

Thesis of the doctoral dissertation

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The relationship between language choice, language attitudes and identity  
A sociolinguistic study in three Transylvanian speech communities

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## Objectives

In my dissertation I examine the relationship between language choice, the factors influencing language choice, language attitudes and identity. I also try to reveal how these conditions determine the language behavior within the context of minority-majority relations.

The study is based on field research carried out in three Hungarian speech communities in Transylvania, namely in Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfintu Gheorghe, Marosvásárhely/Tîrgu Mureş, and Zilah/Zalău. I chose these cities because, they represent the settlement types displaying all characteristic of the minority condition. In Sepsiszentgyörgy, Hungarians constitute an 80% majority, in Marosvásárhely the number of Hungarian and Romanian population is almost the same, while in Zilah the Hungarians represent a 20% minority. In my dissertation, beyond the exploration of language choice strategies and social manifestations of language attitudes, I try to reveal the deeper strata of these phenomena.

I determined the research goals on the idea that there are many quantitative studies available, which draw a general picture about the language choice, the language attitudes and the identity of Hungarian minorities, including the Transylvanian Hungarians, but there is a lack of such studies, that give insight in the details of these issues. My study and the studies already published has many concordances, and I can state that there is a mutual support between them. Beyond the general picture, I wanted to reveal those peculiarities of linguistic behavior very familiar to me as a member of Transylvanian speech community, peculiarities that until today have remained unresearched.

I undertook the study of three strongly interrelated fields of linguistic behavior. The first topic is language choice. Herewith, I discuss how the language choice works in the different domains of social life. I want to find out which language is chosen by the speakers in different domains. This has been the topic of several studies involving the whole Transylvanian speech community, and the general traits of language choice have been pointed out (Gereben 1999, Culic -Horváth - Ralp 2000, Benő - Szilágyi).<sup>1</sup> The authors chose to study the different domains of language use depending on their research interests and goals.

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<sup>1</sup> GEREBEN FERENC 1999. Identitás, kultúra, kisebbség. Osiris, Bp.

CULIC, IRINA - HORVÁTH ISTVÁN - RALP CRISTINA 2000. Etnobarometru: Relații Interetnice în România. CCRIT, Cluj-Napoca.

BENŐ ATTILA – SZILÁGYI N. SÁNDOR 2005. Hungarian in Romania. In Fenyvesi Anna ed. Hungarian Language Contact outside Hungary.. John Benjamins Publishing Company. Amsterdam-Philadelphia, 2005: 134-162.

I decided to investigate smaller segments of the Transylvanian speech community. In the first part I considered that it is important to complement the existing picture that deals with language choice. Furthermore, I am intent on revealing new details pertaining to this issue, so I have decided to examine the domains of language use with special attention to speech partner.

I investigate the factors of language choice, as well. I have tried to identify the factors influencing language choice and the extent to which they are dominant in different domains. This is the second part of my study.

The third part is dedicated to the analysis of attitudes. In this part I wanted to find out the extent of positive and negative attitudes speakers have towards their mother tongue, as well as towards the official language. The studies mentioned above have indicated that the whole Transylvanian community has a strong positive attitude towards their mother tongue, which is a powerful cultural symbol, and, simultaneously, the main element of ethnic identity. There is a positive attitude towards the Romanian language as well, which is justified by its official status. I consider important the discussion of language attitudes in order to distinguish between the affective value and the economic value of the languages. The authors of the above-mentioned studies state that there might be a difference between these two linguistic dimensions, however, it was not the subject of their study. I included in my research the Transylvanian vernacular of Hungarian language, and I aimed at a more detailed investigation of it, as well. I focused on the standard local vernacular, and its spoken variant. I tried to find out the attitude of the speech community towards their local vernacular, and its place in comparison with standard Hungarian spoken in Hungary.

Beside field research, I also performed an analysis of the sociolinguistic situation of the broader Transylvanian speech community and the three speech communities chosen for investigation. I outlined the socio-historical context of the language, its presence in the social scene, as well as its legal and political background. All this data contributes to better understanding of the results of quantitative research.

There is a significant amount of international and Hungarian literature related to this topic. In reviewing this literature, I have tried to keep a balance in the presentation of Hungarian and international scientific works. I conducted the discussion in a chronological order, but this aspect could not be followed strictly, as the studies of different researchers, which were published at different times are closely interlinked.

