

## CONSTRUCTING DIFFERENT ETHNIC IDENTITIES: SYMBOLIC VALUES, LINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE IN A HUNGARIAN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY (NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ)

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### 1. The project<sup>2</sup>

#### 1.1. On data

The present paper is based on preliminary analysis of bilingual data collected for a sociolinguistic study which investigates social and linguistic changes characteristic of language shift in immigrant setting by drawing special attention to its universal and language (community) specific features. In 1994 the author conducted five months of fieldwork in the Hungarian-American community of New Brunswick, NJ in the United States combining methods of participant observation, network analysis and sociolinguistic interview. The entire corpus consists of 180-hour-long interviews with 45 speakers, and cca. 25-hour-long spontaneous discourse material.

#### 1.2. Theoretical background

The focus of my study is language shift: a sociolinguistic setting in which multilingualism is gradually transforming into a new monolingualism also in the internal (intraethnic) linguistic market (see also Jaspaert & Kroon, 1991). According to Gal's definition (Gal, 1979: 17) language shift "consists of the socially motivated redistribution of synchronic variants to different speakers and different social environments". Since the process must be seen as a simultaneous social and linguistic change in the life of a community (Gal, 1991: 66-67), its study requires the involvement of different approaches. To understand the interrelationship between the social and linguistic aspects as well as the speed of the process I applied a three-level multidisciplinary framework (Bartha, 1993, 1995/96).

First, it is important to study the **socio-historical and economic context**, from the perspective of the symbolic fields (Bourdieu, 1977, 1994), linguistic markets and the ecology of language (Haugen, 1972; Edwards, 1994). In the bilingualism literature we can find much evidence that it is unavoidable to define this level, since we know that in one context a similar

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historical, social, and economic setting favors language maintenance, while in another context it leads to language shift or death. Highlighting specific extralinguistic characteristics of a given contact situation beyond the general tendency allows us to study the dynamics of language maintenance and shift (for further extralinguistic factors see e.g. Kloss, 1966; Fishman, 1966a; Grosjean, 1982; Clyne, 1992; Paulston, 1986, 1994).

The level of **the speech community** needs to be evaluated next, specifically the **changes in the community's linguistic practice**: what kind of rules are valid in language choice, style-shifting and code-switching; what virtual and symbolic roles in everyday communication one or another language plays; and what the functional division of labor among the elements of the community's repertoire is. It can be essential to analyze the system of values, norms, attitudes and especially the folk theories and ideologies<sup>3</sup> adopted by the speakers towards the languages in question.

The third, strictly **linguistic level** is the analysis of the **individuals' language ability and usage**. The dramatic change of functions, norms and attitudes do affect the structure of language. Researchers describe the process of language loss in terms of functional reduction and/or simplification in the linguistic system<sup>4</sup> which represent functional and structural loss (cf. Huls & de Mond, 1992).

Although language shift and loss are not mutually exclusive, in my approach these concepts are not interchangeable. The primary unit of the former is the speech community, while the terms "language loss" or "attrition" refer to a bilingual individual. Although these issues can be studied separately, I will attempt here to demonstrate their interrelationship through the empirical results of my sociolinguistic –anthropological analysis.

## **2. Immigrant (transitional) bilingualism: shift or maintenance?**

There is a very common assumption according to which mother-tongue shift in immigrant setting reaches its end over the span of three generations<sup>5</sup> (Fishman, 1966a;

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<sup>3</sup> The term "language ideology" is used here as a cultural conception related to other cultural and social forms like authority, power, prestige, attitude, stigmatization, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Although, according to the attrition literature, structural loss often goes along with simplification, it is impossible to consider them equal. We can find counterexamples indicating that complex forms and innovations can also appear in the speech of younger people in transitional stages of the process (Gal, 1992: 330; Dressler, 1991: 100-101).

<sup>5</sup> Paulston claims that "maintained group bilingualism is unusual. The norm for groups in prolonged contact within one nation is for the subordinate group to shift to the language of the dominant group, either over several hundred years as with Gaelic in Great Britain or over the span of three generations as has been the case of the European immigrants to Australia and the United States in a very rapid shift" (1986: 495).

