

INTEGRATION OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS IN AN ONLINE LANGUAGE COUNSELLING PLATFORM

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an upgrade of the existing software infrastructure of an online language counselling platform with public engagement mechanisms. At the time of the upgrade planning, the platform in question was already well established among users and had great potential to serve as a platform for public-oriented research; however, it was primarily intended to help users with standard language communication. This paper presents steps taken towards consensual integration of the public in the research process through the GRACE project. Activities leading towards an upgrade of the platform started in the autumn of 2019 and are currently in progress. The upgrade will be completed by October 2021.

GRACE aims to contribute to the European Commission goal to spread and embed Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) in European research, i.e. achieve institutional change. The concept of RRI implies that stakeholders in the research process work together in order to meet the needs of society, namely through democratisation of science, responsiveness and responsibility (GRACE, n.d.; Owen et al., 2012). The vision associated with participation in the GRACE project is to develop a plan for defining more advanced forms of collaboration between researchers and the public, and to upgrade the existing platform accordingly. More specifically, we envision a language counselling service that relies on citizen science, based on the perception that the public is competent to conduct carefully structured research in areas that are readily accessible to citizens, such as the language they speak (Svendsen, 2018). Reliance on citizen science will pave the way for the formation of new, more participatory, institutional agendas such as the production of modern language manuals.

Language counselling belongs to the broader spectrum of language management activities (Jernudd & Neustupný, 1987; Lengar Verovnik & Kalin Golob, 2020). In Slovenia, language counselling in various forms represents a notable linguistic tradition. Language counselling activities started in the late 19th century. Today, the so-called language corners (language-oriented newspaper sections), together with popular science language manuals and language counselling forums, fill the linguistic gaps created by the inadequacy of current language manuals (Verovnik, 2016).

CURRENT SITUATION

Language Counselling Platform

The central language counselling platform for the Slovenian language (*Jezikovna svetovalnica*, available at <https://svetovalnica.zrc-sazu.si/>) managed by Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language at Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU) is a good example of how the public can be involved in the scientific process. The platform relies on contributions from the public

in the form of language questions and dilemmas, which are answered by linguists and published on the platform. The ZRC SAZU Language Counselling Service is a reputable consultative body for various language-related professions and for the entire Slovenian language community as it is free of charge and openly accessible; anyone can register and ask questions. The platform receives up to 1,000 views per day and publishes about 30 answers per month. It is widely used for addressing ambiguities in standard language and seeking advice on linguistic choices; researchers use it to identify language description gaps (Dobrovoljc et al., 2020).

The Language Counselling Service is in its core a citizen science service; language counselling cannot be done without the input from the lay public. The lay public is always ready to participate in discussions regarding language use. The Language Counselling Service strives to be democratic in its judgements of language use which agrees with aims and goals of planned activities; the users are invited to participate in order to make the answering process even more democratic. The planned upgrade of the existing platform will not only facilitate citizen science activities; researchers will also benefit from additional user input.

As the Language Counselling Service operates online, it is used by Slovenian language users worldwide. The majority are from Slovenia, followed by users in neighbouring countries (possibly members of minorities). Even though Slovenia is a country with many dialects, the majority of language difficulties refer to standard language.³⁸ The platform requires users to register in order to ask questions (the purpose of this is to limit user activity to language related questions only). The registration process does not require personal data as users can register using their e-mail, Google or Facebook accounts.

Users of the Platform

Platform users are mostly Slovenian language speakers. They are willing to actively engage in constructive linguistic discussion and research. They perceive standard language as a vital part of their common identity. However, their perception of the linguist's role is not entirely uniform: some are rather reluctant to still accept the traditional role of the linguist as the decision maker (Dobrovoljc, 2004). Others seek straightforward and authoritative linguistic advice on specific issues as well as in-depth explanations of linguistic phenomena. Questions from pupils and students who are still in the process of learning the language are also common.

The platform is a reputable and referential consulting body for laymen and professionals alike; however, language-related professions such as proof-readers, translators, teachers, etc. predominate (Dobrovoljc et al., 2020). Slovenian language users are very interested in their language and its well-being. The need to share their views and opinions on language is very real and frequently expressed. The Language Counselling Service offers competent assistance to users who either face various problems or difficulties that cannot be satisfactorily solved by consulting the available hand-books and manuals, or judge the state of affairs described in the available guides to be in contrast with the actual language use. The Slovenian language has two million speakers who speak either one of the existing eight dialects or one of the regionally spoken language varieties. Mastering the standard language based on the central Slovenian dialect is a challenge, especially for speakers from peripheral regions. In Slovenia, a network of proof-readers and language consultants has developed, and the modern dynamics of language (Internet, social networks, etc.) require up-to-date language manuals. A survey conducted in 2017 (Dobrovoljc et al., 2018; Verovnik, 2016) showed that most questions are asked by

³⁸ In Slovenian, the standard language is an agreed supra-regional idiom used in the written language since the middle of the 19th century.

users in the 30 to 49 age group. The majority of users have a higher education (university degree, 84%) and the predominant motivation for using the Language Counselling Service is professional need (51%) or the inability to find the answer in available language manuals. Most users indicated that the Language Counselling Service is recognized as a valid reference source in their professional environment.

