Black, White, Colourful, Gray: Visual Effects in the Children's Book *Mimi & Liza*

Gabriella Petres Csizmadia

Gabriella Petres Csizmadia is a senior lecturer at the Institute of Hungarian Linguistics and Literary Science of the Faculty of Central European Studies of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. Her research focuses on three fields: investigations of autobiographical texts, contemporary children's literature and the issues of literary pedagogy and teaching literature. Her main publications include *Kontúrkísérletek – a kortárs irodalmi mese vázlata* (2021), *Legere. Módszertani kézikönyv az irodalom oktatásához* (cooperation with N. Tóth Anikó) (2020), *Fejezetek a gyermek- és ifjúsági irodalomból* (2015) and *Személyes (az) irodalom* (2014). Her studies have been published first of all in the journals *Irodalmi Szemle*, *Opus*, *Partitúra* and *Ambroosia*.

Abstract:

*The study presents the reader with an intermedial interpretation of the storybook *Mimi & Liza* written by Katarína Kerekesová – Katarína Moláková – Alexandra Salmela (2013). The storybook follows the story of the friendship of two little girls, Mimi, who sees the world proliferating in mad colours, and the blind Liza, who is immersed in inner seeing. The two girls are presented as each other's opposites through the semiotics of two counterpointing colour schemes. The analysis is based on Mitchell's conception of media (Mitchell, 1994), that is, it sets out by acknowledging the intermedial state of the culture of children's books, and then it follows the unfolding of the visual elements up through the investigation of expressive visual effects created by the text's rhetoric. The visualization happening with the help of language is the condition of the common worldview of the blind and seeing characters as well as the guiding principle and goal of the volume; therefore besides the visual representation characteristic of children's books, an emphasized role is given to the validation of the ekphrastic perspective in the analyzed work. The ekphrases of the text are presented as intermedial references (Rajewsky, 2010) based on Irina O. Rajewsky's interpretation of intermediality. A unique feature of the interpretation is that the ekphrases of the volume read as sort of imaginary/imagination ekphrases which create the special, children's book version of ekphrasis. It is characteristic for this imagination ekphrases that the order of the imaginary image and its linguistic description create an undecidable symbiosis. These images, however, can also be interpreted as inverted ekphrases, since they function not merely as descriptions of imagination ekphrases, but also as the visual world representations of linguistic imagination. Through several examples the study introduces and analyzes the mechanisms of the visualization happening with the help of language as well as the scenery painted with words.*

There are barely any medially homogenous children's books that consist solely of a body of text. This is particularly true in regard to contemporary children's literature, a genre that, given its hybrid mediality, has reacted very sensitively to the pictorial turn in visual culture (Visy, 2017, p. 463). This refers not only to W.J.T. Mitchell's oft-cited claim that "all media are mixed media" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 95) and that "the homogeneity of a purely verbal field is but a theoretical concept with a claim to global validity, as the linguistic always mingles with something non-textual, non-verbal, or material, with that which is its own Other that sometimes appears eruptively" (Sándor, 2006b, p. 65), but also to the immanent characteristic of works of children's literature that they strive for a medial mixedness and complexity by forming a transitory zone between verbal and visual media. This transitional, intermedial state results in a cooperation and interdependence between the linguistic and the pictorial, which in turn requires the synchronic coexistence of textual and pictorial elements, the parallel depiction of the visual and the textual narratives, and the interaction between and an intermedial interpretation of picture and text. According to Emőke Varga, "the recipient of an illustrated book is a viewer and a reader at the same time, reading/viewing images through the text and the text through the images" (Varga, 2007, p. 10), and therefore, meaning can be derived from the interrelations and interactions among pictorial and linguistic elements (Kantár, 2017, p. 19).

