

# DEZSŐ KOSZTOLÁNYI AND INTERTEXTUALITY

## ANTICIPATIONS OF POST-MODERN LITERARY CRITICISM

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In 1918 French linguist Antoine Meillet published an ambitious work entitled *Les langues dans l'Europe nouvelle*. Purporting to offer an assessment of the linguistic situation in Europe “telle qu'elle est, et non comme les vanités et les prétensions nationales ... souhaitent qu'elle soit”.<sup>1</sup> the Frenchman descanted on the inadequacies of many European languages. Expressing his belief that in Europe “la civilisation matérielle, la science, l'art même s'y unifient”,<sup>2</sup> Meillet lamented that the gradual incorporation of many languages into academic and intellectual discourse hampered this process. He complained that in the 20th century “la connaissance de l'allemand, de l'anglais, de l'espagnol, du français, de l'italien ne suffit plus à qui veut se tenir au courant de la civilisation moderne.”<sup>3</sup>

There was an unintended irony to Meillet's rueful remark. At the time that he was writing his book the Hungarian poet and novelist Dezső Kosztolányi was formulating ideas about language very different from those of Meillet. In articles published in Hungarian periodicals Kosztolányi expressed views that threw into question some of Meillet's basic tenets. Indeed, in 1930 Kosztolányi penned a response to Meillet's work in which he challenged the Frenchman's conclusions. Meillet, however, ignorant and even disdainful of Hungarian, could hardly “se tenir au courant.”

Kosztolányi's conception of language constituted a radical departure from the views of his European contemporaries. Though his ideas seem to reflect the influence of German thinker Wilhelm von Humboldt, they also bear startling similarity to the concepts later expressed by Bakhtin, Barthes, and others. Indeed, in both his articles and his fiction the Hungarian poet anticipated some of the most influential theories of the 20th century.

In order to understand Kosztolányi's conception of language we ought to begin by contrasting his ideas with those of Meillet. Meillet adopted a conventional approach to language. Echoing Locke's faith in the primacy of thought, he contended that “[la langue] fournit à la pensée une forme”.<sup>4</sup> Many of the languages of Europe Meillet thought insufficient for this task. Breton, for example, he dismissed as “un outil si grossier, si peu utile qu'aucun Breton sensé ne peut songer

à l'employer de préférence."<sup>5</sup> He had similar contempt for Hungarian. Indeed, the Frenchman believed that the entire Finno-Ugric language family "n'a fourni de véritables langues de civilisation."<sup>6</sup>

Kosztolányi thought this ranking of languages absurd. He viewed language as an organic structure and rejected the notion that one language could be considered superior or inferior to another. A people's language, he believed, is an embodiment of its past.<sup>7</sup> According to Kosztolányi, language is "a mighty self-contained organism, a product of nature."<sup>8</sup> "From this lofty standpoint", Kosztolányi argued in his response to Meillet, "all languages are equal. [...] There is not, there has never been, there cannot be a barbaric language."<sup>9</sup> "We cannot pass judgement", he believed, "on nature's primeval manifestation."<sup>10</sup>

This view of language was not new in Europe. Already in the 19th century Wilhelm von Humboldt had expressed similar ideas. Like Kosztolányi, Humboldt also described language as an organism. He contended that "[Eine Sprache] ist ein organisches Wesen", and the linguist "muss sie, als solches, behandeln."<sup>11</sup> Humboldt believed, "Die Sprache [...] ist das Organ des inneren Seyns, dies Seyn selbst, wie es nach und nach zur inneren Erkenntniss und zur Aeusserung [sic!] gelangt."<sup>12</sup> "Die Sprache", Humboldt contended, "ist gleichsam die äusserliche Erscheinung des Geistes der Völker: ihre Sprache is ihr Geist und ihr Geist ist ihre Sprache, man kann sich beide nie identisch genug denken."<sup>13</sup> In contrast to Meillet, Humboldt valued the diversity of languages:

