

MIKLÓS KONTRA

The Role of the Fórum Social Science Review (*Fórum Társadalomtudományi Szemle*) in Hungarian Linguistics*

1. A brief historical overview

I find it appropriate to begin my survey of the linguistic contributions of the 25 volumes published so far by the *Fórum Social Science Review* (ISSN 1335-4361) with a brief overview of the main features of Hungarian linguistics on this side of the border (in Slovakia) and beyond the border (in Hungary), starting from 1985. Hungarian sociolinguistic research took off in 1985 at the Research Centre for Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, within its Department of Sociolinguistics (MTA Nyelvtudományi Intézet, Élőnyelvi Osztály). In 1991, the volume *Studies on Bilingualism Outside Hungary* (*Tanulmányok a határainkon túli kétnyelvűségről*), edited by Kontra (1991), was published. It included István Lanstyák's 62-page essay on the status of the Hungarian language in Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1991 (Lanstyák 1991). Four years later, in 1995, Lanstyák caused considerable alarm among some of the leading Hungarian linguists of the time by publishing his essay "The centres of the Hungarian language" (*A magyar nyelv központjai*) in *Magyar Tudomány*. That same year, we successfully applied to the Research Support Scheme in Prague to investigate Hungarian bilingualism across the Carpathian Basin (see Kontra 1999), and by 2000, the third volume in our book series appeared: Lanstyák's *The Hungarian Language in Slovakia* (*A magyar nyelv Szlovákiában*). The first issue of the *Review* had been published just the year before.

It is also worth bearing in mind that, until the end of the 20th century, Hungarian linguistics was restricted exclusively to descriptions of either the codified standard or dialects. Current Hungarian grammars sometimes disregard half of Hungary's adult population, or even more; by contrast, good contemporary accounts describe the language of roughly 12 million Hungarians across the Carpathian Basin (Kontra 2022a, 2022b).

* Edited version of a lecture presented at the conference *Tudomány magyar kisebbségi közegben* (*Science in the Hungarian Minority Context*) in the Fórum Institute, Šamorín on June 14, 2024.

2. A blink at the Review

The linguistic articles in the *Review* cover a refreshingly wide spectrum of topics. Compared with journals published in Hungary, the range of subjects these articles address is almost dazzling. To mention just a few topics and studies from the past decade at random: “Language ideologies and schoolsapes in Hungarian-medium schools beyond Hungary” (Petteri Laihonon, 2023/1); “Linguistic rights in education and public administration in the light of the reports of the committee of experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages” (István Csernicskó and Enikő Tóth-Orosz, 2021/1); “Speaking Hungarian in the courtroom: The use of Hungarian in the courts of the first Czechoslovak Republic” (Attila Simon, 2017/4); “The past, present (and future?) of the *ő*-dialect in Senec/Szenc” (Diana Kožík, 2006/3); “Philosophy and language – The language of philosophy: The linguistic views of two Reform-era Hungarian philosophers (János Erdélyi and Gusztáv Szontagh)” (Béla Mester 2020/3); “Bilingualism as a business interest” (Kornélia Hires-László, Gergely Horzsa, and László Letenyi, 2019/4); “Shifting first-name trends in Slovakia” (János Bauko, 2017/2); “Entrepreneurial bilingualism in Komárno/Komárom” (Géza Tokár, 2016/1); “Ideas about language and language-related issues in the daily *Új Szó* between 1949 and 1999” (Szilárd Sebők, 2015/4); “Standardization as a language-shaping activity” (István Lanstyák, 2015/2); and “Freedom and linguistic freedom” (László Öllös, 2014/2).

What do I find lacking in the *Review*? I would very much like to see studies on the highly variable legal and policy environment of language use that match the depth and quality of those we read from Transcarpathian authors. The gap is only partially filled by Eleonóra Sándor’s study (The Venice Commission on Minority Legislation Drafts, 2011/2), which merely underscores this absence.

Finally, I find the number of linguistics articles in English insufficient, and I am uncertain whether there are enough in Slovak. There could also be more reviews of linguistic works in Slovak, Czech, and Ukrainian, especially since such reviews are virtually absent from journals published in Hungary.

