
Anita Márku

Situational choice of codes among the Transcarpathian Hungarians

Abstract

The topic of the languages used in Ukraine is getting prevalent as more and more literature has been published in the recent years on it. In the life of a minority, like the Transcarpathian Hungarian community, the question of language choice is interesting not only in the case of the Ukrainian and Russian language, but also concerning their own language, which is the minority language (the Hungarian) and the majority language (Ukrainian/Russian). In this study which is based on a representative questionnaire research (N=387) we review briefly the language choice of the Transcarpathian Hungarians. We examine their strategies of language choice in the official, public and private sphere.

1. Introduction

In the recent years there have been an increasing number of writings about the language use in Ukraine. The scholarly essays and volumes explain the spheres of the usage of the two most used languages, Ukrainian the state language and Russian the largest minority language, by sociological models based on the empirical research. This problem is in the focus of the thematic volumes: *Nyelvpolitika és nyelvi helyzet Ukrajnában: elemzés és ajánlások* (Ed. Besters-Dilger 2008 [Language policy and language situation in Ukraine: analysis and recommendations]) *Nyelvi helyzet Ukrajnában: konfliktus és konszenzus között* (Majboroda & Al. 2008 [Language situation in Ukraine: conflict and concensus]). In their monograph Hanna Zaliznyak and Larisza Maszenko (Zaliznyak - Maszenko 2001) point out that according to a survey the Russian language is still dominates in the everyday usage instead of Ukrainian in Kiev (Chernichkow

ed. 2010b, cf. Masenkov 2004). In its 2003 research extended to the entire region of Ukraine, the International Sociological Institution in Kiev discovered that in the various regions of the country the dominance of Ukrainian and Russian is different: in the western and central regions Ukrainian is the dominant language, in the north-eastern part Russian is gaining ground but there are many people speaking *Surzhyk*¹ too. In southern Ukraine the usage of Ukrainian is low and the Russian language dominates (Cserniczkó ed. 2010b: 21).

In the life of a minority as the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia language choice is not restricted to choice between Ukrainian and Russian but between the its own minority language, Hungarian, and the majority language(s), Ukrainian/Russian, too.

The data of the recent 2001 census shows the co-existence of several minority groups: Ukrainians 80,5%, Hungarians 12,1%, Romanians 2,6%, Russians 2,5% and Roma 1,1%. Thus in everyday situations it frequently occurs that the majority of the Hungarians of Transcarpathia have to switch codes and use another language or language variety in addition to their first language in order to effectively communicate. The languages do not have the same functional weight. At the various levels of language use there is a division of functions: at some stages the first or second language of the speakers is dominant, at others they are overlapping. The present paper is a survey of the strategy of code choice, of language use in the official, public and private spheres of Hungarians in Transcarpathia.

2. The research

In 2009-2010 the Antal Hodinka Institute carried out a research by questionnaires about the language use based on samples taken from social strata of the Hungarians in Transcarpathia. When planning the research there were 27 settlements chosen by strict criteria (gender, age, education and type of settlement) and the stratified

¹ *Surzhyk* is a widely used mixed language based on Russian vocabulary and Ukrainian grammar, a contact variant of Ukrainian and Russian. The number of its users is estimated 10-18% of the 46 million inhabitants of Ukraine. (cf. Khmelko 2004, Lenets 2000, Bilaniuk 2004).

samples were taken from 387 informants. Below the research will be referred to as *Rétegezett 2009*.

Of the 387 participating informants there were 167 men (43%), 220 women (57%). Villagers 234 persons (61%), town-dwellers 107 persons (28%), those living in other urban settlements 46 persons (12%). Most of them had secondary school certificates i.e. they were without special qualifications.

The majority of the informants claimed to be Hungarians (86%); Ukrainian nationality (13%); and 1 person each Russian and Roma, 2 persons with Hungarian-German identity.

