

Réka Zsuzsanna Simon

„Every majority should learn minority languages”

Interview with Orsolya Nádor

Abstract

These days, when the language rights, the moral arguments are not enough to convince the majority to invest money in the minority language education, the importance, the value of the

language economics are really high. In these interviews I try to get answers to many questions: How can be maintained a minority language in the specific conditions what surround it? How can be kepted the linguistic diversity, linguistic heritage, the minority language alive in the most effective way, using the latest ideas of language economics? How is viewed in this Eastern- European region the discipline of language economics? What we know about it? The minority language education itself hinders the acquisition of the majority language? What decides how much money will spend the majority of a country for the minority language education? What is known about the market values and not market values of a minority language? The language diversity helps or not the business area?

1. How does the language of instruction, the culture in the mother tongue define identity and its development?

It is evident that there is no identity without the identity of the mother tongue, without culture in the mother tongue. Culture in the mother tongue can be very spontaneous, it develops naturally through the acquisition of the language, but if it made conscious it can greatly help the speakers to their identity. If I am familiar with the linguistic structure of the language, I learn about its literature then I can get nearer to the Hungarian identity. That can be observed

by students coming from the western diaspora. Their identity seems fairly strange looking at it from the Hungarian point of view. It is not an identity-type usual in the Carpathian Basin but one where the mother tongue is missing but there is an enormous nostalgia after that mother tongue. Before the mother tongue, as the language of their origin, can find its place in their minds they have a strange double identity. They have great nostalgia toward the Hungarian one but their dominant identity is that of the country they come from; the English identity or that of America or South America are all different. As they absorb consciously the linguistic, literary, historical or folklore culture the identity coming from the language of their origin, the 'root identity', becomes stronger. It can grow to the point that there are some who do not want to go back anymore. Fortunately this kind of Hungarian identity without the Hungarian language is not significant in the Carpathian Basin as yet though there are already tendencies. I believe that language loss in the diaspora and at such places where there is a strong dividing line between the languages and the Hungarians live along the border where the own educational system is not as developed as e.g. in Széklerland, the phenomenon would appear sooner or later.

2. What is your experience, what is the present-day European attitude towards bilingualism, multilingualism?

There are states that are members of the European Union and there such that are not. There are countries that accept linguistic pluralism without necessarily signing a Charta or any other international document and there are such that did sign it but do the opposite of what they have signed to accept. The leading idea of the Union is that there is linguistic pluralism in Europe and it is its greatest value. This is correct at the level of principle and it also works. All the resolutions and recommendations (these are recommendations and not laws) emphasizing linguistic pluralism are more or less in order. There is, however, some flaw e.g. does the given country admit that there are minorities in its territory or does not. Usually the French are pointed out as an example but the Ruthens in Hungary could also be mentioned; for a long time it was forbidden to refer to them and were ethnically classified as Slovaks. In the 1980s it could not be said

that Komlóska is a Ruthen village because what is Ruthen then; it is Slovak and that is that. It means that we could also find shortcomings at home. But there are countries e.g. Norway, Sweden or Finland where linguistic pluralism has received emphasis. It is difficult to tell how positive it is or not. If we observe the linguistic policy of Finland, e.g. in Turku with its 6% Swedish minority everything is signed in Swedish too; in general the Swedish minority is about 5% in the entire Finland. But there are many small Swedish communities around Helsinki where the use of the Swedish name on signs has been authorized only recently. So there are showcase settlement like Porvoo, a Finnish – Swedish settlement. The bus is marked in Finnish and Swedish Porvoo/Borgå; at the schools the Swedish language is taught. The Finnish students are rebelling against it saying, that they want to learn a more useful language. It is an absolute gesture. It is also mentioned frequently that as a regional language Swedish has an important role in the northern area. It is true but the Finnish students believe it would be more useful to learn some other language or they should not be a subject of the final examination. This is the case when the language policy of the state and the will of the citizens do not meet. They learn Swedish but never use it. It is connected to the fact that the prestige of Sweden and therefore the Swedish language was high until recently but nowadays it seems the Finnish self-consciousness is rising, the Finns are increasingly proud of being Finns (it was not always so) and the Swedish language is not so important anymore. It is an interesting duality. But I could mention Norway too. There are other countries too, e.g. in Spain, where allegedly everything has been righted by the Catalan language and culture thanks to their receiving autonomy. The most recent legislations and state measures seem to contradict it.

