

JOHANNES SYLVESTER’S GRAMMATICAL LEGACY (1539) AND ITS EUROPEAN BACKGROUND

JÓZSEF HEGEDŰS

Corvinus University
Közraktár u. 4–6.
H–1093 Budapest
Hungary

Abstract: In 1539, a peculiar Latin–Hungarian (more precisely: Hungarian–Latin) grammar was published by Johannes Sylvester, dedicating the grammar (probably symbolically) to his son. Unfortunately enough, his grammar got lost in the war-stricken times of the first half of the 16th century. At the end of the 18th century, however, it was found again and then republished. Being lost, the grammar in question could not influence the grammarians of Sylvester’s age.

The “discovery” of the mother tongues in Europe, the birth of a new spirituality (Reformation) and the compelling drive to translate the Bible into vernaculars were the unmistakable signs of the first linguistic revolution.

The grammar actually is a contrastive analysis of Latin, Greek and a lesser degree German, Hebrew and Hungarian. What is more interesting, it deals with structure and not with single word comparisons. Sylvester was the first in Europe to articulate the basic difference between the chief European languages (Latin, [Ancient] Greek, German and the non-European Hebrew) and Hungarian revealing that Hungarian is of postpositional character; so he was the first in Europe to discover agglutination as the basic feature of Hungarian (though he was not familiar with this term). Among other things, he casually mentions the relationship of Hebrew (the “lingua sancta”) to Hungarian, as was the linguistic trend of his age.

Keywords: first linguistic revolution, structure comparison, agglutination, absence of gender, definite article

1. Very little is known about Sylvester’s life though much has been written about his linguistic activities, especially his *Grammatica Hungarolatina* (1539). He was probably born in 1504 (?) and in all prob-

ability he died in 1553. His circumstances of life, his grievances and struggles, his wanderings, sufferings, disappointments and literary career have been carefully and competently detailed by Balázs (1958). Not long ago, Éder discussed the aftermath of Sylvester's Grammar in detail (Éder 1989, 385–96).

Occasionally there emerge disputes whether Sylvester's Grammar was the first of its kind or there were other Hungarian grammars prior to his. Allegedly a certain Adrianus Wolphardus, a Transylvanian nobleman wrote a Hungarian grammar in Latin in 1512 (Kovács 1971, 488). There are some scholars who suppose Janus Pannonius, a Hungarian, to have composed a short Hungarian grammar in Latin around the closing quarter of the 15th century. The chances to find a forerunner preceding Sylvester are, however, very slim.

As far as his little known life is concerned, he was born in a small village in the upper part of Transylvania. The local landlord noticed some talent in him, lent him a helping hand, sent him to school. In 1524 he was already a promising student at the then renowned Cracow University. But in 1529 he pursued his studies at Wittenberg University, in the city of Luther and Melancton, both humanists and reformers.

He was the first foreign scholar to be appointed as professor of Hebrew at Vienna University in 1543. On the other hand, in 1546 he became the professor of Greek at the same university.

Unfortunately, Sylvester's grammar was not well known in Europe or in Hungary in the 16th and 17th centuries. Very probably almost all printed copies of the Grammar got lost in those war-stricken times of Central Europe. As is well known to historians, the Turks dealt a disastrous blow at the small Hungarian army and subsequently occupied large parts of central Hungary between 1526 and 1686. After the Ottoman occupation and later under Habsburg rule serious economical and political unrest prevailed in the country. Needless to say, Sylvester's life was deeply affected by the trauma of the national disaster.

It was only at the end of the 18th century that a physician and polyhistor, István Weszprémi, discovered Sylvester's Grammar and published it in 1795. Weszprémi's main concern, however, was to point out that even Sylvester, as early as the 16th century, clearly proved the great similarity of Hebrew with the Hungarian language (Weszprémi 1795, 86).

