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## **The Hungarian language use of the Csangos in Moldavia**

### **Abstracts**

*The ancestors of Csángos migrated from a uniformly Hungarian region of the Carpathian Basin to Moldavia in several waves between the 12th and 18th centuries. Today they too are giving up the agrarian way of life, there is strong tendency to migrate and the inhabitants of the Csango villages rapidly grow old. The preservation of their Hungarian language needs conscious language saving strategies. It is cause for optimism that they could preserve their mother tongue during the years of the dictatorship thanks to their strong linguistic "immunsystem".*

Csangos are Hungarians who live in Moldavia in the eastern region of Romania. East of the Carpathian range they live cut off from the masses of Hungarians living in Romania. They form a language isle (Sprachinsel) in a Romanian speaking area. Their population is cca. 250 thousand and about 61 thousand are Hungarian speakers (Tánczos 1999:21). Their settlements are in the neighbourhood of two cities: Bákó and Románvásár.

### **Historical background**

Their ancestors settled over from the continuous Hungarian speaking territory of the Carpathian Basin between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> cc. The groups arriving at various times came for various reasons. At the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> c. Hungary's population suddenly increased and the first settlements were founded in Moldavia along the frontiers. In the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Endre II, king of Hungary invited the Teutonic

Knights for the protection of the eastern frontiers, however, because of increasing disagreement with them, Endre chased the Knights away and replaced them by Hungarian frontier guards (Domokos 2001:18,20,22). Hungarians started settling down in large numbers during east of the Carpathians the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> cc (Benkő 1990:18). After the Tatar invasion (1241-42) King Béla IV. organised the protection of the borders by building military frontier posts along the River Seret where the soldiers were accompanied by their families too. In the 15<sup>th</sup> c. persecution of the followers of Jan Hus was the cause of the next wave, Hussites from the southern part of Hungary and also from Pozsony arrived to the area and built their own settlements (Benda 1993:41). In the 16<sup>th</sup> c. Seklers settled over in great numbers to avoid the heavy taxation. The largest and most important group arrived in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. following the so called ‘peril of Madéfalva’. In 1764 the Seklers rose against the measures of Empress Maria Theresia which stopped their earlier privileges. The imperial army attacked them and took heavy revenge on the rebels. Great masses fled to Moldavia (Domokos 2001:83), who either founded new settlements, or joined Hungarians already living there, or else moved in Romanian inhabited villages (Tánczos 1999:10).

### **The name**

The name has been explained in various ways, all of them stressing that the groups are separated from the Hungarian community. According to the most frequently quoted explanation the name comes from the verb *csáng* “to stray” (Tánczos 1999:10). Others are of the opinion that it has come from the characteristic way these people pronounce the noun *csengő* “bell”; it is assumed that bells were important during the wandering to the region, hung around the neck of their animals. Again others derive the importance of the bell to their being frontier guards who announced the enemy by rhythmically ringing the bell referred to as *csángat*.

## Dialect

The above short history explains why their speech represents such a special variety of Hungarian. The groups coming from various parts of Hungary spoke different regional varieties and arriving in different centuries their speech represented different stages of language development. The speakers were broken off the continuous Hungarian speech area by the ranges of the Carpathians cutting them off from communication. Thus their language has preserved several archaic forms. They have been left out of Hungarian language changes, thus the results of the “Language Reform” movement (1790-1820) did not reach them, a fact especially important because it was when the Hungarian vocabulary was enormously enriched and modified. At the same time the Csango language also changed, the Romanian neighbourhood had great influence on it especially on the vocabulary. This is why the Csango Hungarian dialect has several characteristics that tell it apart from all the other Hungarian dialects.

Their way of life greatly helped in preserving the language. They have been interested in agriculture, bred animals, always lived in small villages, had little contact to other communities that all together helped preserving the language. Today they are bilingual, they are fluent in Romanian too, the young people know Romanian better than Hungarian. The number of Hungarian speakers varies from village to village, though there are settlements where all the inhabitants speak Hungarian (Tánczos 1999:18). Within the family and among the neighbours they communicate in Hungarian while Romanian is the language of the public sphere.