It is an interesting question how the EU member states act since every one of them is supporting linguistic pluralism in principle. There is the Charter for Languages. The signing of the Charter is a gesture because it does not oblige the state for anything. There is a historical analogy: after World War I. there was an especially block on linguistic policy in the minority protection agreement of Saint-Germain. The states declared that they would not restrict the use of the mother tongue, the right of education and the use of language in church services of minorities that lived in their territory. At inter-

national level it was in order, but the realization was at the level of individual states and in Czechoslovakia there came the regulation that under the 20% minimum there was nothing. That was not in the international agreements. It is not in the Charter either, there are no percentages in it. Still the states set limits for economic reasons or else for political ones. How justified the percentages are depends on the economic vitality of the individual countries. If we examine a rich one, like Finland nowadays, it can afford the luxury of having classes for small minority groups. It is also important that Sweden has considerably been supporting education in Finland. It is no problem with them, what is with us, to send a number of books to various places, to make so many stipends available per year. For Sweden it does not raise any problems. If we look at our region, the Eastern-Central European region of the Carpathian Basin, it turns out that if a small school somewhere in Romania asks for 10 volumes of one of the set texts and 8 of another because the existing ones fell apart, they get it, of course. But this is only one school but if eight-ten schools of the county come up with the same demand it means difficulties because there are no more copies to be given away and Romania was never famous for its generosity towards its minorities. Returning back to the original question: what is the attitude toward multilingualism. It can be stated that some countries aim more overtly at assimilation others more tacitly, in spite of having signed the international agreements. Why it is and how it is always depends on the given country. Hungary, especially after Trianon, has tried to give an example to be followed by our neighbours. But it is no secret that between 1945 and 1962 there were no schools for the minorities in Hungary. There were generations without institutional education in the mother tongue and identity. Some could not go to kindergarten for minorities because there was none for a long time, some received only such education in their mother tongue that would be unthinkable e.g. for a Hungarian in Transylvania, that the mother tongue was taught at a language class, some talk about their literature, history, people, but the other subjects would be in the majority language because the pupils would not understand it in their mother tongue. That was the situation of the minorities in Hungary; their language had no social value. Even now with the minority law, thirteen ethnic minorities are ensured of their education in the mother tongue but the question is how many

schools exist there for Armenians? Or there are the Greeks. The Greek minority is a very recent group, they are not indigenous at all, it is more a gesture. They have assimilated so completely that Beloiannis, the village they settled down, has lost its sense, everybody refers to it as Ivánca and there are hardly any children to learn Greek. In the case of the Hungarians beyond the border the assimilation is not that advanced but there are warnings. From the linguistic point of view the question is what type of bilingualism it is. If it is additive, i.e. when the mother tongue has its own prestige, its own functions and the other one too. And there is usually a third language involved too. In Europe it is the English language, with its own domain of use and prestige. In the case of a bilingual person or of a one who lived in minority, English would mean a special category. In the case of the minorities in Hungary it is a trans-positioning bilingualism, a loss of language that probably is already difficult to reverse. How could be the processes slowed down or reversed? May be if the majority would learn the language of the minority. We are upset to hear that if someone goes into the office say at Beregszász to do his business and the law ensures that he can do it Hungarian but it proves impossible because there are no forms in Hungarian. Why are there none? Because none was made. It means that minorities should not wait for the majority to prepare for them the forms in the minority language. It has to be prepared and a motion started that it should be accepted or at least bilingual forms would be needed. If a Slovak or Serbian of Hungary goes into the office of one of the Budapest self-governments, or Germans, there are districts where there are German nationalities living, they would hardly find a clerk who would be able to talk to them in their local minority dialect only in the literary language. Since old people cannot learn it, they would talk in Hungarian. There are such problems in Hungary too and in Hungary the nationalities are not oppressed. It is one thing how the state guarantees the rights but it is also important how the law is carried out. The controversy between *de jure* and *de facto* is there.

