

Farkas, Tamás

· Eötvös Loránd University of Sciences, Faculty of Humanities,
· Institute of Hungarian Linguistics and Finno-Ugric Studies, Budapest
· farkas.tamas@btk.elte.hu

CHANGING NAMES AS ABOLISHING THE
DIFFERENCE:
PERSONAL NAMES AS ETHNIC SYMBOLS,
CHARACTERISTICS OF SURNAME CHANGES
AND THE MAGYARIZATION OF SURNAMES
IN HUNGARY¹

*A nevek megváltoztatása mint a különbségek eltörlése:
A személynév mint etnikai szimbólum, a családnév-változtatások
jellemzői és a családnévek magyarosítása Magyarországon*

*Promena imena kao brisanje različitosti:
Rođeno ime kao etnički simbol, karakteristike promena porodičnih
imena i mađarenje porodičnih imena u Mađarskoj*

Many names were changed spontaneously in language contact situations according to the name stock of the dominant community in Hungary in old centuries. In the 19th century, nationalism gave rise to a new linguistic ideology aiming at uniting the 'nation'. Surnames became treated also as ethnic symbols, thus the concepts of the assimilation of linguistic/ethnic minorities and the changing of surnames of foreign origin joined together. The paper gives an account of the linguistic and onomastic factors of this phenomenon, and the historical, social, ideological background of the process. It focuses on the assimilation of minorities and its consequences concerning their personal names in Hungary, a lot in common with similar processes of other countries, in the 19th and 20th century.

Key words: names as ethnic symbols, name assimilation, assimilation of ethnic minorities, linguistic ideology, surname changes, name Magyarization

¹ The paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

1. PERSONAL NAMES AND SOCIETY

Personal names are not only the most important means of identification of a person, but according to our sociocultural knowledge they may also refer to the bearer's social background. A personal name may refer in some likelihood to such features as social class, religion, and ethnic identity or background. These possible references, of course, change in time, space, and sociocultural environment.

Names were born to meet the needs of society, and change according to the changes of the characteristics of people as individuals and also as members of the different groups of society.²

2. DEVELOPMENT OF SURNAMES OF MINORITIES IN HUNGARY

Names are born in society, exist and may change primarily in oral, collective use. Their usage in written documents and their regulation by state administration affects the lives of names. In historical Hungary the use of inheritable surnames developed in a natural way among Hungarian, German, Slovakian and Croatian population. In the Habsburg Empire at the end of the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century, however, specific decrees prescribed the use of permanent surnames for the still surnameless Gipsy (1783), Jewish (1787) and Greek Orthodox (mainly Serbian) minorities (1817).³ This fact affected the name stocks of the minorities even if their surnames came from their own languages. Hungarian Gipsies, at the same time, borrowed their surnames from the language of the surrounding Hungarian society, whilst members of the Jewish communities adopted German surnames in 1787 for Emperor Joseph's decree.

Personal names in a foreign language environment are exposed to spontaneous name assimilation, as in the cases of many surnames of foreign origin in Hungary, according the characteristics of the Hungarian language and its surname stock (see FÜLÖP 1985, MIZSER 2009, FARKAS 2009a, FÁBIÁN 2011, SZILÁGYI-KÓSA 2014 etc., also as the sources of the examples given below). Regular changes in the written form of the surname occurred, e.g.: *Schmidt* ~ *Smied*, *Smidt*, *Smidth*, *Smit*, *Smitt*; *Schäfer* ~ *Schäefffer*, *Schéffer*, *Seffer*, *Séffer*, *Schéfer*, *Sefer*, *Séfer* etc. (cf. HAJDÚ 2010: 417–418). The phonetic character of

² For an overview of the publications on surname changes in Hungary, see FARKAS 2012b, SLÍZ 2012. For the surname changes in other countries, see FARKAS 2001: 156–158, 204–233; WALKOWIAK 2014: 132–147.

