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***Personal Names and Ethnicity. Geolinguistic Research of
Historic Personal Names in Hungary***

0. Introduction¹

The etymological research of Hungarian surnames of the Middle Ages shows the distribution of the lingual origin which may contribute to the historical-demographical reconstruction of ethnic patterns. Later on (from the 16-17th centuries) this relationship is not always clear. Hungarian researchers mostly rely on regular censuses taken in the 19-20th centuries for studying language-borders; however, censuses from the beginning of 18th century can be used to demonstrate earlier ethnic patterns. They have attempted to prove the applicability of the method of name-analysis with the help of resources including both the names and the admission of self-identity or first language of individuals. The results of their investigation revealed that name analysis can be used in order to identify ethnicity, when conducted on the basis of sufficient data.

We have created a database of historic personal names found in Carpathian Basin and the Atlas of Historical Surnames of Hungary (AHSH) which rely upon the first and second country-wide censuses (ConsReg. 1715 and 1720). These censuses can give the most overall picture of multiethnic Hungary in the early part of the 18th century (see csaladnevatasz.hu).

I'd like to mention the possibility of investigating the origins of surnames with help of the AHSH. Since most early censuses contain the names of taxpayers, the method of name-analysis enables us to reconstruct what languages were being spoken — as well as the borders and territories formed by these languages — in the Hungarian Kingdom.

1. The important question is: How personal names are connected to ethnicity?

Analyzing the connection between names and ethnicity is a difficult task due to the fact that name origins and ethnic background (in other words, an individual's connection to his/her identity) can cause great uncertainty and result in numerous incorrect assumptions. This situation becomes further compounded in the case of historical documents, an area which does not

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make it possible to ascertain the individual's genuine ethnic background or check this information by other methods, such as by referring to a personal statement. Researchers of historical sources must also not forget that ethnic identity is viewed quite differently today compared to how it was judged in the past and is a reflection of the complex process of nation-building that occurred in Europe following the Enlightenment. In the case of sources predating the eighteenth century, ethnic identity can at best be described as possessing a feeling of self-identification toward a certain people or group.

According to the Hungarian linguist, ANDRÁS RÓNA-TAS, “a people (or ethnos) can be defined as a group that has formed throughout history and possesses a common **cultural system of symbols** which it consciously uses to **differentiate itself from other peoples** while also **having its own, consistent name for itself**” (RÓNA-TAS 1996: 24).² In this definition a “common cultural system of symbols” refers to a broader system within which the existence of a common language plays a role as only a single, albeit important factor. It must be mentioned that the Age of Enlightenment also marks the period when an individual's native language came to represent the essential and primary factor in defining ethnic identity in Hungary. (See also RÁCZ 2009, 2010.)

These few caveats are important due to the simple fact that proper names fulfill a basic part of any language system. As this lecture intends to demonstrate, how a proper name fits into a particular language system can—as we shall see—point to an individual's connection to an ethnic group, but not in a way that can be considered absolute.

To return to my discussion of ethnic identity in pre-Enlightenment times, the opinion that no sort of ethnic awareness or consciousness existed before the eighteenth century is most certainly incorrect and should be rejected. This statement is supported by the fact that a definite means of identifying ethnic background already existed in Carpathian Basin when the habit of assigning family names became customary. In fifteenth-century sources for Hungarian family names originating from the Upper-Tisza region (North-Eastern Hungary), among the ten most commonly featured names the ethnonym of

² As to what factors were viewed as belonging to a cultural system of symbols, a source from sixth-century Byzantium indicates that a Turkic steppe people (the Utrigurs) were not attacked by another Turkic steppe people (the Kutrigurs) because “they belonged to the same people, spoke the same language, possessed homes, clothing and lifestyles similar to theirs and came from the same lineage, even though they bowed to other rulers” (RÓNA-TAS 1996: 23). The significance of this description lies in its ability to demonstrate how—beginning in the sixth century—identifying the members of a group or people included the importance of possessing a common language, yet not exclusively so.

Tót [means formerly 'Slav', later 'Slovak'] is found in first place, while *Oláh* 'Romanian' takes eighth place. Out of the entire name material, *Tót* occurs at 3.4%, a number that indicates a very common recurrence. The fact that the usage of ethnonyms had been a general phenomenon throughout the entire Carpathian Basin is demonstrated by lists featuring the most common family names (including their orthographic variations) today. In 2007 the name *Tót* reached third place at 2.16%, while *Horvát* 'Croatian' appeared in fifth place with 2% out of the family names found in Hungary. The name *Német* 'German' occurred at 0.9% and *Oláh* was eighteenth at 0.37%. The reason for why it is less common for ethnonyms to be used as family names in other parts of Europe can be explained by a variety of historical and cultural factors (see also FARKAS 2013).