Paulston, 1986; 1994) and studies of other Hungarian American communities show results consistent with this argument (Kontra, 1990; Bartha, 1993; 1995/96; Fenyvesi, 1994). In contrast, my present research indicates that the process, being more complex, differs by community. The study reveals further that even within the same community this process varies across migration wave, because the symbolic position of Hungarian language within the cultural value system of the community alters between groups (cf. Clyne, 1996: 310). Language shift in New Brunswick is less rapid and not as extensive than in other immigrant groups: there appear to be conscious language maintenance efforts reversing language shift.

The point needs to be considered is that in this community Hungarian is still used in a wide variety of situations. What makes this setting potentially unique is that besides informal situations Hungarian is the dominant language in the following local institutional domains: five Hungarian churches –two of which give weekly services in Hungarian–, the Hungarian scout troops, the Athletic Club, the Hungarian American Heritage Center, The György Bessenyei Alumni Association, Saturday School and Kindergarten, and, recently the Hungarian Institute and Hungarian Philology as a minor at Rutgers University.

These are the institutional bases for written and spoken use of Hungarian. Nevertheless, participation only in these organizations is not sufficient; the primary criterion for group membership is the so called “skillful, proper usage of Hungarian”.

The analysis of factors that potentially influence language shift demonstrates that education level and the socio-economic status both in the home country and in America correlate positively with the amount of speakers’ language preservation efforts. The study also highlights that these factors do not directly support language maintenance: they correlate strongly with other factors like attitudes towards Hungarian and with purist ideologies constructed by the community members.

One of the most interesting findings in this respect is that ideology construction and language preservation efforts are not goals but tools: they are used to distinguish the migration waves with differing socio-economic backgrounds and varying representations of maintenance and ethnic identity.

### **3. Migration waves: different ideas of language and identity**

Since the beginning of this century there has been a continuous flow of Hungarian American immigrants to New Brunswick. Nonetheless, there are at least three characteristic migration waves: the Old Americans, the post-World War II displaced persons or DPs, and the

'56 refugees (see also Fishman, 1966b). The fourth group I also studied, the so-called newcomers, who arrived after the late 1960s, has a very similar character to the 56 refugees.

### **3.1. Old Americans**

The Old Americans arrived until the 1920s. They were poorly educated people of peasant background driven by economic reasons, considering their stay transitional, having only guest-worker status. Their goal to return to Hungary was destroyed by treaties following the First World War. Therefore they became members of the American working class. 'Language' was directly related to personal career in their ideologies rooted in the mainstream's political ideas of melting pot. So they forced their children to learn English and assimilate into the new society as soon as possible. As a consequence, their children –in their sixties/seventies by now– are English-dominant bilingual, or, more often, English monolinguals. The Old Americans were dialect speakers of Hungarian and they never learned English well enough to become fluent in their both languages. Besides the dialect features, their speech can be characterized by lexical loss and high rates of English borrowings. Interestingly enough, these people used significantly more core elements which is not a result of lexical attrition but is a very important device to express different social meanings, e.g. positive attitudes towards the English language (see also Mougeon & Beniak, 1991: 207; Scotton & Okeju, 1973; Scotton & Ury, 1977; Romaine, 1989: 64-65).

### **3.2. Displaced Persons**

As the second migration wave the DPs arrived between 1948-52 for political reasons. Most were middle-aged men with families, educated people from the middle and upper classes including some of noble background, but in the US they were not able to gain higher status than the Old Americans. They had no relationship with communist Hungary; at the same time maintaining their Hungarian ethnic identity and culture played the central role in their local activities.

Although they had a wide Hungarian verbal repertoire, being middle-aged and maintaining strongly the ethnic traditions made it difficult for them to reach the proficiency of native speakers of English. In addition, since Hungary was ally of Hitler's Germany, the DPs faced negative discrimination of the "mainstream" making upward mobility even more difficult.

