

Linguistic human rights of “peripheral” speakers (based on interviews with aged ethnic Hungarians from Romania)

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Introduction

Linguistic human rights are usually discussed in connection with national (ethnic) minorities or dominant groups who want their linguistic rule and privileges to be perpetuated through legislation (Hamel, 1997:3). I suggest here two novel issues which could also be taken into consideration. This is the linguistic situation of aged persons, especially in a bilingual environment.

(A1) Previous research. I started a field work (conducted by in-depth interviews) on the fragmentary knowledge of language and the actual language usage of ethnic Hungarians from Romania. These people being native speakers of a non-standard variety of an unofficial language, namely Hungarian in Romania, represent a doubly disadvantaged group of people regarding their human prospects (Szépe, 2001:18). In addition, they are part of a society where the legislation has been aiming at enshrining the pre-eminence of the official language over the minority languages (Kymlicka and François, 2003:5).

(B1) On-going research. Now I am trying to complete this research (correspondence) inquiring into the humanitarian law aspects. The questions are the following: (a) Have you been “dispreferred” or discriminated because your speech and communication appeared “elderly”? (Not forgetting that aged people have several other symptoms of their age.) (b) Are there in your bilingual zone any special ways of handling official cases of aged people who went to school previously in another language than the administration uses now? (c) Do you get any official (or communal) assistance in learning a new idiom (or refreshing a formerly known idiom by you which has fallen into disuse)? (d) Have you got access to computers in adequate programs (including free chance of learning to use it) in order to read and communicate in your minority mother tongue?

(A2) Previous results. By revealing own belief and opinions about language and language usage, the interviewees offer us the possibility to get an insight of how language policy have influenced their lives, behaviour, their knowledge about languages, and attitudes towards languages and other cultures. The languages concerned are the informants’ mother tongue, Hungarian; second language, Romanian and foreign language(s) learned and practised mainly

in formal language learning circumstances. These interviews were lead among 22 aged Hungarian native speakers in two towns of Transylvania (Romania) in August 2007.

All the informants of this research grew up in places with Hungarian as the dominant language in all fields of life, and half of them moved to Vulcan (a town where Romanian has been spoken by the majority and at official institutions) in their late teens or early twenties. Concerning aspects of language rights of ethnic Hungarians from Romania see Kettley (2003), Péntek – Benő (2003) and Szarka (2003).

According to my hypothesis, the informants from the town with a higher number of ethnic Hungarians find it easier to be accepted and esteemed by Romanian people on the basis of their knowledge of Romanian than the informants from the town with Romanians constituting the majority of the population. The Romanian people in the two towns differ for example in how much they expect from their ethnic Hungarian counterparts regarding their knowledge and usage of Romanian. However, these different expectancies do not influence the native speaking Hungarians in their positive attitudes towards the second language and even other languages and cultures.

(B2) Preliminary results. My preliminary conclusion for the set of issues on linguistic humanitarian law can be (just right now) advanced in the forms of the research questions: (a) There is a very low level of linguistic “dispreference” of aged people across different speech communities (be they interwoven or separated from each other), (b) Special services for any bilingual persons are more and more depending on the availability of bilingual public servants and on their knowledge of historical dimensions of ethnic and linguistic problems, (c) Language learning and refreshing a previously known other idiom is considered to be a private affair (with some notable exceptions), (d) There are no special places where aged people could learn and use computer, and there are no special programs prepared for them.

Methodology of research

Informants

The research was conducted in two towns of Transylvania, Romania. One of the towns is Vulcan, which is in the South-East of Transylvania with a population of 30,188. Here 90 % of the population are Romanians, 7 % are ethnic Hungarians, and the rest of the population are of other nationalities. The other town is Miercurea-Ciuc, which is located in the East of Transylvania. The total number of its inhabitants is 42,029. Here ethnic Hungarians constitute 81 % of the population, Romanians represent 17 % of the town’s inhabitants and 2 % of the remaining population are of other nationalities.