In the multiethnic Carpathian Basin, populations during the Middle and Modern Ages also used religious identity as a means of defining individuals, for this region also represented a sort of buffer zone where Western Catholicism met Eastern Orthodoxy. In some instances religious affiliation was defined according to ethnicity since belonging to a certain religion was specific to a particular ethnic group or two. This fact can be easily verified with the help of the *Lexicon locorum*, a source from 1773 listing the spoken languages and religious affiliation of each village in Hungarian Kingdom (LexLoc.). Romanians and Ruthenians had originally Orthodox, later Greek Catholic religious, an assumption that did not always represent reality given the fact that there were Protestant (Calvinist) Romanian villages in Southern Transylvania as well. Most Saxon Germans were Lutherans while Hungarians (before the Counter-Reformation in the seventeenth century) were mainly Calvinists. The need for taking this additional aspect into account emphasizes the fact that the usage of ethnonyms for proper names did not signify the individual's native tongue alone, but also referred to other cultural factors, such as religion, customs, or a knowledge of origin.

In reference to names, the issue of what is precisely reflected by a **family name's linguistic origin** must also be considered: does a family name indicate the name bearer's linguistic and ethnic origin, or provide us instead with clues concerning the environment that gave the name? Experience has proven that in the case of natural naming, the **community** itself designates a name for the individual. Furthermore, it does so in its own language, whether or not the individual is a newcomer, outsider or from a different ethnic group. This circumstance is what led to the ethnonym family names mentioned above, i.e. *Tót*, *Német*, *Kun*, *Rác*, etc. It is also necessary to remember that ethnonym family names may refer to customs, characteristics, or events and not only to ethnic background; while this somewhat specialized instance

occurs with far less regularity, it should still be taken into consideration as a possible factor.

The multifaceted reasons for why an ethnonym may have been assigned to individuals raise questions in methodology that affect the very essence of name analysis: an unequivocal **connection between a name's linguistic origin and the ethnic background** of its bearer cannot be drawn. It is first absolutely necessary to establish some sort of methodological standpoint concerning how certain elements or groups of elements found in the given name stock are being used to explore ethnic origins. In other words, a clear distinction must be made between the name's linguistic form (name origin) and the name bearer's ethnicity.

In the history of Hungarian personal names, the assigning of family names first began in the second half of the fourteenth century. By the end of the fifteenth century the population's majority (85 to 95%) already has some type of secondary name other than a first (Christian) name that was used to differentiate that individual from others. In this period it can be said that a name primarily referred to the name-giving environment and only secondarily (not counting a few exceptions) indicated the name bearer's linguistic background.

A few additional comments, however, need to be included to the latter statement. In order for a family name assigned to a newcomer by the community to remain existent, the name bearer and his or her descendents had to have become bilingual. The newcomer, in other words, had to have assimilated into the given linguistic environment. If this were not the case, before names were formalized the chances of passing down a name possessing a linguistically divergent origin would have been far less. For example, a—most likely—Romanian individual received the ethnicity-signifying name of Oláh from his or her Hungarian environment, then eventually became bilingual in both Romanian and Hungarian. Linguistically the next generations completely assimilated into their environment and thereby passed on this Hungarian-language name to their descendents.

Later on, however, it is important for researchers to consider—as a consequence of internal migration—the way different name systems mutually influenced one another upon coming in contact. Until names were formalized (in Hungary this occurred until 1787, or more precisely until 1814), a family name that had originally entered a linguistically foreign environment, then assimilated during the following one or two generations may have spontaneously changed (name assimilation) under the influence of its new environment. It was, however, far more common for assimilation to have

occurred parallel to the family name remaining in existence, a fact supported by historical sources as well as the current name data.

Based on the factors discussed above, researchers are correct not to view certain names as an indicator of the name bearer's ethnic affiliation. Instead, this type of information should be considered an initial clue toward uncovering the **broader environment** (village, district, region) in the case that some sort of general conclusion needs to be drawn based on a compilation of data concerning linguistic or even ethnic make-up.

2. Methods for analyzing names

Reconstructing ethnic background belongs first and foremost to the field of history. Within this discipline, ascertaining a region, village or district's ethnic heritage represents an important research area for historical demography and social history. The fact that linguistics and onomastics bear a close connection to this type of issue goes without saying. Defining the proper name's origin is a task for etymology, a field governed by the rules for its own methodology, a circumstance which cannot be neglected by historical inquiries. During the interwar period in Hungary, when the process for conducting historical ethnic examinations was evolving, the methodology was developed by the Slavicist linguist, ISTVÁN KNIEZSA (KNIEZSA 1934/1965/2003). The essence of this method was summarized by historian ISTVÁN SZABÓ in his monograph on Ugocsa County: "All the collected names must be categorized according to the language to which they belong. While qualifying names by language is nothing more than an attempt to express the name's linguistic form, on the basis of this linguistic categorization it is still possible to decide a community's linguistic character and draw conclusions regarding its ethnicity. We therefore find it necessary to view as uncertain or vague those names whose form and content—in spite of their definite linguistic form—either contradict one another or show the possibility of contradiction in reference to ethnic heritage" (SZABÓ 1937: 5).