It is worth mentioning that Sylvester's grammar was republished by the poet and literary critic as well as leader of the Hungarian language renewal, Ferenc Kazinczy (1808). A reprint edition—based on the 1539

edition—was published by Budapest University (ELTE) in 1977. (This reprint edition was used for the present paper.) In 1989 the grammar was translated into Hungarian by Zsuzsa C. Vladár (cf. Vladár 1989).

Sylvester's activities (his translation of the New Testament in 1541, but especially his *Grammatica Hungarolatina* [1539]), happened to coincide with the period that could be considered the **first revolution of linguistics** (cf. Hegedűs 2003, 18). Various circumstances took part in this revolution. The circumstances, however, were focussed on a decisive drive: the Man of the Middle Ages came to be re-evaluated as Man and the new Man intended to be the central and a creative figure in his own history and so his crisis of identity was over. Humanism and Renaissance are the reflections of the rebirth of Man. There are many telling signs of this rebirth. One of them is the reformation of faith. One of the important demands of the reformation was to translate the Scriptures into the vernaculars. As Gáspár Károli put it: the books of the Old and New Testament should be accessible for everybody in order to evaluate and discuss them because God wishes to save every man (from the Foreword to his Bible translation, 1590).

Another focal point of historical events were the great geographical discoveries in the wake of which lots of data suggested that there existed much more than 72 or 70 languages as was formerly believed.

In connection with all these newly discovered languages the surprising thing was that among the European and non-European language descriptions (grammars) there was not a considerable time-shift. Spanish and Portuguese discoverers are especially worth mentioning—chiefly the missionaries following them to the distant South America, West Indies, and Central America trying to compile grammatical descriptions of the highly unusual languages they encountered. It is remarkable that as early as the 16th and 17th centuries Quechua, Aymara, Tupi etc. descriptions, grammars are published by Spanish and—in a lesser degree—Portuguese missionaries. Also, Asian countries—e.g., Annamese (Vietnamese)-speaking regions, too—are involved in “language discoveries” (cf. Rowe 1974; Hegedűs 1962).

Apart from certain early Provençal grammatical descriptive attempts, Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* and the like, real European vernacular grammar-writing is linked with the name of Antonio Nebrija who in his *Grammatica de la lengua Castellana* (Salamanca, 1492) put into words the Spanish world-conquering glory in a hidden, semi-transparent form.

In his wording, “language has always been a companion of the empire”¹ (González-Llubera 1926, 3). This is indeed a thought-provoking view on the role of language repeated later by Spanish and German grammarians in the 16th and 17th centuries. In Nebrija’s footsteps there appeared vernacular grammars in Europe and as a result, Sylvester’s grammar as well (1539).

That vernacular grammar-writing—i.e., the discovery of the mother tongue—was not an ephemeral, or accidental phenomenon but a clear sign of the above-mentioned linguistic revolution was felt and valued during the 16th and 17th centuries. Thus, for instance, Mosellanus remarks already in 1519 that the languages were neglected in the Middle Ages, but in our era—he writes—after the long night, the sun rises again. Otherwise, God understands the languages of every people “The more advance we make—he says—while studying languages, the closer we get to God’s likeness” (Mosellanus 1519, 3, 17, 19).² In 1524, Luther in a letter written to the town councillors of every city, urged to help learn (foreign) languages emphasizing that by the help of languages general knowledge grows richer (Moldehn 1907, 15, 20, 22). It is not accidental that in 1537 a sort of “collected studies” was published entitled *Novus Orbis Regionum* in the foreword of which Grynaeus enthusiastically describes the geographical discoveries and the brave Man who searches for new heavens, new seas, other people, other customs. Of course—he says—there are disinterested people who ignore the wonderful things and think it unreasonable to leave the home country, the family, for all these things (Grynaeus 1537, Praefatio). Olaus Magnus speaking about northern (in fact, Asian) people enthusiastically accentuates “the wonderful diversity of languages” (Magnus 1555, 136). Although Chytræus does not look at the things of science with fresh insight, he nevertheless argues that “therefore it is necessary to study languages: they are the doors and keys of all sciences” (Chytræus 1564, 1–4).³ And indeed, during the 16th century, in a degree hitherto not experienced, the study of foreign languages was flourishing, as Bibliander remarks. Though there are people—he goes on to say—who do not bother about foreign languages because they give up acquiring any knowledge as it requires great efforts, or they

¹ “Siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio.”