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## The method

The study of language choice, the factors influencing language choice, and the language attitudes is possible only if there is an adequate amount of quantitative data, which must be analyzed in depth, and if the context of the revealed phenomena is explained. This topic needs to be backed up with field research. I opted for the use of questionnaires for data collection, because in this way the general aspect of language use can be compared with the results of already existing quantitative studies, and hereby the details of language use can be more clearly explained. I chose the quota sampling method. The sample reflects in equal proportions the composition by age, sex, and education of the studied speech communities. The field research has been carried out between August 2003 and October 2004. The data has been provided by 240 informants, which means 80 informants per each settlement. During the fieldwork I was present when the informants filled the questionnaires, the remaining part was collected indirectly.

One of the criteria of selecting the informants was their homogenous Hungarian family background. This selection criteria is important because in the case of Hungarians who live in mixed marriages the use of Romanian in family domain is more intensive. The data of the above-presented sample reveals how often is Romanian spoken by those Hungarians who live mainly in mother tongue environment, and what is the function of the Romanian language in the communication process.

As I mentioned above, the sampling took place in three Romanian settlements, typical within the minority context: Sepsiszentgyörgy, Marosvásárhely and Zilah. In these cities the proportion of Romanian and Hungarian population are close to 80/20, 50/50, 20/80 %.

Because of the quota method, the sample is not representative, but in view of the results, it genuinely presents the peculiarities of language use within the studied speech communities. Moreover, I think we can accept the statement that the results are illustrative for the whole Transylvanian speech community.

The hypothesis is based on my previous knowledge and observations about the Transylvanian speech community, as well as on the academic literature related to the topic. The members of the Hungarian community have a positive attitude towards their own mother tongue, and tend to use it extensively. The affective value of the mother tongue is higher than its instrumental value. The Transylvanian vernacular of Hungarian is also popular, and bears a

general respect. This is supported by a widely known stereotype that true Hungarian is spoken in Transylvania. The attitudes towards the official language are more objective. In this case is valid the opposite of the above-mentioned case. The instrumental value of Romanian is much higher than its affective value.

## **Results**

The results of the research have confirmed the hypothesis. Moreover, the study has revealed several peculiarities and problematic issues of language use.

### *The sociolinguistic situation*

After 1920, the Hungarians from Transylvania have lived on the territory of the Romanian national state, a situation that evolved into linguistic isolation, which, in turn, marked the beginning of the separate development of the local vernacular. The minority policy of the Romanian state has been determined for a very long time by the idea of the creation of a homogenous nation state. After the change of the regime, the minority policy has become more tolerant. We must take into consideration that the assimilation-oriented attitude, which lasted almost a century, can not be changed in spectacular way within a period of a few years. In fact, a positive change took place: there is a much larger package of linguistic rights, and a higher number of domains for the use of the Hungarian mother tongue. By all means, this is a fact not to be ignored. Furthermore, it is important to use all the existing range of rights. A positive change has taken place in the political approach of linguistic rights, but there are numerous challenging issues that have yet to be addressed. The contemporary historical processes and the technical development enable a stronger contact with the motherland and the mother tongue, which favors a higher degree of linguistic homogeneity.

### *Language choice*

The mother tongue is the dominant language for all three linguistic communities on which I have conducted research. The use of Hungarian is almost exclusive inside the family domain. This has an outstanding importance since this is background for language inheritance. The presence of the state language is a marginal phenomenon. The use of Romanian within the family has a special function: it enables the learning of the language, while ensuring the “censorship” of the family communication.

The use of the mother tongue in all the domains of social life is an evident, spontaneous act within the ingroup. Mainly the language of state is used in majority–minority communication, irrespective of the domain of use. Both languages are prevalent only within a mixed company, mainly in Sepsiszentgyörgy and Marosvásárhely especially when more than one Romanian and Hungarian speaker are present. Another peculiarity is that in the semi-formal domains the use of both languages is particular to Marosvásárhely. The use of mother tongue without any restriction is possible only in the family, so the presence of Hungarian language is most common in family domain. In the workplace and at school, which meant to be two formal domains, the linguistic behavior of the speakers is similar to the friendship and neighborhood domains. Because of the restricted possibilities there is less mother tongue usage in semi formal domains. In the formal domains like police and public administration the main language is Romanian.

In the studied three settlements the prevalence of mother tongue is in correlation with the ethnic composition of the population. In Sepsiszentgyörgy, where the Hungarians are the majority the use of the mother tongue is the most frequent, in Marosvásárhely, where the ethnic composition of population is almost balanced less frequent, and in Zilah, with a Romanian majority is the most limited.

