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Kiss Attila Gyula

**Hungarian as a Second Language
in Oradea / Nagyvárad:
Cultural Reflexions and Language Ideologies**

Introduction

My study branches out into the area of language, teaching and learning in an intercultural context which is at the crossroads of sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and cultural studies. The research area deals with a broad range of phenomena related to language and culture focusing on values, goals and beliefs, which at times lie behind and are embedded in actual educational cultures and practices. I approach the issue from the vantage point of 'language ideologies' as formulated by American sociolinguists (e. g. Gal 1979; Kroskrity 2000; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Blommaert 2005).

Little attention has been given to the role of language ideologies in Hungarian language acquisition. In spite of its potential in improving the sometimes troubled interethnic relationships, no attention has so far been given to learners of Hungarian with a Romanian dominant background. Therefore I sense the need for better conceptualization of the problem of teaching and learning Hungarian in this specific context.

Present paper makes part of my PhD research project whose principal aim, through the case of Oradea / Nagyvárad, is to explore the possibilities of teaching a minority language and culture for majority inhabitants. My main goal is to conduct ethnographic research and analyze interview data on how different local inhabitants interpret the need and consequences of learning Hungarian and the linguistic situation they live in. I follow the discourse approach to map the content and structure of these discourses about language.

Even though minority linguistic rights are guaranteed by Romanian law (e.g. bilingual street names and inscriptions and the possibility of minority language use in public institutions), many of these practices have not been put into action in Nagyvárad / Oradea¹. The state language is in dom-

¹ Not even a very summary history of Nagyvárad / Oradea can fit into the restraints of this paper. The city for several centuries was one of the centers of

inant position in Romania, supported by government offices, education and police (Benő and Szilágyi 2005). Furthermore, Romanian national and local media has treated bilingualism – at least the pairing of Romanian with Hungarian – with great suspicion. Against this background the idea for local Romanians to learn Hungarian often seems rather unpopular and bizarre. Finally, there are also economic, political and historical positions of the region, which have complex linguistic consequences for learning Hungarian.

Research method and data

Learning of a minority language requires a close look at language ideologies and interaction in a socio-historically sensitive arena in which the language learner identity is socially negotiated (Gal 1979). My general framework is the study of Language Ideologies. For analysis, I will use a combination of qualitative methods. Silverstein (1979, 193) in an early formulation postulated language ideologies as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use”. A decade later Irvine (1989, 255) points out the social, political and cultural elements. In her opinion linguistic ideology is: “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests”.

Hungarian cultural life. One can recall the founder king Saint Ladislaus, the outstanding humanist Janus Pannonius (1432–1472), and much later the vibrant coffeehouse culture of the cosmopolitan city at the turn of the 20th century which was breeding place for modern Hungarian literature. A great many non-conformist poets, and intellectuals – like Ady Endre, Juhász Gyula and the poets of “Tomorrow” anthology started out from here. At the time Hungarian monopolized the linguistics landscape of the city with marked official and social pressures to “magyarize” the Romanian minority speakers (Nemes R. 2010). The Hungarian dominance lasted until 1920 – when Transylvania, together with Partium, was ceded to the Romanian state –, but cultural, social, and linguistic strategies to make Transylvania Romanian would continue for many decades to come (Livezeanu 1995). According to the 1910 census data the percentage of inhabitants claiming Hungarian nationality (ethnicity) was 91,1% (Szarka 2002, 198) – this number included the large local Jewry, the majority of which perished in the Holocaust. Based on the preliminary results of the 2011 census, out of the total 184.861 inhabitants, the percentage of those who claimed Hungarian mother tongue was 23,81% in Nagyvárad / Oradea.

There has hardly been any ethnography applied in this field and there are no similar studies on this subject about the region. But studies from Western Europe on the learning of minority languages like Welsh (Trosset 1993) and Catalan (Woolard 1989) show the validity and necessity of this research in this area. Only by introducing the ethnographic and discourse perspectives may we get closer to the heterodox data of what it means to be a Hungarian second language learner in Nagyvárad / Oradea. An ethnographic study of state language speakers learning Hungarian is carried out as it was first outlined in Susan Gal's ground breaking work (1979) and recently by Heller (2007; 2011) and Blommaert and Jie (2010). I will integrate the discussion of particular formulations with theories of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, cultural studies as well as second language acquisition studies.