² “Quanto plus in linguarum studijs quis profecerit, tanto propius dei imaginem refert.”

³ “Ideo Linguarum studia, quae uelut fores sunt & clauēs omnium doctrinarum, necessaria sunt.”

consider it a useless thing. Of course, in these hectic times “the voice of Muses is almost oppressed by the enraged instruments of Mars” (Biblander 1548, Praefatio).⁴ According to Albinus, in the years past, there were two wonders: discovery of unknown islands and the study of foreign languages (Albinus 1580/1714). Later all this is crowned by Keckermann’s declaration: it is miraculous that the new world is discovered just when in Europe (foreign) languages began to flourish and the heavenly (i.e., religious) doctrines are being cleaned (Keckermann 1613, Vol. II, 749).

From the end of the 16th century on, certain kinds of mixed geographical descriptions were published like that of the Italian geographer, Magino, in which we find rudimentary descriptions of (or simply sometimes very brief references to) several widely different languages of South and Central America, e.g., “Peruvian” [Quechua] and those of Africa (Magino 1597, 133, 203, 207, 210; cf. Hegedűs 2003, 27–30). We could go on enumerating a series of scholarly minds who clearly noticed that the idea of the Babel Confusion of Languages was in a state of slowly breaking up and something very new came into being in the realm of languages, hence the novelty attached to the “newborn” languages and linguistics. This novelty, that is, a linguistic revolution was clearly felt by contemporaries. Even the famous thesis pronounced probably for the first time by the English Camden[us] (1551–1623) that language exhibits the most reliable signs of the origin of people (Schottel[ius] 1663, 127).⁵

The vulgar (vernacular) language descriptions—chiefly grammars—embody certain languages and consequently they usually stand opposite to another language: they somehow or other (usually unfavourably) value another language and soon a sort of “war of languages” takes place. That this is one of the curious features of this era was—among other things—registered by Bovillus in the first half of the century: “no doubt, in this way everywhere a rivalry sets off between nations with regard to the priority of their language” (Bovillus 1533, 45).⁶ What is more, some sort of aesthetical classifications were brought to surface by the rivalry among the chief European languages, e.g., “the Italians bleat, the Spanish moan, the Germans bawl, the Galls sing”, as the famous saying (“un proverb fort célèbre”) states (Estienne 1579, 179).

⁴ “Martis furiofa instrumenta propemodum uocem musaru(m) opprimunt.”

⁵ “In lingua certissimum originis gentium argumentum.”

⁶ “Orietr, nulli dubium est, hunc in modum varios vbique inter populos de suae linguae primatu contentio.”

In his home country Sylvester, too, joined the so-called “war of languages”, which he named γλοσσομαχία ‘language war’, and argued that Hungarian surpassed all the other languages, including the “lingua sancta” (Hebrew) if we considered its richness of conjugations and declensions (Sylvester 1539, 93). Subsequent to this declaration we find a curious protest that is not easy to explain. In Balázs’ interpretation, it sounds like this: “I am annoyed with those considering this language [i.e., Hungarian] as unworthy of human communication. They not only hold it in contempt, but are not even loath to besmirch it with the poison of their tongues. Doing this, they offend not only against us, but even against God, the creator of languages” (Balázs 1958, 283; Sylvester 1539, 93). Further on Sylvester calls our attention to the fact that we are hiding an enormous treasure—our native language—which, however, we are ashamed of, albeit other people please themselves even with their humble property (Balázs 1958, 284; see Révész 1859, 22–3 and Sylvester 1539, 93–4). Anyway, it seems half obvious that Sylvester’s unique grammar in the Europe of the period was born on the waves of the Reformation. There was some risk in Sylvester’s grammar and it was its language, its totally alien character. Since joining the Christian faith (from the 10th century on), we abhorred to “exhibit in public” our “barbaric” language that profoundly differed from those of our neighbours. So we kept trying to avoid our former “pagan” roots implied several times in a hidden context through centuries. Perhaps this is one of the explanations of the regrettable fact that only scanty linguistic records in Hungarian remained because Latin deeply concealed our native language for long centuries.