Die Sprachverschiedenheit tritt [...] in doppelter Gestalt auf, einmal als naturhistorische Erscheinung, als unvermeidliche Folge der Verschiedenheit, und Absonderung der Völkerstämme, als Hinderniss der unmittelbaren Verbindung des Menschengeschlechts; dann als intellectuell-teleologische Erscheinung, als Bildungsmittel der Nationen, als Vehikel einer reicheren Mannigfaltigkeit, und grösseren Eigenthümlichkeit intellectueller Erzeugnisse, als Schöpferin einer, auf gegenseitiges Gefühl der Individualität gegründeten, und dadurch innigeren Verbindung des gebildeten Theils des Menschengeschlechtes.<sup>14</sup>

There are other affinities between the ideas of the German educator and the Hungarian poet. Both Kosztolányi and Humboldt doubted the primacy of thought over language. Indeed, they questioned this division. Humboldt wrote "Wenn wir Intellectualität und Sprache trennen, so existirt [sic?] eine solche Scheidung in der Wahrheit nicht."<sup>15</sup> "Das Denken", Humboldt suggested, "ist aber nicht bloss abhängig von der Sprache überhaupt, sondern, bis auf einen gewissen Grad, auch von jeder einzelnen bestimmten [sic?]."<sup>16</sup>

Kosztolányi shared this belief. He echoed Humboldt when he wrote, "we think in words, and not only does thought influence language, language influences thought."<sup>17</sup> Kosztolányi waged an almost quixotic struggle against the incorpora-

tion of words and structures from foreign languages into Hungarian. In 1926 he wrote an article in which he offered literally dozens of alternatives to the word “fantasztikus” (“fantastic”).<sup>18</sup> He was motivated not only by his conviction that the incorporation of loan words into Hungarian would cause people to forget words of Finno-Ugric origin. He also believed that this would impair an individual’s ability to think. The child who grows up learning foreign languages, he cautioned, would fail to develop an understanding of the subtleties of one language. Kosztolányi believed that “both his sense for language and his ability to think will wither.”<sup>19</sup> “Not only do we think”, Kosztolányi wrote, “language also thinks. [...] people cannot take liberties with language, because if they hit it, it will hit back, it will intercept and make off with their thoughts – whereas, if they handle it gently, not only will it carry into effect their thoughts, it might even lend them one or two new ones.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet Kosztolányi’s ideas went beyond those of Humboldt in their implications. Humboldt questioned the potential of translation:

Man hat zwar die Wörter der verschiedenen Sprachen mit allgemein gültigen Zeichen vertauschen wollen, wie dieselben die Mathematik in den Linien, Zahlen, und der Buchstabenrechnung besitzt. Allein es lässt sich damit nur ein kleiner Theil der Masse des Denkbaren erschöpfen, da diese Zeichen, ihrer Natur nach, nur auf solche Begriffe passen, welche durch blosse Construction erzeugt werden können.<sup>21</sup>

Kosztolányi – though in practice a translator – in theory rejected translation. Challenging the notion that the relationship between signifier and signified was arbitrary, Kosztolányi suggested that the signifier signified nothing more than itself. Just as Derrida would later play with the French pronunciation of Hegel’s name (“l’aigle”<sup>22</sup>), Kosztolányi pointed out that the Hungarian word “désir” would translate into Hungarian as “vágy”, yet the word itself echoed the Hungarian word “vezér” (“leader”).<sup>23</sup> The translator, he wrote, must waver between such possibilities.

