Two Relative Contact Phenomena in the Language use of Hungarians in Transylvania

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ABSTRACT:

The paper discusses two peculiarities of language use generally taken to be relative contact phenomena in case of Hungarian in bilingual, non-dominant context: the preference of analytical linguistic variants and non-standard plural forms. The data come from two sociolinguistic surveys conducted in Transylvania (in 1996 and 2009). The surveys were carried out with the participation of a representative sample of speakers. The 1996 survey was conducted with a quota sample (N = 216 in Romania and N = 107 in Hungary) and the 2009 sample with a representative sample (N = 4058 in Romania). The hypothesis that Romanian-dominant bilingual speakers tend to exhibit relative contact phenomena to a larger extent was supported with respect to these two issues. The results show that the occurrence of these phenomena is determined both by the language competence of the dominant language and by the regional characteristics of the bilingualism. The results confirm the possibility that the spoken-language properties under discussion are relative contact phenomena.

Keywords: contact phenomena, minority varieties of Hungarian, analytic form, non-standard plural usage, sociological variables

1. Introduction

The effects of the state languages in the Hungarian linguistic regions surrounding Hungary manifest themselves not only in absolute contact phenomena (lexical borrowing) that are caused by bilingualism, and are different from the language varieties used in Hungary, but also in grammatical structures that can also be found in the language use of monolingual speakers in Hungary, albeit the frequency of such elements in these surrounding regions is either higher or the context in which they are used is wider: they are used in more language varieties and registers. These peculiarities of language use can be seen as relative contact phenomena because their presence cannot be explained merely

through the effect of the majority language, although this effect also cannot be ignored if the use of said structures is commonplace in the donor language. Relative contact issues differ from absolute contact phenomena in their nature: these structures may be present in a language usage independent of external influence, but the bilingual situation may weaken or strengthen linguistic structures under the influence of contact situation (Lanstyák 2003: 56–57, Benő 2008: 42–43, Nábělková 2014: 70). The non-standard use of plural forms, the use of analytical structures, the frequency of diminutive forms, and feminization in the language varieties used in these regions can be seen as such relative contact phenomena.¹

Based on this, we can form the hypothesis that the frequency of the aforementioned phenomena are closely related to bilingualism, and it is possible that speakers who are state-language dominant exhibit these relative contact phenomena to a higher degree.

In my study I present the process of analitization and the use of plurals in the Hungarian spoken in Transylvania based on the 1996 RSS study and the survey conducted by the Institute for Minority Studies in 2009.² Previously, I had written about feminization and the use of diminutives using a similar approach (Benő 2016).

2. The prevalence of analytical structures

As it is known, one of the typological characteristics of Hungarian as an agglutinating language is that it is more synthetic than Slavic or Romance languages in which analytical features are more commonplace. The tendency of Hungarian to use more compact structures can also be seen in that it expresses certain concepts using compound nouns more frequently than Indo-European languages (Göncz 1999: 151, Csernicskó 1998: 122, Benő–Szilágyi 2005: 157–160, Péntek–Benő 2020: 282–286). In the context of bi- and multilingualism, the effect of

1 The RSS study conducted by Miklós Kontra in 1996 looked at many different types of relative contact phenomena. For an analysis of these see Csernicskó 1998, Göncz 1999: 146–195, Lanstyák 2000: 200–226, Szépfalusi et al. 2012: 203–224, Fancsaly et al. 2016: 177–195. The crosstabs of the RSS research led by Kontra, Miklós (“The Sociolinguistics of Hungarian Outside Hungary.” Research Support Scheme group grant (RSS/HESP No. 582/1995) of the Higher Education Support Programme) were published in *Nyelv- és Irodalomtudományi Közlemények* (Kontra–Péntek–Szilágyi N. 2010, 2011).

2 In 2009, the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities (<http://ispmn.gov.ro>) in partnership with the Hungarian Demographic Research Institute and the Max Weber Institute for Social Research conducted a sociological and sociolinguistic survey among the Hungarians living in Romania. The title of the survey was *Demographics, Stratification, Language Use – Second Wave*. The number of respondents was 4058. The data obtained from the multi-tiered survey which used randomized sampling can be seen as representative of Transylvanian adult population (over the age of 18). The survey focused on the linguistic habits and patterns found in multilingual social situations (see also Horváth 2014).

