

# THE (bAn) VARIABLE IN THE SPEECH OF FIVE- AND TEN-YEAR-OLD HUNGARIAN CHILDREN

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how five and ten-year-old children use the (bAn) sociolinguistic variable (the inessive case marker ending) in Hungarian. The aim is to study whether there is differentiation in the use of this variable relating to age, gender and residence. The research sheds light on gender-difference in the use of the (bAn) variable by the five-year-olds, and different patterns can be seen in the two age groups.

Keywords: child language variation, Hungarian, sociolinguistics

## 1. Introduction

The study of child language variation has become more central in sociolinguistic research recently. Numerous studies have found that pre-school children already show variation according to gender, social background or style (Fischer 1958; Labov 1989; Ladegaard–Bleses 2003; Mátyus 2008; Romaine 1984), but these studies also emphasise that more visible gender differentiation occurs only later, mainly in (pre-) adolescence. At the same time, Chambers (2003: 171) argues that speakers use socially significant variants throughout the process of language acquisition.

No studies have investigated so far whether variation according to gender concerning the use of sociolinguistic variables occurs in the speech of Hungarian children. The aim of this paper is to study how five- and ten-year-old children in Mindszent (a small rural town in southern Hungary) and Szeged (a county town in southern Hungary) use the (bAn) sociolinguistic variable, the inessive case ending suffix in Hungarian morphology.

In Hungarian, (bAn) is the inessive case ending of nouns as in *ház-ban* ‘within a house’ or *kert-ben* ‘within a garden’. Letter A in the suffix can either stand for *a* (*ban*), or for *e* (*ben*), depending on vowel harmony: the vowels of the stem determine the vowel of the suffix. The variable (bAn) has two variants: [bAn] which is

considered to be the standard variant, and the non-standard [bA] variant (Váradi 1995-96: 297-8).

In adult speech, this variable has been studied using several methods. The grammaticality judgement tests of the Hungarian National Sociolinguistic Survey show that the use of the (bAn) variable is stratified by sex and residence: informants from cities chose the standard variant more often than those from large villages, and in both residence groups women favoured the standard variant more than men (Kontra 2003: 93).

Studying the guided conversation data from the Budapest Sociolinguistic Interview-2 (BSI-2) database, (bAn) shows variation according to occupation groups – with the highest percentage of the standard [bAn] variant in the teachers' group (59.57%) and the lowest among the factory workers (6.98%): gender variation could not be studied in this corpus (Matyus 2011: 309).

According to the role-model hypothesis children model on their same-sex parents and same-sex peers, thus it is reasonable to expect a rate of gender variation similar to the adult pattern: we expect girls to use the standard [bAn] variant more frequently than boys, and children from Szeged to use it more often than children from Mindszent. Studying the past tense morphology of 4-, 6- and 8-year-old Danish children Ladegaard and Bleses (2003) found gender differences in all the three age groups. In their study the informants' use of vernacular forms increased with age, and gender difference was greater with the older children.

On the basis of findings from previous research I hypothesies that

1. in situations, where the interlocutor (i.e., the interviewer) is more standard than the informant, girls will use the standard form more often than boys from the same age group, i.e. girls will increase their use of the standard variants.
2. in Szeged the rate of the standard will be higher than in Mindszent - for both girls and boys.
3. ten-year-olds will use the standard variant more often than five-year-olds.
4. sex-difference will be higher among ten-year-olds than among five-year-olds.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The present study investigates the language use of 40 children, 20 five-year-olds and 20 ten-year-olds. The children are drawn from two residences: Mindszent and Szeged. Mindszent is a small town in southern Hungary, with about 7500 inhabitants. During my previous research in Mindszent, I found that most of the inhabitants work in some branch of agriculture, and the rate of unemployment is well above the national average. As for the education level of the parents of children who attend the kindergarten, most of them have some kind of vocational training, very few finished secondary grammar school, and even less parents attended college or

university. One reason for this situation may be that there are very few job opportunities in the neighbourhood, so most of the better educated young people move to bigger towns. According to teachers at the kindergarten, most children still acquire the regional dialect as their vernacular, and its prestige is quite high. Thus., although quite a big settlement, Mindszent resembles a large village, not a town. The other town, Szeged is the centre of the Csongrád county with 170.000 inhabitants.

## 2.2. Procedure

The children were tested in their kindergartens/schools but in a separate room. A picture description task was used. Twelve cartoon pictures were presented to the children, and they were asked to talk about each one. If this free talk did not result in a sufficient amount of tokens, extra *Where is...? Where can you find...?* questions were asked by the interviewer – this was especially needed with younger children. For short periods with some participants, this picture description task sometimes changed into a picture-based free conversation.

## 2.3. Recording and transcription

The children were recorded for approximately 20 to 30 minutes, in total 20 hours of speech was collected. Recordings were made with Olympus WS-310M digital voice recorder, and transcription was made with the help of Olympus AS-4000 PC Transcription Kit. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS.