I try to urge that the majority should learn minority languages. It is true a concrete aim should be there and there is also the question of usefulness. If persons belonging to the majority learn the language, culture, history of a minority they can find an explanation for many things, can imagine the spirit of the others. For example when those

minority education and language laws are made that are somewhat of discriminative character, the picture is not black or white, there is a duality between the requirements of politics and everyday life. For example if a businessman or people with regional relationship with Hungary, a Romanian or a Slovak, would go to a language school to learn Hungarian irrespective of their country's severe law to facilitate assimilation. Unfortunately there is hardly any interest in the courses teaching the languages of the neighbouring countries held by the Institution of Slovaks or the Romanian Institute. The students are very enthusiastic at first then they disappear. It is much worse than in the case of learning Hungarian. There is an interesting duality in there.

3. Why do you think that regionalism might be the way out for the minority education in the East-Central European countries?

I think because of the elevation of prestige. If I send my children to a school where they can learn besides English and German Slovak, Romanian, Ukrainian as a free elective third foreign language, of course the one relevant in the region, it could offer possibilities to avoid unemployment. It is evident the economic relations would sooner or later create the need for joint enterprises along the borders – there have already existed several – or there might appear enterprises of foreign ownership. It would be advantageous if there are persons who could be employed because they speak the language. A foreign correspondent could have an important role e.g. with a knowledge of Slovak or Ukrainian when living in Miskolc. Such persons would be potential employee for foreign firms settled down there. I believe it is going to be important on the other side too e.g. a child from a mixed marriage would be sent to a Hungarian school in a neighbouring country; the great majority of such children are sent to Slovak or Romanian schools now, the motivation being that they are living there, want to make good there, one of the parents is Ukrainian, Croat, Slovak or Romanian, thus they have the advantage of being socialized bilingually therefore it seems better to be educated in the majority language, Hungarian can be learned otherwise, by reading, watching Hungarian television etc. It would endanger identity, not necessarily that of the second generation but that of the

third certainly. But if there is usefulness involved, if the regionalism strengthens I could imagine that the parents in a mixed marriage would consider to send their children to the Hungarian school and not in the majority school, not in all the cases of course but about 20% seems realistic. May be the child has no head for academic studies but will be someone with a secondary school education and would have better chances if say a Hungarian would settle own in that region and then they would be able to find work with the knowledge of Hungarian, understanding the locals as well, thus they could have advantage at the work force market.

4. In principle is there a limit how much and what kind of functions are allotted to the minority languages?

In principle there are no limits. If we consider the international recommendations, when there are documents written by various committees sooner or later all the member states join them voluntarily or under pressure and we all know that there are consequences therefore in principle there are no limits exactly because the principle of the Union is that the aim is a multicultural, polyglot Europe where the languages are on equal standing; but we also know that there are some that are more equal. There is no international legal obstacle in the way of minority languages to have functions in the majority states. It is in the practice where the obstacles appear when it reaches a lower level. When it is not anymore a question of principles but a decision made by economic factors, e.g. how much it costs to maintain a minority school, how much the training of its teachers, how well they would be able to teach since they will be educated in the country of the majority language and no, say, in Hungary; it is similar to the training of the Slovenian minority language teachers who are educated in Hungary and not in Slovenia. It is an expensive thing. It is a philosopher's estimate but it could cost more than a semester at the medical university because board and lodging and the whole training have to be included. And if we take the rights seriously the minorities would need not only teachers but lawyers, doctors, veterinarians, politicians and economists too. Therefore it is advantageous to have the facilities in the birth country, e.g. the young people of belonging to the Hungarian minority can go to the

Selye University in Komárom, to Kolozsvár or to the University Sapiientia in Transylvania, it seems probable that at Eszék, too, will open possibilities, and in Voivodina too; and let us not forget about the Ferenc Rákóczi II. College in Beregszász either. In Slovenia the situation is not as simple anymore. There the language change has reached a level that the few children who really want to be educated in Hungarian are sent to Szombathely. In Hungary the situation is satisfactory in the field of nationality kindergarten teachers, general and secondary school teachers but not in the other fields. The universities of the neighbouring countries only could help those members of the nationalities in Hungary who want to be educated to be engineers or doctors in their minority mother tongue.