Data was gathered during fieldwork in Oradea / Nagyvárad where I organized and taught several Hungarian as a second language courses for adult learners. The informants in this research were among the participants to my courses. In relation to fieldwork my goal is to find out how informants explain or understand issues connected to Romanian-Hungarian bilingualism.

In the following I will analyse some interview excerpts in which informants speak about language contact among Hungarians and Romanians, encounters with bilingualism, and their experiences. As sites of encounters are the ethnically mixed families, circle of friends or acquaintances, as well as the television as a means to learn the language. We will see bilingualisms for some informants it was a matter of the every-days while others were rudely reminded about the subordinate position of the language in the early 90's.

Romanian learners of Hungarian and language contact

In this section I will illustrate—through some interview excerpts – possible encounters of Romanians with the Hungarian language, in its double quality, the language of the local minority and that of the Republic of Hungary, just 20 kilometers away from the city.

KA: Unde v-ați întâlnit cu limba maghiară prima dată?

Loredana (W1975, teacher): Da, sînt din Oradea, m-am născut aici.

Prima dată, de fapt în copilărie, din copilărie. În cartier am avut prietene foarte bune care vorbeau limba maghiară. Și de la ele jucându-ne ne-am învățat una pe cealaltă. Ele m-au învățat limba

maghiară eu i-am învățat limba română. Încă de pe atunci am învățat accentul... dacă pun accentul pe *á*, cum se citește, dacă este cu accent, dacă nu este cu accent cum se citește sau unele cuvinte în limba maghiară *víz* sau *ablak* sau *ház* foarte... preponderent vocabular.²

KA: When did you meet with the Hungarian language for the first time?

Loredana (W1975): Well, I am from Oradea. I was born here. For the first time in my childhood. In the neighbourhood I had very good friends who were speakers of Hungarian. And from them, playing together with them. They taught me Hungarian and I taught them Romanian. I learned the accent at that time, how to put the accent on the *á*, how to read it with an accent and without in some words like *víz* or *ablak* or *ház* mainly vocabulary.

The informant's depiction about the lieu and form of linguistic contact between Romanian and Hungarian children may be typical and shared by many Varadians. These early encounters with Hungarian and the mundane acquisition of a second language correspond well to the writer's my own childhood memories.

A contemporary source describes the social circumstances of Romania in the early 1980's in the following terms: "After 1947, the new government followed the Soviet example of agricultural collectivization and forced industrialization accompanied by a remodelling of the state along totalitarian communist lines" (United States Department of State 1983, 1). The Romania of late 70's and early 80's could be characterized as the climax of the politics of *forced industrialization* and urbanization under the directives of the Communist Party and its leader Nicolae Ceaușescu. There were minimal differences in the lifestyles of most people. References to "cartier" evoke the social and linguistics realities of the childhood of an entire generation, who are in their thirties now. The informant recalls that by living in a neighbourhood made up of socialist style blocks of flats the children played together in front of their apartment buildings and they

² All interviews were carried out in Romanian, but due to space limitations in the following only the English transcripts will be given. Speech data was recorded digitally with the consent of informants in the course of multiple sessions conducted by me. The names of informants have been changed for the sake of protecting their identity. In brackets after the names I indicate the informants sex (Man / Woman) and year of birth together with the occupation (e.g. W1975, teacher).

encountered bilingualism in a natural way, learning from each other while playing there. Usually both parents were employed in the recently set up industrial manufacturing sector of the town and worked long hours, Saturdays included, but nor was it unusual that they had to contribute to the *building of Socialism* by working on Sundays, or in three shifts, too. In these circumstances the many children from the years of demographic peaks could be barely supervised by their parents, but mostly left to their own devices to socialize freely in ethnically and linguistically mixed groups acquiring both Romanian and Hungarian. The iconic image of these times is the youngster – carrying the keys to the family’s flat on a line around his/her neck –, who due to the lack of social institutions to organize their free-time hung out in front their block of flats, or the numerous construction sites that were mushrooming in and all around the city in a frenzy of building new housing for factory workers. Depending on their temperament and individual inclinations they roamed the concrete of their *cartier*, and sometimes fought turf battles with other groups of the neighbourhood, or kids from the other neighbourhoods. Some of them would have been called juvenile gangs if the societal framework of the Ceaușescu regime had allowed for the existence of such *decadent* categories.

