ON LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

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1.

Presumably it is a somewhat unrewarding part to be a linguist in a country where wide strata of the population – including the intelligentsia as well – only know about the linguist that he is the person who will give a clever (or not so clever) and always very self-confident answer to the ‘tell me, please, is it correct to say’ type of questions. His other main task is to hunt down structures like ‘but however’ even if it was used without problem by the greatest authors of Hungarian prose for four centuries from Péter Bornemissza to Miklós Szentkuthy. Still, this is the case. Out of a hundred randomly chosen Hungarian electors (instead of electors I could well have written degree holders) probably over 90 would believe that purists are the same as linguists and could not name a Hungarian linguist other than them.1 It might occur to some that in the second half of the nineties2 there was some dispute in this country between purists and a few unknown people who called themselves linguists, but it remains in complete darkness who these were and what they were doing if not preserving the purity of the language. While they are doing quite a lot of things, some of them sometimes quite great things like a representative national survey on language usage unique in an international comparison as well.

It would not be easy anyhow to write objectively about the book Language and Society in Hungary at the Fall of Communism edited by Miklós Kontra. On the one hand because even its outline would exceed the framework of a review but even its genre, on the other hand because this work forces one to constantly make excursions – because of the variety and richness of the topics treated or just touched upon – or to rejoice – because of the importance it has in my view. It is almost impossible to review the work, but it should definitely be known (and possibly be used!) by anyone truly interested in the questions of our society3 – be it a quality expert in any field of social

1 This is particularly true for foreign linguists. Noam Chomsky’s name is the best known to some but not primarily because of his oeuvre as a linguist.
2 In 1997, actually.
3 It is no mistake. Even those social scientists can/will benefit from this book whose main focus is not language.
science, or just an outsider deeply interested in the matter. This is a basic book. It fills a space in an area, where, apart from a few excellent representatives of linguistics, most of our intelligentsia did not feel the lack of it. After so many ideas, impressions, misbeliefs and hysterias about language, language trends, about standards, high or low, customs, language ‘decay’ it is for the first time that we are confronted with the language use of Hungarian society – the living Hungarian language through this book.

2.

In the *Introduction* (19–25) Miklós Kontra reviews the traditions of writing a Hungarian grammar as well as the possibilities of a scholarly approach to the language. Then he moves on to the research exposed in the book and informs the reader that the basis for the chapters written by him in the 371-page book is a poll done in the spring of 1988 by the Institute of Linguistics of HAS and the former Research Centre for the Mass Media. This poll is called the Hungarian National Sociolinguistic Study (HNSS) and it was based on the cultural-communicational stratum studies entitled Milieus done by Róbert Angelusz and Róbert Tardos. HNSS studied the language use of Hungarians above the age of 18 on a 832-strong sample, representative from the point of view of age, sex, education, and settlement type. The Hungarian National Sociolinguistic Study, which contained grammatical decisions, oral sentence forming and written error correction exercises, was supplemented by the Budapest Sociolinguistic Interview (BUSI), done at the same time with tape recorder to study spoken language. The interviewees of the latter one were members of a subsection of the Budapest sample of HNSS.

3.

In the second chapter entitled *Linguistic Approaches* (26–40) the editor starts with a short introduction to clarify the meanings of the terms *linguist, linguistics* in present-day Hungarian usage and the scholarly status of purism. He presents the basic principles and main goals of purism, theoretical linguistics and sociolinguistics. These are – with various emphases and not necessary in Miklós Kontra’s words: 1. *Purism* aims at making the use of a never exactly defined ideal language version universal. In order to achieve this it encourages, discourages or - most often –

4 The Hungarian word for purism is ‘nyelvművelés’ — literally the cultivation of language — and is not only similar to the word meaning linguistics ‘nyelvészet’, but is more than just a movement. — the Translator.

5 Treating purism as a linguistic approach could be considered as a magnanimous gesture. Taking into account, however, the characteristics of the topic 'language and society' and the 'functioning' of purism in Hungary and not least taking into account the state of general knowledge about linguistics in our country, this approach is well founded. (The only thing that indicates the disputable nature of purism as a scholarly discipline is the fact that in contrast to Chomsky’s Chomskyan theoretical linguistics and Sociolinguistics purism got a subheading with a definite article in Hungarian ('A nyelvművelés').)