5. What are the features of a well-developed language policy?

There we have to think about several fields. One is administration, the other education and the third that has not been mentioned even in the international documents is collective rights. Minority language use has always been regarded as personal right. It is collective in its character but if one asks a legal expert or tries to read about it in the literature it turns out that it is not. It is a difficult question. If it is declared that it is a collective right then it is compulsory even if there are, say, just two children then they have to be educated in their mother tongue and the whole curriculum should be provided at that. There is minimal chance for that in Hungary and the truth is that not even in Sweden in the last couple of years, since Sweden is usually mentioned in connection to collective rights, that there even immigrants are given collective rights. However, that is a separate category and it is special because there are no laws concerning immigrants, only indigenous inhabitants. Who is accepted as an indigenous inhabitant is regulated by the laws of the given country. There are no international documents directing that such and such a minority must be accepted. It will be decided by the country itself whether yes or nay and they will develop a system of criteria that allows the minimum of ethnicities to be accepted as minorities.

Returning back to the three aspects that are the major ones to be considered. What level of schools are necessary, how the mother tongue should be presented there or how expedient it is. There are

a number of psychological analyses finding that the first four years of grade school should be basically taught in the mother tongue. However, if it is the wish of the parents for the child to find its way in the majority society, the majority language should be taught effectively not the way it is done nowadays but as the language of the surroundings. There are things here it is possible to rely on the children's actual knowledge but it must not be presumed that that is on par with the mother tongue. The beauties of that major language and culture should be shown; if the children are well acquainted with the majority language and culture and not the idea is strengthened in them that they are forced to live in a bilingual situation probably additive bilingualism would be the preferable for the minorities too. It is the key problem of language policy and it has to be achieved that the additive bilingualism should become desirable for the community. To be able to achieve it the minorities should be given the necessary tools for it. The case with language policy is that there is always someone who directs. And who is it that directs? It always depends on the governing party of the majority system; also what is that party's attitude towards the given minorities and it should also be considered that the minorities themselves are not homogeneous. It is the question who among them is in conversation with the government, what is their own politics, their language policy because minorities can have language policy too; it is another question how fully they can enforce it. The government is in possession of the power, the other is a tolerated part in the mechanism of power. Whether it is a tolerated, supported or prohibited minority, the use of the mother tongue depends on the political winds. Romania is a good example. The role of the Hungarian Romanian Democrat Party (HRDP) is unquestionable, it had indisputable merits after the fall of the Ceausescu regime, then there was a period when there was silence about HRDP, then there were inside changes, there were inside strives, rearrangements, new associations developed. It was evident that everybody has their own ideas. When such a party comes part of the power than it becomes a factor in home and foreign policy, and then it can talk about politics, even about minority education and language policy. Because a minority could have a policy to no avail, nobody would be interested in the ideas of a group that has no place on the political scene. Administration. What it is that should or could be achieved.

The employment of bilingual clerks should be pressed for but bilingual clerks do not grow by themselves. The minorities should achieve that there be persons from their group where they have an interest, to have a member in the local self-government, mayor's office, police for the possibility of dealing in the mother tongue. It is the responsibility of the minority, the politics of the minority that there should always be someone who is motivated by this policy to become e.g. a policeman or fire-fighter or ambulance crew member.

6. Is it possible to say that the laws concerning language use are already made differentiated at the European Union level?

It has already been mentioned. There are international documents that get signed sooner or later but when and how these will appear at the level of the individual countries depends on which party or coalition is the governing power. After accepting the Charta there could be a law created relating to the minorities but it will be of no use if that coalition will lose the next elections and the whole system would be upset because the new government overrides what their predecessors had said and done. Thus it depends on which party has the power and how the country's economy is doing. If the economy is shaky, if there are serious economic problems e.g. high rate of unemployment, it is easy to take out on the nationalities, as we could experience it for decades. It would be favourable if these laws would be made in a more subtle way. There could be general mandatory ones (with possible punitive sanctions) for everyone independent of the above mentioned situations, then comprehensive minority and language supporting programs and a minimal program where every country could put together a package of elements of choice suitable to their traditions and legislation.