3. Károly Tóth’s research in Dlhá nad Váhom (Vághosszúfalu)

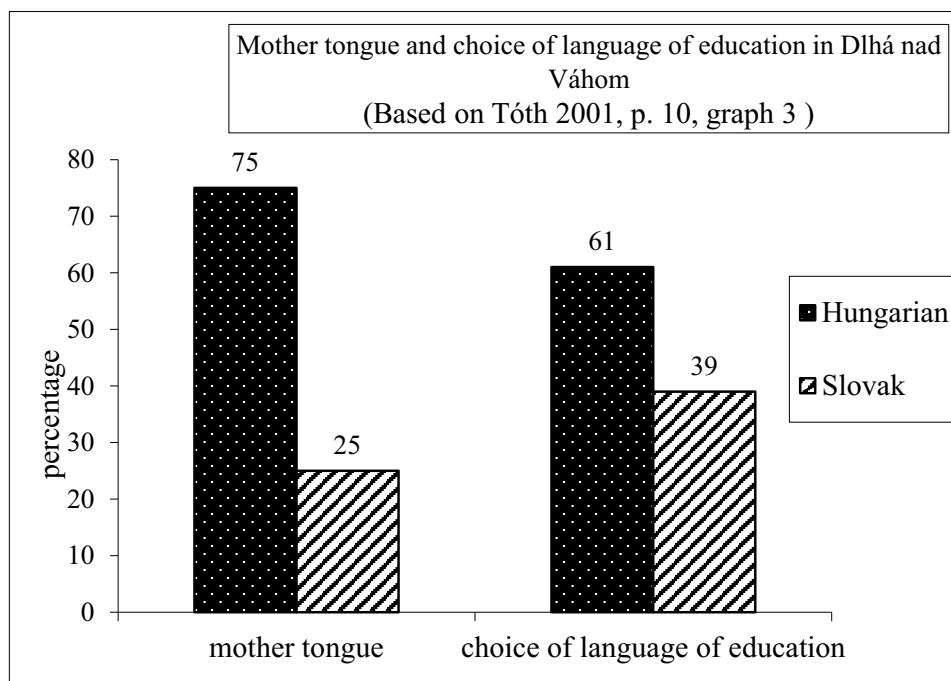
What Károly Tóth unearthed in his native village and later published in the third volume of the *Review* (Tóth 2001, see also in English in Tóth 2003) would have done honor to any distinguished Hungarian linguist. In the year 2000, Tóth witnessed a series of baffling developments in his home village. Dlhá nad Váhom, at that time, was hardly at the mercy of state power—setting aside the broader Slovak national context. In the decade leading up to the study, the village council had consisted entirely of Hungarian-identify-

ing members, the Hungarian school had been re-established, the local congregation had a Hungarian-speaking priest, and still, natural assimilation had nonetheless begun, in the view of some, irreversibly. Villagers sensed a palpable shift in the ethnic makeup of the settlement.

The village had remained unaffected by the post-World War II deportations and population exchanges, since the entire population had undergone re-Slovakization. The village had both Hungarian and Slovak-language schools, as well as a Hungarian kindergarten. What followed, then, was scarcely believable:

At the request of parents, beginning in September 2000, a Slovak-language class was opened in the previously Hungarian-only kindergarten—something that had never happened before—all this despite the fact that Slovak political parties and organizations were virtually absent from the village. True, during the same period, the activity level of Hungarian organizations, especially cultural ones, was also close to zero. (Tóth 2001: 8)

Figure 1. Mother tongue and choice of language of education among the inhabitants of Dlhá nad Váhom.