Such medial hybridity of children's books is due to reception psychology reasons, as members of the target audience, that is, small children, engage with the books primarily through visual communication and decode them by picture reading. Due to the special reception processes of child readers, children's books *a priori* involve a medial boundary-crossing, that is, the displaying of visual elements besides the text. According to Zsuzsanna Várnai, due to their pedagogical and psychological characteristics, pre-school children strive to interpret and comprehend their environment through visibility (Várnai, 2017, p. 393), and thus read books as "a series of images" (Révész, 2017, p. 419). For the past almost two hundred years, this peculiar need for medial complexity has been the foundation of the children's book market, which, in targeting "guided readers" (that is, child readers not yet capable of autonomous reading and thus relying on adults' assistance), has come up with new, mixed genres such as picture books, activity books, informational books, illustrated books, children's papers, and children's fables (Hermann, 2017, p. 18) that bridge linguistic and visual media. The so called "picture book culture" and the dominance of images have been a major organizing factor of the children's book market ever since.

Works of children's literature are defined by the relationship between image and text. With regard to analyzing the networked interconnectedness of text and illustration, György

Endre Szőnyi's claim seems relevant, who writes that in intermediality, "we have to diagnose an unsettlingly heterogeneous semiosis in which the pictorial and the verbal, the intuitive and the discursive, the iconic and the symbolic are overlapping and intertwined" (Szőnyi, 2004, p. 201). At the same time, Katalin Sándor highlights that the mingling of visual and verbal arts and the entanglement of different media and discourses are intrinsic characteristics of art: "‘Painting is like poetry, and poetry is like painting’—that is, it is possible, even desirable to strive for sensual and painterly effects and depictions in language and in literature, while images are suitable vehicles of narration, allegorization, and the representation of history" (Sándor, 2006a, p. 17). In this paper I consider a work of children's literature in which not only illustration and text engage in an intermedial interaction but the rhetorics of the text also invoke a plastic visuality in readers. In the analysis of *Mimi & Liza*, a Slovakian-language children's book by Katarína Kerekesová, Katarína Moláková, and Alexandra Salmela (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2013, 2016), I focus on pictorial effects and ekphrases generated by linguistic means instead of the characteristics of the illustrated children's book or the exploration of image-text relations in a traditional sense. In my analysis, I rely on the concept and typology of intermediality as developed by Irina O. Rajewsky, who distinguishes between three types of intermedial phenomena, namely, medial transposition, media combination, and intermedial references (Rajewsky, 2010). In the string of stories under scrutiny here, I analyze the operation of intermedial references, or references to a semiotic system. It describes cases where one medium refers to the system of signs of another medium and imitates the latter using its own medium-specific tools. According to Rajewsky, ekphrasis can also be considered such an intermedial reference, which in works of children's literature functions as a means of bringing fantasy to life. It means that its primary aim is not the linguistic depiction of an existing work of art (Heidrun Führer and Bernadette Banaszekiewicz calls this "factual ekphrasis" [Führer and Banaszekiewicz, 2014, p. 61] but the opening and embodiment of a fantastic world, that is, to depict fictional images ("notional ekphrasis" [ibid.]) and to function as a fantasy image-ekphrasis. Therefore, ekphrasis as it appears in children's literature aims not only to recreate and imitate but also to map the imagined world. In this sense, ekphrasis lets imagination run free, encourages the representation of the fantastic, which "must facilitate seeing through hearing" (Krieger, 2017, p. 508). In the analysis of *Mimi & Liza*, I primarily focus on the function of notions generated by colour effects as well as on the tools for creating plastic verbal depictions.

The black-and-white and the colourful

The storybook *Mimi & Liza*, first published in Hungarian in 2016, contains seven literary tales, and was originally created as an animated series. Due to its popularity over time, the creators were invited to turn it into a book (Tet'áková, 2014). The success of the animated series came from its vibrant visuality teeming with colours, and such visuality is also a key feature of the subsequent series of contemporary children's fables: the first book in the series (analyzed here) received an award for the most beautiful children's book in Slovakia in 2013 (Cíferská, 2014, p. 24). The themes, rhetoric, and design of the series rely heavily on visual elements. The dynamic dichotomy of colourfulness and lack of colour endows the characters, locations, and plot of the book with a symbolic-metaphoric meaning: after all, the string of literary tales aim to explore the colourful nature of the imaginary adventures the two title heroines concoct into their otherwise dull everyday lives. Colours therefore become the principal tools of visual creation, while the concepts of colourfulness and lack of colour maintain a continuous balance between utilizing their literal and metaphorical meanings, which in turn maintains the tension of both narration and narrative.