6 And that is its major effect as well!
expressly forbids the use of certain words, expressions and grammatical structures, irrespective of the territorial or social distribution of language. 7 2. Theoretical linguistics attempts to describe language in a strictly formalized set of rules, as exact as mathematics. According to the goals of representatives of this school, with this set of rules one has to be able to generate all the (with respect to common usage) well-formed utterances of the given language, whereas no ill formed (i.e. wrong) utterance could be generated by it. 8 Theoretical linguists do not take the territorial and social varieties of language into account too much either, or they do so only if it can be fitted into their theory and only as long as it can be fitted into it. Theoretical linguists, as linguists in general reject purism. 10 3. The subject of sociolinguistics is language – primarily spoken language – in its social reality and varieties. Its followers therefore have as a starting point what exists – looking at language without qualifying or valuing it – and they try to find valid regularities in the varieties of spoken and living language, regularities that can be related to the results of related fields of scholarship, or that can offer new information for these fields and that can be interpreted in a wider social context.

In the introduction to the second chapter Miklós Kontra illustrates the differences among the three approaches on the example of the behavior of verbs ending in -t in non-standard Hungarian. 11 The examples support what has already been said: 1. Purism does not have anything relevant to say, even though it can ‘talk about’ the phenomenon. It does not even attempt to approach and explain with a scholarly method, it just condemns it. 2. Theoretical linguistics, in the present example Robert M. Vago gives a formal description probably difficult to follow for readers not well versed in generative linguistics and phonology. In comparison with the results of HNSS, that served as the basis of the sociolinguistic approach it is clear that despite of all efforts this theoretical approach cannot completely cover reality. 12 3. Sociolinguistics describes the situation based on the linguistic behavior of a certain group of speakers, in our case on the grammatical decisions and oral sentence completions of the members of the 832-strong nationally representative sample. The most important conclusion drawn in connection with the non-standard behavior (using ‘-suk, -sük’ and ‘-szuk, szük’) is that people whose mother tongue is Hungarian can be

7 And often irrespective of the opinion of other purists as well. (See e.g. the views on the ‘el kell menjek’ (I must go) type of utterance, which is welcomed and liked by some purists as a nice Transylvanian characteristic and is disliked and hunted like and ugly Balkanism by others.)
8 A question of detail rarely treated but one that stems from the basic principles of theoretical linguistics is that the utterances of an ideal speaker-listener would be terribly simplistic.
9 Or rather a sentence or two showing such properties.
10 Concerning their arguments and objections - to which sociolinguistics would probably have quite a few things to add - see László Kálmán’s writing Purism as a Pseudo-science (Kálmán 2003).
11 That is the use of the non-standard/dialectic indicative of the verbs ending in -t (üt, lát, ért, etc) as a form identical with the standard Hungarian imperative form, that is the indicative use of üssük, lássuk, értsük, etc.
12 Of course in part it does. Vago’s famous t-palatalisation/deletion rule from his book The Sound Pattern of Hungarian (1980 Washington D. C. Georgetown University Press) predicts that whoever “uses ragasszuk instead of ragasztjuk and nyissuk instead of nyitjuk” that is whoever uses ‘-szuk, -szük’ will always use ‘-suk, -sük’ as well and the other way round. This, however, is not true. (Kontra ed. 2003: 36–37) (See the earlier treatment of the same question in Kontra 1992.)
divided into three groups: *i. standard speakers*, who do not use the non-standard variety, *ii. semi-standard speakers*, who use some non-standard versions (‘-szuk, -szük’, but no ‘-suk, -sük’) and *iii. non-standard speakers*, who use all non-standard versions (‘-szuk, -szük and ‘-suk, -sük’). It is not only the distribution of the non-standard version that is different but also the speaker’s opinion about it. The characteristics of the phenomenon carry important social information as well as bringing forth and leaving open further linguistic questions.

4.

In the third chapter entitled *The Framework of the Study* (41–84) a detailed description of the Hungarian National Sociolinguistic Study follows. As an introduction to this chapter the editor gives the most concise description of the main goal of the study, which in his wording is “to map the social registers in Hungarian usage in Hungary, to establish the social phenomena linked to certain forms of language and to study linguistic change.” He also establishes the further goal of the book to become a basis for further theoretical generalizations (Kontra ed. 2003: 41).

The real presentation of HNSSS starts with a description of the principles of sample selection in sociolinguistic studies based on the very few existing Hungarian studies and on three foreign studies, two Canadian and an Australian one. Then follows a most detailed account of the evolution of the questionnaire, that was used in the study between 11 April and 3 May 1988, its relation to the study entitled Milieus carried out by Róbert Angelusz and Róbert Tardos, its characteristics as interpreted in the light of the data of the micro-census of 1984 and the census of 1990, as well as the major sociological characteristics of the study. The process and difficulties in choosing the speakers representing the inhabitants of Hungary above 18 years of age, the research centres – the 100 settlements shown on maps on the front and back cover of the book – and the questioners are presented.