### **3.3. The '56 refugees**

The third, the most influential group of the community by now are the '56 refugees who came mostly as young people without families. Though not all were political refugees, the US government treated them as such and smoothed their integration through monetary support and education fellowships. Many of them completed secondary school in Hungary and subsequently received technical training or university degrees in the United States. They became fluent bilinguals and quickly established themselves as part of the American middle class.

### **3.4. The ideology of “proper Hungarian”**

The DPs played the crucial role in constructing purist language ideologies and in creating a new ethnic identity in which Hungarian language became the primary component in comparison with the Old Americans' group where secondary symbols like clothing, food, dance and music referred to their Hungarianness. Because the DPs' social status dropped to the level of the peasant origin Old Americans, the ideology of proper use and cultivation was an appropriate symbolic tool for distinguishing themselves from the former group. The Old Americans' linguistic practice, their non-standard, dialect speech and code-mixing was considered a sign of low prestige. Moreover, the ideas of purism and cultivation could meet the redefined ideology of nationalism of the Hungarian middle class following the First War and has been reformulated to the context of New Brunswick.

The '56 community members by and large accepted the folklinguistic theories of the DPs –though their political views were/are significantly different. An institution critical for promoting language maintenance and transferring this ideology to the 2nd and 3rd generations is the Hungarian scout organization. Children only become members if they already speak their parents' language. Furthermore, the only permitted language in the scouthouse and during the scouting events is Hungarian.

## **4. Degrees of purism and their (socio)linguistic consequences**

There are, of course, no exact parameters of what constitutes proper Hungarian. The analysis of conversational data coupled with results from participant observation reveal that the norms of the community override individual abilities: even children who can barely speak Hungarian are expected to communicate in that language. Data show further that parents' language use patterns correlating with the level at which they accept the linguistic norms of

the community can counterbalance the factors that can cause attrition by their children. The degree of acceptance of the ideology of skillfull, proper Hungarian, the different interpretations of ethnic identity and membership in the core community are reflected in three basic types of language choice strategies parents apply. There is a range from unconscious strategy 'seen as implicit in their speech practices, through the most conscious explanations to outsiders of appropriate language behavior as part as public discourse' (cf. Woolard 1995: 241). I call them authoritative, interactional and integrative models.

#### **4.1. Family patterns of language choice**

##### **4.1.1. The authoritative model**

According to the first model those who hold strongly to the purist ideology speak only Hungarian at home and in community settings and insist that their own and others' children do likewise.

##### **4.1.2. The interactional model**

The second type means that those parents who place great importance to both the internal and external linguistic market apply discourse-based strategies; their choice between speaking English or Hungarian varies by communicative necessity according to discourse topic and situational factors (like partner, locale, setting, relative social relationship, etc.).

##### **4.1.3. The integrative model**

According to the integrative model those who hold other values much higher than language preservation speak exclusively English to their children even if they speak Hungarian to each other. It is important to note, however, that in some cases this is a very conscious strategy which can be evaluated as a symbolic resistance to their peripheral role in the core community's network.

#### **4.2. Structural loss**

Although there is functional reduction of Hungarian by all informants, especially those of the 2nd generation which also causes changes in the linguistic structure, the extent of reduction and the types of changes correlate with the strength of purist ideologies and the language choice strategies the parents apply. Attrition process is faster in those families in which English is the dominantly spoken language as compared to households in which

Hungarian is the exclusively used one. For the former group attrition occurs on all levels of the linguistic system.

What are the main differences among second generation speakers by the three models they have been socialized? Significant phonological changes do not occur in the “Hungarian only” group. The most remarkable difference among the groups is the amount and type of loss related to morphological and syntactic rules. Those who speak only English at home do not know the distribution of Hungarian preverbs, the rules concerning case endings; there are also significant differences in terms of agreement and concord, double negation, word order, etc. The non-standard use of definite and indefinite conjugation is a systematic and early developed change within all three groups:

#### 4.2.1. Indefinite conjugation instead of definite

Ezt nem *akar* hinni, hogy ez történt.

want.3sg.INDEF (S[tandard] H[ungarian]: akarja )

‘He doesn’t want to believe that this happened’.

Úgy *éreztek*, hogy nem figyeltem.

feel.PAST.3pl.INDEF (SH: érezték)

‘They felt that I wasn’t listening’.