The storybook explores the friendship of two little girls, Mimi and Liza, who become friends when they move into the same residential block. The reader is made aware of the workings of intermedial reference already in the first tale which establishes the plot's framework and introduces the heroines. This story relies on the symbolic power of vision and pictorial elements, as shown by the dichotomy of colour schemes used for depicting each of the girls: Mimi is blind, black and white, and lives without colour ("This little girl, Mimi, was indeed black and white: her face was pale, her smooth, shoulder-length hair was black, and she wore a black tee and a white dress."), whereas Liza is a blue-eyed, blonde-haired, ruddy-faced, vivid character, who is sporting all the colours on her dotted dress. The focus on the visual features of the heroines is emphasized by the fact that the book comes with two bookmarks: a yellow (blond) and a black one. The two girls defined by colours represent two different worldviews, contrasting and complementing one another at the same time as a *homo duplex*. Liza's personality is just as strident and indulgent as her appearance: she is a truly colourful personality who knows no boundaries, boredom, or fear, and assertively seizes every opportunity. She is the one to initiate the adventures, to set events in motion, usually without any kind of foresight. Mimi, living with physical limitations, is rather careful, steers clear of extremes, and prefers order, balance, and predictability. With her level-headedness and foresight, she is the one to resolve their adventures and to find the way out of the often perilous imaginary situations. In terms of their insight, the blind Mimi is much more attentive in their adventures than Liza. The two girls symbolically represent a colourful and a black-and-white

world, respectively, and they are excited to explore and engage with each other's external and internal worldviews, trying to identify with one another's way of seeing. "Seeing together" grows to be a motto for the book ("One's eyes are open, the other one's are closed. Together they can truly see." [Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 1]), and accepting one another's colour scheme, that is, accepting one another, becomes paramount. Liza gradually learns the art of seeing "with the ears and touch" and extravisual perception from Mimi, who identifies colours through simile-mediated impressions as well as tactile, gustatory, and olfactory experiences and sensations: for example, the colour yellow means a warm summer for her, while her favorite colour is "the one I hear when it's raining" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 54). At the same time, Mimi's black-and-white world becomes more and more receptive to adventures articulated through colour, the experience of common play immersed in a fantasy world. The different colour and world perceptions of the two little girls, based on different experiences, get to define their identities, and learning about and accepting one another become the stake of their friendship and a condition of their playing together that forms the basis of their existence.

The colourful and the gray

The girls live in a gray block of flats in a gray city, yet when they spend time together, they enter a realm of fantasy opened up by their imagination and engage in adventures bursting with colour. As a result, by the end of the book, even the gray residential blocks introduced in the beginning of the story become colourful, both literally and metaphorically. This is aptly visible in the double-page illustrations before and after the story: before the stories, the illustration shows a corridor with closed doors coloured in gray and green, whereas after the stories, the images depict open doors and corridors teeming with people. The gray of the corridors is made colourful by the sharing of personal micro-stories and the establishment of lively neighbourly relations. The girls' main antagonist is grayness that "eats up all the colour" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 35) and means the lack of adventure, bleakness, and dullness for them. Mimi describes her attitude toward the colour gray and its repulsiveness through plastic similes: for her, gray "is like the cinder scrunching under our feet, or the haze under our eyelid, or the concrete wall on the way to Granny's, or the ash on fire baked potatoes, or the month of November" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 36). In the beginning of their friendship, Mimi briefly had second thoughts that Liza may also find her gray, that is, dull, but Liza points out that a black-and-white world is not the same as a gray one: "'How could you be dull!'", Liza snorted. 'And anyway, you're not even gray. You're black and white, neatly

separated. You're the most interesting girl in the world'" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 36). Already upon their first meeting, Liza realizes that Mimi's blindness does not hide a domain of darkness but instead a rich and colourful alternative world, which is an invigorating adventure to explore in itself.