1867 is the foundation of the Romanian Kingdom. The new Romanian state system replaced the earlier one of voivodes and aimed at the creation of a uniform Romanian nation and tried to disregard minorities living in the territory. From this time on the exclusive official language was Romanian and Hungarian was prohibited in churches, schools and every public forum.

### Religion and language use

Religion plays an important role in the Csangos' life; they are devout Roman Catholics. Their denomination is their identity. If asked what nationality they are, the usual answer is "Catholic". They consider the Catholic inhabitants of the other villages to be their relations notwithstanding what language they speak. They adhere to the community instead of the language because they remained ignorant of the historical development of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. creating the Hungarian nation and making the Hungarian language a sign of identity (Tánczos 1999:23). They were Roman Catholics from start on and have preserved their religion. Reformation played no role in the region because there were no Hungarian-speaking priests to convert them to it (Mikecs 1989:192). Later that was the reason why they remained free from assimilation, their being Roman Catholics kept them apart from Orthodox Romanians. In the 13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> cc. Catholicism thrived in Moldavia, only Hungarian priests were there. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. a great part of Hungary joined Reformation, the Catholic church in minority was not in the position to send priests to Moldavia, thus the Csango people asked help from Rome. From 1620 onward there were priests sent from Rome, however, with the mission to convert the Orthodox Romanians. The missionaries were mainly Italians, thus they could more easily communicate with the Romanians, and being usually sent for only one year, they did not even try to learn Hungarian (Szabados 1990:89). At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. the Hungarians in Moldavia required the church service to be held in Hungarian, indeed there were Hungarian priests sent to them for short periods, but they did not get their remuneration, some them were imprisoned and they also happened to become victims of highway robbery. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. the Romanian Kingdom introduced the Romanian language in the churches. In 1884 a Roman Catholic bishopric was founded with seminary in Jászvásár where the young Csangos were educated to become Romanian priests (Domokos 1990:90). A1895 law banned bilingual catechisms. In 1930 of 27 parish priests only one was Hungarian, but he was sent to a village where the congregation could not speak Hungarian. In 1938 there was a regulation issued for the Hungarian populated settlement of Co. Bákó that Romanian was the only language to be used in

the public sphere, the church included (Szabados 1990:90). The area officially had no Hungarian inhabitants; in reality everybody spoke Hungarian.

The Catholic Church has played an important role in the linguistic assimilation of the Csangos. The “pater” has been the primary authority in the villages, the only learned person among the unlearned inhabitants. He is the leader of the community, his voice is heeded. This why in the seminary of Jászvásár priests to be are trained, as were the Janissaries in old Turkey. Most of the priests are Csangos turned Romanian who do not want to speak Hungarian in and out of church; they are hostile towards those who do not want to disavow their origins. They claim that Roman Catholicism equals with Romanian Catholicism, that Hungarian is the language of Satan and the Hungarian the Csangos speak is not real Hungarian only a demeaned version of it. This is the usual argumentation when the congregation requests service in the Hungarian language. In November 2003 Jean-Claude Perrisset, the papal legate in Bukarest promised the possibility of using Hungarian during the service in Moldavia. It was, however, not carried out because the bishop of Jászvásár interpreted it as the Csangos mother tongue and not standard Hungarian and declared that it would take too long and too much work to translate the whole liturgy into Csango dialect and by the time it would have been completed it would prove unnecessary to be introduced (Szilágyi 2006:110). In Romania the Catholic church vindicates itself the right to decide what is the mother tongue of the congregation disregarding whatever they claim themselves to be. Pope John Paul II. consented to the employment of Hungarian priests in Moldavia, but priest who were educated in Gyulafehérvár (Transylvania) have not been allowed into Moldavia. Vatican has failed to make decisive steps to fulfil the Hungarian Csangos wish to attend mass in their mother tongue because the protection of Catholicism in an area with Orthodox majority is much more important for Rome and from this point of view what language is used during the service is of little importance.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 2006 the Csangos of Pusztina sang psalms in Hungarian in Church before the mass. It counted an important event in the Csangos’ religious life. The St. Stephen Society in Pusztina pled for the use Hungarian language during mass since 1990,

they even sent a delegation to Rome to introduce the case. However, a short time later it was decided that the possibility of saying the prayers in Hungarian depended on the consent of the bishop. The Moldavian church again proved to be unsympathetic. It might not have been a coincidence that the October instance had happened just before Romania joined the European Union.

