

Cultural regionalism in Hungarian context

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ABSTRACT:

As an introduction to the thematic issue of *Hungarian Studies Yearbook*, dedicated to *Regionalism in culture – cultural regionalism*, the article offers an overview of current research interests in the field. Within the domain of Hungarian studies, regional approaches and the idea of cultural areas as an important frame for cultural analysis and comparison was present in research work from the 19th century. After a general introduction, the article presents the current methodological approaches to regionalism studies and the main topics debated in the fields of literary studies, linguistics, and cultural anthropology.

Keywords: cultural anthropology, Hungarian studies, regionalism, linguistics, literary studies, local identity constructions

In general, regionalism is interpreted in political and cultural contexts. As a political term, it refers to administration and to forms of organizing local political power, to the degree of autonomy of the local communities. As a cultural term, it is related to local identity constructions, languages, different forms of physical and spiritual culture (arts, literature, folklore, religion). Since regionality also presupposes complex local identities, the research projects in the field are often connected to the following topics: attitudes of minority and majority groups, traditions and (post)modernity, mobility and cultural change, aspects of ideological backgrounds concerning the function of culture, language, and literature.

The focus of this volume entitled *Regionalism in culture – cultural regionalism* intends to present regions as geographical and cultural units in the context of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Within the field of literary studies, the concept of ‘regional literature’ intersects several areas of interest, and during the last decades, the question of literary regionalism was addressed from various perspectives. Area studies, the study of spatial representations, border studies, postcolonialism studies, the study of minor literatures, of intercultural communication and transnational identities have their own research questions to be addressed through the discussion of regional literatures. Within Hungarian literary studies, the question of discussing the topic became increasingly relevant during the last century because of the processes of institutionalization in the minority Hungarian literatures of the countries neighbouring Hungary. In this respect, one of the main research interests referred to the relationship between regional Hungarian literatures and Hungarian literature as a national construct. The result was manifold because of paradigmatic differences in constructing national cultures. As one of the theorists of regional literatures pointed out during the age of postmodernist pluralism, the focus on regional aspects opened up the possibility to highlight the pluralisms inherent in national cultures. However, another fallacy from this perspective was the possibility to repeat the organicist metaphors of traditional approaches to national cultures (Dainotto, 486) – mental constructs of regions may differ substantially from one another.

In this respect, the region as a mental construct, a utopia that tends to incorporate an increasing number of layers connected to social, economic, cultural and political emancipation (Vallasek, 60) became a topic for further research within the domain of Hungarian studies. Rethinking the scale based on which new questions are asked became necessary. Constructs like East-Central Europe, with a focus on its postcolonialist approach, may help to better articulate the relevance of different historical contexts within such analyses (Terian, 21). The articles published in the current issue of *Hungarian Studies Yearbook* may help further explore the question of regionality on different scales, following a comparative method.

The approach proposed by László Boka (*A Missed Opportunity? Transylvania as a Virtual Central Europe*) places the discussion into a Central European context. One of his main arguments highlights the potential to see the regional identity construct of Transylvanism as a version of the idea of Central Europe. The values that are central to the early theories of Transylvanism, formulated by authors like Aladár Kuncz or Károly Kós seem to show relevant analogies with the ideas of cultural dialogue characteristic for the Central European area.

Another important possibility is to compare European microregions like the Tornio Valley in Northern Scandinavia with Transylvania. Such approaches have a tradition in the interwar Transylvanian press, where Aladár Kuncz proposed a thematic column in his journal *Erdélyi*

Helikon, dedicated to minority cultures and regional cultures of Europe. In her article (*Components Of Belonging in Two Finno-Ugric Minority Literatures*), Enikő Molnár Bodrogi compares linguistic and cultural strategies of authors like Bengt Pohjanen, writing in Meänkieli, and Károly Molter, writing in Hungarian – examining, in fact, the literary representations of such issues. The analysed novels create viable models for constructing regional identities, discussing in detail the functionalities of different languages within the Scandinavian and Transylvanian contexts.