For Kosztolányi a symbol was valid only if in it the signified becomes the signifier. “*Tej*” (milk), he wrote, “for me is simply *tej*, because it has a past of thirty-six years – the number of years I have lived. But *Milch* for me is only twenty-six, *lait*, *latte*, and *milk* barely twenty. Sometimes I don’t even believe that they really mean *tej*.”<sup>24</sup> This blurring of signified and signifier underlies Kosztolányi’s conviction that “It is not possible to translate.”<sup>25</sup>

Kosztolányi anticipated not only the ideas of Derrida, but also those of Bakhtin and Barthes. He suggested that language itself is fundamentally intertextual. “The value of a word”, he wrote, “depends first and foremost on its context.”<sup>26</sup> Words, he claimed, do not exist independently of one another. In one of his articles on the hazards of learning foreign languages at a young age, Kosztolányi listed various

words for “weak.” Each of these was appropriate in a particular context. The feeble arm, he wrote, was “gyenge” (“weak”), but a soft breeze was “lenge” (“light”).<sup>27</sup> In each case the meaning of the word was dictated by the other words in the sentence. It was not contained within the word itself, but rather in the contexts within which it had been used.

The similarity between this view and the essential tenet of Bakhtin’s work is striking. “Each word”, Bakhtin wrote, “tastes of the context and contexts within which it has lived[.]”<sup>28</sup> The implications of this idea were more fully developed by Barthes:

a text is [...] a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. [...] [The writer’s] only power is to mix writings [...] Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary[.]<sup>29</sup>

None of these ideas was alien to Kosztolányi. “There is much that we don’t remember”, he wrote. “But language – hidden from us – remembers everything.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, decades before Barthes put pen to paper Kosztolányi had expressed the notion of writing as an intransitive verb. “I do not use language”, he wrote, “rather it uses me.”<sup>31</sup>

How are these ideas about language present in Kosztolányi’s fiction? An examination of a few passages from his novel *Skylark*, published in 1924, is revealing. Focusing on Kosztolányi’s use of loan words as dialectical markers that reveal the presence of several languages styles of discourse within one text, I will suggest how the novel itself may be perceived as an allegory for Kosztolányi’s conception of language.

The characters of the novel attempt to appropriate words and phrases of a language foreign to them and, as Bakhtin writes, “to populate [the words] with [their] own intentions[.]”<sup>32</sup> (From now on I use the word language in the sense articulated by Bakhtin.) Their failure illustrates the contrast between their haughty pretensions and their humdrum lives. The following passage describes a loutish braggart who is hoping to prove his bravery to the townspeople by engaging in a duel:

Feri Füzes was to meet the opponent’s seconds in the club dining room so that statements could be drawn up and the thorny affair, which had been dragging on for weeks, could finally be settled, for better or worse, according to the proper protocol. Provocation, duel, court of honor, sabres, plastrons, five paces forward, to the finish – these were the words that buzzed through Feri Füzes’ head[.]<sup>33</sup>

This passage is taken from Richard Aczél's English translation of the novel. Aczél has succeeded in rendering the distinctive feature of the original. The words buzzing through Feri Füzes' head are clearly the hackneyed rhetoric of chivalry. For example, the word 'buzzed' reveals the implied author's skeptical stance toward Feri's appropriation of these words.

There is one feature of the original Hungarian text, however, that deserves attention. In the Hungarian the words "provokálás" ("provocation"), "bandázs" ("plastron"), and "öt lépés avansz" ("five paces forward") stand in stark contrast to the words "megverekedés" ("duel"), "becsületbírótság" ("court of honor"), and "végkimerülés" ("to the finish").<sup>34</sup> The words in the first group are of Latin origin. The words in the second group are Finno-Ugric. This use of awkward loan words for which there are common Finno-Ugric equivalents in Hungarian reveals that Feri Füzes is attempting to adopt a language other than his own. A Hungarian would usually say "előre" for "forward." The word "avansz" is the Hungarian spelling of the French fencing term, "avance." This appropriation of another's speech depicts Feri Füzes as a fop who strives to ape fashionable affectations.

Kosztolányi makes more blatant use of loan words when satirizing the political pretensions of the townspeople:

At the opposite end of the table the men talked politics. They spoke of state delegations, constitutional crises and of Prime Minister Kálmán Széll.

"Ah yes", Környey sighed. "A visionary statesman[.]"