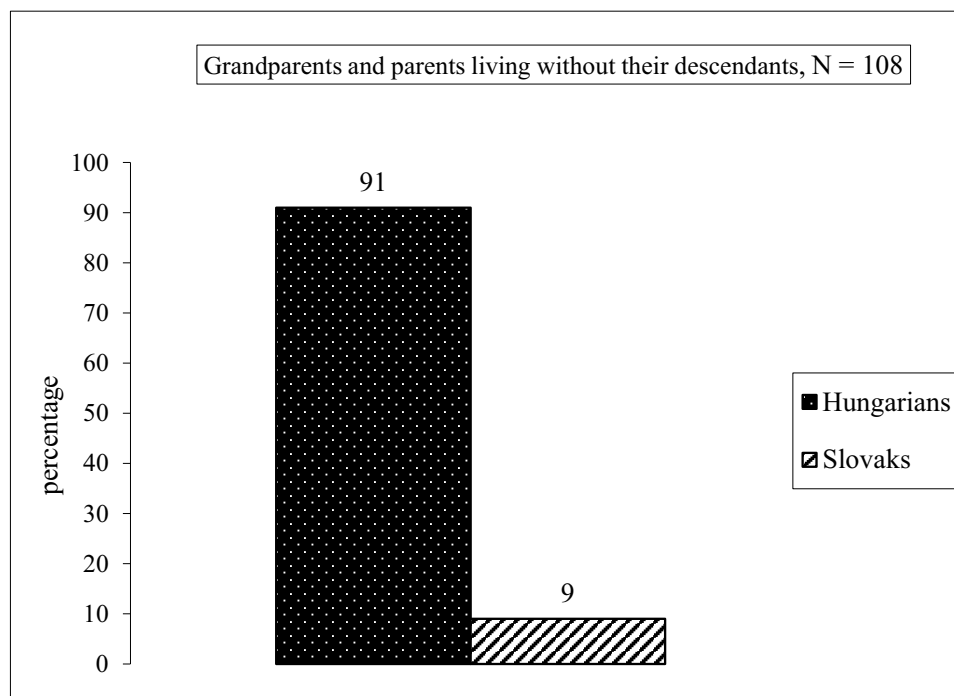
Source: Tóth 2001.

Of the village's 883 residents, 75% were Hungarian and 25% Slovak. The Hungarian-speaking population was aging, while the proportion of Slovak-speaking parents was

significant. Among school-age children, Slovak speakers were already in the majority. As shown in Figure 1, school enrollment patterns were tipping toward Slovak-language education (despite the fact that, under conditions of equal age distribution, equal fertility rates, and enrollment in mother-tongue schools, one would expect 75% Hungarian and 25% Slovak-language schooling).

In the 1980s, it would have been unthinkable for a Slovak-speaking young woman marrying into the village (or any newcomer, for that matter) not to learn Hungarian immediately. Two decades later, the situation had shifted dramatically: acquiring Hungarian was no longer taken for granted, and instead it was the family that adjusted its language use to accommodate the Slovak woman.

Figure 2. Grandparents and parents living without their descendants, by ethnicity.



Source: Tóth 2001: 13.

Károly Tóth discovered the explanation for this ethnic transformation when he conducted a meticulous survey of every single household in the village. What he found was that 39% of occupied homes were inhabited solely by parents and mostly grandparents without their descendants. A significant portion of the village's plots and houses were up for sale. For Dlhá nad Váhom, situated on an ethnic borderland, this was particularly ominous: the near-

by growing and affluent town of Šaľa (Vágsellye) had a Slovak majority, and one of the directions of its expansion was precisely toward Dlhá nad Váhom. Figure 2 displays homes where only grandparents or parents lived, broken down by the owners' ethnic identity.

The disproportion is striking: there were 10 times as many elderly Hungarians living alone as there were elderly Slovaks. Moreover, here, inevitably, market forces enter the picture. Elderly people eventually pass away (Hungarians too; no one lives forever), and their heirs sell their homes to the highest bidders, who typically happen to be affluent Slovaks from Šaľa. Thus, in this case, it was spontaneous market processes, not the oppressive policies of a hegemonic nation-state, that triggered a language shift in the village. That is why, by 2001, Slovak-language schooling had become more widespread in the village than the actual language use would have justified, and that is why Károly Tóth (2001: 17) stated that "it is not enough to fight only against forced assimilation. Effective minority protection must also aim to curb, or even halt, natural processes of assimilation."