Grayness, however, is key factor in the girls' lives as it pushes them to cross boundaries, and serves as a basis for boredom and as an environment that inspires their colourful fantasies. 'Gray-hunting' manifests in the girls' seeking of exciting adventures. These adventures are derived from the girls' dull, foggy, rainy everyday realities in the city: in their colourless environment, the girls come across some powerful visual effect, which completely sweeps them away, magically bringing the two-dimensional scenery to life, and, through metalepsis, swinging them over into a wild and colourful fantasy world. The transition from colourless to colourful, the meeting of the two worlds is marked by an overwhelming, quasi-hypnotic sensual effect, a visual experience bursting with colour that breaks the grayness, which bridges the rational and the irrational realms. The latter is expounded in a wild carnival of colours: the deeper the girls delve into an adventure, the more colourful their surroundings become, as if the increase and performation of colours were generating the adventures themselves. The battle against the gray and colourless ordinary is fought through the overflow of the colours of the girls' imaginary world.

Adventures into the imaginary world are usually triggered by the animation of a visual element, which functions as a kind of ekphrasis, and which stands out among the ordinary features of the girls' gray reality. These visual elements are either created by the girls, or they project them into their reality through their imagination. The "descriptions of representations generated in a medium other than verbal" (Milián-Bogyai, 2009, p. 29), that is, ekphrases, are created by the children's imagination; therefore, the visual experience requires the "seeing together" of Mimi and Liza as well as their pictorial interpretation that animates the rampant visuality. In this sense, ekphrases are the product of the operation of the imagination, fantasy image-ekphrases of sorts: special versions of children's book ekphrases that create an entangled symbiosis of the order of the fantasy image and its linguistic description. The images thus animated can, however, be also interpreted as reverse ekphrases, as they do not solely function as descriptions of fantasy images but also as the pictorial animation of linguistic imagination. Fantasy ekphrases therefore are hovering at the borderlands between the rational and the irrational worlds, unsettling and recontextualizing the world as experienced by the two girls. Creations that can be considered such fantasy image-ekphrases include Mimi's thousand-colour castle made of building blocks, which fascinates Liza so much that, entranced by the view, she

grabs her friend's hand and walks into the castle that is coming to life (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, pp. 22–31). A similarly overwhelming visual effect is produced by the rainbow painted on the gray wall of a corridor, which is wiped off by the building manager: the chalk powder from the remnants of the rainbow grows into a swirling cloud of dust, blowing the heroines into a world of the rainbow's colours (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, pp. 42–54); or the textile scenery consisting of the seamstresses' cloths, which is transformed into a savannah by the children's imagination (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, pp. 62–73).

The description of the block castle can be considered the rhetorical method of spatial description in literature as interpreted by Zsolt József Miklósvölgyi, that is, a structure of architectural descriptions. According to Miklósvölgyi, "this rhetorical structure is a specific case of ekphrasis which primarily raises the medial problem of the translatability and permeability between linguistic descriptions and spatial forms" (Miklósvölgyi, 2019, p. 157). The block castle is Mimi's artwork, that is, an object with a non-linguistic mode of existence, the presentation and medial translation of which is achieved by linguistic means. The visualization of the scenery here is based on the emphasizing of the swirling colours, that is, the visual effect; this way, the architectural ekphrasis can also be considered on the basis of Mitchell's interpretation, according to which ekphrasis is "the transformation of verbal representation into visual representation by the reader" (Szőnyi and Szauter, 2008, p. 205). The block castle is standing in the middle of Mimi's black-and-white room, in a colourless environment, and is sporting "all the world's colours" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 22). The castle is a magical building inside a non-magical one, in stark contrast with the puritanical and strictly pragmatic child's room. Such spatial embeddedness shows the hidden and covert nature of this imaginary world. Whereas Mimi's room is furnished for her, striving for a simplicity, clarity, and predictability to facilitate easy navigation (Mimi describes her room as follows: "Everything is neatly in order in it, so that I won't get tangled in any stocking lying about, or won't bump my head in open cupboard doors. My toys are also nicely stacked, each in its own place. I always know exactly where to find what." [Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 14]), the block castle built in the middle of the room "was taller than the girls, and had so many little gates, towers, and bridges that Liza could never make before" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 22). The description of the castle becomes a fantasy image-ekphrasis when Liza, circling "the miraculous construction" looking for an entrance, finds a "three-winged golden gate" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 22), and enters with Mimi. At this point, the castle becomes real, takes on a life of its own,