Those with Hungarian as their mother tongue represent the majority (94%); of the Ukrainian nationals, too, many claimed to have Hungarian as their mother tongue. There were 17 persons (4%) with Ukrainian as their mother tongue while there were 50 (13%) Ukrainian nationals.

The informants were asked to fill in a questionnaire consisting of 58 questions inquiring about language usage, language choice at various spheres, identity, bilingualism (lexical borrowing, code switching) and attitudes attached to them in overt and covert manners.

3. Language choice at the various language spheres in Transcarpathia

Language choice is influenced by several factors: the linguistic and social background of the participants, their mastering of the language, linguistic attitude, the topic of the conversation; also by the social function of the conversation (whether solidarity or exclusion) and of course by the situation, scene/environment too in which the conversation is taking place (Grosjean 1982: 136, Borbély 2001: 118).

The scene of the language use tries to model the norms of language choice of a speech community on the basis of typical participants, typical topics and typical scenes connected to them (Bartha 1999: 97). Fishman (1972) said that every community has general abstract stages of linguistic use that are social-cultural developments which fix the characteristic features of the various situational types according to implicit rules in institutionalised forms. Such are: participants,

place, topic and the codes (language, variety) attached to them. He enumerated five prototypes of spheres of language use: home, friendship, church, education and work (cf. Borbély 2001:116).

István Csernicsekó and the members of the Hodinka Antal Institute have made surveys of the strategies of language choice among the Hungarians in Transcarpathia. Csernicsekó used a different grouping in his 1998 survey and set three spheres of language use. Based on the responses of 144 informants on the questionnaire he found that Hungarian was the dominant language in the *private sphere*. In the *public sphere* (communication with acquaintances, watching television, shopping, post office, surgery, workplace, etc.) the use of the three languages (Hungarian, Ukrainian, Russian) were about equal. In the *official sphere* the proportion of the use of Hungarian was the lowest (cf. Csernicsekó, 1998; Csernicsekó ed. 2003: 68–83, Márku 2008).

Planning the research these three divisions were taken as the basis, supposing that going *from informal toward formal the proportion of the use of the Hungarian language will decrease and that of Ukrainian/Russian will increase*; there is a *division of roles between the languages*: at some stages the Hungarian at others the Ukrainian language is dominant.

Official and public sphere

To the question of the questionnaire what language(s) are being used in the various spheres and situations the most frequent answers are given in Figs. 1. 2. and 3. in percentages. The Russian and Ukrainian languages are considered together in the questions.

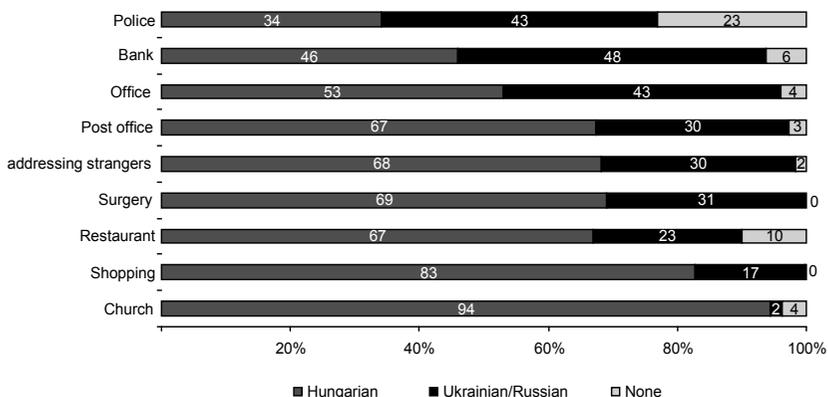


Fig.1. Spoken language use at the communicational spheres (Rétégzett 2009, N=387, in %)

The official sphere does not contain office administration only but such institutions and places are included, too that are stages of official communication regulated by written and unwritten laws (constitution, language law) and community norms.

