

A Pragmatic View of Heritage Language and Its Relation to HSL

New roads in language teaching, new roads in the transfer of culture: the continuous search for new possibilities characterizes every teacher eager to develop his or her craft. Yet a debate concerning new methods or approaches cannot be held in the case of language students who are of Hungarian descent, yet still need to learn Hungarian, for little attention has been paid to their unique requirements. Indeed, at most we can consult a scattering of studies that—according to laymen—utilize methods used in native language training while those working in the field interpret these studies as examples of Hungarian as a Second Language (HSL).

This is to be expected, for heritage language learners typically display a wide range of language ability and can possess anything from beginner, to highly advanced language levels. Verbal skills are generally more common, while fluency is emphasized over accuracy. It is for this reason that heritage learners—after completing a written language competence test—almost always find themselves amongst »real« foreigners being taught in university courses or language classes utilizing HSL methods. For students like these, the material being covered in this type of course is frequently unnecessary and can, in some instances, even require the completion of tasks that are decidedly harmful in nature. The result: the student who knew a bit more than the others at the beginning of the course starts to lag behind, eventually losing his/her self-confidence. In many cases, by the end of the course this student often shows the least development. Having lost all sense of motivation, the heritage learner becomes far less interested in learning more about the Hungarian language or culture.

In Sunday/Weekend Hungarian Schools operating outside of Hungary, parents usually enroll children between the ages of eight and fourteen as a way to preserve the family's connection to Hun-

gary's language and culture. In many places youth groups are also available to high school students. Teachers of these courses either utilize the curricula and textbooks written for native Hungarian speakers, or they create their own course materials based on these same sources. In institutions such as these students face perhaps a greater challenge in comparison to that experienced by a heritage learner placed in an HSL program; from the very beginning, they find themselves far behind the level demanded by textbooks intended for their counterparts living and studying in Hungary. They do not understand the vocabulary used in reading selections and, by the time they overcome the hurdle of vocabulary, their willingness to continue is gone.

In this lecture I would like to outline possible solutions for the current situation while also calling attention to certain factors that must be taken into consideration. At the same time, I intend to describe the kind of methods used in programs created for the purpose of educating heritage learners at the Balassi Institute in Budapest, Hungary. Emphasis will be placed on language usage as one of the most important aspects of culture; increasing students' awareness of language behavior therefore allows us to develop both linguistic and (inter)cultural competence.

Structural and Developmental Aspects of Linguistic Abilities Displayed by Heritage Learners

The list of general characteristics is lengthy. Among the many traits displayed by those who have only learned a language at home, within the family circle, a lack of linguistic awareness is also characteristic of Hungarian as a heritage language. Verbal skills are far more dominant than written ones, unstructured use of (written and oral) expressions, not surprising given the fact that comprehension is usually valued above accuracy by the language community. Elements of children's speech—or »baby talk«—are frequent. Semantic selection is frequently not based on those stylistic demands imposed by the given context, while elements of formal linguistic requirements are either missing, used improperly, or appear randomly. Knowledge pertaining to language usage—such as how and

when to utilize the formal you versus the informal you, the appropriate form for speech acts—is frequently inadequate.

Language communities unconsciously establish the following order of magnitude in language ability: attention is always paid first and foremost to the size of a speaker's vocabulary. Accent follows; has the speaker got an accent? Does his/her speech seem foreign, or does the speaker »talk nicely«? Correct spelling is next, while grammar usage—does he/she »talk right«?, i.e., use the right cases, conjugate verbs correctly—is last. This short description adequately shows that the standards imposed by a community composed of laymen is not going to be the same as those expected by a teacher responsible for language development.

Not only is it of great importance to discover why a heritage learner has chosen to learn Hungarian, it is also necessary to lay out what goals he or she would like to attain. While HSL learners also frequently want to define what language level they wish to reach, the much more uneven language ability possessed by heritage learners—who actually use a kind of interlanguage—makes it far more difficult for a teacher to map out which areas require additional work. It is therefore essential to define what results can be (and are) expected in the course of the program. If, for example, the student is motivated by emotional reasons, failure in reaching a set of irrationally high goals can result in a feeling of emotional failure. The other important factor is to urge them to put effort into something that has always »come naturally« to them; in other words, unlike their counterparts in Hungary, prior their participation in a language course, they have never studied this language in a conscious way and have never, for example, been exposed to grammar. In the case of heritage learners, we cannot speak of beginning a language with the very basics, but rather of a kind of language learning that demands a combination of methods used in both native and foreign language education.