However linguistic and ethnic affiliation function as very strong markers in the world of adults, and society at large, these ethnic and linguistic boundaries rarely influenced one’s group of friends between children, and adolescents in those times.

When the researcher enquires another informant, belonging to the older generation (b.1957), about her relationship to languages she gives a different account of her childhood memories spent in a nearby provincial town where the family was the source of bilingualism.

Ana (W1957, teacher): Strange, but also familiar because my grandmother spoke it. But the environment where I grew up as a child Hungarian was not spoken. And when my father and mother spoke it I looked at them in amazement because they could speak this language, and could speak it well. But I was not brought up in a Hungarian speaking environment. My sole contact [to the language] was my grandma.

The importance of environment is highlighted by this informant, too. The fact that Hungarian was spoken in the family seems to be much less of importance on the “environment” as a whole, than in the previous case. This example also draws attention to the very complex issues of identities in multi-ethnic regions and multilingual families. Even though many peo-

ple spoke Hungarian in the family they did not consider it important for the child to become proficient in Hungarian. In this case only the grandmother spoke Hungarian to her. It is the language of communication with the grandmother.

When the informants speak about their family ties we see that the situation is not less complex and this brings about complex linguistic situations, as is highlighted in the interview excerpt below:

KA: And in the family aren't there Hungarians? What about kinship, cousins?

Loredana (W1975): Yes, I have kins, cousins. My mother's sister is married to a Hungarian. My boyfriend is Hungarian, namely his father is Hungarian, and his mother is Romanian. He knows Hungarian. I talk to him, I *pilfer words* from him.

In ethnically mixed family contexts like the one above there could arise situations when members of the family in certain situations will use Hungarian even though the Romanian is the language of communication by default. The communication between the couple usually takes place in Romanian, but when the boyfriend talks to somebody in Hungarian she pick up words inferring meaning from the context. When discussing about the region other informants also point out the multi-ethnic nature of the area and ethnically mixed marriages. Some informants themselves live in such inter-ethnic marriages.

Ana (W1957, teacher): In the background there are a lot of [ethnic] mixing. Families and mixed friendships. It is a very well-welded-together-area. This situation has existed for a long time [it has] deep roots.

Corina (W1960, entrepreneur): So that of tolerance?

Ana: Namely there are inextricable ties. Families, generations of ethnically mixed families, so there is no question about it.

Ethnically mixed marriages and families that go back for generations are not only the reality but generally accepted as the norm by this informant. This is indicative of the use of the value laden adjective “inextricable” indicates this, which also suggest that there were times, when this *mixing* was frowned upon and not considered normal. As another informant recalls:

Corina (W1960, entrepreneur): Yes, yes, yes... , but I had to suffer as an adult. They wanted to throw me out of my job. My first job when I came to Oradea, for I am married to a Hungarian. *Vatra Românească* was very powerful at the time.

In order to fully understand the significance of this brief remark it is worth to say a few words about the background, and cast some light on the immense personal implications of the intolerant nationalist politics of the first half of the 90's. The Vatra Româneasca, the *Romanian Hearth* that the informant refers to is a cultural association that together with the *Party of the National Unity of Romanians* (PUNR), and the *Great Romania Party* (PRM) promoted ultra-nationalism and were as Andreescu puts it the “main extremist actors” of Romanian politics: “The ideological foundation of the Romanian Hearth was the anti-Hungarian sentiment. The founders have been involved, at the end of January 1990, in anti-Hungarian provocations, some hidden but some manifest (in the local press and especially in *Cuvântul liber*, the organ of the future Hearth, as well as on TV). The anti-Hungarian feeling was supported by the media in the country's capital, and it reached a peak around the middle of March 1990.” (Andreescu 2003, 29)

As the informant points out their activity permeated the everyday life, made itself felt not only on the level of national politics, but down to the individual. Even though, informants would characterize the inter-ethnic relations in Oradea as one of mutual appreciation, and acceptance there have been lurking forces which made it their political agenda to untie the above mentioned “inextricable links”. The National Unity of Romanians (PUNR), and the Great Romania Party (PRM) have not gained the support of the majority of citizens—as it happened in Cluj at the time—, but they were active in Oradea, too, and made felt their ideology based on the intolerant brand of nationalism.³

Former theories showed a neglect for the individual, but contemporary research points out how the individual is also biographically shaped (Blommaert 2005; Wetherell 2008; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008). Or we can refer to the small stories research and propositions about the intersectionality of identity as proposed by other researchers (Ochs and Capps 2001; Georgakopoulou 2007). When I asked about the places where