The results have proved the hypothesis: the percentage of the use of the Ukrainian language is the highest in the official stages (office, surgery, bank, post office, etc.). It is also apparent that Hungarian is also used in such occasions; the earlier studies (Cserniczkó 1998, Cserniczkó Ed. 2003) and personal experience indicate that it is usually restricted to the spoken level even though in theory the law rendered bilingual administration possible. According to the laws in force the Hungarian language can be used besides the state language in official administration at places with absolute Hungarian majority (over 50%) (Cserniczkó 2010b: 101–103, Beregszászi–Cserniczkó 2004: 23–71, Cserniczkó ed.. 2010a).

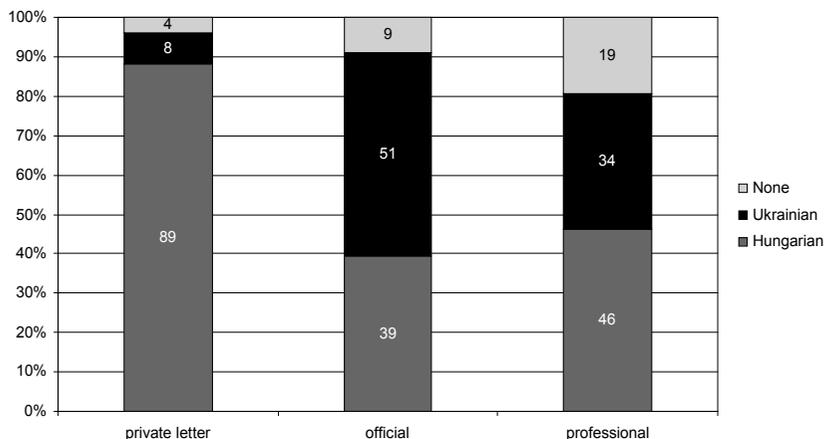


Fig.2. Written language use in the various communicational spheres (Rétegzett 2009, N=387, in %)

Fig. 2. clearly indicates that basically the state language is the language of official administration, half the informants write applications, official documents in Ukrainian but 39% of the informants use the Hungarian language, too, for such purposes

In the summer of 2010 the Hodinka Antal Institute commissioned two interviewers to ring up the self-government offices of 48 settlements with Hungarian inhabitants² inquiring whether applications to be handed in the self-governments could be written in Hungarian. The self-governments contacted were all in settlements where the proportion of the Hungarian inhabitants is over 50%, i.e. there should theoretically have been possibility to use the Hungarian language in all the offices (Cserniczkó 2010b: 101–103).

The result of the telephone inquiry was that of the 48 self-governments only 28 were ready to accept applications written in Hungarian.

The results of the inquiry support the results of earlier surveys (Karmacsi 2004, Cserniczkó ed. 2010b): that on the spoken level administration in Hungarian is possible at most settlements with Hungarian majority but it is problematic in the written form. The

² Alla the self-governmental offices with absolute Hungarian majority were approached, however, several of them could not have been reached during the two months of the program, may be due to summer leave.

written administration in Hungarian is further made difficult by the fact that bilingual (in Hungarian and Ukrainian) forms, brochures etc. are rarely available. Bilingual inscriptions are more frequent but still fewer than necessary (Csernicskó szerk. 2010b: 101–103).

The language use of the professions too, is divided: the majority of the informants have been writing professional texts in Hungarian, 34% in Ukrainian/Russian and 19% does not use either language for such purposes. The language of private letters is Hungarian only.

There was a question about the reading habits too. The use of Ukrainian is higher in the case of official documents and operating instructions otherwise Hungarian is the dominant language.