³ In the latter case, Emperor Francis I decreed patronymics hereditary, which had changed from generation to generation before. For the details, see KARÁDY–KOZMA 2002: 20–26.

the surname may also change in accordance with the phonetic rules of the majority language: *Kmetykó* > *Metykó*, *Mráz* > *Maráz*, *Vindl* > *Vindel*, *Jakl* > *Jakli* etc., sometimes by folk etymology: *Haas* > *Ház* ‘house’, *Langh* > *Láng* ‘flame’, *Kaszavits* > *Kaszaviszi* ‘carries a scythe’, *Kaszakovits* > *Kasza* ‘scythe’, etc. Surnames of foreign origin are sometimes translated by the bilingual environment: *Cservenka* > *Piros* ‘red’, *Fischer* > *Halász* ‘fisher’ etc. The community of another mother tongue may also change the original surname for an ethnonym (e.g. *Németh* ‘German’, *Horváth* ‘Croat’), or may change it to a completely new surname. The strongest degree of individual name assimilation is deliberate name changing, in Hungary above all the Magyarization of surnames.

Name assimilation means adapting oneself to the language environment of the majority, which – in general, but not always – is the dominant language of the country. But also in Hungary, in regions inhabited by national minorities, however, this could also mean adapting oneself to a minority language if it was dominant in the given area (cf. e.g. TURCANU 2011). For example, influenced by the Croatian or the Serbian languages: *Varga* > *Vargaity*, *Mezei* > *Mezeics*, *Sebes* > *Sebesics* (FARKAS 2009c: 48).

The linguistic influence of the majority language had another special consequence in the Hungarian language area: the ‘given name + surname’ order of the personal names in European languages was changed for the Hungarian ‘surname + given name’ order, which became general in the name usage of different Hungarian minorities.

3. SURNAMES OF MINORITIES IN MAJORITY ENVIRONMENT

Principally it is true what Haugen writes in connection with immigrants: “surname in the first place is an orthographic problem” (cites KONTRA 1990: 106), but bearing a surname as a member of a minority group may raise more questions.

The same surname in different language environment might elicit different effects. Surnames of foreign origin might sound ordinary or ridiculous, and they could also have disadvantageous connotations in the majority language (FARKAS 2004). E.g. the surnames *Hugyik*, *Hugyecz*, *Hugyina* coming from a Slovakian word meaning ‘musician’ in Hungarian connote the word *húgy* ‘urine’, whilst the frequent Hungarian surname *Kiss* ‘little, small’ will get a special connotation in English speaking environment.

Apart from the above facts, one can easily realise that in American crime stories and movies, for instance, gangsters usually bear Italian names, characters of lower social rank in many cases have Slavic ones, whilst bad guys

are regularly given German names. Both social psychological and onomastic researches deal with the question whether changing foreign-sounding names to usual name forms of the dominant language helps to erase prejudice and to what extent this process assures better social integration to the bearers of the names. Here returns the 19th century idea one could meet in the times of Magyarizations of surnames: "it is obvious that however good expert *Krachenfels* counsellor is, he can never be as popular as could be if he changes his name to *Sziklai* [Hung. 'cliff, rock' + suffix *-i*]" (SZENT-IVÁNYI 1895: 2; italics mine – T. F.).

4. SURNAMES AS ETHNIC SYMBOLS

Surnames can inevitably express our belonging to the groups of society. Surnames in the first place seem to identify the family and the ethnic group we belong to, regardless of the fact whether this connection is real and/or accepted.

4.1. *The linguistic origin of names*

Looking at a deeper level, a surname reveals something partly about an ancestor of its owner and partly about the language use of the contemporary community surrounding this ancestor. Thus, a surname is less and less adequate to draw valid conclusions about linguistic or ethnic identities of later descendants. At the same time, in relation to earlier historical periods historical researches regularly use the evidence of personal names (N. FODOR 2011). In the age of nationalism, and also in modern times, a name takes the role of an ethnic symbol, thus possesses special value: a name might become a means of acceptance or refusal (M. HORVÁTH 2014).