2. As a result of the concealed ideology of the Renaissance, Man was searching for his historical identity, hence his interest not only in his mother tongue, but also in the first, the original language. During the 16th and 17th centuries there emerged—as primordial languages—Scythian, and Celtic (or Scytho-Celtic, Celto-Scythic) together with other supposedly original languages (born in Babel) as Teutonic (together with Holland or Cimbic), Danish, Swedish, etc. Besides these languages there was an all-important language that overshadowed all the other languages—it was Hebrew, the “lingua primigenia”, the “Lingua Sancta”—God’s language of the Scriptures. The myth of the sanctity of Hebrew together with Greek and Latin—as the Trinity of Languages—was created by the Fathers of Church, first of all by Augustinus, then by Isidorus Hispalensis in 600 A. D. Let us quote his words: “In fact, there are three

sacred languages: Hebrew, Greek and Latin, they excel all over the world to the highest degree. As we know, the cause of death of our Lord was written by Pilate on the Cross. Therefore, owing to the ambiguity of the Sacred Scriptures the knowledge of these languages is indispensable in order to be able to turn to the other if some doubt in connection with a word or interpretation of one text in one language occurs" (Migne 1845, 82, 326).⁷ Roger Bacon (1214–1294) emphasizes the importance of Hebrew for a theologian: "The theologian has to return to God's wisdom in Hebrew so that he could drink the waters of wisdom from the source" (Kukenheim 1951, 94–5).⁸ William Tyndale in *The Obedience of a Cristen man* (1526) declares: "For the Greke tonge agreeth moare with the english then with the latyne. And the properties of the Hebrue tonge agreeth a thousande times moare with the english then the latyne" (Jones 1966, 55). Tyndale already got wind of the general direction of views in language science: comparison of languages is the soul of the first linguistic revolution. And as is known, the Hebrew language played a highly important role through centuries as a central factor of comparisons. It was a privilege for a language researcher to find some Hebrew roots in his native tongue. So it was with Sylvester: while dealing with the Hungarian transitive verbs, he wrote with enthusiasm that in this respect Hungarian was to a great extent similar to the sacred language (Sylvester 1539, 60).⁹ It should not be forgotten that Sylvester's remark concerning this similarity must not be overvalued, this "revelation" is not his chief contribution to Hungarian and general linguistics.

Sylvester had excellent teachers at Cracow University and especially at Wittenberg University. He must have studied Reuchlin's voluminous Hebrew grammar (1506). Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) was the first to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew into German in 1494. In his words, Hebrew is God's word: "When I read Hebrew, I believe I hear God himself speaking" (Borst 1957–1963, 1049).¹⁰ In another work,

⁷ "Tres autem sunt linguae sacrae: Hebraea, Graeca, Latina quae toto orbe maxime excellent. His namque tribus linguis super crucem Domini a Pilato fuit causa ejus scripta. Unde et propter obscuritatem sanctarum Scripturarum harum trium linguarum cognitio necessaria est, ut ad alteram recurratur, si quam dubitationem nominis, vel interpretationis sermo unius linguae attulerit."

⁸ "Oportet theologum recurrere ad Sapientiam Dei in Habraeo, ut sciat ex fonte haurire aquas sapientiae."

⁹ "Quae res manifestissime ostendit magnam nostrae linguae cum sacra illa, nimirum Hebraea ejse affinitatem. . ."

¹⁰ "Wenn ich Hebräisch lese, glaube ich Gott selbst sprechen zu hören."