This study has two major merits. First, only a few years after the nightmare of the Vladimír Mečiar era, it showed that assimilation can also occur spontaneously, driven by market dynamics. Assimilation, when it happens without coercion, is a human right, while forced assimilation constitutes a violation of human rights (see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). The second strength of this study lies in its thoroughly comprehensive investigation of processes unfolding within a single village. This can only be fully appreciated if one understands that, as Susan Gal put it, "language shift happens village by village" (see Part 5 below).

4. István Lanstyák shakes up the status quo

After earning his Hungarian-English teacher's degree in Debrecen and immersing himself in Western, primarily Anglo-Saxon sociolinguistic scholarship, István Lanstyák launched two "battles" within Hungarian linguistics in Slovakia and the broader Carpathian Basin.

The first centered around the argument that Hungarian is not a Budapest-centered but a pluricentric language, with multiple centers (see Clyne 1992 and Lanstyák 1995). This claim sparked a major controversy lasting over a decade (see Kontra-Saly [eds.] 1998), and it took quite some time before Hungarian linguists came to understand that the pluricentric nature of Hungarian was not a foreign plot but a factual reality whose recognition was in the shared interest of all (see Szilágyi 2008). In doing so, Lanstyák broke a taboo dating back 75 years, to the Treaty of Trianon.

His other act of taboo-breaking was at least as much of a sacrilege, though it targeted a tradition of far older standing. It concerned Hungarian language purism, that cen-

turies-old dogma that there exists a single “correct” Hungarian and its “incorrect” counterparts and that the authority to decide between them belongs not to speakers but exclusively to linguists. Correctness in Hungarian was treated as sacred and untouchable; anyone who denied it was branded unpatriotic, even unfit to be a true linguist. After all, a true linguist was also a language cultivator, and a language cultivator was by definition a purist—one who eradicates foreign words wherever possible and informs “incorrect” speakers that they do not belong among genuine Hungarians.

Well versed in sociolinguistics, Lanstyák quickly spotted the vulnerable spots in this purist tradition. First, it was burdened with linguistic and scholarly shortcomings and descriptive inadequacies. Second, such a prescriptive practice, reinforced by native-language education, stigmatized large segments of Hungarian speakers and undermined their confidence in language use. One of his earliest articles, published in *Irodalmi Szemle* in 1990, already carried a title that amounted to heresy: “Bilingualism and national survival” (Kétnyelvűség és nemzeti megmaradás).

Lanstyák’s two-part, extensive study published in *Fórum Társadalomtudományi Szemle* in 2003–2004 bore a long title that deserves to be quoted in full: “Local ‘valuable’ language varieties, ‘respectable’ foreign words, ‘peculiar’ meanings, ‘aggressive’ abbreviations, ‘hybrid’ language and their kind: A selection from the rich storehouse of purist nonsense” (Helyi „értékes” nyelvváltozatok, „tisztos” idegen szavak, „visszás” jelenségek, „agresszív” rövidítések, „kevercs” nyelv és társaik. Válogatás a nyelvművelői csacschaságok gazdag tárházából).

For his examples, Lanstyák drew on the Hungarian purist journal *Édes Anyanyelvünk* (Our Sweet Mother Tongue), then supported by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences,¹ several ministries, and other public-interest organizations. The “nonsense” he cited was usually written by lay activists, though the journal itself was edited by three professional linguists. Lanstyák’s “self-justifying” explanation is worth quoting:

The statements and opinions cited here were not included in my collection simply because I disagree with them, but because they no longer belong among scientifically acceptable views. Some are linguistic myths, others are linguistic superstitions, and yet others are simply nonsense. (Lanstyák 2003: 70)

1 Since the 1950s, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences’ activities in linguistic prescriptivism and language protection have varied in quality, they often contradicted their declared goals, and at times even proved socially harmful. Fortunately, and fortunately for István Lanstyák as well, the same institution has at times also carried out useful work: for example, this two-part study of Lanstyák’s was prepared with the support, among others, of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Domus Board (MTA Domus Kuratóriuma).

