3). Unlike children, adults cannot enjoy the benefits of natural language acquisition and have to rely on formal learning (Crystal, 1994). This means allocating specific time and effort to language learning or refinement. For highly qualified professionals, social mobility is blocked without fluent English. Overseas qualifications, even when formally recognized, are useless in Australia unless they are ‘translated’ into English and adjusted to another cultural context. For working-class migrants, the language issue has a different emphasis. A high level of English proficiency may not be necessary at work, but without it they remain alienated from the Australian environment and never able to feel ‘at home’.

With regard to their life chances and life satisfaction, my interviewees gave varying degrees of importance to the fact that they lived in another language. Those with lower levels of English were not necessarily the ones who felt they were the most adversely affected by migration to Australia. The level of social expectations seemed to be as important in this assessment as their ‘objective’ language proficiency.

The 1960s’ working-class migrants: life in the ‘ethnic bubble’

For all of my interviewees from this cohort, migrating to Australia meant encountering a severe language barrier. The majority of them were low skilled and spoke no English at all; in the 1960s, the language was not an entry requirement. In the 1981 census (Bureau of Immigration Research, 1990: 1), 74.8 percent of Yugoslav-born migrants were unskilled. This group of Croatian migrants has been described as a typical working-class community in Australian migration literature (Johnston, 1979; Evans, 1984; Jupp, 1988, 1998). All of my respondents reported initial difficulties at work and rather ingenious attempts to cope with the English speaking environment. The usual situation is succinctly explained in the following quote:
If you did not go to school you can never speak well. It was possible to go to evening classes, but I didn’t … I had a fiancée back home and I wanted to work as hard as possible to save money and bring her here. (Mr J.K., migrated in 1966)

A considerable number of my respondents found their first employment with already established Croatian migrants in their businesses, usually market gardens. Some worked in Australian firms, often where other Croatians worked, so that they could assist new arrivals with the language:

We learned at work … you would listen to people speaking English and pick up some words. Previous arrivals would interpret for us. After a year, I was able to understand simple things, instructions and questions. (Mr V.J., migrated in 1967)

The lack of English seriously impeded the possibility of job promotion. It was also hard to change jobs, even if they were not happy with the current one. With poor spoken English and often no written English, they did not feel confident to venture outside the safety net of their Croatian workmates. This is in line with Johnston’s (1979) findings on ‘the lack of occupational mobility typical for immigrants’, also confirmed by Wooden et al. (1994) and Forrest and Johnston (2000):

Although we came a long time ago, we didn’t learn a very good English … it was only to manage somehow. I could never write myself, but there was always someone around to help with forms … we had friends who were born here, second-generation Croatians … and later on our children were able to help. (Mr A.M., migrated in 1969)

Outside work, everyday life in the English speaking environment entailed a plethora of more or less serious obstacles. Shopping, communicating with their children’s teachers or government agencies, talking to neighbours: it was all problematic. Women from my sample seemed to be able to cope with these difficulties somewhat better than men, perhaps because most of these everyday chores were allocated to them so they had to venture out. This finding contradicts earlier research, which indicated lower levels of English proficiency among NESB women as compared to NESB men (Bureau of Immigration Research, 1990: 26). One of the issues that need to be taken into account is that Yugoslav (and Croatian for that matter) women from this cohort had the highest rate of workforce participation among migrant women. Their husbands’ relatively low income made their employment a necessity; all interviewed women from this group worked full time even when their children were young and were thus exposed to the language through work as much as their husbands (or more, having worked more often in shops, cleaning and other service jobs), and more than them outside work.