#### 4.2.2. Definite conjugation instead of indefinite

Meg *akarta* harapni engemet.

want.PAST.3sg.DEF (SH: akart)

He wanted to bite me.

Semmit sem *éri* az ő élete.

be.3sg—worth (SH: ér)

‘His life is worth nothing’.

#### 4.2.3. Lack of preverbs – Non-standard use of preverb

Asziszem a város is *különböztet*.

distinguish.3sg.INDEF. (SH: megkülönböztet)

‘I think that the city also distinguishes people’.

És az egyik kutya engemet *látott* és akkor továbbra kezdett ő aaa

kezdett futni. see.PAST.3sg.INDEF. (SH: meglátott)

‘And one of the dogs saw me and then it started to aaa it started running’.

Biztos a cserkészlet mer<t>, a gyerekeket *tartja be*

in+keep.3sg.DEF. (SH: tartja össze, 'keep together')

'Definitely the scout because it keeps the children in'.

Kéne *beszokni* [megszokni] azt, hogy mos<t> mos<t>

into+to-get--used-to kezdek (SH: megszokni)

'I have to get used to the fact that I am just starting'.

#### 4.2.4. Lack of agreement

De mégis *van azok az idők*...

be.3sg. that-pl. time-pl. (SH:vannak azok az idők)

'But there are still those times'.

Nem *voltam* a barátai, tudod.

be.PAST.1sg. friend-pl. (SH: voltam a barátja)

'I was not her friends you know'.

#### 4.2.5. Lack of double negation

Pontosan ez volt a probléma, hogy *senkinek mondtam*.

no-one.DAT.3sg. tell.PAST.1sg.

'The problem was precisely that I told nobody'.

*Senki tudta*, hogy fényképezőgép.

no-one know.PAST.3sg. (SH: senki sem tudta)

'No one knew that it was a camera'.

#### 4.2.6. Analytical features

És ha ezt nem érted, és és nem érted, hogyan a a az ember hogyan változik

ettől,akkor engemet *nem tudsz érteni*.

no can.PRES.2sg.understand.INF. (SH: érthetsz)

'And if you don't understand this, and and you don't understand, how how a person changes, because of this (from this), then you *cannot understand me*'.

...hogy azér<t>, hogy több pénzt *tudnak* kapni.

can.PRES.3pl. (SH: kaphatnak)

'...that therefore that they can get more money'.

Mikor ő *ők fiatalabbak* vo<l>tak, akkor *ők* mentek New Brunswick-ba.

they they (SH: Mikor fiatalabbak voltak, N.B.-ba mentek)

'When they were younger they went to New Brunswick'.

Két *pohár* van ő hogy *bornak*.



wine.DAT.sing. (SH: borospohár)

‘There are two glasses for wine’.

### 5. The second generation: ideological analysis

Ideological constraints may counterbalance the natural process of functional and structural reduction of Hungarian. Certain linguistic phenomena are strongly stigmatized and people, even the American born speakers try to avoid them, but the degree and type of stigmatization vary by generation or migration wave. For example, the second generation has a stronger negative reaction to the morphologically-phonologically integrated English elements (loanwords) occurring in Hungarian discourse than their parents as **a kind of dirt in the language**:

(1)...Mert ezek □ legtöbb, aki ezt csinálja, ezek az idősebbek, akik má itt itt é<l>nek jópár évig.

□ Ez egy ilyen öö □ ilyen szennyeződés a nyelvbe<n>. [MR202—2a 1650]

‘Because these □ most, who does this, these are the older people, who have lived here for quite a few years. □ [until a few years] That’s a kind of □ uh kind of dirt in the language’.

The young speakers recognize and are able to define the prevailing language ideologies and the related community norms as the second and third extracts illustrate:

(2) *A közösségben □ tudod az a jó gyerek, aki jól beszél magyarul, az a rossz gyerek, aki nem jól beszél magyarul.* [MR201—4b 0821]

‘In the community, □ you know, those are the good kids who speak Hungarian well, those are the bad kids who don’t speak Hungarian well’.