The following names were categorized as uncertain: 1) the ethnonyms *Orosz* 'Ruthenian', *Lengyel* 'Polish', *Muszka* 'Russian', *Német* 'German', *Török* 'Turkish', *Zsidó* 'Jew' stb., excluding those referring to language (*Magyar*, *Székel* = Hungarian; *Litva*, *Ruszi* = Slav); 2. family names stemming from place names, the linguistic form of which does not comply with the name-giving town's ethnic make-up (e.g. *Bródi* is a name given in Hungarian, but settlement Bród was populated by Ruthenians); 3. the names for counties or regions possessing an ethnically mixed population; 4. occupational surnames that appear in the same/similar form in multiple languages (ex. *Kovács* 'blacksmith', *Bodnár* 'hooper', *Takács* 'weaver'); 5. loanwords that have

similar forms in two or three languages (ex. the words *huszár* ‘hussar’, *hajdú*, *kocsis* ‘coachman’ originate from Hungarian, but are names in Ruthenian and Romanian as well); 6. family surnames that are originally firstnames, but exist in similar form in multiple languages (ex. *Adam*, *Damjan*, *Daniel*, *Kozma* (*Cosma*) found in Hungarian, Romanian and Slavic languages). (See further examinations e. g. JAKÓ 1940; BÉLAY 1943; ILA 1944.)

While many aspects of the KNEZSA–SZABÓ methodology are acceptable and should be followed, one correction is necessary: this method does not clearly separate the language’s origin (“linguistic form”) from the conclusions drawn on this basis concerning ethnicity. Furthermore, even as this method emphasizes the community’s linguistic make-up, it still attempts to expose the ethnic origins of individuals (see the increased caution expressed in 1. concerning ethnonyms’ relationship to place names).

In contrast to its historical precedents, the method I utilize differs in that it attempts to separate defining a name etymon from ascertaining ethnic origin and thereby places these distinct analytical aspects in different categories.

2.1. Defining linguistic origin

My method reflects that used by KNEZSA–SZABÓ in many respects. Regarding the list of categories for names judged as uncertain, I only kept those that are vague from a linguistic standpoint; in other words, a name is viewed as “vague” when the presence of multiple linguistic origins render it impossible to define the etymon. Those names that display a multi-lingual origin, yet occurred in linguistically homogenous areas are still categorized according to the language of the given area; in my analysis uncertain names refer to the names found in areas of ethnically mixed populations (ex. the name Kovács is classified as Hungarian if found in a Hungarian village and Slavic in a Slav village, but becomes uncertain when it occurs in a Hungarian-Slavic village). My solution is similar in the case of Christian names and loanwords commonly found in multiple languages. On the basis of this method it is possible to define the origin of family names and their percentage within a village, district, county, or region.

2.2. Conclusions concerning linguistic/ethnic make-up as shown by personal names

The category above is expressly rooted in linguistics and demonstrates the etymological ratios for family names in a given territory. These results can be interpreted within the field of onomastics, thereby forming an important foundation for further linguistic studies. Any type of interdisciplinary research still demands a language-based examination of the Carpathian Basin’s ethnic pattern during a particular historical period. No matter how challenging

it may be to analyze the connection between names and ethnic heritage, it is not a task that can be ignored.

What is it that we can certainly conclude from family names? First of all we have to identify the **ethymon of surname** so we can point out the ratio of different languages in the corpus under investigation. In the next step we can try to **identify the ethnicities with the help of first names**. However it is not always possible because the census-writers changed the first names to Latin forms so they became neutral with respect to ethnicity. But there are many examples in the census of 1715 which show that the commissioners wrote in Latin forms only the names of Hungarians but other names (mainly of Romanians) were left in their original forms.

In my formerly work (N. FODOR 2013) I presented the importance of the historical personal names on the basis of the names of district Kővár.³ The commissioners from county Hont registered 545 tax-payers in the first census in 1715.

The ethimological examination of family names in district Kővár resulted in big ratio of names of Romanian origin: two thirds of names belong here, approximately 22% of the names are Hungarian and the rest (14,13%) are of uncertain and other (Slavs and German) origin.