Foreign-sounding – thus not Hungarian-like – names might impose an effect on society based on the following logical line: a foreign-sounding name → a non-Hungarian name → a person of non-Hungarian mother tongue → a person of non-Hungarian origin → a non-Hungarian person. Curiously enough, we more easily consider a person whose surname is *Unger* ('Hungarian' in German) to be a foreigner than a person whose surname is *Németh* (meaning 'German' in Hungarian). In the history of Hungarian surname changes, people en masse changed their foreign-sounding surnames, whilst those common surnames from the ethnonyms of the minorities in the Hungarian language (*Németh*, *Horváth* etc.) were hardly ever substituted.

As it was stated above, surnames seem to evoke the image of foreignness chiefly because of their linguistic characters. Thus bearing certain surnames – especially those of German origin – might sometimes be disadvantageous

(FARKAS 2009a: 32). Bearing surnames of German origin was typical of the Germans and the Jews, and the social estimation of the former group periodically, also that of the latter group in general, could be particularly bad. During the First World War, for example, the increasing number of applications for name changes handed in among the Germans living in Russia or changing the name of the English royal family in the same period from the German *Battenberg* to *Windsor* are characteristic features. During the Second World War, German surnames were changed in the United States; whilst in Hungary it happened in great numbers only after 1945 when those names were treated as the sign of collective guilt as a consequence of the War.

A foreign-sounding surname could be changed not only because it marked one's belonging to a definite minority, but also because it functioned in general as a symbol of being a foreigner, in other words, as a symbol of not belonging to the nation (cf. MAITZ 2008). Suffice it to say that in Hungary a *Petrovics* as *Petőfi*, in Rumania an *Eminovics* as *Eminescu* could become a great poet of his chosen nation. To illustrate that judging a surname to be a foreign one is not only the question of etymology, let me quote a political verse from the end of the 19th century: "He is not Hungarian, he is *ics-vics*, / We do not need *Simoncsits*, / Long live *Benyovszky*" (cites Ignóty 1898/1978: 210). Both are Slavic names, but the latter is not a simple and southern Slavic one, but it has a Polish and a noble character. (For the history of surnames ending in *-ics* in Hungary, see FARKAS 2009c.)

4.2. *The typicality of names in minority groups*

The reference of a surname to one's belonging to a minority group is not only the result of foreign origin or foreign sound-values. The high frequency of certain surnames within a given ethnic group is also important (FARKAS 2004: 51–52). This can be experienced in the case of the surnames of Hungarian Gipsies. The surnames considered to be typically Gipsy are of Hungarian origin, but are borne typically by Gipsies, as they refer to names of occupation practiced traditionally mainly by Gipsies (e.g. *Lakatos*, *Kolompár*, *Orsós*). As the change-of-name petitions in Hungary suggest: any name can play the same role. The Hungarian *Boldizsár* or the Slavic *Petrovics* can also indicate the ethnic group, if they are borne mainly by Gipsies in the local community. (For details, see FARKAS 2009b: 46–48, 70, 72, 88–90.)

Peculiarly enough, a surname which has already been changed and which is derived from the surname stock of the dominant language can also reveal its bearer's previous status as an outsider. Among the Jews certain new surnames became so frequent that these names could be more associated with the Jewish than with the integrating community. (Such names are in other countries e.g.

the Russian *Levin-s* coming from *Levi-s*; or the English surname *Gordon*; FARKAS 2001: 51, 54.) Characteristically Magyarized surnames – as Magyarizations of surnames were typically initiated by Hungarian Jews – could often be considered as Jewish names in Hungary.

4.3. *The relativity of foreignness and identity*

It is important to note that the foreignness of a surname is relative. In the United States, for example, not only a change of *Schmidt* > *Smith*, but also a change of *Goldschmidt* > *Schmidt* can serve better integration into the dominant society (MAAS 1958: 170). The same is true in Hungary for example, for the changes *Krcsik* > *Krecsik* or *Gräff* > *Gráff* (change-of-name petitions, No. 350, 427 in 1997), though the new names do not typically sound Hungarian. It is also notable that foreign-like and Hungarian-like sounding has sometimes nothing to do with the linguistic origin of the name, but it should be understood with respect to the synchronic language competence of the society. In this way, a forgotten old Hungarian surname could also be "Magyarized", whilst a new name can only apparently be Hungarian. Name changing can attain its aim also in this way.