Reuchlin claimed the Scriptures to have been written in Hebrew by God himself (Reuchlin 1514, eiii). There was a famous scholar at Wittenberg University who made a deep impression on Sylvester. He was Philipp Melancton, one of the then well-known “*virī trium linguarum*” (i.e., scholars knowing Hebrew, Greek and Latin). He enthusiastically stimulated his students (among them Sylvester) to seriously study Hebrew in his *Oratio de studiis linguae ebraicae* [1546] (cf. Brettschneider 1843, 708–12). Sylvester’s real teacher in Hebrew, however, was M. Aurogallus, who published a Hebrew grammatical compendium in Wittenberg in 1523 (cf. Balázs 1958, 105).

As was mentioned earlier, Sylvester complained of the Hungarian language being slandered and besmirched. In Wittenberg he lived in a multinational society of students representing wealthier countries. Most of the scholarly public opinion regarded Hungary as an underdeveloped country where there were no merchants, no craftsmen, only masters of some trade coming from foreign countries (Philelphus 1502, 228). It is very characteristic of the unfortunate, not self-afflicted backwardness caused by the disastrous defeat by the Turks in 1526 and the subsequent state of constant warring that some years after this national disaster there appeared a book in Vienna, the capital of a neighbouring country, on how to make business, how to write business letters, how to order goods in written form, how to take legal steps etc. (cf. Fruck 1528). Without going into details, however, there were sympathetic signs of goodwill towards the Hungarian trauma and mourning (see e.g., Justa 1598).

At the same time, however, there were (sometimes heated) debates about the origins of Hungarians. Most of the foreign scholars were for the Hungarians being descendants of the Huns (e.g., Riccio 1543, 70).¹¹ Some of them were for the Scythian origin, though Huns and Scythians at the time were not strictly separated from each other (cf. Haugen 1536; Stumpf 1548, 4). There was another scholar who claimed the Huns to have spoken German language and although the Hungarians were of Hunnish origin, they did not speak German; they used an unspecified foreign language (Irenicus 1518, XVIII, LXXV). The unsettled question is mirrored in Münsters’s *Cosmographia* (1544). Münster elucidates the question by saying that there is a serious debate and discord among scholars concerning the history of the Hungarians because some claim

¹¹ “... quando gli Hunni gente di Scitia, i quali alcuni chiamano Vngari... Trenta duoi anni dopo la uenuta loro inVngaria per consenso tutti gl’ Vngari crearono per loro Re Attila, il quale é da gl’ Vngari chiamato Etele.”

that the Hungarians and the Huns are two separate nations with separate languages. Others, however, take a stand for them to be one and the same nation (Münster 1544, dXXVI).¹² Around this time a new turn begins: a kind of **paracomparative** guesswork—spanning centuries—about the Hungarian language. The focal point is Bibliander's standpoint in which—summing up briefly—he claims the Persians to be of Scythian origin, but because they are Partians, they show in their language similarity with Hebrew. And as the Hungarians are of Scythian origin, their language is Partian and through this connection they might have a certain Hebrew affinity in their language (Bibliander 1548, 10).

It is perhaps not quite useless to call the reader's attention to a curious fact: from this century on, Hungarian comparative linguistics was deeply determined by linguists of foreign countries comparing Hungarian—through the centuries—with more than two hundred widely different languages (from Hebrew to Sumerian—but including Finno-Ugric, too). Also, it was this period when genetic comparative linguistics—however rudimentary—was born, so for instance Gelenius made a comparison of four languages: Latin, Greek, Germanic and Slavonic [Czech] (Gelenius 1537).