³ Andreescu also quotes a representative sample of the very vocal and aggressive discourse that presents the mind-set of these political forces: “As it is well-known, the nomad spirit and the barbarian style of the Hungarian people and its minority in Romania did not disappear in the last 1000 years. Maybe we, Romanians, will have to cure them of this embarrassment and turn them into a peaceful, civilized European people that will no longer covet foreign lands. God forbid they should once again extend their paws toward Romanian territories.” Gheorghie Funar, *Informația Zilei, Satu-Mare*, October 27, 1994.

one could encounter the Hungarian language informants point out the availability of Hungarian language television:

Loredana (W1975, teacher): For television I was watching Hungarian television all the time. There were cartoons and films dubbed into Hungarian, absolutely everything, and I learned many words. I understood, not all but roughly everything, spoken Hungarian, after which there was a void concerning Hungarian language use.

This interview points out that an important aspect for Hungarian Second Language Acquisition for the generations socialized before the 1989 Romanian Revolution, is the availability of Hungarian language television in this border region. Programs broadcast from Budapest, were followed by Hungarians and Romanians alike because practically it was the sole television channel available, not counting the daily few hours broadcast of propaganda on Romanian national television. It was not uncommon that people living beyond the Eastern Carpathians—mountain range that obstructed the Hungarian television signal to reach their homes in inner Transylvania—, came to spend their holidays at Felix Baths, or with relatives in Oradea in order to follow e.g. the football World Cup, or in general Hungarian television programs, which offered the only window to the outside world. Many Romanians in the border region picked up substantial passive knowledge of Hungarian, because Hungarian language television channel was running in their home. The practice of watching Hungarian television by Romanians ceased after 1989 when the Hungarian channels lost their monopoly due to the appearance of free Romanian media. It did not take long before numerous channels in Romanian language started vying for the viewers attention.

The younger post-revolution Romanian generation could already polish their English pronunciation on subtitled, but undubbed Hollywood cartoons and movies. Not many of Romania speakers would surf the Hungarian channels any more.

Motivation for studying Hungarian and the reactions of acquaintances

In the face of it, it may seem strange that the very decision of taking part at Hungarian language classes can bring about negative reactions on the part of fellow Romanians. The informants often indicate that some of their fellow Romanians look in askance at them for attending Hungarian lessons. Even if they were not directly asked by the interviewer why they took up Hungarian,

and about their motifs of starting the course they feel the need justify their position. They voice that their interest in culture and the language of the local minority and that of the neighbouring country is intended as a gesture of openness, and good will:

Sandu (M1957, civil servant): I started to learn Hungarian out of the respect that I feel towards Hungarians, my colleagues, the citizens of Oradea.

Loredana (1974): [I learn Hungarian in order] to be able to understand, to be able to say a few sentences in the language of the other one // and he/she could understand you. I think it has to do with respect that you want to show towards the other one. To show him/her that you know the language he/she uses.

These accounts indicate that there exist goodwill, openness, and interest on the part of those who take up studying Hungarian. On the other hand other informants encounter the suspicion and bafflement of some of their friends and acquaintances who do not see the point in why a Romanian should learn Hungarian. These reactions put our informants on guard and in a position of defence. When I asked them about the reaction of their immediate surrounding, some would relate the following:

Sandu (M1954, civil servant): Some of my acquaintances congratulated me and appreciated positively that I study Hungarian. Others were bewildered and asked me: “Why precisely Hungarian? Why not another language? Why not a world language?”

Maria (W1961, physician): They found it funny. First of all they found it cool, but how should I say? They were surprised. Something like that.

KA: They wondered why?

Maria: Yes first they asked me: “Why? Do you want to move to Hungary?” But, noooo I said “Why should I want to?”

KA: This was their reaction?

Maria: Yes this was the first reaction: what is the hidden reason... .

As we see from the above interview the informant also has to take a defensive position, because she encounters surprise as a reaction to her account of studying Hungarian. Her interlocutor could see no other reasonable explanation for such an endeavour than, that she might consider emigration to 6 kilometres to the west, where we find the neighbouring Hungarian Republic. In the background of this allegation there is “the one nation state, one language concept” which disregards completely the reality of multilingual regions within the borders of one country, together with the

existence of minority languages and their potential usefulness within a country other than the nation state itself.