Priboczay, who was an old forty-eighter, became visibly heated.

"No doubt because he went to Vienna for the unveiling of the Albrecht statue. He, prime minister of Hungary. For shame!"

"Tactics", Környey replied."

"Tactics", Priboczay nodded bitterly. "And when they ordered our boys out to the Hentzi statue in Pest? That was tactics too, I suppose? Bánffy would never have done such a thing. Never. Your man's a commoner today."

"Raison d'état", Feri Füzes commented.<sup>35</sup>

Aczél again preserved vital features of the original. Introduced here as the utterances of the characters, the words "delegations", "constitutional crises", "visionary" and "raison d'état" represent a parodic stylization of political discourse.

It is nevertheless worthwhile, however, to consider some of the features of the original. In the original, the English "talk politics" is "politizálni."<sup>36</sup> This is a verb created from the noun "politika" ("politics"). The noun is, obviously, a loan word. Just as "talk politics" is mocking, "politizálni" is always ironic. In the Hungarian text, however, this loan word accents more clearly the transition into a new language. It is then followed by a series of equally awkward loan words that a speaker

of English will recognize: *delegáció*, *taktika*, *koncepciójú*. This last word is particularly absurd. It is the adjective form of the noun “*koncepció*” (“concept”). The phrase “*nagy koncepciójú államférfi*” translates literally into English as “big concepted statesman”, meaning “statesman of great concepts.” Though the word “*koncepciójú*” exists in Hungarian, it sounds as absurd as the word “concepted” would in English. The absurdity of these terms betrays the vacuity of the discussion.

It is significant that the characters in this dialogue interpret the word “tactics” differently. The first sees tactics as a virtue, the second as a failing. Each fails to populate the word with his intentions. Bakhtin writes:

not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them[.]<sup>37</sup>

It was Kosztolányi himself who warned that language, if mishandled, would “intercept and make off with”<sup>38</sup> the speaker’s thoughts.

In these examples the transitions from the words of the narrator to the speech, or thoughts, of the characters are clearly marked. There are more subtle changes, however, in which a character’s attempt to appropriate another language is contained in narrated monologue. The following passage describes Feri Füzes’ outrage at being made the butt of a joke:

For a moment Feri Füzes was at a complete loss. Then he asked himself how such behavior could possibly offend a proper gentleman, and looked for someone else to provoke.<sup>39</sup>

The first instance of parodic language (“how such behavior could possibly offend a proper gentleman”) is introduced explicitly as the character’s thoughts. It is worth mentioning that in the original Kosztolányi used the word “gentleman”, though no such word exists in Hungarian. This ostentatious use of an à-la-mode term (many Hungarians considered loan words a sign of cultivation at the time Kosztolányi wrote) is typical of Feri Füzes’ airs. The concluding clause of the passage is, in Hungarian at least, equally mocking. The telling clue is the word “*provokáljon*” (“provoke”). This loan word reveals that this not simple narration but rather the thoughts of Feri Füzes.

The irony of the mixture of languages in the novel is not simple however. The failure of a character to appropriate another’s speech does not always evoke scorn, but sometimes pity and sympathy. There are two stalwart peasants who struggle to adopt the townspeople’s language in the novel. They too attempt – and usually fail – to appropriate the speech of others. In this instance the failure is pathetic rather than comic.

The following passage illustrates the inability of the peasants to grasp the language of the townspeople. The protagonist of the novel, Ákos, reads newspaper headlines to his wife, referred to here as “Mother”:

“Strike”, said Ákos. “An English word. Pronounced *strahyke*. The workers don’t want to work.”

“Why not?”

“Because they don’t want to.”

“Why don’t they make them?”

Ákos shrugged.

“Goodness, Mother”, he said in a low voice, adjusting his spectacles on the bridge of his nose, “five thousand workers are on strike in Brazil. ‘The employers have adamantly refused to meet their demands.’”

