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Social Factors Influencing the Acquisition of the Romanian Language by Students Belonging to a Local Community Hungarian Minority

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Abstract

Research on language acquisition is a central theme in sociolinguistic research. Contemporary social, economic and political processes affect the life of communities and the languages what they speak. Globalization, migration and the enlargement of the European Union can significantly change the role and the future of majority and minority languages. In this research, we aim to reveal the family level language choice strategies of the Hungarian community in the small town of Margitha (Bihor County, Romania), discussing the role of family related social framework that positively or negatively influences the motivation of minority students to acquire knowledge of the Romanian language. For this purpose, we used both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. The results of research confirm that in multi-ethnic communities perhaps the most important, however at the same time the most vulnerable component of ethnic identity is the linguistic identity, which plays a key role in shaping the cultural landmarks and contents that determine the social integration of the individual. The positive family effects of socialization with the Hungarian language can be observed mostly in the ethnically homogeneous family. However, if one of the spouses is ethnic Romanian, the dominant language of communication within the family is more likely to be the Romanian language.

Keywords: *Linguistic socialization; minority students; multi-ethnic communities; motivation to learn the language; influencing factors.*

1. Introduction

Contemporary social, economic and political processes affect the life of communities and the languages what they speak. Globalization, migration and the enlargement of the European Union can significantly change the role and the future of majority and minority languages.

At community level, linguistic socialization is a central factor in language preservation. In multi-ethnic communities, perhaps the most important and at the same time the most delicate component of ethnic identity is linguistic identity, which enables community members to engage in social life and plays a key role in

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shaping the cultural framework and content that define an individual's social integration.

Our research is discussing the role of the family related social framework that positively or negatively influences the motivation of Hungarian minority students to acquire knowledge of the Romanian language. In this paper, we shall reflect on the influence of the family environment in the process of linguistic socialization of children belonging to the Hungarian minority.

2. Problem Statement

Research on language acquisition demonstrate that in most cases, the family is the primary basis and starting point of education, positive socialization with the mother tongue, and mother tongue education. The family, as the primary factor of socialization, makes a decision that is very important for the future, taking into account linguistic socialization, thereby planning the linguistic future of children (Piller, 2002).

Family language policy can be defined as an "explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within the home among family members" (Fogle & King, 2013). Representatives of this field of research (e.g., Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Luykx, 2005) have attempted to integrate theory, public policy data, and language areas of children's language acquisition. The main research preoccupations concerned "family language ideologies (how family members think about language), language practices (what they do with language), and language management (what they try to do with language)" (Spolsky, 2004).

Monolingual families mostly have their own language policy, for example in terms of practical use or politeness (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Spolsky, 2004). An important area of research on family language policies is how family decisions provide the framework for parental interaction and the linguistic development of children (De Houwer, 1999).These decisions and practices determine, for example, the cross-generational transmission of minority language within the family (Fishman, 1991).

Much research has focused on bilingual and even multilingual families in order to better understand how to preserve the inherited language in our homes. These studies took into account a number of factors in order to promote child bilingualism policies, including parental consistency, child age, social contexts, and support (De Houwer, 2009). While there is no specific language policy for a bilingual family (e.g., one parent is monolingual only) and due to the fact that the child is regularly acquainted with the two languages, research suggests that a home language policy that reflects multilingualism cannot be ignored (Döpke, 1998).

An increasing number of researches examine the critical influence of children on the language use of parents. In contrast to previous research which mainly emphasised the role of parents in the linguistic socialisation of children (Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002), more recent work focused on family socialization as a collaborative outcome, i.e., that children are also active participants in their parents' socialization with languages (Luykx, 2005; Goodwin, 2006).

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

The general aim of our research is to reveal the family environment related language choice strategies of the Hungarian community in the small town of Margitha (Bihor County, Romania), focusing on the following specific aims/research questions:

a) What are the factors that contribute to the linguistic socialization of children?;

b) What is the influence of the family upon children in learning their mother tongue, and later the extent to which the Hungarian language is present in different language use scenes in the child's life?;

c) Based on the sociological characteristics of the families of the heterogeneous Hungarian community in Marghita, what differences can be discovered in the field of the use and function of languages?;

Based on results of previous studies (Flóra & Szilágyi, 2008; Sallai, 2010) we started from the hypothesis that in the case of ethnically homogeneous marriages, the experience and transmission of Hungarian identity, Hungarian language to the next generation is a natural and usually undisturbed process. If, on the other hand, one of the spouses is Romanian, the dominant language of communication within the family is likely to be Romanian language.