the surrounding languages can manifest itself in the fact that analytical structures can appear with a higher frequency in the Hungarian language varieties found in the regions outside of Hungary than in those found within it. The 1996 survey shows that the speakers of Hungarian who live as minorities judge more frequently analytical structures natural or acceptable than those living in Hungary (Göncz 1999: 173–175). The participants of the survey had to choose between synthetic and analytical linguistic variants in terms of naturalness, familiarity and well-formedness in cases such as *tagdíj* – *tagsági díj* ('membership fee'); *buszozás* – *utazás busszal* ('riding the bus'); *hegedül* – *hegedűn játszik* ('playing the violin'); *szépítkeznek* – *szépíti magát* ('putting on make-up') etc. All of these linguistic variables could be found in all of the regions, but the surveyed minority speakers living in contact situations chose the analytical option on average more often than the speakers living in Hungary. Given that this difference is statistically significant in the case of most questions, it is very possible that the explanation that points to the indirect effects of the official language is correct. In the 1996 study, the answers given by Transylvanian speakers to four tasks were significantly different from the answers given by speakers of Hungary (K_503, K_507, K_603, K_613) (**Table 1**). In the case of all four tasks a greater proportion of Transylvanian speakers judged the analytical structures to be more natural and acceptable than Hungary-Hungarian speakers.

Task	Acceptance of analytical structure			Acceptance of synthetic structure			Significance level	
		Trans	Hu		Trans	Hu	chi-square	p
K_503 (<i>tagsági díj/ tagdíj</i>)	N	137	30	N	78	75	34.9307	0.000
	%	63.6	28.6	%	36.3	71.4		
K_507 (<i>utazás busszal/ buszozás</i>)	N	113	21	N	103	86	31.4968	0.000
	%	52.3	19.6	%	47.7	80.4		
K_603 (<i>légi teret/ légtérét</i>)	N	61	10	N	153	97	15.200	0.000
	%	28.5	9.3	%	71.5	90.7		
K_613 (<i>szépítette magát/ szépítkezett</i>)	N	133	21	N	79	84	51.3405	0.000
	%	62.7	20	%	37.3	80		
	Average %	51.7	18.6	Average %	48.2	80.6		

Table 1. The acceptance of analytical and synthetic structures by speakers in Transylvania (Trans) and in Hungary (Hu) (data showing significant differences) (1996, RSS-study).

The survey conducted in 2009 in Transylvania also contained a question which gave the options of *utazás busszal* – *buszozás* ('travelling by bus') (124.1: "Az alábbi mondatpárok közül válassza ki azt, amelyiket

természetesebbnek érzi” – ‘Choose from the following sentences the one that you feel is more natural’:

Un-om már ez-t a sok busz-oz-ás-t.
be.tired-1SG EMPH this-ACC the much bus-VDER-ADER-ACC

Un-om már ez-t a sok utazás-t busz-szal.
be.tired-1SG EMPH this-ACC the much travelling-ACC bus-INS
‘I am very tired of all this travelling by bus’.

In this case, 44.2% (N = 1745) of the Transylvanian participants felt that the analytical structure was more natural, and 51.6% (N = 2036) chose the synthetic form (163 participants, meaning 4.2%, chose the option *I don't know*). Therefore, just like in the survey from 1996, this study also shows that Transylvanian speakers have a high preference for analytical structures. If we look at the relationship between linguistic, social and regional parameters, based on the data we can see *regional differences*: more of those living in a diaspora (in the counties of Arad, Máramaros/Maramureş, Brassó/Braşov, Temes/Timiş, Beszterce/Bistriţa and Fehér/Alba) found the analytical structure more natural (56.7% [N = 417] compared to those living as a majority in their region – in Székely Land – where 38.3% [N = 492] chose the analytical option). The significance level of this relationship: chi-square = 62.606, df = 2, p = 0.000, N = 3763. We also find a statistically significant difference between the options chosen based on *type of settlement*. Those living in villages chose the analytical structure less frequently: 40.6% (N = 756), whilst 47.4% (N = 988) of those living in cities found the analytical structure familiar (chi-square = 28.114; df = 2, p = 0.000). The relationship between *how well the participant speak Romanian* and how frequently they chose the analytical structure supports the interpretation of analitization as a relative contact phenomenon. The data show that the better the participants' language skills in Romanian, the more natural the analytical form seems to them: 48.4% of those who judged themselves as *perfect* at speaking Romanian chose the analytical structure, and 49.2% of those who deemed themselves *very good* at it chose this option. 44% of those who felt that they *don't know Romanian very well, but they can make themselves understood*, and 36% of the ones who felt that they *mostly understand, and have difficulty making themselves understood* chose the analytical option as more natural. This same percentage for those who felt that they *barely understand a few words* is 32.7%, and for those who do not understand Romanian at all, it is 29% (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. The preference for analytical structures and Romanian language competence

The answers given to the question regarding the language used at home (101.1) also confirm the correlation between the frequency of Romanian language use and the preference for analytical forms. 43.5% (N = 1417) of those who said that they *only speak Hungarian* at home, and 40.3% (N = 73) of those who said they *mostly speak Hungarian* at home chose the sentence that contained the analytical structure. This same percentage for those who chose *half in Romanian, half in Hungarian* is 46.9% (N = 90), and for those who chose *mostly in Romanian* it is 55% (N = 55). The language used at home and the preference for an analytical or synthetic structure shows a statistically significant correlation (chi-square = 175.536, df = 5, p = 0.000, N = 3758).