### **Language use at school**

In Moldavia Hungarian has been kept alive through communication, the speakers do not read and write in Hungarian. The explanation lies in the lack of school education in the mother tongue. The first schools were opened in the area at the time of the foundation of the Romanian kingdom at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. The use of the Hungarian language became prohibited in public use and the ban was preserved till the end of World War II. From 1947 onward primary Hungarian-language schools were opened thanks to the *Magyar Népi Szövetség* [Hungarian Folk Association] that was the political representative of the Hungarian minority in Romania. It had independent primary schools with Hungarian as their teaching language; secondary schools were scarce. There were other schools too where Hungarian was taught as one of the subjects. The new schools met considerable difficulties, the major one being the lack of teaching materials and suitable buildings. Some of the early schools had to be closed because there were not enough teachers who knew Hungarian. Teachers from Transylvania frequently came on constraint and wanted to leave as soon as possible. At the same time teachers at Romanian schools felt threatened of possibly losing their jobs because of the new Hungarian schools and tried to convince parents not to have their children taught there. The Catholic priests also campaigned against the children to be taught Hungarian among their congregations. The Hungarian Folk Association was actually organized by the Romanian Communist Party that tried to prove after the war that it meant to take care of Hungarians outside Transylvania too. The new schools discredited, the parents intimidated resulted in the closing all the Hungarian schools in 1959 (Vincze 199:203-210).

Till the 1990s there was no school education in the mother tongue. After 1990 there were private attempts at instructing village children in reading and writing in Hungarian. It was started at private homes and an increasing number of children participated as the years went by. They received no material support, the instructions were even prohibited in 2001 ([www.devaigyerekkek.hu](http://www.devaigyerekkek.hu)). Though the parents were constantly under pressure education in Hungarian has been resumed in 2002 and are popular ever since. The children also receive instructions in singing and dancing.

The most important step forward is that the Hungarian language has become an elective subject taught in three lessons per week at the schools, first at those of Klézse and Pusztina with 17 and 24 pupils respectively. The number of participating villages and pupils has been increasing. During the school year 2006/07 there were 992 pupils who received instructions in Hungarian in state schools in 14 settlements (Bákó, Buda, Csík, Diószén, Frumósza, Klézse, Kostelek, Külsőrekecsin, Lábnyik, Lészped, Magyarfalu, Pusztina, Somoska, Trunk) and further 400 extramurally. 53 of them received stipends for higher education. In the past 15 years 1200 Moldavian Csango students studied in Hungarian schools in Transylvania: Csíkszereda, Gyimesfelsőlök, Székelyudvarhely, Gyulafehérvár, Kolozsváron as well as in Bucharest. More than 100 of them graduated from universities in Transylvania and Hungary. However, it must not be forgotten that there are more than 900 Hungarian-speaking children of school age who would need similar education. There are about 30-35 villages without any form of instruction in Hungarian ([www.csango.ro](http://www.csango.ro)). During classes standard Hungarian is taught but the use of the dialect is also accepted. This approach is important in strengthening the children's self-consciousness and in consequence the survival of the dialect, because being set apart from the standard variety the dialect would be devaluated (Péntek 1998:302). It is a pity the schoolmasters not only do not propagate learning Hungarian but try to obstruct Hungarian lessons. At some places the staff excommunicated the Hungarian teacher; it also happened that the Romanian teachers humiliated the pupils learning Hungarian. Many parents are still afraid to send their children to Hungarian lessons. The priests' preaching against Hungarian in church still causes fear among the congregation. The clergy has exploited the fact that god fearing simple

people look up to their priests and heed their word; thus they have misused their influence against education in Hungarian. They also suggest to talented pupils not to continue their studies in Hungarian institutions but to apply to the seminary in Jászvásár, where the future priests are trained in Romanian mentality to denounce their Hungarian culture frequently success.