“Poor things”, said Mother, not really knowing whom she pitied, the workers or the employers.<sup>40</sup>

The newspaper constitutes a foreign language that the couple is not able to understand.

When the peasants venture into town they encounter similar riddles. The protagonist is puzzled by the words on the menu at a fancy restaurant:

Vanilla noodles. What exactly can they be? I’ve never tried them, never even seen them. I’ve no idea how they might taste. [...] I’ve only ever glimpsed the name, in passing, between the curd dumplings, fruit sorbets and hazelnut gateaux. As if I’d dreamed it somewhere. Still can’t get it out of my head. [...] Noix de veau. Another puzzle. [...] Crayfish bisque, caviar à la russe. Absurd macabre names.<sup>41</sup>

In this passage the character himself mixes three distinct languages. As he struggles to sort out the words on the menu (the first language), he makes simple statements such as “I’ve never tried them” (the second language). He then lapses into fancy rhetoric (“As if I’d dreamed it somewhere”) inspired by what is for him something fantastic, but what is for the reader something mundane. This constitutes the third language.

The closing phrase of this passage reveals that the character himself is aware of the dissonance between these languages. As he grows more perplexed by the strange languages of the townspeople, however, he becomes less aware of how he mixes these languages. In the following passage he asks himself if it is really a sin to indulge in the pleasure of fine cuisine:

Is it a sin? They say the devil torments the fasting hermit. If it is a sin, it’s all the sweeter for being so. What do I care? One can’t deny these things exist. Goulash soup exists, out there in the world, on the table.

[...] And on the menu too, between the saddles of mutton and herdsmen's cutlets. Beside the tenderloins of pork and the rump steaks. And then all the other things on the menu – they exist too. The sides of pork, the Transylvanian mixed grills, the lamb chops. Not to mention all the dishes with English, French and Italian names: beefsteaks, tournedos, fritto misto, breathing their foreign aromas. Then the cheeses, light and creamy, thick and heavy, the Camemberts, the Bries, the Port-Saluts; and the wines, red Bull's Blood from Eger, sweet muscatels, light Chardonnays, and Fair Maid from Badacsony, in tall and slender bottles. Fair Maid. Beloved Fair Maid. Ah, my sweet, Fair Maid...<sup>42</sup>

The mixture of languages in this passage gives rise to a multiplicity of meanings. On the one hand the juxtaposition of quasi-biblical rhetoric with entries from a restaurant menu is comic. On the other hand the character's adoption of a lyric tone as he recites the items is pathetic. So enthralled is he by the delicacies (pleasures which for him have been forbidden by his austere daughter) that he manages to fill these banal terms with all his longing and frustration. The character has successfully appropriated another's speech and transformed it into a language of his own. In a clever blurring of signifier and signified Kosztolányi has strung together mundane terms to create a poem expressing the transports of a man tasting life's forbidden fruits as if for the first time.

The novel *Skylark* is a subtle tragedy in which the author manipulates clashing languages in order to depict the hopelessness of the characters' strivings to escape their monotonous lives. The story can be interpreted as an allegory illustrating Kosztolányi's belief that the meaning of a word is dictated by the context in which it has been used. The characters' inability to escape their dreary surroundings is analogous to the impossibility of uprooting a word from the contexts within which it has acquired meaning.

To this day Kosztolányi's ideas about language remain – to my knowledge – unmentioned by scholars outside of Hungary. Much has changed since the publication of Meillet's book. Yet it is still the case that, along with Russian, west European languages are studied in depth, while other languages of Europe (not to mention the rest of the world) are given cursory attention. Even the iron curtain did not prevent the ideas of Bakhtin from spreading to the West. The Hungarian language has proven to be a more formidable barrier.