However, the informant personally considers multilingualism a natural state, explaining it with the fact that she is from the multi-ethnic Banat region. She attended a German language high school in Timișoara / Temesvár / Temeschwar and there she learned that a “real citizen of the city should speak at least three of the languages” of this region. Because of her family background she could also understand Serbian. In school she had French and Russian, and after adding English to her linguistic repertoire she started to study Hungarian when she moved to Oradea. This is truly impressive linguistic trajectory of one person however, it is not all that unusual because people who have their roots in the Banat region of Romania have traditionally esteemed multilingualism as a positive phenomenon (Laihonen 2009). The informant words her credo in the following way:

Maria (W1961): To be able to speak a language, it opens up the path to another culture, another civilization. It is very important. For me by any means it is important to be able to understand some neighbors. Because I do not know if you realize that Romanians know very little about Hungary and Hungarians, not counting their daily experiences. But they do not know anything about civilisation, history. I do not know whether this is a mutual problem. Probably not because... so

KA: What is the reason for that?

Maria: There is prejudices here. They do not have the inclination. And for me it is most curious for one to learn German first, because Hungarian is the first language that you bump into in our region.

The informant expresses disapproval with fellow Romanians not being interested about things Hungarian, and blames their shortsightedness and the prejudiced approach towards the Hungarian language and culture. She explains their disinclination with existence of prejudice, and expresses that learning Hungarian could be also practical for Romanians because it is the first language that they could encounter in this region.

In other situations the study of Hungarian is looked upon as a matter of fact and normal state of affairs. The informant speaks about how much bilingualism is accepted and embraced by her circle of friends, because she mostly socializes with people who come from ethnically-mixed backgrounds where bilingualism is the norm. Therefore they take it for granted that one takes up a Hungarian course, especially if one works in a Hungarian environment.

KA: And your friends how did they appreciate the fact that you attend Hungarian language courses?

L (W1974): And my friends, most of them speak Hungarian. XY my best friend at her turn has a Hungarian father and a Romanian mother, or YZ, he too speaks Hungarian, his mother is Hungarian

Most of them speak Hungarian, it was not at all a big surprise for them. It was understood that now, of course why should you not know Hungarian. They saw it as a matter of fact.

Bilingualism, or a multilingual linguistic repertoire is presented as natural in the circle of friends of this informant. As opposed to the previous situations, likely because of the mixed ethnic background of this informant's circle of friends, bilingualism is the unmarked case, a feature of the everyday.

Conclusions

As we could see from above interviews the linguistic situations in the field defy easy categorization, therefore only sociolinguistic ethnography can deliver more accurate answers. According to the post-structuralist definitions of language societal practices themselves are sites of struggle. Heterogeneous linguistic societies all want power and truth to themselves. According to Bakhtin (Bakhtin et al. 1994) and Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991) language itself is not a neutral medium, but it reflects a great deal of the symbolic power differences. Speakers of minority languages frequently encounter this power position of the dominant language.

The educationalist theoreticians (Vygotski, Valsiner, and Veer 1994) Kramsch (2009), and Lantolf (2000) in their educationalist studies also point out that in the course of language learning it is not the cognitive linguistic competences that are the most important. They suggest that we should not focus on the individual language learner as a generator of linguistic form, but consider the individual as a member of the given community. This aspect has special import for those who want to teach Hungarian to the members of neighbouring nations.

Hungarian classes can not only serve as a framework for meeting with one another but also make necessary the reflection in relation to the Hungarian culture. They give not only an opportunity to present cultural representations, but also serve the development of a dialogical situation. Mapping societal, cultural, and scientific reflections is a must. Benedict Anderson's (2006) concept about nations crops up in the works of Wenger (1998) in

relation to the identity and the language learner. He points out that the language learner also sets up *imagined communities*. There are individuals who serve as gateways into the foreign/second language communities (Peirce 1995).

In order to facilitate communication in border regions like Oradea with a very distinct character, we should have a close look at the chances to learn each others' languages in diverse minority situations, identities, practices and hitherto unanalysed language ideologies that exist and operate in these regions. In the search for linking points with the neighbouring peoples it is of great importance how these investments into the language and the people could become productive and pay dividends. Teaching Hungarian as a Second Language in minority circumstances can furnish important answers to Hungarian Studies in general.

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