and becomes independent of its creator's will. The block castle becomes a dynamically changing scenery in a constant metamorphosis, which expresses its relations toward the intruders by (sometimes illogical) transformations of its space: the rainbow bridge leading to the castle falls down, the girls fall into the "unknown black depths" of the castle, in which they are met with "impenetrable" and "deep" darkness, gray, cobwebbed stone walls, cold floors, bats and spiders, and are attacked by a toy clown come to life. All of a sudden, the block castle has unknowable depths, and the construction turns into a gray stone labyrinth posing a threat to the girls. The personified castle lures them in with its attractive, colourful exterior, and its hostile nature is expressed through the chilling description of the repulsive building hidden underneath its shiny surface. The anxiety brought about the morose gray surroundings is dispelled by Mimi, who is not afraid of the dark and is unaffected by the sinister gothic scenery. Once she manages to calm the frightened Liza down, their depressing, grim spatial perception also changes, the light come on, and the block castle's malignance disappears: "the castle was brimming with sparkling and playful colours again, and all the dark spectres were gone. Colourful butterflies flickered in, tickling the girls' noses with their big wings. Mimi and Liza laughed, grabbed the clown's hand, and they stepped through the three-winged golden gate, right back into Mimi's room" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 30).

The marked opposition of gray and colourful is also presented in the ekphrasis of the chalk rainbow Mimi and Liza drew. The girls' draw the picture on the grayest of all gray places: the wall of the corridor in their residential block. To achieve the visual effect generated by the rainbow, it is important to show the circumstances under which the drawing was created: the girls, on a particularly gray and gloomy day, were trying to cheer each other up by drawing a rainbow. "It was a gray day. Gray rain was falling on the gray houses, which were barely visible in the gray mist. Gray cars were crawling along the gray streets; every now and then, gray people crossed the road, only to disappear immediately behind a gray door. This day, even the otherwise happy and gleaming ringing of the streetcars was dampened by the gray fog. Mimi and Liza were sitting on the gray corridor of their gray block of flats in silence" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 35). The description of the space and the weather acts as an ekphrasis in itself and goes beyond merely emphasizing grayness: the text invokes mental images of a slow, silent, gloomy, and tasteless world. The colour gray representing the boredom of time at a standstill becomes personified in the girls' imagination, with Liza saying, "[g]ray has eaten up all the colours, and its spreading so fast that it will gobble us up, too, in a minute" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 35). The battle against grayness broadens into an existential struggle, and to defend themselves against being overrun by boredom, they decide

to draw “a nice, big, colourful rainbow” (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 37) on the wall of the corridor “to make this ugly, gray sun shine” (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 37). To endow the rainbow with magical features, the girls ritually name and identify each colour through various sensory experiences expressed in the form of similes. Mimi draws the red stripe of the rainbow, which “is like a warm cup of tea in winter” (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 39); Liza paints the yellow stripe, which “is like the sun, like dandelions, like little chicks” (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 39). The depth of the different colours, however, only truly opens up when it becomes spatialized: when the grumpy building manager wipes the rainbow off the wall, the chalk powder grows into a wildly swirling cloud of dust, which shuffles the girls and the building manager into a world of the rainbow’s colours where each colour has its own microcosm. The rainbow born from the children’s drawing becomes a fantasy image-ekphrasis, with surreal colourscapes moving in rapid succession, each of which floods the girls with a myriad different shades and variations of a colour. The swirling colours originate from Liza’s dotted dress: Mimi throws a blue dot into the gray cloud of dust threatening the rainbow world in upheaval, which tames the dust storm and turns it into a blue cloud and blue raindrops, which in turn morph into a blue umbrella. Then the blue puddle under the girls’ feet grows into a waist-deep body of water and colourful fishes, and finally, the umbrella first turns into a boat, then a steamboat. The girls experience such overwhelming, creative overflows of colour for each and every colour of the rainbow, which reveal the countless different manifestations and infinite playfulness of each colour to the characters, and replace the gray-induced gloom with the euphoria, vividness, and flow inspired by the cavalcade of colours. The powerful visualization and sensory effects of the different colour experiences move the building manager to give herself over to the carnival of colours and to open up to the colourfulness of everyday life. The girls and the building manager travel back from the rainbow world animated by the drawing to the building’s corridor, and as a result of their experiences with colours, they acquire new, more colourful identities: their experiences have so strong an effect on them that they celebrate their new, refreshed worldview by taking on new names. Mrs. Grime, the building manager becomes Mrs. Mottle, and she would wear a leaf- and flower-patterned dress instead of her gray cardigan; Liza is renamed Dotted Liza after her characteristically cheerful dress; while Mimi becomes Rainbow Mimi as she can perceive and comprehend all the colours “with her hands and ears” (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 36).