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## Notes

1. Antoine Meillet, *Les langues dans l'Europe nouvelle*, (Payot: Paris: 1928.) Avant-propos de la 1er Édition (1918).
2. *Ibid.*, 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 1.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. *Ibid.*, 178–179.
6. *Ibid.*, 50.
7. The German word "Volk" is perhaps a better rendering of the Hungarian "nép".
8. Dezső Kosztolányi, *Nyelv és lélek* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1990), 8. ("A nyelv egymagában álló hatalmas szervezet, egy természetproduktum.")
9. Dezső Kosztolányi, "A magyar nyelv helye a földgolyón." In: *Nyugat* (Reprint, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó), July 16, 1930. 81–92. ("Ebből a magas szempontból minden nyelv egyenlő... Nincs, nem volt, nem lehet 'barbár' nyelv.")
10. *Nyelv és lélek*, 252. ("A természet ősi megnyilatkozásában nem bírálhatjuk.")
11. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung." In: *Wilhelm von Humboldts Werke* (Beriling: B. Behr's Verlag, 1907). Vierter Band, 10.
12. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts." In: *Ibid.*, Siebenter Band, 14.
13. *Ibid.*, Siebenter Band, 42.
14. *Ibid.*, Vierter Band, 8.
15. *Ibid.*, Siebenter Band, 42.
16. *Ibid.*, Vierter Band, 21
17. *Nyelv és lélek*, 49–50. ("Szavakban gondolkozunk, s nemcsak a gondolkozás hat vissza a nyelvre, hanem a nyelv is visszahat a gondolkozásra.")
18. *Ibid.*, 63–65.
19. *Ibid.*, 49. ("Mind a nyelvérzéke, mind a gondolkozása elsorvad.")
20. *Ibid.*, 120–121. ("Nemcsak mi gondolkozunk: a nyelv is gondolkozik. [...] a nyelvvel nem

- lehet komázni, mert az, ha ütök, vissza is üt, elsikkasztja gondolatukat, holott, ha csínján bánnak vele, nemcsak érvényre juttatná gondolatukat, hanem esetleg kölcsön is adna nekik egyet-kettőt.”)
21. *Wilhelm von Humboldts Werke*, Vierter Band, 21.
  22. See Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, “Kosztolányi nyelvszemlélete.” In: *Alföld* (August, 1994), 47–59.
  23. *Nyelv és lélek*, 575.
  24. *Ibid.*, 44. (“A *tej* számomra csakugyan *tej*, mert harmichat éves múltja van, ahány éve élek, de a *Milch* bennem csak huszonhat éves, a *lait*, a *latte*, és a *milk* pedig alig húsz. Néha nem is hiszem el, hogy valóban *tej*-et jelentenek.”)
  25. *Ibid.*, 120. (“Nem lehet fordítani.”)
  26. *Ibid.*, 15. (“A szó értéke mindenekelőtt a helyzetétől függ[.]”)
  27. *Ibid.*, 49. (“Az erőtlén karó gyenge, a tavaszi levél azonban már zsenge, a könnyű ruhácska vagy a szellő lenge, a tengő fa csenevész, a düledező, régi ház rozoga, az üveg pohár törékeny, a beteges gyermek vézna vagy satnya vagy mazna, a tévedő ember gyarló, az erélytelen táplálék silány vagy hitvány vagy gyatra stb.”)
  28. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 293.
  29. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.
  30. *Nyelv és lélek*, 53. (“Sok mindenre nem emlékszünk. De a nyelv, rejtetten, mindenre emlékszük.”)
  31. *Ibid.*, 318. (“[...] én nem használom: hanem engem használ.”)
  32. Bakhtin, 293.
  33. Dezső Kosztolányi, *Pacsirta* (“Skylark”). Translated by Richard Aczél. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), 39.
  34. Dezső Kosztolányi, *Pacsirta* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1961), 38.
  35. *Skylark*, 68.
  36. *Pacsirta*, 60.
  37. Bakhtin, 294.
  38. See note 20.
  39. *Pacsirta*, 69.
  40. *Ibid.*, 57.
  41. *Ibid.*, 61–62.
  42. *Ibid.*, 63.