## 3. Results and discussion

In total 2018 tokens were collected from approximately 20 hours of recording. Table 1 presents the results of the study. The participant-code can be found in the first column. In the following section, participants are identified with abbreviations denoting their age, residence (M for Mindszent, SZ for Szeged), and sex (M for male, F for female). So, for example, the abbreviation 5MM stands for five-year-old Mindszent Male participants.

Participant	(bAn)	[bAn] standard	[bA] non-standard	Rate of stan- dard tokens
5MF	350	234	116	66.86%
5MM	371	105	266	28.30%
5SZF	425	320	105	75.29%
5SZM	459	240	219	52.29%
<b>5 total</b>	<b>1605</b>	<b>899</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>56.01%</b>
10MF	101	61	40	60.39%
10MM	100	22	78	22%
10SZF	111	62	49	55.85%
10SZM	101	66	35	65.34%

<b>10 total</b>	<b>413</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>51.08%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>1110</b>	<b>908</b>	<b>55%</b>

Table 1. Findings of the research for all informants

The table shows that among the five-year-olds both in Mindszent and Szeged, girls used the standard variant of the (bAn) variable more often than boys (66.86% for Mindszent girls, 28.30% for boys; 75.29% for Szeged girls, and 52.29% for boys). However, the difference between the “rate of the standard” of the production of boys and girls was much sharper in the Mindszent group (38.56%) than in the Szeged group (23%). (These results are not significant, using an independent samples t-test: Mindszent:  $t=1.907$ ,  $p=0.093$ ; Szeged:  $t=1.264$ ,  $p=0.242$ )

If only sex is considered in the same age group, without reference to residence, five-year-old girls used the standard variant of the suffix at a rate of 71.48%, while for the boys this number was 41.57% ( $t=2.271$ ,  $p=0.036$ ).

The results also demonstrate that the participants (boys and girls together) from Szeged chose the standard variant more often than participants from Mindszent, with 63.35% standard tokens produced by the former and 47.02 produced by the latter ( $t=1.009$ ,  $p=0.326$ ).

However, the ten-year-olds show a different pattern: in Mindszent, girls used the standard variant much more often than boys (60.39% for the girls and 22% for the boys), just like the five-year-olds, but in Szeged boys had a higher rate of standard tokens (65.34% for boys and 55.85. for girls). These results are not significant, either: Mindszent:  $t=1.555$ ,  $p=0.159$ ; Szeged:  $t=0.506$ ,  $p=0.626$ . If residence is not considered, girls used the standard variant at a rate of 58.01%, while the boys used it at a rate of 43.56% (but this result is not significant). Here the difference between girls and boys was much smaller than in the younger age group. ( $t=0.585$ ,  $p=0.566$ ). The ten-year-old participants (boys and girls together) from Szeged used the standard variant more often (60.66%) than interviewees from Mindszent (41.29%). ( $t=1.117$ ,  $p=0.279$ ).

Returning to the hypotheses, I assumed that in situations where the interlocutor (the interviewer) is more standard than the child, girls would use the standard form more often than boys from the same age group. This is true for three groups out of the four (5M, 5SZ, 10M), but is not true for the ten-year-old girls in Szeged. However, as most factors did not have a statistically significant effect on the use of the variable, I joined some groups together for a further analysis. This way the results show that among the five-year-old informants sex statistically significantly affects the use of the (bAn) variable.

According to the second hypothesis in Szeged the rate of standard would be higher than in Mindszent for both girls and boys, but just as with the previous hypothesis, the ten-year-old Szeged girls show a lower rate of standardness than ten-year-old girls from Mindszent. Further research is required to determine why the 10SZF group is so different.

The ten-year-olds did not use the standard variant more often than the five-year-olds. The last hypothesis, saying that sex-difference will be higher among ten-year-olds than among five-year-olds, was also disproved.

As opposed to the findings of Ladegaard and Bleses (2003), in the present study the children's use of vernacular forms did not increase with age. Different picture-sets were used with the two age groups in this study, and the task itself meant obviously different things to the five- and ten-year-olds. For the younger informants it was like a question-answer process, whereas for the older ones it was more like a picture description. These two differences may well have accounted for the differing results of the two studies.

Further research with the same methodology for all age groups could provide more precise results.

#### 4. Conclusion

In my study I examined the use of the (bAn) sociolinguistic variable by 40 five- and ten-year-old informants in Mindszent and Szeged. Although most of the results were not significant, the findings of the mass categories suggest a clear gender-dependence, and also a great difference according to residence. However, the patterns in the two age groups are quite different, and in some cases not in line with the adult data: among the five-year-old children there is a larger difference between the sexes than there is in adults. These results are rather surprising, assuming that mothers serve as the most important models for both boys and girls during the early stages of language acquisition, which would suggest that the patterns of boys and girls should be closer to each other than the patterns of men and women.

Further examinations would surely provide us with a more detailed picture and help to understand how children acquire variant sociolinguistic patterns.

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