3. No doubt, Sylvester must be regarded as **the first European grammarian** applying the method of **structure comparison** in linguistics (for the notion of 'structure comparison' see Décsy 1969, 51). Although Sylvester chose to compile a well-balanced handbook for young Hungarians studying Latin, his work finally turned out to be a half-Hungarian–half-Latin grammar (cf. Stipa 1990, 104). Szathmári's investigations (1962, 53–61) have revealed that Sylvester's grammar contains considerably more data, comparisons and observations on the peculiarities of the Hungarian language than those of Latin. According to Lakó's well-weighed standpoint, scholars of small countries and nations are in a less favourable situation concerning the international publicity of their works than those of the "big" countries; achievements of scholars from small nations are not easily taken into consideration (Lakó 1983). This statement is especially valid in Sylvester's case: he is still not acknowledged properly in European general and contrastive linguistics.

¹² "Hie ist ein Große zwittracht vnd mißhall in den Historien. Dan es wollen etlich/das die Vngern vnd Hunen seyend zwei volker/vnnd haben auch zwo sprachen gehabt/Die andern aber sagen es sey alles ein volck gewesen."

In Benfey's view (1869, 236), Job (Hiob) Ludolf (1624–1704) was the first—Semitic—linguist who based language comparison on using grammatical structure as major evidence of linguistic affinity; he did it in his comparative work proving the genetic relationship of the Aethiopian, Syrian, Hebrew and Arabic languages. Ludolf published his work in 1661; it was broadly revised in 1702. This happened more than 150 years after the publication of Sylvester's Grammar (1539). It is worth remembering that in the 16th–17th centuries almost exclusively single words or word-forms—often of very controversial quality—were used to prove the affinity (kinship) of a given language with another. The comparison of grammatical structure was quite unusual at the time. The structure comparison in Sylvester's grammar might have been, no doubt, less acceptable or attractive for scholars dealing with word comparisons. That must be another cause (besides the small number of accessible copies) why Sylvester's Grammar did not get into the circulation of language studies of the 16th and 17th centuries.

It is interesting that Benfey (1869, 221) did mention this grammar in a few words: “Eine ungarische Grammatik von Joh. Erdősi 1539” (by “Erdősi”, Sylvester is meant). Interestingly enough, Rowe (1974)—more than a hundred years later—did not seem to know anything about this grammar although it was already easily accessible.

Though Sylvester had some precursors and paragons like Reuchlin, Erasmus, Aurogallus, Melanchton, Donatus, etc., his originality seems to be unquestionable. He was the first in Europe to notice the following points:

3.1. The prepositions in Latin correspond to **postpositions** in Hungarian (Sylvester 1539, 46–7). This may be trivial today but it was a major recognition in the first half of 16th century. Thus Sylvester discovered the postpositional feature of Hungarian in contrast to Latin representing the European languages in general. Postpositional simply means as much as **agglutinative** (cf. Hegedűs 1994, 47). However strange it may seem to be, there appears another reference—more than a hundred years later—to the postpositional structure of a language. It was Georg Horn who, when writing about the fantastic origins of the American population, commented on the “Brazilian” language as using postpositions like the Finnish language and therefore—Horn argues—the two languages have a common feature, so they must somehow be related (Horn 1652, 166). But what “Brazilians” he speaks about is difficult to tell. Perhaps the Tupis?

Anyway, Horn brought together—completely at random—two distant peoples seemingly having much the same linguistic structure. Later, in a manuscript (*De Lingua indole Finnica Observationes*) written by the Hamburg polyhistor, Martinus Fogelius, in 1668, which, however, was lost but then refound in the late 19th century, postpositions were listed as a common feature of Hungarian and Finnish (cf. Stipa 1990, 77–88).

Needless to say, Sylvester—like all the scholars of his age—did not know anything about agglutination. As is widely known, Wilhelm von Humboldt was the first linguist to coin and introduce the term *agglutination* (see, e.g., Hutterer 1986, 14). The term is still used by language typologists, albeit since Humboldt's time it underwent several internal reformulations, especially by Sapir (1949 (1921), 120–46) though he—like a prophet—called our attention to the great variety of linguistic types: “[...] it is naturally impossible to give an adequate idea of linguistic structure in its varying forms. Only a few schematic indications are possible” (*op.cit.*, 146).