Most of my interviewees from this cohort reported they never acquired a level of proficiency that would enable them to feel comfortable in the English speaking environment (cf. Jupp, 1998: 112). Limited formal
education made acquisition of the second language difficult. Johnston (1979: 85) reported ‘extremely high’ illiteracy rates among Yugoslavs, which apparently pertained to literacy in English. Overall, this migrant cohort seemed to speak and understand English better than they were able to read and write; women seemed to cope better than men, perhaps also because they were not too embarrassed to expose their language inadequacy.7

Because of the language barrier, this group of migrants lived largely within an ‘ethnic bubble’.8 The ethnic community (clubs, neighbourhoods, extended families) was an island of the familiar world in the ocean of incomprehensible, (sub)urban, English speaking society. The Croatian community in Western Australia provided a linguistic and cultural shock absorber for newcomers. Suburban living was an alienating experience for this rural cohort coming from close-knit communities. New patterns of work and women’s employment outside home represented an unfamiliar strain on the usual family regime. New urban skills were not easily acquired because of the lack of English. Being of considerable size, the Croatian community could live in relative ‘ethnic isolation’ from the wider society: there were Croatian grocery shops, butchers, winemakers, hairdressers, pharmacists and priests in Perth, and doctors and lawyers among the second-generation migrants.

One aspect of the ‘ethnic bubble’ is the residential concentration and residential stability, clearly noticeable in this group of migrants (cf. Jupp, 1991: 100–1). Most of my interviewees stayed in the same suburb for decades (cf. Castles and Miller, 1993: 111). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997b), most southern Europeans – 29.6 per cent of whom are Yugoslav born – usually remain in the area of their initial settlement. Yugoslav born have a lower spatial mobility rate (11.3 per cent) than Australian born (18.8 per cent) or ESB migrants (over 20 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997b: 13).

As a consequence of the language barrier, a lack of urban skills and being stuck in hard and low-status jobs, most of these people never felt at home in Australia. My interviewees reported that their ethnic community partly compensated for the loss of their native communities, but the linguistic and cultural distance between the ‘old country’ and Australia felt continuously uncomfortable. It is clear that language is the pre-condition for any degree of cultural integration; English proficiency was a link to the host society that was missing for this group of migrants.

The 1980s’ professional migrants and ‘cultural competence’

My interviewees from the 1980s’ wave all reported they had overcome the language barrier and established themselves in the English speaking envi-
ronment. Their social field normally expanded into mainstream Australia. They maintained a range of social contacts with non-Croatians and regarded the Croatian community as irrelevant to their life in Australia. As already stated, the points test system meant that they had at least a working knowledge of English on arrival.⁹

Language is not only a means of communication, but also a carrier of culture and values. As Clyne (1994: 1) put it, ‘language represents the deepest manifestation of a culture’ and people’s values ‘play a substantial role in the way they use not only their first language(s), but also subsequently acquired ones’. The ability to communicate effectively was the starting point for highly skilled migrants, but once this has been acquired other issues were likely to arise. For example, many of my interviewees reported their, sometimes painful, awareness of cultural differences in communication styles and patterns. Avoiding misunderstandings and mutual misconceptions between themselves and English native speakers was another difficult task for them to grapple with:

I think some ethnicities fit into Australian culture more easily … I’m sure my English neighbours had less difficulties with it than me, although they say they also had adjustment problems … but from my point of view their migration is more like moving house … quite far though … I imagine non-Europeans would have even more problems. (Mrs J.K., migrated in 1988)

Clyne argued that, in an ‘immigrant country’ like Australia with a single national lingua franca, access to power may only be achievable for people with a fairly high degree of communicative competence in English if they achieve some active command of ‘Anglo’ communication rules. This especially applies to the work environment (Clyne, 1994: 208). The following quotes express the idea I heard repeatedly in the interviews: that being understood is a matter not only of language competence but also of ‘cultural competence’, which cannot be acquired prior to migration:

Australians are more reserved, not as outgoing as Europeans. We Croatians tend to speak more loudly, we interrupt each other, talk at the same time, wave arms and gesticulate … we tend to raise our voice much more easily than Australians and this can be interpreted as a lack of manners … I learned this from my ex-boyfriend who was Australian … I had to modify my communication style in order not to be misinterpreted. (Ms N.B., an engineer, migrated in 1988)