4. Research Methods

In this research, conducted in 2019 in the town of Marghita (Bihor County) we used the following quantitative and qualitative methods:

a) Questionnaire based survey of the students enrolled in the Hungarian language Horváth János High School in Marghita according to ethnic family background and self-declared national identity. The survey, conducted with the help of teachers, included the whole student population of the school (904 students);

b) Study of the available data from official records and church registers concerning the ethnic distribution of population in Marghita;

c) Interviews with local church leaders concerning the linguistic options within ethnically heterogeneous (Hungarian-Romanian) families;

d) Family background case presentations of the high school students identified as belonging to ethnically mix families, focusing on linguistic options and influencing factors within the family.

5. Findings

5.1. Ethno-demographic characteristics

The current population of Marghita is 13 871, 38% of whom are of Hungarian ethnicity according to the estimation of the local organization of the Hungarian Democratic Union in Romania (HDUR). The following data show a sharp decline in the Hungarian-speaking population both numerically and in its

share in the total population (from 45, 8% at the 2011 census to an estimated 38% in 2019); this is also due to the fact that there was a considerable wave of migration abroad, assimilation into ethnic Romanian population due to mix marriages, and demographic aging which resulted in increasing death rates.

Table 1. Ethnic distribution of population in Marghita

Year	RO	HU	Other	Total
2002	9167	7468	656	17291
2011	7800	6930	404	15134
2019	No data	5571	No data	13871

Source: Romanian census data (2002, 2011); estimation of local HDUR organization, personal communication to the authors, 13.06.2020 (2019)

According to the 2019 records of the registers of the local churches linked to Hungarian population, the membership of the Roman Catholic Church totals 1210, and that of the Reformed Church is 2140, while the number of children studying in the Hungarian school is 906.

From our interviews with church leaders result that according to the family tracking they made, if an ethnic Hungarian marries an ethnic Romanian, in most of cases their children are christened as Orthodox and the dominant language is Romanian in the family; consequently the children are enrolled in a school with Romanian teaching language. The Roman Catholic priest shared his observations made during his annual family visits (587 families who asked for the blessing of their flats). In the overwhelming majority of ethnically heterogeneous families the child socializes with the Romanian language and attends Romanian school. Only in 27 mix families the children understand Hungarian. According to the information provided by the local DAHR organization, several families with Hungarian names no longer speak Hungarian, a complete language change took place.

5.2. Ethnic family background of children enrolled in the surveyed Hungarian language educational institution

The following table shows the results of our survey conducted among the student population of the Horváth János High School in Marghita:

Table 2. Ethnic identity of Horváth János High School students and of their parents

Class	TOT	FAM	FHU	FRO	MIX	FLS	OTH
1	21	21	21		1	21 HU	
2	17	17 SIB				17 HU	
3	16	3	2	2		14 HU 2HU-RO	9
4	16	14	16			16 HU	
5	28	22	28			28 HU	

6	23	23	23			23 HU	
7	27	27 TW	24	3	3	25 HU 2 RO	
8	22	20	22			22 HU	
9	31	31	29	2		29 HU 2 RO	
10	16	16 SIB	16			16 HU	
11	22	3	1				21
12	18	12	17	1		17 HU 1 RO	

Source: Survey in Horváth János High School

Legend: TOT-total number of students FAM – raised within a family with Hungarian, Romanian or Hungarian-Romanian ethnic background FHU-Hungarian family FRO-Romanian family FLS – family linguistic socialisation HU – Hungarian family linguistic education RO- Romanian family linguistic education HU-RO – Hungarian and Romanian family linguistic education MIX –ethnically mix families, OTH –other ethnic belonging SIB-siblings TW – twins.

As can be seen, children come mainly from ethnically homogeneous families, and there are some who do not live in the family of their origin due to divorce or adoption. The number of children from mix marriages in this school is rather small. The dominant language used in the family in the Hungarian - Romanian mix marriage depends on whether the mother or father is Hungarian or Romanian. In addition to linguistic socialization, other factors also contribute to the evolution of the new generation's identity formula in terms of mother tongue and nationality.