Language Counsellors

The language counsellors involved are in-house linguists employed by the Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts who provide language advice as an addition to their professional assignments and scientific research. They sometimes experience assignment overload and therefore have limited time and energy to devote to language counselling. That can sometimes be a problem when many questions are waiting to be answered. To some extent they are sceptical about public participation in the research process. Language users are expected to ask questions and this is approved of. On the other hand, some linguists do not think it is appropriate for the public to express their opinions on linguistic matters.

Also, some believe that language counselling is not particularly valued (it is more the domain of application than research), although some issues demand in-depth research on language dilemmas. Some researchers see language counselling as an unnecessary activity. In this sense, language counselling would need to be re-evaluated as socially and linguistically relevant, particularly in the fields of language policy and science funding.

Existing Public Engagement Mechanisms

Language users are already involved in the upstream stage of the research process as they provide language questions and ambiguities. Language counsellors answer questions of their choice and area of expertise and, after careful evaluation of the Editorial Board, the answers are published on an open platform. At the time of the upgrade planning, the public was not yet officially and in the narrow sense involved in the mid- and downstream stages of the research process; although, occasional feedback via email and the publishing of answers on the platform could be considered downstream public engagement in the broadest sense.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In the process of identifying the main points where the platform could benefit from a broader aspect of public engagement activities, several steps were taken. First, the Editorial Board of the platform gathered their thoughts and expectations regarding the announced upgrade. Then, a good practice study was conducted by the authors of this contribution to gain insight into similar activities in the field of linguistics. A questionnaire was created to explore the experiences and needs of language counsellors. With all the findings in mind, an upgrade plan was drafted and tested through a consultation process. Through the analysis of the consultation process, the final upgrade plan was devised. In the following subchapters, each of these steps is presented.

Editorial Board Meeting

The Editorial Board meeting revealed that mid- and downstream research stages of the platform have the greatest potential for improvement in terms of public engagement. The platform does not yet

include midstream public engagement activities. There is potential in this direction as the platform reaches a wide audience and has over 1,800 registered users. Editorial Board members were in agreement about including the public in the downstream research stage, namely through the addition of a structured feedback gathering mechanism to the platform.

Study on Good Practices

The study on good citizen science practices in linguistics presented opportunities this methodology enables in the field. Since language is one of the areas of particular interest to the public, language-oriented citizen science activities are likely to be successful in providing large and useful datasets. Most resources (Svendsen, 2018; Stoll, n.d.; *SNF-AGORA*, 2020; *IamDiÖ*, 2020) describe citizen science activities in the up- and midstream of the research process; downstream citizen science activities are less common, which is to be expected given that decision-making in science is usually the preserve of scientists. This was also the case with the involved language counsellors - they too were hesitant when it came to user feedback.

Especially relevant to the platform upgrade activities is the project DiÖ – German in Austria (*IamDiÖ*, 2020), namely its satellite project *IamDiÖ* which is platform-based in a way that is similar to the ZRC SAZU Language Counselling Service. This project is financed by the Austrian Science Fund. It constitutes of research into the variation and change of the German language in Austria. It explores the use and the subjective perception of the German language in Austria as well as its contact with other languages. The project is institutionally situated at four academic institutions in Austria: University of Vienna, University of Salzburg, University of Graz and the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Citizens of Austria (users of local German varieties) are encouraged to ask questions about their language and to either find answers themselves, or in dialogue with the researchers involved. The lay public submit language related questions (and potentially answer them), gather pictures of writing in public spaces (and potentially analyse them) and create memes.

Here, we focus on the part of the project where the public ask questions about the German language in Austria. These citizen science activities are mainly up- and midstream. The way the public asks questions on language is similar to how the ZRC SAZU Language Counselling Service works (upstream). The submitted questions present valuable research cues. Citizens can conduct their own research as well and tackle language dilemmas. The progress of research and its outcomes are presented in the project blog. The participants are both the lay public in general and language professionals (translators, teachers etc.). The submitted questions are answered by researchers involved in the project, most of them are linguists.