I can conduct a meeting at work but if I get engaged in an argument I may sound rough and abrupt … So I am still learning, not only the language but the communication style … We [Croatians] tend to be more direct, but English has these indirect ways of saying things … which one can also use to hide incompetence or insecurity … well, I do not have this shelter, this trump card up my sleeve. (Mr R.K., an engineer, migrated in 1988)

Phrases and idiomatic expressions are deeply embedded in the history and culture of every nation and can hardly be transferred into another
language/culture. They have to be learnt from scratch, representing one of the main difficulties in acquiring a level of linguistic competence beyond basic functional communication, something professional people no doubt aspire to. Therefore a complex cultural learning, plus acquiring specific ‘local knowledge’, is a necessary backdrop for their second language acquisition. When it comes to a sophisticated level of language learning that is necessary for professional people, the line between ‘purely’ linguistic and cultural competence seems to become increasingly blurred. Some of my respondents found observing their children and communicating with them in English helpful in acquiring Anglo ‘cultural competence’.

**Foreign accent, Australian identity and social status**

Apart from being a means of communication and the expression of culture, language is also an important means of identification (Clyne, 1994: 2). It takes on a symbolic meaning that is central to ethnic group cohesion (Castles and Miller, 1993: 222). Language represents an important, if not central element of group identity. Smolicz (1981) identified language as a core value of some Australian ethnic groups. In Australia, migrants are recognized as members of certain ethnic groups by their language or accent and ranked accordingly. Language and accent are a marker of one’s social status in the native language too: people are recognized as members of different social strata ‘by the ear’.

In the course of my research, I used a control group of eight ESB migrants (English, Scottish, Irish and South African), with the length of Australian residence varying from five to 29 years. With them I focused on questions pertaining to ‘feeling at home in Australia’ and ‘feeling Australian’. ESB migrants did not feel awkward in claiming their ‘Australianness’ although they were also recognized as migrants by their accent. This points to the argument that the English language represents a core Australian value so ESB migrants can assume their ‘cultural belonging’ to the Australian nation. A non-Australian native English accent still defines a person as a ‘cultural insider’, whereas being a non-native English speaker (having a foreign accent) defines a person as a ‘cultural outsider’. The level of language proficiency and class status influences this definition. If viewed through Hage’s discourse of hegemonic ‘whiteness’, being NESB (‘ethnic’) is in its consequence the same as being non-white (cf. Hage, 1998). However, one’s degree of ‘whiteness’ can be improved through participation in dominant discourses and practices, for example by mastering Australian accent, slang and Anglo-Australian communication rules and style. Professional Croatians have more social capital to invest in this endeavour than working-class Croatians.

My interviewees from the professional wave reported they were recognized as migrants by their accent and usually asked about their country of
origin. Their emotional response was usually the feeling of otherness; this prevented them from ‘feeling at home’ in Australia. Many of them felt they had no right to claim their Australian identity as long as they were recognized as people ‘from another place’. This situation tends to be permanent: only a tiny minority of non-native English speakers who came to Australia as adults can correct their accent to the point of being linguistically indistinguishable from Australian born. In many cases, this prevented the development of a genuine feeling of belonging to the Australian community. This is clearly expressed in the following quotes:

As soon as you’ve left Croatia, you are a stranger forever … they always ask you where do you come from, it may be out of sheer curiosity, but it reminds you time and time again that you are a stranger. (Mr B.R., web pages creator, migrated in 1991)

We are always recognized by our accent and in most cases we are asked where do we come from, which is annoying, especially if the question comes as soon as I open my mouth to speak, from the people I do not even know … I do not think they want to offend us, but I feel challenged in my right to belong to this society and to be a part of it in the sense that whatever happens here affects us as much as them, the people without a foreign accent. (Mrs D.R., an engineer, migrated in 1989)

People’s identity is a combination of their own idea about who they are and ideas others have about them; feeling Australian for Croatian migrants thus seems to remain an elusive goal. A relevant question that arises at this point is whether the people with a foreign accent are discriminated against. Does the foreign accent represent an obstacle in the fulfilment of migrants’ professional, material and social expectations? The recent professional migrants tended to claim that their social status is adversely affected by the fact that they are NESB ‘aliens’. Due to their higher expectations and aspirations, their level of frustration with living in another language was higher than in the case of the older working-class wave of migrants who spoke much less English on average.