Besides the linguistic description of the children’s architectural and painterly artworks created through their imagination, an applied art-based ekphrasis also deserves attention. One

day, Mimi and Liza visit the twin seamstresses living in their block, where the various kinds of intertwined textiles are reanimated by the girls' imagination as a seamstress' savannah: "The cloth rolls unwound. Yards and yards of textiles spread out into a wide, waving savannah" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 63). The savannah scenery culled together from various textiles is depicted in the text using metaphors (instead of similes) inspired by tools and materials used for sewing: patch bushes, zipper baobabs, lace locusts, brocade giraffes, and tulle ponds populate the multi-coloured scenery that changes from sentence to sentence. The seamstress' savannah contains several alliterative descriptions, a praiseworthy feature of not only the text's linguistic inventiveness: in the animated textile world, "wool-ephants are walking" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 65) and the girls are "supping on linen sidewalks" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 65). The savannah-ekphrasis focuses on the type of textile used as a material mediating device, and highlights it as an immanent feature of location and character descriptions, thus continuously reflecting on the fictional nature of the textile space. This metafictional method emphasizes the distinction between the rational and irrational worlds of the girls, and it interprets the materiality of the savannah scenery as a boundary set by the rational world: for example, the only way for the terrycloth crocodile to find a mate is it receives help from the rational world, where a patchwork crocodile is sewn for it. This all-encompassing textile world reveals itself to Mimi through touch, hearing, and smelling: "Mimi could smell the scent of the burning Sun and the light touch of the fresh breeze. Dry leaves of grass were rustling in the wind" (Kerekesová, Moláková and Salmela, 2016, p. 63). The dynamic performance and perpetual motion of the seamstress' savannah are also enhanced by the girls entering this exotic realm by riding a brocade giraffe or skipping ropes and swinging using the trunks of wool-ephants. The girls also leave the seamstress' savannah in a peculiar way: they ride a whinnying sewing machine back to the seamstress' flat.

Summary

Based on the analysis of the semiotics and plot-forming function of colours, intermediality can be considered a key characteristic of the storybook *Mimi & Liza*. The dynamics of and the interplay between pictorial and linguistic representation is apparent not only in the markedly eye-catching illustrations but in the rich descriptions and the abundance of ekphrases as well. Visualization through language serves as the common ground for the seeing and the blind heroines and as the guiding thread and aim of the book; therefore, beyond the pictorial representation characteristic of children's books, the work under scrutiny here also focuses on an ekphrastic approach. By opening up the boundaries between opposites, the events of the plot

focus the reader's attention on the mechanisms and resolutions of dichotomies, on the processes of interactions and transformations whereby the marked differences between the two heroines evolve into a friendship. Besides the fantasy image-ekphrases animating the play activities, it is also important to highlight the blind girl's scene descriptions (of the gray city, her own room, and her way of perception) which open pathways toward the experience and exploration of extravisual perception.

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Gabriella Petres Csizmadia
Institute of Hungarian Linguistics and Literary Science
Faculty of Central European Studies
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
gpetres@ukf.sk