Code-switching, as an alternation between languages, is a distinctive feature of bi- and multilingual persons living in regions where several languages are spoken. The phenomenon was searched intensely in bilinguals' speech (Myers-Scotton 1993, Martin–Wei 2009), but it is also present in literary texts. Johanna Domokos and Marianna Deganutti in their article (*Four major literary code-switching strategies in Hungarian literature. Decoding monolingualism*) provide an innovative framework that can be used to cover most literary multilingual practices as aesthetic play. As the authors point out, these multilingual literary practices can be classified in multiple ways and the functions of codeswitching in literary texts are complex and multi-layered.

A comparative approach by Zsuzsanna Varga (*Writing For The Family Audience*) raises also a more general question of the aims and results of comparing products of different cultures and of different regions. The author analyses the relationship between the German *Gartenlaube* and the Hungarian *Családi Kör*. Contrary to a long historiographical tradition, the article offers an alternative view of their relationship, distancing herself from models of influence and originality; as a result, the article avoids the colonial narrative that views Eastern European press and literary modernization as mimetic afterlives of Western European 'origins' and 'originality'. The article performs an inversion of this tradition, arguing that the *Családi Kör* as a spin-off of the *Gartenlaube* opens another path and worldview that was not available for the German periodical.

In linguistics, regionalism is connected to the regional and social varieties of a language. It also implies bilingualism and plurilingualism since, in most cases, cultural regions presuppose more language variants and multiculturalism. In a multi-ethnic context, the relationship between languages is very complex. We can speak about the symmetry and asymmetry of languages concerning their usage, juridical status, and linguistic competence of bilingual speakers. As it is well known, the main base of ethnicity is the mother tongue: language community is seen as an ethnic community. The varieties of a language are also connected to different forms of identity since through different verbal codes speakers also identify their geographical origins, their social background, and group membership. Dialects can have the function of sociolects and thus local and social identities are interconnected.

The linguistic diversity of a territory contributes to building up different cultural and ethnic identities and thus language is also one of the region-forming factors. As it is known, about 3,000 000 Hungarian speakers (about one-third of the Hungarian-speaking population) live outside Hungary in a minority situation, most of them in the regions neighbouring Hungary: in Transylvania (Romania), in the Southern part of Slovakia (former Upper Hungary), in Vojvodina (Serbia), etc. Their minority situation also means limited possibilities of using mother tongue in formal context: in education, administration, and justice. The intense influence of the official languages leads to interference and contact phenomena in these minority variants of Hungarian, and also creates a multicultural context with complex social interactions.

Hungarian-speaking people living in Slovakia are the largest minority in Slovakia. The efficiency of their education in Hungarian and the primary school students' language competence is presented in the article written by Viktória Gergelyova and Ildikó Vančo (*Difficulties in reading comprehension of Hungarian primary school students in Slovakia*). The study presents the problems found in cognitive reasoning, accurate interpretation of information, and complex reading comprehension. The empirical research of the article was conducted in two grade levels in bilingual regions in the eastern, central, and western parts of southern Slovakia. The results point out that independent processing of the text was a problem for most students. Another competence that needs to be developed is the correct interpretation of information without ignoring the context. The conclusions of the study are useful and relevant for educational planning in cases of bilinguals living in a minority situation.

Another Hungarian minority situation is presented by Boglárka Németh in the context of dialects and language variants. In her article (*On the enregisterment of Szekler. Communicational stereotypes recreated in the sketch Úgy-e, Magdi? by Open Stage*) Németh analyses aspects of stereotypical representations of a Transylvanian Hungarian dialect (Szekler) through a case study on a satirical representation. The work is a contribution to a new field of study: the enregisterment of language variants, the process through which a linguistic repertoire becomes a socially recognized register. The process of enregisterment is manifested through public discourses, as the article points out. The analyses show that enregisterment is based not only on lexical and phonetical aspects of speech but also on specific grammatical and conversational practices which are also part of stereotypical representations of Szekler speech. The study also carries out a pragmatic analysis of the interactions depicted by the sketch, revealing the semiotic repertoire assigned to the Szekler dialect.