Lanstyák went on to present 75 numbered absurdities, dedicating the study as a birthday gift to linguistics professor László Zeman, who had just turned 75. I will not recall any of them here, but I strongly recommend reading, or rereading, the study to anyone interested in questions of language purism and linguistic popularization. Anyone who does so will not only learn a great deal but will be thoroughly entertained. Here are two excerpts:

The fact that linguistic purism is unsuited to “defending” the Hungarian language beyond the borders or within the enlarged European Union is not a flaw—just as it is not a flaw of a poppy-seed grinder that it cannot darn socks. It was not made for that purpose. The deficiency lies not in purism itself, but in those professional and amateur language cultivators who misuse it. (Lanstyák 2003: 79)

Recommending *Édes Anyanyelvünk* to lay readers is like recommending a goulash made of venison and beef, in which the beef is spoiled but the venison is not. (Lanstyák 2004: 69)

In my view, Lanstyák’s cited studies hold enormous significance in post-transition Hungarian linguistics. I could also mention his excellent work on language ideologies (e.g., 2017) or his analyses of Bible translations (e.g., 2013), but alas, time does not permit. Still, if a proper history of modern Hungarian linguistics is ever written, it will devote many pages to Lanstyák’s oeuvre, and not least to the many contributions he made within the pages of the *Review*.

5. Science and politics, scholars, and politicians

Whether Hungarian social scientists, including sociolinguists, should offer advice to Hungarian politicians is a matter of divided opinion. Sociologist Attila Z. Papp recently remarked, for instance: “As a researcher, my goal is not to redeem minority society, but to understand it” (Quoted by Csanda from a book by Tamás Gusztáv Filep, 2021: 176). Many sociolinguists go considerably further than that. Mary Bucholtz (2024), for example, in her review of the volume *Translanguaging for Equal Opportunities: Speaking Romani at School*, edited by János Heltai and Eszter Tarsoly, underscores the importance of promoting social justice in research.

Ten years ago, at the 18th Hungarian Sociolinguistic Conference in Nitra (Nyitra), I conducted an interview with Susan Gal (see: *Interview with Susan Gal*), from which I now quote a segment (transcribed by Szilárd Sebők):

MK: I am speaking with Susan Gal, professor of linguistics and anthropology at the University of Chicago, whose first book immediately brought her international recognition, and, by extension, shone a light on us Hungarians as well. That first book examined language shift in Oberwart (Felsőőr), a town in Burgenland, Austria. Her fieldwork there hap-

pened in 1974 (exactly 40 years ago) and the book was published five years later, in 1979.

[...]

Now, let me ask a different kind of question. Susan Gal is one of the foremost, if not the first, experts on language shift. That's been known for at least 35 years. She travels widely and is not a stranger to Hungary, either. She has many academic, teacher, and intellectual friends here. I wouldn't even rule out that she has actually seen a Hungarian politician in person—not just on television. Hungarian politicians these days talk a great deal about national erosion, the destructive effects of language shift, and many other real or perceived threats. This is as true of Hungarian politicians in Slovakia as it is of those in Hungary or Transylvania. In other words, the political discourse is full of language shift-related commentary.

Let me ask you: if a Hungarian politician came to you from a region where they feel language shift needs to be slowed down or stopped, would you give them advice?

SG.: Let me ask a question in return: are we talking about a Hungarian politician who wants to stop language shift? Say, among Hungarians abroad?

MK: Yes.

SG: To be honest, I wouldn't give them advice. And the reason is, as was said yesterday too, I believe, these are local matters. You can make generalizations about them, as we just did, but it is critically important to understand the local situation. Language shift happens village by village, and offering general advice... That's just not something I do.

MK: Fair enough, but has it ever happened that a Hungarian politician consulted you on such a matter?

SG: No one in the world has ever done so. And that is worth emphasizing. Because it is one thing for me to say, "If we want to understand what's happening somewhere, let's send a student, let's send a young researcher, let's go and take a look at what's going on there." Because, as we just said, it is very important to understand how local people value language. And that you cannot know in advance, because many different factors come into play. Once we know how they assess things and what they see as the most important issues, then something can be done. Of course it can. Just as something could have been done in Oberwart—or maybe even still could be. But! Thank you for asking. Let me stress again: no one in the world has ever come to me; not that I would have had some general advice to give them. Good, very good question...