Surnames are also connected to one's roots: to family descendance as well as traditions. Thus it is understandable that with the advent of greater freedom, after the change of regime in 1990, more people asked and got back the original, non-Magyarized surnames of their families.

5. SURNAME CHANGES AS MAGYARIZATION OF NAMES IN HUNGARY

In the text above, it has been presented how a surname can function as a group marker. Now, I shall go on to overview the complex (historical, social, political, ideological) background of name changes, especially the background of Magyarization of surnames in brief. (For the details, see KARÁDY-KOZMA 2002, MAITZ-FARKAS 2008, FARKAS 2009b.)

5.1. *The roots of the process*

Before the end of the 18th century the quasi-feudal, multilingual and multi-ethnic Hungary was organised on the basis of social classes, religion and regionalism instead of ethnicity. Language was not a primary social marker, not the means of identification or segregation. The new type of identity was born with the awakening of national feelings and linguistic nationalism. Identities

involved values; the subjective identification with objective symbolic forms was a natural (but sometimes also expected or required) means of expressing and reinforcing group membership – for the individual, for society and for the dominant political culture. The use of names should also be treated in this setting. In a given context preserving or changing a surname of foreign origin might clearly represent one's attitude.

In this part of Europe, thus also in Hungary during the 19th century the nation became determined rather by origin, culture and mother tongue than by citizenship, place of birth and dwelling. In those regions where the linguistic-ethnic characteristics were not strong enough, it could seem to be extremely important to reinforce relating components. So it happened in the multinational Hungary of the early 19th century where the Hungarians were in a slight minority. Herder, father of national ideology, predicted that the Hungarians would be absorbed into the sea of surrounding foreign nations. In this situation the national language could become even more important for the Hungarians than it was for all nations of the region. And if language is so important, names are important, too.

This importance affected different types of proper names. German names of streets were changed for Hungarian names. The process of establishing the official settlement name system also tended to give preference to Hungarian names or Hungarian variation of the names. The 19th century was also characterised by the extensive use of national given names: historical names were revived, new names were coined in literature, foreign given names were either translated or Magyarized in vast quantities.

5.2. *An ideology for changing surnames*

Returning to surnames: the first wave of surname Magyarization can be considered as an extension of the 1848–49 War of National Independence, but the boom in name-Magyarization – in accordance with the development in political and social history – took place in the 1880s. Surname Magyarization was supported also by the government but its popularity relied on social backup. The process itself was consistently labelled as *névváltoztatás* 'name change' in official language, but everyday language as well as publicity used the term *névmagyarosítás* 'name Magyarization' – to reveal the typical aim and method. The otherwise natural process of surname changes and surname assimilation was seriously strengthened by patriotism and linguistic nationalism.

Opinions in connection with surname Magyarizations in the given historical context were basically dependent on two factors: (1) what certain groups of society thought about the minorities of the country (accept, integrate or segregate) and (2) whether these groups believed Magyarizations could help them to

achieve their goals (whether they considered name changing only to be an external symbol or also an effective means of assimilation). Propagators of surname Magyarizations in the era of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and also later in the interwar period could think: “there is a need for a Hungarian name policy” (LENGYEL 1917: 209). The aim was “to create a homogeneous nation-based society and also to make it externally Hungarian in its names” (CSÁNYI 1915: 4). Though “a foreign-sounding name does not exclude one’s devotion to Hungary [...] it is also true that a Hungarian name unites the individual with the Hungarian nation” (CSÁNYI 1915: 4). As SIMON TELKES, the most zealous promoter of Magyarizations (himself an assimilated Jew) said: “As one becomes Christian and is admitted into Christian society with the adoption of Christianity, one can gain full acceptance into Hungarian society, into the nation with a national baptism by changing his foreign name to a Hungarian one. The name must be considered as a political creed of a Hungarian citizen [...] Magyarization of the name is an oath of allegiance, a patriotic vow” (TELKES 1898: 3). This was also a reply to rival nationalisms threatening the Hungarian nation: “A Hungarian name [...] gives evidence to foreigners that this country is not subject to division, but is a thousand-year-old giant cliff” (LENGYEL 1917: 212–213).⁴