Altogether 16 ethnic Hungarians participated in the research, six in Vulcan and 10 in Miercurea-Ciuc. All the 11 women and five men have been acquaintances of mine.

Most of the people questioned in Vulcan had worked in industrial service, while those in Miercurea-Ciuc in the agricultural sphere.

Tables 1 shows the age, sex and the highest level of schools attended by the informants.

Table 1: Informant variables in the two towns

Vulcan				
Informants	Informant' s code	Age	Sex	The highest level of school attended
1	V1F	68	F	lower primary
2	V2F	70	F	lower primary
3	V3F	76	F	upper primary
4	V4F	77	F	secondary school
5	V5F	81	F	technical school
6	V6M	74	M	secondary school
Miercurea-Ciuc				
1	MC1F	62	F	secondary school
2	MC2F	67	F	upper primary
3	MC3F	68	F	lower primary
4	MC4F	70	F	technical school
5	MC5F	76	F	lower primary
6	MC6F	79	F	technical school
7	MC7M	62	M	secondary school
8	MC8M	67	M	upper primary
9	MC9M	72	M	technical school
10	MC10M	73	M	technical school

Instruments

The instrument used in the research was a questionnaire consisting of 10 questions inquiring about: a) Being discriminated on the basis of their “elderly” speech and communication; b) Being linguistically assisted when handling official cases in their second language; c) Getting any official or communal help in learning a new idiom or refreshing a formerly known idiom which has fallen into disuse; d) Their access to computers in order to read and communicate in their minority mother tongue.

Results

I have tried to find out some aspects of the linguistic behaviour of old people in a bicultural environment. These findings will also be placed into the larger set of my results which I got in a more or less monolingual Hungarian environment, namely in Hungary.

Questions 1, 2 and 3 of my interview enquire about the “dispreference” or discrimination of old aged people’s speech and communication by younger people. The questions are found in the Appendix.

As tables 2 and 3 also show, there are a little more informants from Vulcan than from Miercurea-Ciuc who have been “dispreferred” or discriminated in some way because their speech and communication appeared “elderly.” In the case of people from Vulcan, the contact between their mother tongue, Hungarian and their second language, Romanian, is more intensive in many fields of life. This language contact may also influence the fact that the aged people’s language usage seems old fashioned for younger generation. Nevertheless, one informant from Vulcan, V3F mentioned: “Young people have always respected me.”

Table 2: Answers to questions 1 – 3 (details)

Questions	Vulcan		Miercurea-Ciuc	
	6 informants		10 informants	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
1	2	4	3	7
2	3	3	3	7
3	2	4	0	10

Table 3: Answers to questions 1 – 3 (sum)

Questions	Vulcan and Miercurea-Ciuc	
	16 informants	
	Yes	No
1	5	11
2	6	10
3	2	14

Considering all informants, only one third of the interviewees stated that they have been despised by younger people because their speech and communication appeared “elderly.” However, when discrimination comes into scene, only two people admit that their “elderly” and old-fashioned speech happened to be the cause of their discrimination.

As it can be seen in table 4, people in Vulcan did not get any help from interpreters or any bilingual persons when handling official cases. Two of the informants (V2F and V3F) mentioned that they did not need any help in this respect. In Miercurea-Ciuc people can usually handle all kinds of official cases in Hungarian. In spite of this fact, four of the informants stated that there were cases when they got some special services in dealing with administration in the official language.

Table 4: Answers to question 4

Questions	Vulcan		Miercurea-Ciuc	
	6 informants		10 informants	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
4	0	6	4	6

The answers certainly do not reveal the informants' wish of having been assisted by any interpreters or bilingual persons when dealing cases at official institutions. It only turned out that one quarter of all the informants have got special services when handling official cases.