Furthermore, let me share briefly one more story in which *Fórum Review* played a significant role. Between 1998 and 2021, I published nearly a dozen essays and articles in *Kritika*, *Élet és Irodalom*, and other outlets about the linguistic genocide afflicting Hungary's Roma population. Yet over the course of those 25 years, I was unable to persuade the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) to remove the question from the census questionnaire that effectively causes linguistic genocide: the item on "mother tongue: Gypsy (Lovari or Boyash)."

Then *Fórum Review* published an article of mine (Kontra 2021). It was titled "Remarks on the Concept of Mother Tongue" (*Megjegyzések az anyanyelv fogalmáról*), and I sent

it to my friend Pál Péter Tóth, a retired demographer at the KSH. He subsequently forwarded the piece to a colleague—someone with a functional brain, it seems—who promised they would change the question, and, indeed, the 2022 census questionnaire listed Romani and Boyash as two separate languages.²

13.1. What is your mother tongue?

Answering this question is voluntary. By responding, you consent to the use of your data. You may mark two answers if you like.

- ☐ Hungarian
- ☐ Bulgarian
- ☐ **Gypsy – Romani (e.g., Lovari)**
- ☐ **Gypsy – Boyash** [author's highlights]
- ☐ Greek
- [...]

All of this, however, remains only a partial success because even today we cannot know how many indicated Romani as their mother tongue and how many indicated Boyash since in its aggregated data the Central Statistical Office reported only the following:

Figure 3. Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2022 Census data [red marking signals the stress the Author wants to add to the selected items - the Editor's note]

1.1.6.1 Population by mother tongue, ethnicity, and sex							
Mother tongue, ethnicity	Mother tongue						
	1930	1970	1980	1990	2001	2011	2022
Male							
Hungarian	3,925,780	4,923,857	5,130,958	4,915,661	4,528,028	3,967,620	3,952,113
Domestic minorities							
Bulgarian	2 429	..	..	751	651	1,377	1,257
Gypsy (Romani, Boyash)	3,852	16,996	13,826	23,945	24,191	27,804	12,255
Greek	58	..	..	833	984	902	945

We may thus conclude that the Central Statistical Office still finds it difficult to bring an end to the linguistic genocide of Hungary's Roma population. However, at least, after a quarter of a century, they have taken a step in the right direction, and for that, credit is due to *Fórum Review*.

2 These are two languages belonging to different language families. Romani and Boyash speakers do not understand each other, just as Slovaks, for example, do not understand Romanians, and vice versa.

6. Science communication

The *Review* is published by the Fórum Institute, and the institute itself has never shied away from science communication. Sticking just to linguistics, Volume VII (*Language*, eds. Szabó Mihály and Lanstyák, 2011) of the book series *Hungarians in Slovakia* (Magyarok Szlovákiában), or *Names of Places, Places of Names* (*A hely nevei, a nyelv helyei*) by Horony, Orosz, and Szalay (2012), are not only of the highest scholarly caliber but also outstanding examples of science communication.

In 2017, a radio series titled *Jaffás and Kofolás* (*A Jaffás és a Kofolás*), hosted by Ildikó Hizsniai Tóth and György Kerényi, began airing on Pátria Rádió in Bratislava (Pozsony). The show explored the Hungarian language: how Hungarians in Slovakia use it and a range of related topics. In each episode, the hosts interviewed real, flesh-and-blood people (and occasionally linguists) from the Matúšova zem region (Mátyusföld) to Bratislava to Budapest. They did not preach or pontificate but rather opened a window onto the everyday world of ordinary people.

In 2022, Ildikó Hizsniai Tóth published a book based on these broadcasts: *You're Telling Me? Conversations on the Hungarian Language with Jaffás and Kofolás* (*Nekem mondd? Jaffás és Kofolás beszélgetései a magyar nyelvről*). The book was priced at 18 euros or 7,000 Hungarian forints at the time. If the Fórum Institute could somehow organize or ensure that this book found its way into every Hungarian school in Slovakia, and moreover, in the entire Carpathian Basin, it would go a long way toward sparking a meaningful, unprecedented conversation about language, nationhood, identity, and other lofty topics that we have never talked about properly before.

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