The question of how to define which areas must be brought to the students' awareness is also a sensitive one. The teacher must decide what level and type of language aspects should be addressed, based on the given individual's or group's needs and as a reflection of their foreign language knowledge and grammatical meta-language. From the time they were small children, heritage learners

have heard the imperative and therefore know how to use the correct expressions. While phrases such as *Tedd le!*, *Hagyd abba!*, *Menj innen!* cause no problems, writing them using the correct Hungarian spelling does. In our experience, it depends on the group and the students' requests whether or not they learn these spellings mostly »by ear«, with help from the teacher, or prefer to learn this according to group the words according to verb endings, the way HSL students do.

Language as a Function of Identity

As previously mentioned, the emotional aspects governing a heritage learner's language ability play a large role in determining the learning process. In the case of third or fourth generation, young Hungarians who have grown up abroad, defining themselves as Hungarian is optional. They can, for instance, also opt not to use the language spoken by their grandparents, great-parents or other relatives and instead communicate with family members in their adopted country's language. According to Ferenc Gereben's research concerning the relationship between language and identity, Hungarians living in minority circumstances are more likely to feel that an attachment to language, culture, or certain historical and religious traditions bears far more weight in defining their Hungarian identity than blood origins do¹. A lack of a connection to the Hungarian language can also play an important role in self-identity.

This statement is supported by the fact that the importance of the Hungarian language is emphasized far more in regions where few Hungarians live, while less so in places where a larger population is found².

It therefore follows that if a young person of Hungarian descent feels he or she is capable of expressing himself or herself in a nuanced way, similar to how those living in Hungary can, then the initial feeling of being »different« or »foreign« disappears. Fulfilling lingu-

¹ Gereben 1998, 97f.

² Ibid.

istic ability therefore leads to the fulfillment of a heritage learner's Hungarian identity.

In short, psychological obstacles cannot be ignored; teachers must realize that—in the case of heritage learners—drawing attention to certain mistakes can make the student feel his or her identity is being questioned. Teachers face an incredibly difficult challenge in convincing students that things they have always used—albeit in other surroundings—are actually incorrect, even if these inaccuracies helped them to fulfill their linguistic needs and replaced a missing function. Students may begin to question whether or not someone who does not speak Hungarian correctly can still be considered Hungarian. The right amount of diplomacy and reassurance can naturally keep the student from losing his or her sense of motivation, but the teacher must always keep the students' sensitivity in mind.

Other than obvious grammatical functions, attention should also be paid to the teaching of the rules governing certain linguistic behavior—rules frequently related to correct grammar usage as well. A typical example is found in the way the correct intonation is not used by students who otherwise speak Hungarian well. Intonation is frequently a subject only addressed in beginner level HSL groups; if advanced level students can express themselves correctly and well, then teachers do not draw their attention to the fact that they are not using the right intonation. A partner who is a native speaker, however, will automatically assume that any request in a question form put forth with a descending intonation, as opposed to the correct, rising-descending intonation is impolite and interpreted as a—rude—command.

Students capable of producing correct utterances displaying proper vocabulary and grammar usage no longer receive the kind-hearted forgiveness generally given to foreigners trying to speak Hungarian; native speakers do not view them as being foreign, which is why natives rarely realize that the mistakes being made are not a negative aspect of the speaker's (or, in a much worse case a group's) personality, but rather the product of pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic deficiencies³. The speaker is neither impolite, agg-

³ Thomas 1983, 95f.

ressive nor stupid, but has unwittingly and unintentionally broken the rules simply because they are completely unknown.

If, however, heritage learners feel they fail to make contact with native Hungarian speakers who either deliberately or unconsciously send negative feedback in the course of conversation, then the heritage learner will not want to accept the role being offered. Eventually, the individual decides to belong to a different community or culture that is more forgiving of his or her linguistic capabilities.

Let us examine two of the most common issues in linguistic politeness—greetings and the proper usage of the informal or formal you—from the point of view of a heritage speaker. According to Hungarian culture, greetings are (even today) an important sign of an individual's politeness. Since greetings usually initialize each interaction, the correct usage can be decisive in forming the right kind of impression. In the course of interviews I took with American-Hungarian students attending classes at the Balassi Institute, one student described the situation in the following way: »Well, you have to say hello. It's so important that if you don't, everyone looks at you funny. Here you have to, so I learned how.« Hungarians greet one another upon stepping into an elevator, then say good-bye when leaving the elevator. Hungarians greet one another in a lot of situations and places that seem strange, intrusive or totally unnecessary within the context of American culture. Native Hungarians, however, do not compare the differences between American and Hungarian customs: they simply decide that American-Hungarians are extremely rude. If the teacher clarifies this cultural issue, then students are able to behave in the appropriate manner.