As opposed to the majority of informants from Vulcan who speak with public servants mainly or always in Romanian, more than half of the informants from Miercurea-Ciuc use mainly or always Hungarian with civil servants. One of the informants from Vulcan, V3F, claimed that even if she knew that the servants at official institutions spoke Hungarian she always spoke to them in Romanian. Another informant, V2F, states the opposite as the previous person: "The official language is Romanian, but if I know that the public servant is Hungarian, I speak Hungarian with her or him."

Table 5: Answers to question 5

When handling official cases can you speak in Hungarian with public servants?	Vulcan	Miercurea-Ciuc
	6 informants	10 informants
a) I speak mainly in Romanian	4	2
b) I always speak in Romanian	1	2
c) I speak mainly in Hungarian	0	5
d) I always speak in Hungarian	1	1

The answer of informant V1F is surprising, as she lives in Vulcan and the majority of the civil servants as the majority of the whole population is Romanian. She admitted to speak Romanian only if necessary, because her command of Romanian is not good.

Nine of all the informants use Romanian mainly or in all cases, and there are seven who use Hungarian, their mother tongue when speaking to civil servants.

On the one hand, the majority of the subjects from Vulcan have used Romanian successfully at official institutions, needing no help or just on rare occasions. On the other hand, almost half of the people from Miercurea-Ciuc can handle official cases in the official

language without any linguistic help, and the rest stated that they needed help quite often by helpful civil servants, or they can also handle everything in Hungarian.

It is interesting to discover that even if two informants (V2F and V4F) from Vulcan stated that they rarely or quite often needed help, none of the informants from Vulcan were provided with special services.

According to the answers half of all the informants have such a good command of Romanian that they can handle official cases without any problems or they may just need some linguistic help on rare occasions. The other half of the research participants claimed that they needed help quite often speaking Romanian with the officials or they could speak Hungarian at official institutions. All this answers are found in table 6.

Table 6: Answers to question 6

Are civil servants usually helpful in case they notice that you have language difficulties, and for example you do not remember one or two Romanian words?	Vulcan	Miercurea-Ciuc
	6 informants	10 informants
a) I never need any help, I understand everything and I can express myself very well	2	1
b) I never need any help, I understand everything and I can express myself quite well	1	3
c) Yes, they have been helpful but they rarely had to help me	1	0
d) Yes, they have been helpful, and I needed help quite often	1	4
e) I can handle everything in Hungarian even at official institutions	1	2

Almost all informants said that they had never got any assistance in official or other ways in learning new and modern expressions in Hungarian and/or Romanian. Answers to question 8 show that none of the informants have ever got any assistance in refreshing formerly known idioms or expressions which have fallen into disuse. All the answers are unanimously „No” to this question.

Table 7: Answers to questions 7 and 8

Questions	Vulcan		Miercurea-Ciuc	
	6 informants		10 informants	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
7	1	5	1	9
8	0	6	0	10

All but one (V6M) of the informants stated that they have not had the chance to use the computer. Person V6M uses the computer for sending messages and for making telephone calls. In Miercurea-Ciuc there are more people who know about the existence of computer courses or programmes for adults/aged people. Only one (V4F) of the informants states that one has to pay if you want to attend these courses. Three of them (V2F, MC7M, MC10M,) say that these courses are not important or necessary for them as they are old.

Table 8: Answers to questions 9 and 10

Questions	Vulcan			Miercurea-Ciuc		
	6 informants			10 informants		
	Yes	No	I do not know	Yes	No	I do not know
9	1	5	0	0	10	0
10	1	4	1	5	3	2

Conclusion

(a) The first of my hypotheses was that there is a low level of linguistic “dispreference” of aged people. Comparing this presupposition with research results, it can be detected that they do not completely conform to each other. The results indicate that while the level of linguistic discrimination of aged people is quite low, the level of linguistic dispreference is not that low. One third of the informants (5 people) admitted that there were cases when they had been despised because of their elderly speech; and almost the same number (6 people) said that they happened to be told by youngsters something like “Oh, we say this in another way”.