Migrants from the working-class 1960s’ wave spent most of their free time with their families, on their properties and within their ‘ethnic bubble’. Home, family and ethnic community represented the focus of their identification and belonging. This focus was imposed by the inability to mix freely with English speaking people, and has led to the maintenance of traditional values as criteria for status attainment (cf. Skrbis, 1999). Extended families and ethnic neighbourhoods maintained the importance they had in their native rural communities. Traditional values, such as the ethic of mutual help and care and the traditional intolerance towards ‘deviants’ (such as unemployed, single or divorced people and childless women), were largely maintained. This group of migrants attained their status from within their ethnic community and there were virtually no significant others outside it (cf. Gans, 1962; Shibutani and Kwan, 1965). For this reason,
they did not see their limited English and/or Croatian accent as a ‘status problem’, although language represented a big practical obstacle in their Australian life.

The later group, proficient in English, sought status outside the ethnic community. Most of my professional interviewees expected to become linguistically indistinguishable from middle-class Australian born in the course of time, but it did not happen. This represented a major disappointment for some of them. Also, some of them saw the Croatian accent as loaded with low prestige. Many argued there was a hierarchy of foreign accents in Australia. The following quotes express their attitude on what it means when their accent is first heard, and then usually located by the question ‘where are you from?’:

There is a prejudice about Croatians, we are still ‘wogs’, that’s how I see it, you should not forget what profile of people have been coming here for decades … manual labourers, just like others at that time, Greeks, Italians … it’s only in the last 10 years that more educated people have been arriving … I am sure it makes a different impression when you say you’re Croatian as opposed to when you say you’re German, English or American, or when you sound French. (Mr D.B., an engineer, migrated in 1988)

I think my English immediately pushes me into the ‘migrants’ box … I’m not glad about that … it’s as if I must reveal something important about myself as soon as I say anything. Sometimes I would like not to disclose this fact straight away … and then the question ‘where are you from’? It can be an obstacle in communication from the very start. (Mrs. J.K., language teacher, migrated in 1988)

For Croatians, who are not visibly different from the dominant group, the foreign accent seemed to be a main ‘indicator of otherness’. Due to their accent, their self-perceived social status had been lowered. Some claimed their job promotion had been slowed due to the cultural bias, because of their ‘foreign name and accent’. Other studies have established the existence of such barriers (Hawthorne, 1994: 57, 1997).

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I examine some of the ways in which the migration experiences of two groups of Croatian migrants from different socioeconomic backgrounds are affected by living in another language. My data indicates that the issues and problems are different for working-class migrants compared to professional migrants. Class seems to be at least as important as ethnicity in determining their migration experiences in Australia.

Most migrants from the 1960s’ cohort are still affected by the language barrier after living in Australia for decades. Although migration improved their material circumstances and most of them saw Australia as a ‘land of opportunities’, being working-class NESB migrants apparently meant being
exposed to particular difficulties and discrimination. Most of them were locked into the most unpleasant, low-status and poorly paid jobs: their occupational and residential mobility was much lower than in the Australian born population.

Middle-class migrants from the 1980s’ cohort were proficient in English. At the time of the interview most of them worked in jobs commensurate with their pre-migration status. Yet, they were more prone to state the fact that they were NESB as a source of concern and anxiety than was the case with the less proficient working-class migrants. In spite of their efforts to brush up their English and acquire ‘Anglo’ cultural competence, because of their accent they were always recognized as people ‘from another place’. This seems to be an obstacle to their feeling of belonging to the Australian community. Also, their perception was that being NESB, and specifically Croatian, was not prestigious and that it adversely affected their social status.