All this is followed by a description of the questionnaire - from the methodological points of writing it to the details of its contents. There were 4 kinds of questions concerning language in the study: 1. grammatical decisions i.e. deciding about written sentences whether they were correct or incorrect, 2. oral sentence completion, that is completing a sentence with the form of a given word judged appropriate by the speaker, 3. choosing between alternative forms in a written text, as e.g. to decide between ‘amelyet/amit’ (which/that) or ‘vágyom/vágyok’ (two verbal forms of the verb ‘to wish’), 4. correcting errors in a written text. The independent, that is not language linked, variables based on the Milieus study and taken into account were: 1. the highest school degree of the speaker, 2. the type of his settlement of residence, 3. sex, 4. age, 5. occupation, 6. commuting, 7. ethnicity (Gypsy or non-Gypsy) and 8. his mobility. Another important variable that probably strongly influences language use was added, namely 9. his susceptibility to purism that is whether or not he listened to such purist radio programmes or whether or not he read such writings. The dependent,
that is linguistic variables studied were\(^{13}\) 1. (bVn) and (bV) that is the two versions of inessive (bVn): the standard [bVn] and the stigmatized [bV] and the illative (bV) and its versions: the standard [bV] and hypercorrect [bVn]; 2. the duality of the first person singular of the subjective conjugation of verbs ending in ‘-ik’ experienced in the conditional and the imperative, that goes back to the differences in conjugations with ‘-ik-’ and without ‘-ik-’, that is the S/1 variable (m), which has a standard [m] and a stigmatized [k] version, the S/1 conditional variable (nVk), which has three versions: standard [nék], antiquated/elevated style [nVm] and stigmatized [nák], the S/3 conditional variable (nV), which has two versions: standard [nV] and elevated style [ék], and the S/3 imperative variable (Vn), which has two versions: standard [Vn] and elevated style [ék]; 3. the variable (ami) ‘that’, which has two versions: the standard [ami] and the hypercorrect [amely] and the variable (amely) ‘which’, which has two versions: [amely] and [ami], 4. the variable (nVk)\(^{2}\) that is the first person singular ending of the conditional present tense, which has two versions: the standard [nék] and stigmatized [nák], 5. the variable (indicative of the verbs ending in ‘-t’), which has two versions: [indicative = imperative] and stigmatized [indicative = imperative] and the variable (imperative/subjunctive of verbs ending in ‘-t’), which also has to versions: [standard imperative/subjunctive] and hypercorrect [standard indicative], 6. the variable (természetes, hogy X) ‘it is natural, that X’, which has three versions: [természetes, hogy X], [természetesen X] and stigmatized [természetesen, hogy X], 7. the variable (e), which has two versions: standard [verbal predicate + e] and stigmatized [preposition/negative/etc + e], 8. the variable (a miatt) ‘because of that’, that has two versions: standard [a miatt] and stigmatized [az miatt], 9. the variable (miatt) ‘because of’, that has two versions: standard [miatt as a postposition of cause] and stigmatized [miatt as a postposition of goal] and the variable (végett) ‘in order to’, that has two versions: standard [végett as a postposition of goal] and stigmatized [végett as a postposition of cause] and 10. a few variables in orthography.

13 I must ask the reader to forgive me for the rest of this sentence. My only excuse is that this is one of the most important parts of the review. Points to be noted by the non-linguist reader are:

a) The term linguistic variable that comes from William Labov is a unit in language that appears in the same function but in various versions.

b) Rounded brackets indicate the linguistic variable and square brackets the possible manifestations of it.

The letter V appearing in several instances indicates the vowel that appears in various forms dependent on the phonological environment. (Thus e.g. [bVn] may be -ban/-ben, while [nVm] may be -nám/-ném.)

5.

What follow are chapters four and five that represent about forty per cent of the book on 144 pages that are too concise to be reviewed and at the same time are uniquely exciting. A complete presentation of the results of the study is included in these chapters. In the fourth chapter entitled Results of the Study: Effects of the Independent Variables on the Linguistic Variables (85–165), Miklós Kontra presents the results based on the nine linguistic variables described above and analyses the correlations of these with the nine independent variables from various aspects. In chapter 5, entitled Summing up the Effects of the Independent Variables (169–228) he gives a most complete treatment of the effects of the variable taken over from the Milieus study and the 'purism variable' added to these. (Instead of pointing out certain aspects let it suffice here that some of the results presented are thought-provoking for me, some were a complete surprise and having read through these chapters and having contemplated [?] over them finally a complete picture formed and that the level of elaboration of these chapters is astonishing.)