The further approach takes into consideration the linguistic form of the firstnames. In the conscription of 1715 in many cases we can find Hungarian family names with Romanian and Ruthenian christian/first names. These persons who are mainly Greek Catholic should be considered Romanians. According to the data almost half of the firstnames next to the Hungarian family names reflect Romanian naming so the ratio of the Romanian ethnicity shows increase compared to the Hungarian (e. g. *Suket Kosztin, Katók Dán, Gyárfás Iwon, Orosz Alexa, Korsos Iwon, Deák Jonucz, Baráth Jónocz, Balla Waszi, Csurke Lup, Horgas Waszil, Gyertya Theodor* stb.). „While the Hungarian family name usually represents the previous stage of ethnicity, the first name represents the „recent” situation of self-identity. It is also possible that these names –were given by the members of the host society– to promote the newcomers’ identification (whose „foreign” name was meaningless for them).

The Fig. 1. shows that the complex examination of full names can give significantly different results from the ratio of ethymons of family names.

³ The district Kővár was between counties Szatmár, Máramaros, Middle-Szolnok from the 17th century. At the beginning of the 18th century 77 settlements belonged to it. Its area was merged into counties Szatmár and Szolnok-Doboka in the second part of the 19th century, nowadays it is a part of Maramures, Satu Mare and Silaj in Romania.

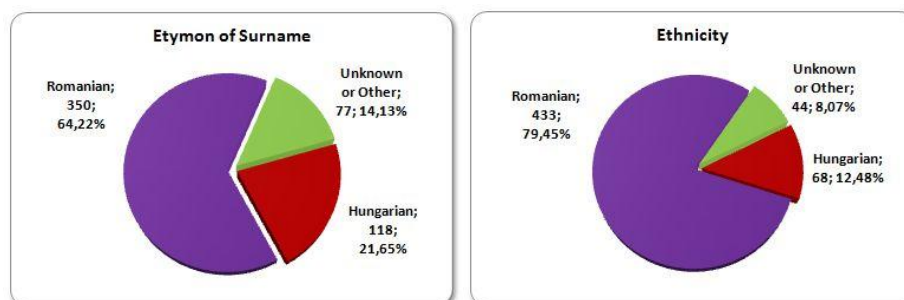


Fig. 1. Etymon of surname and ethnic patterns in the Kővár district (Tara Chioarului) in 1715

Finally I'll use images of the AHS map to demonstrate results based on the two kinds of calculations. Due to time constraints, a detailed analysis of these results cannot be done at this occasion (Fig. 2.).

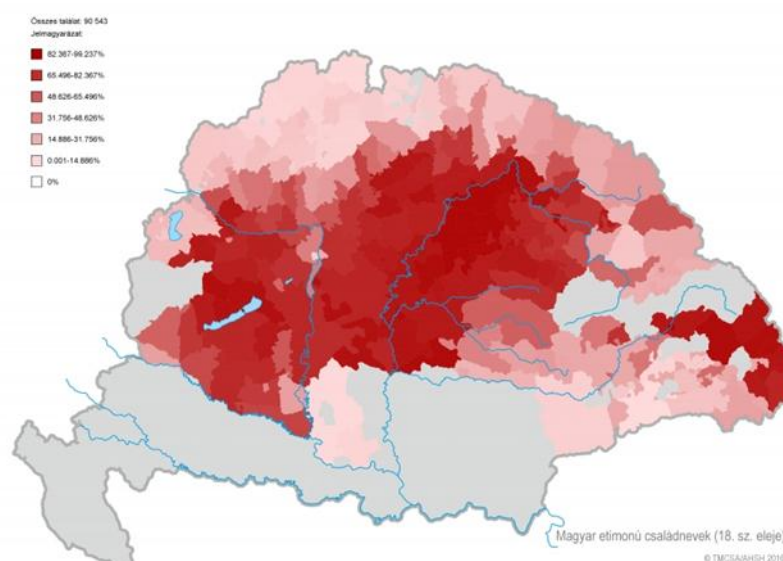


Fig. 2. Spatial distribution of Hungarian-origin Family names in the early 18th century (AHS 1720)

3. Final note

Studies in historical demography (see e.g. TAMÁS 1996; BAGDI–DEMETER 2007) have devoted a great deal of attention to examining changes in the Carpathian Basin's ethnic configuration. A census that includes information

concerning spoken language or ethnic heritage represents the best source for this kind of analysis. Making a registry of spoken languages was first done village by village in 1787, in the *Lexicon locorum*. Later on, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, census takers were already marking down ethnic background based on the individual's admission. Before this period no sources existed that recorded information concerning ethnic heritage in the Carpathian Basin or throughout the Hungarian Kingdom and Transylvania. This is precisely why census registries containing at least personal names are extremely valuable. The first registry of this type was taken in 1713 in Transylvania, and in 1715 within the Hungarian Kingdom. Due to the fact that the tax registries only contain names without including information on ethnicity, name analysis is the only means for identifying ethnic groups.

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