The pupils' studies are sponsored by the *Moldvai Csángómagyarok Szövetsége* [Moldavian Association of Csango-Hungarians], the *Romániai Magyar Pedagógusok Szövetsége* [Hungarian Teachers' Association in Romania] and the *Domokos Pál Péter Egyesület* [Domokos Pál Péter Association]. Recently the rather tight budget available is helped out by the so called 'god parent' program, Those joining the program provide a student's fees for a year and become the god parent of them. 90% of the god parents are from Hungary, the remaining 10% from the western countries. There is constant contact between god parents and their charges through correspondence and also through visits ([www.devaigyerekkek.hu](http://www.devaigyerekkek.hu)).

### *The prestige of the Hungarian language*

Thanks to the introduction of the Hungarian language into school curricula its prestige has increased among its Moldavian speakers. The importance of the language has also been increased by the growing interest of fieldworkers and tourists who visit Moldavia to study the dialect, songs, dances and customs since the opening of the borders in the 1990s. Learning Hungarian is also motivated by the possibility of finding employment in Hungary. The majority of young people seek employment abroad because of the scarcity of work places and the very low wages at home.

In the last twenty years the general changes in Moldavia have allowed a slow change in the status of the Hungarian language. The regular contact with Hungarians, availability of workplaces in Hungary, the turning of international interest toward them, the organized institutions to teach the Hungarian language made it appealing in contrast to its earlier disrepute. However, there are two important conditions still missing that are the prerequisites of the long-term survival of the language. One is the availability of local

workplaces; the other one is the presence of an intelligentsia that is fluent in Hungarian in the written form as well. Young people leave the villages in search of work. In order to represent their interests, local intelligentsia would be of importance. This group or social layer was completely missing earlier, now has started to develop since there are young Csangos who participated in higher education either in Transylvania or in Hungary. However, after graduation they can hardly find employment at their birthplace and thus they would not, could not return. Others find their partner at their study place and settle down there. This is why Hungarian-language secondary schools are necessary in Moldavia and in primary schools too Hungarian should become the teaching language not just be one of the subjects. Teaching in Hungarian would enhance the effectiveness of learning too. According to the so called “vernacular principle” schooling should start in the language the children use at home and should continue in that language as long as possible. (Szépe 2001:134).

*Yesterday – today – tomorrow*

If we consider the history of the Csangos in Moldavia, it is fortunate that they have been still around at all and their dialect preserved in everyday life. Their ancestors left the Carpathian basin in several waves between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> cc. and were cut off from the Hungarian language community.; since then they have been living surrounded by Romanian speakers. They have survived because they stayed together in Moldavia, settling down in independent Hungarian villages or joined Hungarian groups who had arrived before them. They formed closed communities, endogamie still being characteristic: young people prefer to choose their partner either from the same village or from another Csango village. The custom was reinforced by their way of life: agriculture bound them to their place. They had neither wish nor means to leave their village for faraway places. Their number increased instead of decreasing: there were many children in the families thus the Hungarian population in Moldavia added a high proportion of the population increase even for a usually populous area. Between 1930 and 1992 their number was trebled (Tánczos 1999:12). The other force of survival was their

religion: they have remained Roman Catholics and that reinforced their identity in an Orthodox region. Religion has remained of great importance for them because of the reasons discussed above it was religion and not language that has defined their identity.

Agricultural life is on the decline in Moldavia too. Young people do not farm any more but look for employment in big cities or abroad and only few of them return back; thus the inhabitants of Csango villages grow old. In this changed world the preservation of the language could be encouraged by conscious language preservation methods: by Hungarian language education at school, cultural and language camps for children, the founding of cultural centres, exchange programs with Hungary and Transylvania. If we want to consider the future of the Csango dialect, we should refer back to their past: in spite of the oppressive Romanian policy it has survived in the minority existence of its speakers. György Szépe is of the opinion that the language possesses properties that save it from annihilation. (Szépe 2007:19). This “immunsystem” is extremely strong in the language of the Csangos in Moldavia.

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