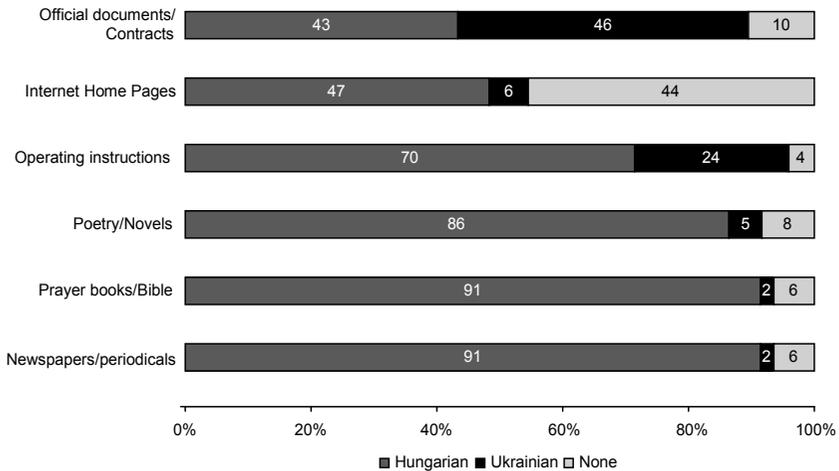


Fig.3. What language do you usually read in
(*Rétegzett 2009, N= 387, in %*)

The role languages in the private sphere

The questionnaire had two questions about language use within the family: on the one hand the informants were asked to give information about what language/s they used talking to their relations and friends in their childhood, on the other it was also asked what language/s were actually being used by the family members.

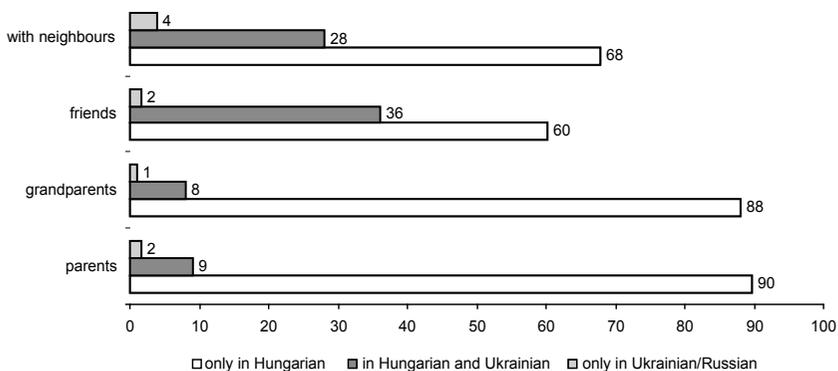


Fig. 4. Language use of informants in childhood
(*Rétegzett 2009, N= 387, in %*)

The answers indicate that the language of family socialization was mainly in Hungarian. Communicating with friends 36%, and neighbours 28% the language use was considerably mixed (Hungarian and Ukrainian).

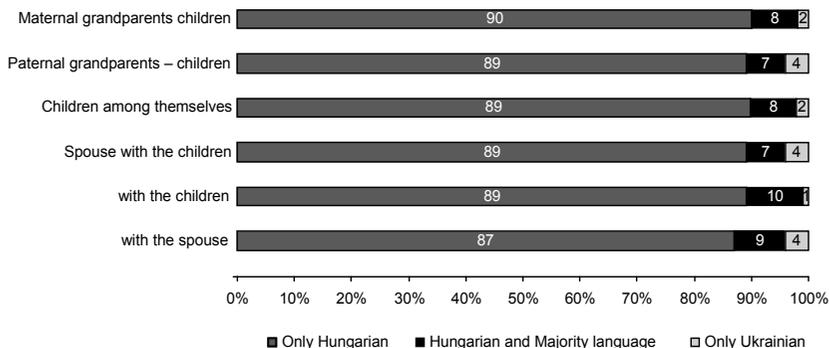


Fig. 5. Language use within the family
(*Rétegzett 2009, N= 387, in %*)

87-89% of the informants speak Hungarian only with their spouses and children. The language used with the children is almost always Hungarian in the entire family (89-90%).