6.

The next short chapter is linked closely to the preceding ones and it complements them as well. It is entitled Task Effects (229–239). Here Miklós Kontra gives an insight into certain parameters that can influence the linguistic study of the social variability of language. These include the variability of individual language use, its seeming inconsistencies, the possible external influence originating in the setting of data types, the effect of the researcher’s instructions to the speaker, the order of the tasks and their repetition, the semantic and syntactic differentiation in the context and grammaticality of the test sentences, the various levels of acceptance of the variations of a given variable, or the uncertainties and differences in the use of the same variable in oral sentence completion, grammatical decision making and written error correction.

7.

In chapter number 7, entitled Nice Hungarian and Ugly Hungarian (240–255) the editor reviews the problem indicated in the title, which occurs often - and I am convinced it is not a linguistic problem – and gives answers based on answers given

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14 38.81%
15 This of course does not mean that there is nothing to be written concerning these 144 pages even in a review, just that one could only pick points capriciously at random from the results of this huge study presented here and from the questions arising from, within and through these results that would be difficult to argue for even in the framework of a book review. These 144 pages, just as the 227 following them must be known. (Especially by those who have a custom of or task to think, say or write anything about modern Hungarian.)
16 This does not mean of course that the answers given to this question do not convey important information for the sociolinguist.

to a question asked in HNSS in 1988, namely that *In various parts of the country people have various ways of speaking. Where do they use the nicest language and where the ugliest?* The results obtained, even though in aspects they were as expected and easy to explain, refuted the widely accepted stereotype of the ugliness of the language of Budapest, while the major characteristics of nice and elevated style were thought to be courtesy, determination and precision.

8.

In the eighth chapter entitled *Language and Society in the Time of Political Change* (256–322) four shorter papers are included. The first one is *Stigmatization and Language Awareness* (256–277) by Csaba Pléh which analyses and presents the strong stigmatization and hypercorrect tendencies present in the speech community of Hungarians living in Hungary. The next two are by Róbert Angelusz and Róbert Tardos, *Styles of Knowledge and Communicative Types* (278–296) and *Sociocultural Characteristics of Forms of Address in the Time of Political Change* (297–313), followed by *Customs of Greeting in the Time of Political Change* by Tamás Terestyéni. These are important works separately as well, and by presenting a wider sociological background they help the better understanding of the age and of what has been written by Miklós Kontra earlier.

9.

The ninth chapter bearing the title *Outlook, Politics, Jurisprudence, Human Rights, School* (323–335) is again written by the editor. Even though it is relatively short it is one of the most important parts17 of this very interesting book. In four short sections Miklós Kontra reviews questions related to language and language usage that are rarely thought after, such as the effect of Marxism-Leninism on the *Dictionary of the Hungarian Language*, the change in the forms of address ‘comrade’ and ‘sir’, the fate of the police term ‘Gypsy crime’ after 1 January 1990, the functioning of democracy if only 12 per cent of voters understand the question put to them at the ballot, the possible legal protection of the ‘purity’ of Hungarian, and the opinions of linguists on a law about language, the role of linguist experts in court, or the lack of it, the change in the meaning of the word ‘meleg’ (gay), the complete neglect of the different mother tongue and other forms of differentness of language in public education partly as set forth in the National Curriculum (NAT), the principles and methods thereof and the arguments and ideas behind it and the effect of all this behind keeping up and reproducing social inequalities.

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17 At least as far as the social effect of the problems touched upon here are concerned.
Apart from all that has been said so far the book has a very sympathetic trait all through. It is that the editor considers the reader as a partner capable of independent intellectual activity and also ready for it. He does not hide from the reader the difficulties and problems and possible uncertainties arising during the work.\textsuperscript{18} It is a result of this that one starts to value this book not just as a superhuman work but also as an exceptional intellectual adventure. This work and adventure together mean that after the publication of the book \textit{Language and Society in Hungary in the Time of Political Change} one cannot write about the Hungarian language as before.

**LITERATURE USED AND RECOMMENDED**


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\textsuperscript{18} Among these we find the point in the acknowledgements that thanks those who helped the thinking of participants of the study with their doubts and objections to the work (2003: 9), the doubts of the sociologist instructor of recording data, Ágnes Bokor concerning the feasibility of the study (2003: 47) and especially the disagreement between Lajos Balogh, dialectologist, who was asked to classify the research centres according to dialects, and Klára Sándor, the linguist adviser of the volume concerning the classification of Salgótarján that influenced the results as well (2003: 247).