3.2. Also, Sylvester was the first to **consciously** use **contrastive analysis**. In the foreword of his Grammar addressed to his son, he lays stress on the importance of **comparing** one's own language (*naturalis sermo* ‘native language’) with foreign languages (Sylvester 1539, 3; cf. Balázs 1958, 18). He reveals a very peculiar feature not found in Latin: whereas Latin uses plural nouns after numerals following one as in *unus homo*, but *duo, tres, decem, centum, mille homines*, in Hungarian, after numerals only the singular is used: *egy ember* ‘one man’ and similarly *két ember* ‘two men’, *három ember* ‘three men’, *tíz ember* ‘ten men’, *száz ember* ‘a hundred men’, *ezer ember* ‘a thousand men’ (Sylvester 1539, 37).

Proving and defending the existence of the Hungarian definite article (*az* ‘the’) was seemingly so fascinating for him that he voiced his objection to his much-admired praeceptor, Melanchton, who had propounded in his Greek grammar that only the Greek and German languages had definite articles. Sylvester emphasized triumphantly that Hungarian, too, had a definite article (Sylvester 1539, 40–1; cf. Balázs 1958, 360–1; Szathmári 1962, 58). Sylvester makes it evident that in Latin there is no such article (*op.cit.*, 49), while the Greek definite article is used in much the same way as in Hungarian (*ibid.*, 42, 70). In the case of possessive pronouns, the definite article can be used in Hungarian **before** these pronouns as in Greek, unlike in Latin where you can say *filius tui est* whereas in Hungarian you say *az te fiadé* [lit. ‘the your son's’, i.e., ‘(it is) your son's’] (*ibid.*,

70). Also, in the realm of possessive pronouns, we use them affixed to the word meant as in *pater noster* — *mi atyánk* [lit. ‘we father-our’, i.e., ‘our father’] (*ibid.*, 71). This construction, too, may belong to the question of **postpositions** (agglutination). Hungarian differs from Latin also with regard to the genitive attributive construction (*ratio syntaxeos*), such as *filius hominis*. This particular construction requires the dative in Hungarian: *az embernek fia* ‘the man’s son, the son of a man’ (*ibid.*, 45).

According to Sylvester, it is utterly wrong to say *filek tighedet* ‘I am afraid you-acc’ or *filek teneked* ‘I am afraid you-dat’—the correct phrases should be: *filek tetuled* ‘I am afraid of you’ and *filtelek tighedet* ‘I am anxious for you’ (*op.cit.*, 46).

It is essentially a correct statement made by Sylvester while pointing out that when Latin participle constructions are translated into Hungarian, the participle is not in concord with Hungarian as in *videntes magi stellam* ‘magi seeing the star’. This should be translated as *látván az csil-lagot az bölcsek* ‘seeing the star, the magi’ (cf. Balázs 1987, 366). As to the rest of the Latin–Hungarian contrastive analyses, Sylvester declares confidently that though Hungarian has some common features with Latin, it displays only “a hundredth” part of differences in relation to this highly respected common language of European scholarship (Sylvester 1539, 47).

3.3. As was mentioned earlier, Sylvester accepted—as the age dictated—the affinity between Hebrew and Hungarian. Among other things, he found that the Hebrew comparative degree of adjectives ending in *-m* is close (but not akin!) to the Hungarian comparative degree ending in *-b* (Sylvester 1539, 18). There is a special conjugation system in Hungarian with forms such as *megöleté*—Latin *fecit occidere* ‘he had him killed, he let him be killed’. Referring to this example, he mentions the German language, too (*ibid.*, 77). Interestingly enough, there are several places where Sylvester compares Hungarian with Hebrew, Greek and Latin examples, so he actually cannot be seen as too obsessed with the Hebrew–Hungarian affinity. We have to repeat our former statement that the spirit of the age itself compelled Sylvester, so to speak, to accept this linguistic “chance”; this was the way to close up to European linguistics. This is, of course, not to say that he “faked” a grammatical “play”. Far from it.