(3) *Ez egy probléma, de itt a magyarok között azért<t> nagyon szigorúk a a a magyar= ha rosszul beszél az ember. □ Én én azt látom, hogy a legtöbb ember, ha nem aaa ha nem irtó jó a magyarjuk, akkor □ azt érzik, hogy nem jó, hogy teljesen nem jó.* [MR201—4a 1619]

‘This is a problem, but here among the Hungarians (therefore) they are very critical with Hungarian, if one speaks incorrectly. □ I I see that that most people, if if their Hungarian is not super, then they feel that it’s not good, it’s completely no good’.

One of the informants describes his imperfect knowledge of Hungarian:

(4) *Nem elég ő nagy a szókincsem. Ő van mikor a □ nem jön egy szó, ő nem jut egy szó eszembe vagy ő nem tudom úgy elmagyarázni, ahogy □ például egy*

*Magyarországon született gyerek magyarul el valakinek.*

[MR203—1b4215]

‘My vocabulary a... is not big enough. There is when □ a word doesn’t appear a the word doesn’t come to my mind or I cannot explain it the way that for example a Hungarian-born kid would explain it to somebody’.

The lack of native-like competence and its effect (the partner’s fractional, monolingual view and expectation, Grosjean, 1992) are illustrated in the following extract:

(5) *Mikor először angolul beszéltem, hogy tudta, hogy ki vagyok. □ De mindig, mikor átmegyek magyarra, hogy akkor kezd félni, mert aszisi, hogy valamilyen hülye van a telefonban.* [MR201—4a 1848]

‘When I first spoke in English she knew who I was. □ But always when I switch to Hungarian, [that] scares her, because she thinks that there is some idiot on the phone’.

The last example shows that Hungarian is not only the symbol of community membership, ethnic identity, the past and ethnic heritage; but it also has a positive value in the external linguistic market:

(6) *t: Jelentett-e neked valami pluszt, hogy a szüleid megtanítottak magyarul?*

*a: Igen. Így így több a □ több lehetőség van □ ilyen célekat célokat elérni.*

*t: Például? [...]*

*a: Ööö ha valami történt, apu mindig mondja, akkor mindig elmehetek Magyarországra és ott beilleszkedhetek nagyon könnyen. Több lehetőség vanna, ő hogy különböző kapcsolatokat teremteni □ világszerte. Ilyen ő világszemponból több lehetőség van.* [MR203—2a 1435]

F[ieldworker]: ‘Do you see any benefits in your parents teaching you Hungarian?’

I[nformant]: Yes. This way this way there are more uh □ uh more possibilities □ to reach these types of aims.

F: For example? [...]

I: Uuuh if something happened, dad always says, I can always go to Hungary and there I can integrate very easily. There are more possibilities uh that to build different connections □ all over the world. From the world’s perspective there are more possibilities’.

## 6. Conclusion

An important finding is that, compared to other Hungarian-American immigrant communities, the social and linguistic process of language shift is considerably slower than is expected: in this case Hungarian language is the key indicator to determine group membership. While there are universal patterns of the process, community specific factors, especially ideologies actively constructed by the group significantly influence the nature, intensity and speed of the process in question.

Speakers apply different techniques to fit into the local linguistic norms and expectations. By the time of my fieldwork I often received English or Hungarian American word lists from Hungarian-born speakers in order to tell them the Hungarian equivalents. An excellent example for the conscious lexical enrichment might be the case of a retired engineer in his 80s who was interested in the Hungarian word for *pantyliner*.

Linguistic practices of the second generation speakers can be characterized further by avoidance strategies, vocabulary enrichment, hypercorrection, even correcting their parents' speech. These techniques, within the studied period, in an immigrant community, unexpectedly lead to relative stabilization of Hungarian.

Another implication of this kind of approach is that without examining the broader social, political, economic, etc. context linguistic changes can be partially understood. In order to get a better understanding of local linguistic practices, in accordance with Woolard's assumption, for a sociolinguistic inquiry the notion of language ideology is also crucial to be mediating link between social structures and forms of talk (Woolard, 1995).

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