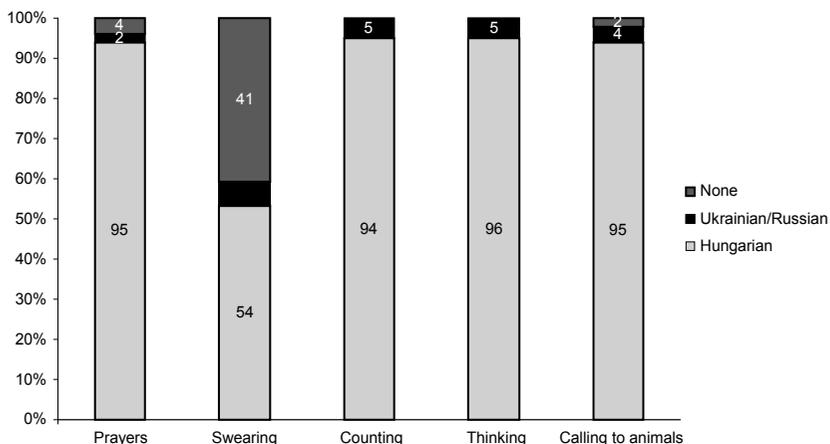


Fig. 6. Language choice in the notional sphere
(Rétegzett 2009, N= 387, in %)

In the notional sphere the Hungarian language is dominant. Almost all the informants say their prayers, call to animals and count in Hungarian. 41% of the informants do not swear at all, 54% in Hungarian and 6% in Ukrainian.

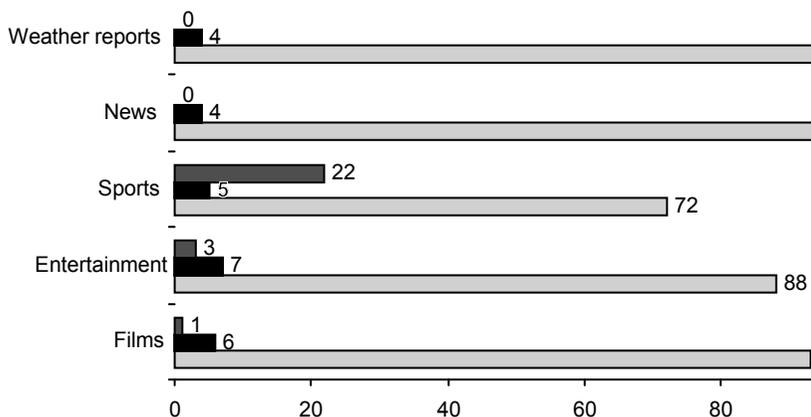


Fig. 7. What language do you chose to watch/listen the programs of TV and radio below? (Rétegzett 2009, N= 387, %-ban)

Fig.7. is about the language choice of media consumption of the informants. The dominance of the Hungarian language is conspicuous again: the informants prefer news, weather reports and films in Hungarian. However, Ukrainian appears in every type of programs too. The data also revealed that there are very few of the informants who are interested in foreign language programs, only 2% of them listen to/ watch films and 1% sports programs in foreign languages.

Summing up it can be stated that as we go toward the informal spheres the proportion of the use of Hungarian grows and that of Ukrainian decreases, i.e. the data justify the hypothesis. Mixed language use is characteristic of the spheres that are outside the private sphere proper and those ones that are not regulated officially which language is mandatory in the given situation. It means that in the public sphere both languages are used. In the private sphere (family contacts, private correspondence and of the so called internal spheres of language use as counting, thinking and calling to animals) Hungarian is used almost exclusively.

There is a division of tasks between the languages of bilingual communities in certain situations, in communicational stages the minority language, in other situations the majority language is used.

While in Ukraine, that is divided linguistically, politically and culturally, the battle for positions is between the Ukrainian and the Russian languages and the researchers are mainly interested in the communicational radius, spread and usage of those two languages, the Hungarians in Transcarpathia too, constantly face the problem of language choice. The question is important because a minority language lives as long as it is spoken. In other words while the demographic, political, economic and cultural sources are battling against each other, the Hungarian language can only survive in Transcarpathia if the spheres increase where the Hungarian language can be used.

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