The basic aim of surname Magyarizations was to unite the nation politically, culturally, emotionally and symbolically. After the collapse of historical Hungary in 1920, GYULA SZEKFŰ, the historian, however, described the process of forcing name Magyarizations as a Hungarian illusion, a substitute rooted in the formalistic concept of the nation (SZEKFŰ 1934/1989: 330–332).

5.3. Personal motives for the name changes

The possible motives for official surname changes are various (in detail, see KOZMA 2007). In a historical-sociological-ideological framework they can be examined according to social groups with respect to real or presumed external expectations or influences. Nevertheless personal interests (eliminating a disadvantage, taking an advantage) of the individual applying for the name change can also be analysed. In the great period of name changes between the 1860s and the 1940s more than 90% of the changes were Magyarizations, i.e. changing a foreign-sounding surname to a new Hungarian-like surname deliberately. In the background first we find patriotism, linguistic nationalism, natural and/or expected assimilation, later accompanied by attempts to escape (in the case of Jews and Germans, as a result of the Second World War). The essence is to get rid of the ethnic, minority character, and to express and to reach integration into the society of the majority.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of these argumentations, see MAITZ 2008.

Due to the external effects on surname changes the movement of surname Magyarization ceased in the second half of the 20th century. From this time on name changes are mostly influenced by personal motives. The vast majority of the abandoned names are still foreign-sounding surnames, but they seem to be disturbing from a practical, everyday point of view. In the context of the Hungarian language a foreign-sounding, unusual name often seems unpleasant or ordinary; and its usage often causes difficulties: such names are not easy to pronounce, note or memorise. It is understandable that a man bearing the surname *Vidrih* in Hungary, called also as *Vidik*, *Vitrik*, *Fridrich* in speech and *Widrih* in writing; or a *Hermanec*, whose name is used as *Hermanic*, *Hermanicz*, *Hermanitz* also decides to change his name (change-of-name petitions No. V59/1952, 7629/1964 and 7224/1964). The same situation could be presented also by the variety of the surname of a petitioner, all of its forms used in the mid-20th century official documentation of the case: *Gutthmann*, *Guttman*, *Guthmann*, *Gutman*, *Guttman*, *Guttman* (change-of-name petition No. G11/1952). These examples warn us not to perceive the previous name Magyarizations as just simply the results of ideological influences.

5.4. Name changes in the assimilation process

The most typical reason for changing one's name all over the world is the individual's will to adjust themselves to the dominant linguistic-cultural-social environment. In the case of immigrants, changing one's name is a means of integration, often performed well before the real integration, sometimes in the hope of being able to make a basic living. In the case of minorities living in a country for centuries changing one's name is a step in the long process of assimilation, which results in eliminating social disadvantages.

The process of assimilation might affect more generations. The first stage, the basis of integration is to borrow the elements of material culture, which is followed by taking over the elements of mental culture, the elements of scale of values. This is accompanied by evolving bilingualism, and may finally lead to language shift. In the use of names it is given name fashion that changes at first, in Hungary followed by a change in the typical European 'given name + surname' order of the person's names. The final stage of assimilation can even be changing one's surname. Official name changes are often preceded by collective or individual name changes in speech. Name Magyarizations could not be compared to the real results of linguistic-cultural assimilation. In stained situations – as in the years after the Second World War among the Germans living in Hungary – name Magyarizations could even go before language shift, even if those speaking German at home could find it difficult to give up their inherited surnames.