7. Which difficulties are confronting a government during the process of language planning?

One is the economic problems, the other the traditions of the coexistence of minorities and the majority nation, how tolerant they are toward each other. The general the practice is, at least in the countries I have visited, in regions with mixed population, that the tradi-

tion was to be tolerant toward each other; the conflict situation was usually created by the majority population that was the newcomer. They did not feel secure whereas security and self-consciousness are very important. If someone does not feel safe they try to stress their power in against the others, be it a football match or a meeting of the self-government.

8. According to Francois Grin, economically speaking, languages have two kinds of values, market and non-market. What role does it play in the development of the directions of language policy?

If Hungary – and the neighbouring countries too - will be able to strengthen the regional policy then the marketing value of the languages – not only that of Hungarian but also that of Slovak, Romanian, Ukrainian, too – will increase in the country of the others.

9. What methods could help to assess the effectiveness of the realization of language policy?

Whether it is spread and accepted as was intended by the given language planners, i.e. it is not an uncertain element in education and does not depend on the actual economic situation of the country. Thus no school would be closed down because the self-government does not has the money to run it but it always have the means at their disposal to finance it as long as it is necessary. This is a very important aspect. But also it is the one that a language using community wants toward the preservation of its language. It is only an external matter but it has to be wished from the inside too. If the speech community is strong enough in adhering either to the mother tongue or to bilingualism and can regard both as an asset, both have practical values, it would probably cause no problem. Those who live in bilingual regions should live in additive bilingualism and not in transposing one. This should be the major aim. The measure of efficiency could be the state of the community's bilingualism, whether it is dominated by the mother tongue or by the majority language. How convincingly do the parents pass down the mother tongue, whether they get support from the educational system and additive bilingualism could develop or they are on the way toward language

loss and when that last could happen. There is research to find out whether transposing bilingualism is on the growth or the community shows a preference toward additive bilingualism. Since at the moment we are just talking in general I can say that the latter leads to the deterioration of the mother tongue. If an different language and culture, that of the neighbours and those in power, have to be learned and the minority understands its value, moreover it is taught in a manner the children learn it with pleasure, bilingualism will be successful and will enrich the speakers' personality. But we know it is not the case, the children do not learn with pleasure those languages because they are not taught properly. The neighbouring countries had more than 80 years to find out how to do it, how to teach children efficiently. Nothing has happened. The only places where something seems to have happened are the two former member states of the old Yugoslavia, present day Voivodina in Serbia and Slovenia; but it is the merit of Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav language and minority policy, where the Serbians taught Hungarian as an environmental language. Thus there was a tradition, therefore the Hungarians were taught Serbian in a different way than nowadays. The previous year I had a course on language policy at the Áron Márton College and the students brought up interesting questions about the present practice, e.g. why Hungarians do not learn the Serbian language in Serbia. It seems something has been forgotten, there was a good tradition, something had started but was swept away. Unfortunately the wars did much harm this way too. The bilingual education in Slovenia has received much (justified) criticism form the experts but viewing from Hungary at the beginning of the 1980s it seemed, at least at the surface – that it was a really democratic education where both languages were present at the same class. The pitfalls became obvious only when one went close enough.

10. How profitable is linguistic diversity for present day business life?

It has also been mentioned earlier. Business life has two major languages English and German. It depends on the type of business, what is the mediating language there and where is the mother firm. At multinational firms German or English are the major languages and it is preferable that the employees have some knowledge of

the country the firm settled down at least at a level that is enough for survival, too. If the business persons learn a couple of words or phrases in the language of the neighbouring countries it is a kind of a gesture of goodwill. The basic importance of it is not to understand the wording of a contract in that language or not; or it is important for a Romanian businessman that the contract written in Romanian should be translated into Hungarian. This is what the persons in the second line are for; for example a young person from Transylvania who knows Romanian well. Such instance may help the business to success. Simply the fact that they were approached in, say, Romanian, or Slovakian or Hungarian can be loaded with success very much and may lighten the constantly present ethnic tensions that frequently break out in linguistic aggression.