(b) For the diaspora minority, the people from Vulcan in this case, special services are not provided when dealing official cases as opposed to the traditional *Sekler* [in Hungarian: *székely*] community. In the latter population a high level of bilingual civil servants are available, which makes it possible for the ethnic Hungarians to speak almost always in their mother tongue, even if the official language of the country is Romanian. Contrarily, people from Vulcan are so used to speaking Romanian in many fields of life that the majority do not or rarely need any special assistance at official institutions. Two people from Vulcan (V2F

and V3F) mentioned that they have not even needed any special services like interpreting or translating, even if both of them grew up in villages with Hungarian as the language of the majority.

As the informants from Miercurea-Ciuc get more linguistic assistance when dealing official cases, it can also be supposed that the majority of the officials from Miercurea-Ciuc, who are bilingual are more aware of the historical dimensions of ethnic and linguistic problems than the mainly monolingual officials from Vulcan.

(c) As I already presupposed, language learning turned out to be mainly a private affair and refreshing a previously known idiom is considered a case completely up to the individual.

(d) Most of the informants (15 people) have not used the computer and according to three of them computers are not important or they do not need them due to their advanced age. They generally seem to be uninterested in computer courses, as only six people know about the existence of computer courses for adults but only one of them mentioned that these computer programs are not free of charge. I suppose that these old aged people would become more interested in computer if they needed it for keeping in touch with their family or good friends living at big distances. For this reason they would probably use the computer for e-mailing and chatting the most frequently.

Linguistic human rights as part of general human rights are constructed for protecting the underdog. I wanted to show, that not only the national minorities people but also the aged people are underdogs in their linguistic and communicational usage (in their language and communication, too). They also need protection.

My point was to show the relation between two underdog positions. My informants belong to linguistic and ethnic minority, plus an “age minority”, and, in addition, they live in double peripheral circumstances: they are away from their capital, Bucharest (in Romania) and from the main town of their mother tongue, Budapest (in Hungary).

I have to remark that the internal structure of a minority social unit has got an influence over the use of linguistic human rights.

One third of the Hungarian speaking people live in bilingual surroundings, and their aging should be carefully investigated with special methods.

The legislation of the majority of states and many international policy documents confirm the unacceptableness of discrimination against older people (CESCR, 1995). Despite this fact, aged people are considered less important by the society: they can wait; it is not urgent to fulfil their needs right away; they have less money; they have less physical force, less physical strength, and they often have less of their persuasion capacity.

Aged people can be defined by several sociologists from 60 or from 65 years, and it becomes a problem because “the world population is ageing at a steady, quite spectacular rate” (CESCR, 1995). It is also true, though, that people are aging in very different ways.

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Appendix

Question 1: Has it ever happened that younger people despised you because your speech and communication appeared “elderly”, i.e. you did not use modern or up to date words and expressions?

Question 2: Has it ever happened to you that while speaking to younger generations they claimed: “Oh, we say this in another way?”

Question 3: Have you ever been despised or discriminated only because people found your language usage old-fashioned or “elderly”?

Question 4: Have you ever been provided with any special services, for example with an interpreter or a bilingual person to help you when handling official cases?

Question 5: When handling official cases can you speak in Hungarian with public servants?

Question 6: Are civil servants usually helpful in case they notice that you have language difficulties, and for example you do not remember one or two Romanian words?

Question 7: Have you ever got any assistance in official or any other way in learning new and modern expressions in Hungarian and/or Romanian?

Question 8: Have you ever got any assistance in refreshing formerly known idioms or expressions by you which have fallen into disuse lately? If yes, who have helped you and how?

Question 9: Have you had the chance to use the computer? If yes, what do you use it for? Do you read and communicate in on your minority mother tongue on the internet?

Question 10: Are there any computer courses or programmes for adults/aged people? If yes, are these courses free of charge?