3. The use of plurals

It is well-known that in the Hungarian standard variety the nouns designating objects comprised of more parts have a tendency to be used in singular form: for example, body parts that come in pairs (*fáj a lába* '(she) has aching foot' [lit. her foot ache] instead of *fájnak a lábai* 'she has aching feet' [lit. 'her feet ache']), fruit- and vegetable names when they mean a category, especially if they come after a quantifier (*sok banán*-SING 'lot of banana' and not *sok banánok*-PL 'a lot of banana') (Göncz 1999: 154, Lanstyák 2000: 213, Péntek–Benő 2020: 299). Usually, the noun is in plural form after the quantifier in the surrounding Indo-European languages. Thus, in Romanian the structure that has the same meaning as Hungarian *sok banán* also contains a plural form: *multe*-PL *banane*-PL.

The Hungarian structures containing the words *sok* ('a lot of'), *kevés* ('few') and *többi* ('other') are especially prone to have a plural noun due to the effect of Romanian in Transylvania. This phenomenon can be observed in the language use of primary and secondary school students as illustrated in the following examples:

„*A többi testvér-e-i-m még nem jár-nak iskolá-ba.*”
 The other-PL sibling-PX3SG-PL-POSS-1SG yet not go-3PL school-ILL
 'My other siblings don't go to school yet.'

„*Minél kevesebb baj-ok van-nak, an-nál boldog-abb vagy.*”
 More few-COMP problem-PL be-3PL that-AD happy-COMP be-2SG
 'The fewer problems there are, the happier you are.'

„*Nagyon sok dolg-ok-at gyárt-ott-ak, ami szennyez-t-e a levegő-t.*”
 Very many thing-PL-ACC make-PAST-PL which pollute-PAST-3SG the air-ACC
 'They produced a lot of things which polluted the air.' (Bohonyi 2011: 59)

Both the form of the agreement with the plural noun that is different from the variety used in standard Hungarian, and the unusual use of nouns can be seen as a relative contact phenomenon, given that it does appear in the varieties used in Hungary, but to a much lesser extent than in the neighbouring regions. This might point to the effects of bilingualism.

The RSS-study conducted in 1996 also measured habits of language use in sentences where the participants had to choose whether the singular or plural form seems more natural, and in the sentence-completion exercises they had to decide which form to pick: *Nézd, milyen szép banánt/banánokat árulnak az üzletben.* ('Look, what beautiful banana/bananas are being sold in the store.') *Erzsi néninek fáj... a szív..., Kati néninek meg a láb... is fáj...* ('Aunt Erzsi's heart... hurt..., but Aunt Kati's leg... also hurt...'). A total of 9 tasks were aimed at the study of agreement in the case of plural forms (K_505, K_506, K_511, K_534, K_601, K_604, K_606, K_611, K_626). In Hungary's neighbouring countries, speakers living in a minority situation chose to use plural forms more frequently than the participants who live in Hungary, although the difference is at times small and statistically insignificant. We can hypothesize that this is also a case of relative contact phenomenon, because the speakers who are actively bilingual or exhibit state-language dominance used non-standard plural forms more frequently, as demonstrated by the data from Vojvodina, Serbia and from Southern Slovakia (Göncz 1999: 185, Lanstyák 2000: 214). A somewhat higher proportion of participants from Transylvania chose the plural answer at the relevant questions than the participants from Hungary (on average the proportion of Transylvanian respondents who chose plural forms was greater with 6.35%). A statistically significant difference can be seen in the answers given to the question nr. 611 by the Transylvanian participants compared to the participants from Hungary ('Karikázza be az [1]-et vagy a [2]-t, aszerint, hogy melyik illik jobban a mondatba! A fiúk még tavaly jelentkeztek... [1] *tűzoltóknak*, [2] *tűzoltónak* 'Circle [1] or [2] depending on which fits better in the sentence! The boys signed up to be ... last year. [1] *fireman* [2] *firemen*'). In this case 37.1% (N = 79) of the Transylvanian participants chose the plural form. In the case of

the participants living in Hungary this number is 15.1% (N = 16). The significance level of this difference is: chi-square = 16.3737, df = 2, p = 0.0000, N = 319). The difference between the answers given at question nr. 506 also shows a significance level close to statistical significance.

K_506: „Az alábbi mondatok közül karikázza be az egyiket, azt, amelyiket természetesebbnek érzi.”

Q-506: Out of the following pairs of sentences circle the letter corresponding to the sentences you consider to be more natural sounding.