Language Counsellors' Needs and Experiences

A questionnaire was prepared to explore their experiences and needs, and to identify potential mitigation strategies and possible incentives. The questionnaire below consisted of 15 questions addressing these potential issues: work overload, lack of time and energy, unwillingness to accept language users as a vital part of the research process, lack of incentives, lack of appropriate scientific evaluation, and perception of language counselling as an unnecessary activity.

Q1 – In 2019, did you participate in language counselling activities of the ZRC SAZU Language Counselling service?

- Yes, I answered at least one language question. (This option allowed the respondent to see all following questions.)
- No. (This option would take the respondent to the end of the survey.)

Q2 – Approximately how many language questions did you answer in 2019? (Choose one option.)

- less than 5
- from 5 to 20
- more than 20

Q3 – In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good answer to a certain language question (e.g. does it describe the situation in language manuals and the language use, does it provide a direct answer to the question, does it provide an evaluation of language alternatives regarding normative adequacy)? (Text.)

Q4 – In your opinion, what is the attitude of Slovenian language users towards language counselling in general? (Text.)

Q5 – In your opinion, are language counselling activities in the ZRC SAZU Language Counselling Service well accepted among Slovenian language users? (Choose one option.)

- Yes.
- No.
- I do not know.

Q6 – In your opinion, is language counselling appropriately valued in science? Please elaborate. (Text.)

Q7 – In your opinion, does participation in language counselling activities put a strain on you? (Choose one option.)

- Yes. (This option lead the respondent to question 8.)
- No.
- Sometimes. (This option lead the respondent to question 8.)
- I do not know.

Q8 – Please elaborate. (Multiple choice.)

- Answering a language question reveals dilemmas that I did not expect.
- It is harder for me to answer questions I do not choose myself, but are instead assigned to me by the Moderator.
- I have too little time to participate.
- Other:

Q9 – In your opinion, is your participation in the ZRC SAZU Language Counselling Service affected by your primary work tasks? (Choose one option.)

- Yes. (This option lead the respondent to question 10.)
- No.
- Sometimes. (This option lead the respondent to question 10.)
- I do not know.

Q10 – Please elaborate. (Text.)

Q11 – What would motivate you to participate in language counselling more often? (Text.)

Q12 – In your opinion, could user feedback on the usefulness of language answers in the ZRC SAZU Language Counselling Service help improve the service quality? (Choose one option.)

- Yes.
 No.
 I do not know.

Q13 – Please elaborate. (Text.)

Q14 – Have you ever used the Q&A database of the ZRC SAZU Language Counselling Service in your research and scientific work, e.g. in your scientific or professional articles or in your lexicographic work? (Choose one option.)

- Yes.
 No.
 I do not know.

Q15 – Please elaborate. (Text.)

Of 23 language counsellors who completed the questionnaire, 20 met the entry condition of having answered at least one language question in 2019. 19 of the 20 respondents completed the survey, 1 respondent completed only the first 6 questions of the questionnaire.

Language counsellors are mainly unanimous that the attitude of language users towards language counselling is positive and that language counselling activities in the ZRC SAZU Language Counselling Service are well accepted among the Slovenian language users. They believe it inappropriate that language counselling is not scientifically evaluated and is not at least partly perceived as a research activity. Even though it is in itself an applied linguistics activity (Orežnik, 1995), it often requires strenuous scientific research. Provided answers to language questions are not included in researchers' bibliographies. Some feel language counselling is perceived as a secondary activity that does not bring research points and is only meant to serve as a promotional activity for the organisation.

Some language counsellors feel language counselling activities sometimes put a strain on them, the predominant reasons being the lack of time, the complexity of language questions and the possible conflict/polemic arising from different views on linguistic matters. Additionally, some language counsellors believe primary work tasks affect or sometimes affect their language counselling activities, mainly through their specialisation; they mostly answer questions related to their field of work. Primary work tasks have priority over language counselling activities.

Language counsellors are highly motivated to answer language questions related to their field of work. Some feel a separate block of time should be reserved for these activities and the work done should have more value and be correctly evaluated. Some feel their participation in language counselling activities would benefit greatly from having a smaller primary task workload.

Language counsellors believe that feedback gathering could be useful for improving the quality of answers to language questions in the spirit of democratization. The possible problem could be that simply gathering feedback on what the user thinks about a certain answer to a language question could

be misleading as language users have very different backgrounds and linguistic knowledge, the motivation behind their questions also differs. Language counsellors believe that the platform's forum, in which the communication between language counsellors takes place, also receives feedback; from other language counsellors, that is. Most language counsellors are in favour of the lay public giving feedback on answers to language question, but they are not in favour of the lay public being able to evaluate language answers in any way in terms of their usefulness or whether the answer was as expected.