It should be mentioned, however, that the era of multiculturalism increased cross-cultural awareness in Australia, at least where public discourses are concerned. Over the last couple of decades, NESB migrants have been better cared for by a number of multicultural and multilingual services than was previously the case. For example, specific needs of NESB migrants have been recognized through the Translating and Interpreting Service, AMES and ethnic radio and TV programmes. The question remains, however, whether ethno-specific services and ‘cultural enhancement’ help eliminate structural inequalities and discrimination (Jayasuriya, 1993: 171–3). The ideology of multiculturalism provides a context for seeing the bilingualism of NESB migrants as bringing a desirable cultural diversity, permitting social adaptability and promoting linguistic and cultural sensitivity, rather than being ‘confusing’ (as Johnston claimed back in 1979). It has been commonly accepted that foreign language learning ‘broadens the mind’. As Clyne (1991) pointed out, the improved status of NESB migrants has contributed to language maintenance, promoted bilingualism and, by the same token, multiculturalism. I am inclined to attribute these positive changes more to the fact that recent NESB migrants are not ‘speechless tools’ as their predecessors were, and to the social mobility of second-generation migrants rather than to the spectacular effects of multiculturalism.

In this context, the integration of the recent middle-class wave of Croatian migrants, whose social capital contains professional, urban and language skills, should be less painful than was the case with the previous wave. However, when their motives for migration and social aspirations are compared to those of the previous migrant cohort, it is hard to say whether they are, overall, more satisfied than their working-class Croatian predecessors. The latter in many cases achieved a level of material standard and security beyond their initial expectations; for a considerable number of professional
migrants, life in Australia did not bring the spectacular professional and material rewards some of them expected in the ‘West’. Many of my middle-class respondents argued that there was an ‘accent ceiling’ in the professions, which precluded NESB professionals from being promoted and getting to the top. Low numbers of NESB migrants in chief managerial positions and all three spheres of government point to the existence of such an invisible barrier (cf. Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1995). Some other Australian studies confirm the existence of the ‘accent ceiling’ that works against professionals who are highly fluent in English (Hawthorne, 1994, 1997). Hawthorne (1994: 61) described the case of the Sydney division of the Australian Institute of Engineers which in 1993 considered involvement in an accent-modification course run by a speech pathologist, for unemployed NESB engineers with excellent knowledge of English. For obvious reasons, the issue of discrimination is not easy to research: researchers have to rely on people’s perceptions, which are in this case likely to be even more biased than usual. For NESB migrants who are marked as culturally different by their accents, the dilemma about discrimination remains: ‘has opportunity [for advancement] been limited by lack of English, or by the fact that the migrant had arrived from a non-English-speaking country? … Is the difficulty related to ethnic origin or to skill characteristic?’ (Shergold, 1985: 67). It is therefore questionable to what degree the language barrier can be removed by the act of multicultural political will.10

For both groups of interviewees, being NESB may be a source of discrimination in employment just as skin colour or religion may be for other migrant groups,11 but for the working-class part of my sample the lack of English is also a real handicap in everyday life in Australia, comparable to a hearing or speech impairment. This applies to most non-native speakers, although to a different degree: being NESB in Australia brings about difficulties that ESB migrants do not face. The question remains to what degree the ‘handicap’ of being NESB has been aggravated by cross-cultural misunderstanding, prejudices and discrimination. As Australian research shows, this is a complex issue that this paper cannot resolve, but also the issue that deserves continuous investigation to which this paper hopes to contribute.