3.4. Every language has a special cut, a particular way of expressing things, Sylvester says. If you are not “diligent” enough to bear in mind this linguistic specialty, a kind of monster will be born when translating

some text from one language to another (Sylvester 1539, 37). It would probably be an exaggeration to say that Sylvester was near to discovering the “world view” in languages which generated heated debates around the middle of the 20th century, but it is safe to say that the (objective and subjective) reality and its linguistic expression in various languages may be very different. So, for example, he points out that Italy has a warm climate, therefore the Italians named the months after *rains*, while in the cold Scythia the months' names were named after the *snow*. Accordingly, you will find the word *imber* ‘rain’ in the names of the Italian months (e.g., September, November, December), whereas in Hungarian (of Scythian origin) *ho* ‘snow’ is found as in *elfo ho* ‘first snow’, *masod ho* ‘second snow’, etc. (*op.cit.*, 22–3).

Sylvester did notice the absence of gender in Hungarian. He recognizes that Hungarian uses special words only for two genders: *him* (masculine), *eme* (feminine) and, of course, he knows that they are not affixed to the words as in Latin or Hebrew.

Certain traces of general linguistics can also be found in his grammar, however rudimentary they are. But in his age we do not find probably anywhere even rudimentary signs of general linguistics. For instance, he mentions that in all languages *z* and *t* easily undergo a change (Sylvester 1539, 65).

3.5. Balázs raised an interesting but unanswerable question: in the house of Melancton—the “Preceptor Germaniae”—there were sometimes informal meetings among Hungarian, Finnic, Estonian, Livish students, that is, students whose language was of Finno-Ugric origin. These curious and casual encounters may have been fruitful in some indefinable way (Balázs 1961, 252–3).

3.6. Sylvester proudly remarks that Hungarian can fully be adjusted to grammatical standards (having, apparently, in mind a common European language system). Also, he stresses that in the field of declensions and conjugations (with regard to formal richness) Hungarian surpasses the other languages including Hebrew, Greek and Latin (Sylvester 1539, 93; cf. Balázs 1958, 288; Stipa 1990, 104).

4. Finally, the question arises: how come that Sylvester became the first European grammarian to base language comparison solely on grammatical structure? The answer is relatively easy: he knew Hungarian

perfectly simply because it was his mother tongue. As a gifted and qualified scholar of his time he was given the possibility of acquiring Latin, Greek, Hebrew and German. In all probability he must have known Hebrew quite well, that is why he became professor of Hebrew at the University of Vienna. All in all, he had to deal with languages that happened to belong to three different genetic units (“linguistic phyla”). Therefore it was relatively easy for him to recognize the main differences between Hungarian (a Finno-Ugric language), Hebrew (a Semitic language) and Latin, Greek, German—the main representatives in Europe of the Indo-European group. He made this discovery instinctively, that is, without knowing anything about these linguistic phyla or language typology. But at the time nobody knew more than he did. He simply focussed on language structure and did not deal with attractive and fancy word-form similarities that became the main concern of the 16th and 17th century linguists in their comparative investigations centred mainly on Hebrew as the “lingua primigenia”, the prestigious “original” language.

His consistent (though not at all extreme) structure comparison of Hungarian with Hebrew apparently served one purpose: he wished to emphasize that Hungarian did not belong to the Indo-European linguistic model. Sylvester defined his mother tongue as a **language type** differing in its **basic structure** from the common European linguistic standard (Latin, Greek, German) and having some not significant common features with Hebrew, an Oriental language. This seemed almost logical as Hungarians were said to have come from the Orient. Needless to say, he did not conclude that Hungarian would be genetically related to Hebrew. As a matter of fact, he was a circumspect typologist ahead of his time by about more than two hundred years. He must have recognized that Hungarian was, with regard to its structure—with its “alien” totality—, a lonely island in the ocean of European languages and very probably he wanted to have this “lonely island” recognized and respected simply because “omnis lingua Dominum laudet” (every language praises the Lord) as was repeatedly asserted in this and also in a later era.

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