As described above, the questionnaire revealed that, next to assignment overload, the lack of formal evaluation for language counselling activities is a topical issue. This problem was communicated to superiors and the search for an appropriate evaluation solution is pending. The main problem, however, proved to be the scepticism of language counsellors towards involving the public in the research process.

The challenge at this stage was to educate the language counsellors who were unwilling to accept public participation about the positive impact of such activities on the research process. The scepticism of language counsellors towards involving the public in the research process was significantly reduced by presenting the findings of the above mentioned good practice study. In addition, a webinar was organised to familiarise the language counsellors with a similar and successful Dutch language portal Meldpunt Taal (represented by Marc van Oostendorp, the portal can be found at <http://meldpunttaal.nl/>). The webinar consisted of an introduction of the Dutch language portal and its functionalities. The presentation was followed by a lively discussion, mainly about the many similarities between the two platforms. Understandably, the Dutch Language Counselling Service(s) attracted the most attention.

Consultation Process

The aim of the consultation process was to obtain information on how public participation in language research, performed with the help of ZRC SAZU Language Counselling Service, can be increased and how the Service can be improved to meet the needs of users and researchers alike. Through this, the main goal of the consultation process was to test the preliminary upgrade plan.

The consultation process consisted of an online stakeholder consultation organised on Zoom and a questionnaire for lay language users. The stakeholder consultation included three professional language users (a translator, a Slovenian language teacher and a proof-reader) and three researchers, namely established linguists from other research organisations active in language counselling activities. The lay users were invited to complete a questionnaire on the main issues discussed during the online consultation. The questionnaire was published on the platform and was active for one week. The 32 respondents with no linguistic background were predominantly professionals or officials with higher education (mostly BA or MA). The age distribution was quite even in the 36-65 age range. The respondents were not regular users of the Service; they usually use it from a few times a month to a few times a year (or even less often).

The topics discussed were broken down to anticipated upgrade elements of the individual research stages. In the upstream research stage, the possibility of sending language questions by email without registration was considered. Participants agreed that mandatory registration was likely to discourage some platform visitors from asking their questions, but felt that the number of such cases was likely to be small. Language users who seriously want to ask language questions will do so even though they have to register on the platform. Also, allowing unregistered questions would probably lead to an increase in unrelated, irrelevant and incomprehensible contributions.

In the midstream research stage, the possibility of adding an editable text box on the Service's homepage was discussed where news and announcements could be published and which could contain links to midstream research in the future. The participants were enthusiastic about the inclusion of midstream research activities on the platform. They would be willing to participate; incentives could be an additional bonus to attract more users. They felt that the platform had the potential to become a kind of linguistic research community with a limited number of enthusiastic lay linguists.

In the downstream research stage, participants welcomed the prospect of collecting feedback as they felt that this could really improve the quality of the service. They also felt that some ambiguity should be expected in the comments section of the feedback module, as some language users will not be able to explain their opinions coherently or at all. Collecting feedback could also provide information about the quality of the answers and their structure, the comprehensibility of the explanation and even an assessment of how democratic the answers should be.

RESULTS

The results of all the activities listed above were used to create the **final upgrade plan** that describes the public engagement activities and mechanisms that will be integrated into the online language counselling platform in Spring 2021.

Upstream

No changes. Mandatory registration remains.

Midstream

An additional editable section will be secured on the platform homepage where news and announcements will be posted by the platform's Moderator and which could in the future include links to midstream research (language use questionnaires, etc.).

Downstream

There will be two feedback collecting mechanisms – (1) for registered users who ask language questions and (2) for visitors in general. The modules will be separate, as most unregistered visitors “stumble” upon answers on the platform after searching for language advice or solutions to their language dilemmas online, few visit the platform with a specific question in mind.

The collected feedback will be stored in separate databases. Feedback will be collected for every published answer individually. The feedback collecting module for registered users (1) will only be visible to those who ask language questions; they will only provide feedback on answers to their own language questions. The feedback collecting module for platform visitors in general (2) will be visible to all platform guests; visitors in general will be able to provide feedback to any answer they read.

Feedback results and relevant findings will be communicated to language users in several ways: (1) in moderator's replies to topics where individual answers are published, (2) in a circular letter directed towards involved language counsellors, (3) in a notice on the homepage of the platform.

CONCLUSION

Public participation in all research stages of the Language Counselling Service will further democratise the answering process; answering strategies will be adapted to the needs of language users. The platform and the organisation behind it will become more responsive to society, namely by aligning the research process and its outcomes with society's values, needs and expectations as expressed through the public engagement mechanisms described above.

The planned upgrade aims to fully involve the public in the research process. Language users will not only provide research material (upstream), but they will also be able to provide feedback on the research conducted and actively participate in linguistic activities (downstream). In the future, midstream research initiatives could also be published on the platform.

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