Notes
1 The first publication generated from The Migrant Experience: A Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia devoted one chapter to the issue of English proficiency (DIMA, 1997). See also Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner (1995); Wooden et al. (1994).
2 Bureau of Immigration Research (1991: vii) gives a figure from the 1986 census of 1,808,663 NESB people living in Australia while the figure from the 1996 census is 2,362,373 (Basic Community Profile, 1996).
3 This paper is no place to contribute to the ongoing theoretical/political debate on what ‘multiculturalism’ is or should be. I only cite it as a public discourse of
‘tolerance’ of minority cultures, which can then ‘enrich’ the white/Anglo Australian culture. As such, multiculturalism is a context for the integration of the recent group of Croatians. The leftist critique of such multiculturalism claims it is still a discourse of white/Anglo hegemony. Hage (1998), in his *White Nation*, equates ‘White racists’ and ‘White multiculturalists’ in their common idea of ‘White nation’ and ‘White culture’ as the site of political will while ‘ethnics’ and Aboriginal population (‘others’) are passive objects of this will.

4 The exact size of the Croatian community in Australia is hard to establish. Croatia only became an independent country in 1991 so the census ‘country of birth’ question does not give a realistic picture because it splits the Croatian population into those who state Croatia and those who state Yugoslavia as their country of birth. (1996 *Basic Community Profile Index* counts only 4151 Western Australians born in Croatia, but 6058 people who speak Croatian.) Paric et al. (1996) state there are 11,500 Croatians in WA, using combined figures from ‘country of birth’, ‘language spoken at home’ and ‘religion’ from the 1991 census. An estimate from the Croatian ex-mayor of the City of Cockburn, where Croatians in Western Australia are concentrated, is as high as 50,000 persons, using surnames as an indicator and thus counting the first, and parts of the second and third, generation migrants (Croatian SBS radio-programme, 10 June 1999).

5 Crystal (1994: 358) quotes a visitor who after 20 years returned to China in 1979: ‘In 1959 everyone was carrying a book of thoughts of Chairman Mao; today, everyone is carrying a book of elementary English’.

6 Markovic and Manderson (2000: 319) who researched adjustment strategies of recent migrant women from ex-Yugoslavia also consider ‘socio-demographic background’ to be the most relevant determinant in choosing a particular adjustment strategy.

7 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report *Aspects of Literacy* states that 40 per cent of NESB Australians sit on the lowest rung of the literacy ladder. ‘It is the older Australians, the immigrants who have been here for decades, who have the worst problems’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997a). This proportion would be higher in ethnic groups which represented a large enough ‘ethnic bubble’, as in the Croatian case.

8 Life in an ethnic enclave is no Croatian speciality: other NESB migrant groups from similar background (e.g. other south Europeans from rural background, with limited education and English) also tended to remain relatively isolated from the wider society (cf. Gans, 1962; Martin, 1972: 123; Richardson, 1979: 4; Jupp, 1988: 172, 1998).

9 My interviewees either migrated under ‘independent’ category (a majority) or as ‘concessional family’ entrants. The latter category means the points test still applied but with a concession of about 1/5 of the total score.

10 *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia* proclaimed ‘the right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity, and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth’ (Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1989, emphasis mine).

11 Bean and Kelley (1988) argued that the Australian labour market is entirely non-discriminatory and ‘blind to ethnicity’. Evans and Kelley (1991: 721) argued that ‘the sociological hypothesis of prejudice leading to discrimination is both wrong (there is little or no discrimination in jobs and pay) and right (prejudiced employers say they would discriminate in hiring)’. Although they argued that ‘minorities receive equal rewards to education’ (Evans and Kelley, 1991: 721) they also state (quoting Kelley and McAllister, 1984: 725) that ‘Mediterranean
migrants with above average education did substantially worse’. My research indicates that their lower job status and income are largely attributable to language difficulties. According to Evans and Kelley (1991: 732), southern Europeans had greatest difficulties with English among NESB migrants. This pertains to the 1960s’ cohort of Croatians. Some other authors argue that ethnic discrimination is present in Australia (cf. Shergold, 1985; Collins, 1991; Foster et al., 1991; Alcorso and Harrison, 1993; Castles et al., 1998).

References


Bureau of Immigration Research (1990) Community Profiles, Yugoslav Born. Canberra: BIR, Statistics Section, AGPS.