5.3. Linguistic educational options in ethnically heterogeneous families

Regarding the 3 students of elementary education living in mix marriages, in the case of the two students living in a Hungarian mother-Romanian father family (twins, meanwhile the mother died), their linguistic identity is determined by the linguistic socialization with the Hungarian language. The inheritance of the language comes from the mother; in accordance to the mother's religion, the twins were christened as Reformed, while their self-declared nationality is Romanian, in accordance with the ethnic belonging of the Romanian father.

In one case, the Romanian mother-Hungarian father formula appears; it is interesting that their child was baptized a Reformed after the religion of the godparent, while the dominant language is Romanian at home, although in their environment they come into contact with many Hungarian peers, so they also learn Hungarian. He sometimes speaks Hungarian with his parents.

According to the report of the Roman Catholic priest, the Catholic child of the Hungarian mother-Romanian father considers himself to be of Romanian nationality although he also speaks Hungarian quite well. He connects to the Hungarian language with a positive attitude, however the Romanian language effect can be felt in his speech.

6. Discussions

According to the instrumentalist theory of identity, ethnic groups and subjects may shift emphasis in the expression of ethnic identity according to the situation, depending on the challenges of the circumstances. In the identity construction of subjects assembled into a dynamic structure, several identities are present at the same time (Young, 1979), and "at certain times a certain special identity is given a primary role" (Bell, 1975, p. 159).The results of our research confirm the scientific value of these theoretical assumptions in the analysis of families with members having different ethnic backgrounds, where the processes related to language use and transmission can become especially complex.

The outcome of this research is also in concordance with the conclusions of a previous study of mix marriages in Oradea (Flóra & Szilágyi, 2008, p. 146), which found that in addition to the close connection between national and linguistic identity, language use can also have some self-regulation and autonomy, which can take a more delineated form when there is a relative balance expressing the cultural affiliation of the partners in the marriage

It is also noteworthy that in a significant proportion of families where one language dominates, children more or less learn and occasionally use the other language as well. In such circumstances, a multicultural environment can have effects that both parents and children can experience as an advantage. These include the possibility for children to learn the languages of both parents as their mother tongue in the family and the possibility of direct family contact with the two ethnic-linguistic communities.In such situations acomplex, multifaceted communication situations can emerge where there is a high chance of a kind of dynamic balance between different linguistic and cultural identities.

In the same time the results of our research confirm, however, that beyond the opportunities to achieve such a relative balance, when compared to ethnically homogenous Hungarian minority families, ethnically mix families are also characterized by a much higher degree of uncertainty as far as the chances of cross-generational transmission of the Hungarian identity within the family are concerned. In mix marriages, the question inevitably arises as to which ethno-linguistic and national identity should prevail, or what compromise can be reached as a result of the "struggle" of the two national languages and cultures within the family.

7. Conclusions

To sum up, it has been confirmed that the positive family effects of socialization with the Hungarian language can be observed mostly in the ethnically homogeneous family: here the attachment to the Hungarian language, the related behaviour and the Hungarian identity are strong; In addition, the results of research suggest that even in the case of heterogeneous families, a favourable status of Hungarian language can also be observed if the children study in a Hungarian school and their religion is Reformed or Roman Catholic, so it is linked to the

Hungarian identity.

In a socio-cultural environment where there are heterogeneous families, the Hungarian-speaking mother can be, and in many cases indeed is, the guardian and transmitter of the minority language, and she can strengthen the love for the language in her children as well. In the identity of the children studying in the Romanian school, however, the Romanian identity element will be the dominant one, and in many cases the child from the Romanian mother-Hungarian father family will have a negative attitude towards the Hungarian language.

Further research will be needed to observe the effects of the family environment, whether ethnically homogeneous or heterogeneous, in terms of the child's linguistic socialization, so we can obtain a more complete picture of this problem.

We found research on this topic important, as strategies can be developed that could increase the prestige of the minority language within the family, enhance the positive attitude towards the Hungarian language in children and thus strengthen cultural pluralism and language retention.

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