Hajnalka Dimény's article (*Do verbal meanings have a radial organization?*) is a cognitive-functional analysis of two Hungarian verbs (*eszik* 'eat' and *táplál* 'feed'). The results and the conclusions contribute to a better understanding of the structure of polysemy and the process of new meaning formation. The hypothesis of the study, that it is possible

a radial category description of the internal semantic structure of both verbs, was not confirmed by the analysis. However, the article shows that figurative uses of verbs are not motivated only by the primary meaning but also by other semantically plausible links in the polysemantic structure of the verb. The article refers to different language variants, styles, and texts types in the analyses. The way of approaching the problem opens up an important line of discussion concerning the structure and origin of verbal polysemy.

While in cultural anthropology and partly also in European national ethnographies,¹ the main approach is the case study², i.e. a deep, detailed and focused analysis of a particular settlement/community through long-term fieldwork and participant observation (known in Anglo-Saxon terminology as ethnography), the larger spatial-territorial organization of culture also was and still is at the forefront of different subfields and approaches. In this respect, the concept of larger cultural homogeneity, the existence of cultural areas as an important frame for cultural analysis and comparison was present in research work from the 19th century. On a different level Hungarian ethnographers – following and furthering the ideas of their German counterparts – also envisaged national culture as the entirety of smaller regional cultures with their differences and boundaries, but also similarities and continuities.

In European national ethnographies ethnographic atlases on the one hand and the study of regional cultural groups, on the other hand, clearly represented the endeavours of describing and delimiting territorially distinct cultural units, while the same endeavours urged ethnographers to formulate the need of transcending national boundaries and investigate cultural phenomena in more European, international contexts. Thus, a significant amount of scientific efforts was invested in conceptualizing the tools for the investigation and description of these territorial units, and also in the description of different regional cultures. The conceptualization included a debate on terminology and pointed to the potentially relevant components of such conceptualizations. Customs, dances and folk music, religion, dialects, folk dresses, vernacular architecture, marriage relations, tools and economic practices – only a few examples of how Hungarian ethnographers tried to grasp the complexity of regional cultures. And while discussing these cultural facts, they inevitably brought into discussion the problem of boundaries, identity and identity politics, the conflicting ideas of identity constructions, the contexts of globalization and nation-building.

As one can see, the idea of territorial organization of cultures is rooted in the 19th and 20th-century traditions of cultural anthropology and

1 Following the German tradition sometimes referred to as *Völkerkunde* and *Volkskunde* (Vermeulen).

2 Although the 19th century tradition of cultural anthropology predicted a more general framework in discussing the large-scale processes of humankind. But this general view was more or less entirely abandoned with the emergence of Malinowskian model of anthropological fieldwork.

national ethnographies. But through these contemporary connections to the problem of identity and boundaries, this is a field that fruitfully contributes to the reinterpretation of our knowledge about culture. In the context of territoriality and culture, one can discuss, *inter alia*, the characteristics of a particular region, but also nationalism and transnationalism, locality and multilocality, territoriality and deterritorialization etc. (Appadurai 2005). The articles included in this issue reflect the complexities of this reinterpretation.

Helena Ruotsala in her article investigates the impacts of the Covid-19 in the cross-border region of Tornio Valley between Finland and Sweden, using concepts of transnationalism and multilocality. The formerly almost invisible border suddenly became visible again with the Corona outbreak and was marked by a riot fence. The local inhabitants were forced to realize the reemergence of their nation states and the different strategies in fighting Covid-19, the tangibility of the new border and its impact on their everyday routines. A cultural and economic region became suddenly split by a “new” border, putting under question mark the existing practices of transnationalism and multilocality.

One of the key representatives of the spatial approach in Hungarian ethnography was György Martin, a folk dance researcher and musicologist, who had an enormous contribution to the elaboration of concepts of dance dialects. Sándor Varga presents his findings in this framework – also by reinterpreting it – when names and delimits the internal regions of Mezőség (Câmpia Transilvaniei, a particular ethnographic region in central Transylvania, that has a highlighted importance in Hungarian ethnography due to its archaic folk music and folk dances). The author argues that one needs a closer look to successfully grasp the similarities and differences in the geographical distribution of traditional dance culture in Mezőség, and delimits a smaller area called the Palatka dance district.

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