- [1] *A mai* *gyerekek* *attól* *válnak* *önzőkké,*
The today-ADER child-PL that-ABL become-3PL selfish-PL-TRA
hogy *mindent* *megkapnak.*
that everything-ACC PVB-get-3PL
- [2] *A mai* *gyerekek* *attól* *válnak* *önzővé,*
The today-ADER child-PL that-ABL become-3PL selfish-SG-TRA
hogy *mindent* *megkapnak.”*
that everything-ACC PVB-get-3PL

‘Modern children become selfish because they get everything [that they want]’.

Here 40% (N = 86) of the Transylvanian participants chose the plural form compared to 29.9% (N = 32) of the participants living in Hungary. The significance level of this difference is: chi-square = 3.1350, df = 2, p = 0.0766, N = 322.

In the questionnaire used for the 2009 survey we can also find the following question related to the use of plural forms: „Az alábbi mondatpárok közül válassza ki azt, amelyiket természetesebbnek érzi – ‘Choose from the following sentences the one you feel is more natural’:

1. *Néz-d,* *milyen szép* *banán-t* *árul-nak* *az üzlet-ben.*
Look-IMP-2SG what kind beautiful banana-SG-ACC sell-3PL the store-INE
2. *Néz-d,* *milyen szép* *banán-ok-at* *árul-nak* *az üzlet-ben.”*
Look-IMP-2SG what kind beautiful banana-PL-ACC sell-3PL the store-INE
- ‘Look, what beautiful bananas are being sold in the store.’

The second option is the non-standard form in Hungarian. 71% (N = 2785) of the participants chose the standard form, and 25.3% (N = 2785) the non-standard form. (146 participants – meaning 3.7% – chose to answer *I don’t know*.) The percentage of the participants choosing the non-standard form in the 1996 RSS-study was 12.6% (N = 27).

A correlation can be discovered between the *Romanian language competence, the frequency of the use of Romanian* and the preference for standard or non-standard forms. Those who deemed that they speak mostly in Romanian with their friends chose the sentence containing the non-standard plural more frequently than average (37.8% more frequently). The participants who deemed that when they count in their heads, they do so in Romanian half the time or most of the time also

had a higher preference for non-standard plural forms. In the case of the former, 30.9% (N = 60), and in the case of the latter 45.1% (N = 37) preferred the non-standard plural (chi-square = 21.726, df = 4, p = 0.000, N = 3714). What also shows the correlation with Romanian language skills is that 32.9% of those who answered that they switch fairly frequently to Romanian when they are speaking in Hungarian also chose the non-standard plural form.

We can also find a correlation with the level of education. Those whose highest level of education is at a primary or secondary school level felt that the non-standard plural is more natural, on average by 28.8%. That percentage in the case of high-school-educated respondents is 24.9%, and the proportion for the university graduates is 18.3%. (The chi-squared test shows that this correlation is statistically significant: chi-square = 19.871, df = 2; p: 0.000, N = 3794).

The correlation between *religion* and the studied linguistic parameter is also statistically significant (chi-square = 38.236, df = 5; p = 0.000, N = 3614). The members of churches that have Hungarian religious ceremonies (Catholic, Calvinist, Evangelical-Lutheran, Unitarian) were less likely to choose the non-standard option (on average 22.8% of them did), than those belonging to a church that uses the Romanian language (Orthodox, Greek Catholic), where the non-standard option was chosen by 39.3% (**Figure 2**). It seems possible in this case that religious ceremony can also be perceived as a platform for language use, because the churches that have ceremonies exclusively in the state language provide yet another platform for the use of the official language, and thus strengthen the dominance of Romanian in the language use of bilinguals. The case is also linked to linguistically and ethnically mixed marriages, since most of the Hungarian speaking believers belonging to these churches come from mixed marriages.

Figure 2. The levels of non-standard plural preference and religious denomination (2009)

4. Conclusions

The results of the study confirm the hypothesis that the preference for analytical linguistic structures and the more frequent use of non-standard plural forms in the regions surrounding Hungary can be viewed as relative contact phenomena, as is the case with feminization and the more common use of diminutives (Benő 2016). The correlation between choosing the aforementioned forms and Romanian language skills points to this. A preference for analytical structures and non-standard plural forms can be seen in the case of those participants who deemed themselves to have greater Romanian language skills and use Romanian more frequently. The difference in terms of preference for analytical structures between participants living in diaspora and those living as a local majority in their region is also linked to this: those living in the diaspora had a higher tendency to choose the analytical structure. Similarly, the preference for non-standard plural forms shows a correlation with religious denomination: members of the churches that provide religious ceremony exclusively in the state language (Orthodox, Greek Catholic) were more likely to choose the non-standard plural form.

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