#### *Factors influencing language choice*

The results of my research have revealed that it is important to stress the relevance of the macro and the micro levels of language choice. On the macro level, language choice is influenced by three factors: the dominant mother tongue, the preference of the mother tongue, and the restricted possibilities for the use of the mother tongue. On the micro level the study has stressed a wide range of factors. This is explained by the wide variety of speech situations. The choice of the mother tongue is influenced by the communication needs, the mutual intelligibility. The use of the mother tongue is possible to the extent that it ensures mutual intelligibility. When this criteria is guaranteed by the official language alone, the code of communication will be the official language. All the other factors influencing language choice can work only within the framework of these basic conditions.

Inside the studied speech communities, the unmarked language choice is general, whereas the marked choice is a rare phenomenon. This is because the language choice of the minority community is determined by the possibilities for language use.

#### *Language attitudes*

The language attitudes of Hungarian speech communities in Sepsiszentgyörgy, Marosvásárhely and Zilah indicate a positive self-image. The speakers' attitude towards their own mother tongue is markedly positive. The affective and instrumental value of the language is high, but it must be mentioned that the strong affective value rise significantly the instrumental value of the mother tongue. The evaluation of the Transylvanian vernacular of Hungarian is more favorable than the vernacular spoken in Hungary. There is a similar situation in the case of identity. The sense of belonging to the both Hungarian speech communities, the one of the mother country and the one of Transylvania is strong, but the identification with the Transylvanian speech community is even stronger. The evaluation of the official language is also positive. In this case, out of a need for communication and cooperation, the instrumental value is high, while the affective value is only moderate. This attitude is a reflection of a tolerant minority behavior. The attitude towards the mother tongue and official language are connected to the ethnic composition of the settlements. Along with the shrinking number of the Hungarian community, starting with Sepsiszentgyörgy, through Marosvásárhely to Zilah, the strength of positive attitudes decreases. This not increasingly high, but it is noticeable. The attitude towards the official language is in stark opposition to this. The strength of the positive attitudes decreases along with the size of Romanian community.

In the three settlements, the majority of Hungarians manifest a cooperative behavior towards the Romanian majority. Mutual stereotypes and prejudices exist, but the members of two distinct communities, living in the same reality, can deal with them in a pragmatic manner.

The three investigated dimensions of the mother tongue are strongly interlinked. The data of the language-choice study indicate the preference for the mother tongue. This is supported by results of the study which investigates the factors determining language choice. The positive ethnic and linguistic identity also fits into this positive image.

The results of my research are in concordance with the data of previous studies of the Hungarian community in Transylvania. At the same time, it provides new information about the language attitudes, the strategies of language choice, and the factors influencing language choice within communities targeted by the study. The Hungarian speech communities from Sepsiszentgyörgy, Marosvásárhely and Zilah are parts of the broader Hungarian speech community from Transylvania, thus, the results of my research are relevant for the linguistic behavior of the larger speech community.

### *Methodological considerations*

In the course of field work and data processing I managed to acquire a number of practical experiences which I can use in my future research projects.

The study produced a corpus of quantitative data which enabled the exploration of the current situation of Hungarian spoken as a minority language in Romania. At the same time, the study gives an insight in the details of language behavior. The results of my research can become the starting point of future studies on this topic.

### **Future research orientations**

As I have mentioned above, my study reveals linguistic phenomena that require further study. The factors of language choice in mass-media consumption is justified. In the chapter on methodological considerations, I have mentioned that, unlike in the case of other topics, when it comes to media consumption only a limited amount of data has been collected. An important number of informants did not answer the questions.

The study of language choice strategies at the workplace would be important, however, indepth investigation would be beset with serious difficulties, such as the identification of workplaces. It would need to get a separate entry here for the purpose of study. It would be important to study workplaces for various professions where Romanians and Hungarians are present on every step of the organizational hierarchy.

The identification of the real instrumental value of the Hungarian as a minority language would also be of utmost importance. In my dissertation I have stressed that the high affective value of the mother tongue positively influence its instrumental value. There is a gap, however, between the answers of informants and that of common practice. It would be important to answer question as to what an extent is the affective value of the mother tongue is influenced by its instrumental value, and what would be the real instrumental value.

Another topic for further study consist in the confirmaton and clarification of the tendency outlined by statistical analysis of the factors influencing language choice. My original goal was to identify the factors which influence the choice of one or another language, but, while processing the data, I noticed a tendency, hence, carrying out a statistical analysis myself. The results demonstrated my assumptions, but this data serves as example only.

In the case of the above-mentioned topics it is important to choose the appropriate research methods and data collecting techniques. The first three topics are suited for the qualitative method, whereas the last topic requires a quantitative approach.