In the case of the assimilation of Jews, a population typically ready to change their personal names, only by converting to the Christian faith they abandoned the last real sign of their minority isolation. An artistic and generally valid interpretation of the process of assimilation one can encounter, for example, in István Szabó's film, entitled "Sunshine" depicting the lives of four generations of a Hungarian Jewish family (FARKAS 2012b: 7).

5.5. *The recruitment of the process*

Subjects of name changes mostly belonged to mobile, developing social layers. Name Magyarizations could fundamentally be described as a behaviour pattern typical of middle class people, which, according to the different characteristics of different social groups, could be present in various degrees. With respect to minorities the most important influencing factors were: the degree of their urbanisation (name Magyarizations were more frequent in towns, especially in Budapest); the degree of their dispersion (name changes were rarer in detached ethnic blocks), their proportion in a region (larger proportion weakened social pressure); the strength of their traditions (a factor supporting name preserving); special features and possibilities of the given community; and other separating factors, as religion (more clearly in the case of the Jews). Name changes could be the sign of altered, altering or vague, weak identity. (For a deeper analysis, see KARÁDY 2009.) Nonetheless, external influences urging name changes could only be effective under these conditions.

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A nevek megváltoztatása mint a különbségek eltörlése:

A személynév mint etnikai szimbólum, a családnév-változtatások jellemzői és a családnevek magyarosítása Magyarországon

Számos családnév változott meg nyelvi kontaktushelyzetben spontán módon, a domináns névrendszerhez igazodva, a korábbi évszázadok folyamán Magyarországon. A 19. századi nacionalizmus azonban újfajta nyelvi ideológiát hozott magával, mely a „nemzet” egyesítésére törekedett. A családneveket is etnikai szimbólumnak kezdték tekinteni, s így a nyelvi-etnikai kisebbségek asszimilációjának és az idegen eredetű családnevek változásainak-megváltoztatásának fogalma összekapcsolódott egymással. A jelen tanulmány e jelenség nyelvi, névtani tényezőiről, illetve történeti, társadalmi, ideológiai hátteréről szóló összegzés, melynek fókuszában a 19–20. századi magyarországi kisebbségek asszimilációjának, illetve e folyamatnak ezen kisebbségek személynévanyagára gyakorolt – más országokbeli folyamatokkal is sok közös vonást mutató – hatása áll.

Kulcsszavak: nevek mint etnikai szimbólumok, névasszimiláció, etnikai kisebbségek asszimilációja, nyelvi ideológia, családnév-változtatások, névmagyarosítás

*Promena imena kao brisanje različitosti:**Rođeno ime kao etnički simbol, karakteristike promena porodičnih imena i mađarenje porodičnih imena u Mađarskoj*

U toku ranijih vekova su se u Mađarskoj brojna porodična imena promenila u situaciji jezičkih kontakata na spontan način, akomodirajući se dominantnom sistemu imena. U 19. veku je međutim nacionalizam iznedrio novu vrstu jezičke ideologije koja je težila da objedini „naciju”. Tako su i porodična imena počela da se smatraju etničkim simbolima, te se koncept asimilacije nacionalno-etničkih manjina spojio sa konceptom menjanja – promene – porodičnih imena stranog porekla. Aktuelna studija predstavlja sumiranje jezičkih i onomastičkih faktora ove pojave, odnosno istorijskih, društvenih i ideoloških prilika koje su stajale u njenoj pozadini. U fokusu razmatranja nalazi se proces asimilacije manjina u Mađarskoj u toku 19–20. veka, kao i njegov uticaj na fond ličnih imena tih manjina, koji pokazuje brojne zajedničke crte sa sličnim procesima koji su se odvijali u drugim zemljama.

Ključne reči: imena kao etnički simboli, asimilacija imena, asimilacija etničkih manjina, jezička ideologija, promene porodičnih imena, mađarenje imena

Beérkezés időpontja: 2015. 07. 30.

Közlésre elfogadva: 2015. 08. 20.