Use of the formal you is also a source of great difficulty for those who come from an English-speaking background. This is partly due to the way the informal you is only used among members of diaspora language communities, a custom that is widespread.⁴ While it is perfectly natural for adults to address one another with the informal you, children are also not required to use formal expressions, even if they have left childhood behind and are now teenagers or young adults who should be capable of using it. In

⁴ Fenyvesi 2005, 313f.

Hungary, correct usage of the formal you is a sign of having reached adulthood. Heritage learners can only protect themselves from the kind of infantilism assigned to foreign speakers if they learn to use the formal you. This, however, frequently proves difficult due to certain established habit as well as the fact that heritage learners are psychologically uncomfortable with the feeling that—in their opinion—the formal you generates a kind of distance not only in connection to the person they are speaking with, but also to the language and speech act itself. It takes a long time for students to learn how to exploit the advantages offered by formal you usage and thereby rid themselves of the feeling that forms such as these are a burden. To quote another American-Hungarian student:

The formal you is really strange to me. If I don't know what to use, I just avoid having to say the *te*, *maga* or *ön*. If I'm talking to someone with the informal you, then we can have a good time talking about anything, but if I have to use the formal you, then I have to watch out and be really careful about what I say, so I don't say much at all.

The frustration experienced by students can perhaps be lessened if a quotation from the famous Hungarian author, Dezső Kosztolányi, is used to point out the unique customs characteristic to using Hungarian in Hungary while simultaneously awakening students' interest in the historical and cultural reasons surrounding their development:

Linguists can reveal the hidden paths and twists and turns a form of politeness takes from culture to culture, in its own kind of international circulatory system. There is nothing more unique than the vocabulary used by a people to express politeness. An entire history lurks behind this, either adding deeper shades of color, or bleaching it pale (Kosztolányi).

There is a process in which intercultural competence between Hungarians can be reached, thereby delicately solving the conflict created by having to relearn the customs of a culture one holds to be his or her own. By following the rules of language usage, the

messages communicated in hidden forms will create a positive impression. As a result, the speaker will be able to realize his or her intention with grammatically correct utterances placed in the correct context, while listeners will feel the speaker possesses good manners. One of the most important tasks in the continuously evolving field of language instruction is therefore the need for language teachers to begin education by increasing awareness of intercultural pragmatic competence.

How can instruction of heritage learners be improved? How can the job of teachers working in isolation from one another be made easier? How can the needs of a heritage learner be met in a university setting? The answer to these seemingly different situations is the same: by developing the kind of strategies, curricula, teaching materials and teaching methods required by heritage language learning. The instructor teaching a group of children in weekend schools faces the same challenges posed by developing various forms of an interlanguage that a university instructor deals with when teaching the one heritage learner placed in a group of »real« foreigners. Each situation requires differentiation and the creation of tasks tailored to the student's needs. It is with this goal in mind that the Balassi Institute has established eMagyariskola, a website devoted to demonstrating different teaching methods, while also making class plans and other teaching materials available to all those who wish to explore new possibilities. It is our hope that generating a virtual professional community will lead to an increased exchange of those methods and tools that have proved effective.

Opportunities in Creating a Language Community Outside of Hungary

Even the most modern means of information exchange—such as those offered by the internet or web 2 applications—cannot replace the value of interpersonal connections and relationships. There are, however, opportunities to develop »real-time« connections between Hungarian communities and those studying Hungarian abroad, or with the cultural and educational institutions available in Hungary. It is one of the duties of Hungarian Cultural Institutes

operating abroad and instructors, visiting professors sent from Hungary to establish contact and maintain connections with the Hungarian communities living in a given country and devoted to promoting Hungarian culture.

For individuals of Hungarian descent, the presence of native-speaking Hungarians currently living abroad provides a serious opportunity for increasing motivation as well as offering opportunities for language practice, the same way time spent at a Hungarian university can accomplish the same.

First and foremost, it is our task to establish a methodology for the instruction of heritage language learners. Teaching materials must be created with the goal of addressing the problems specific to their particular situation. Increased care must be taken in teaching advanced level students linguistic elements rarely taught at an advanced level.

The ultimate goal is therefore for heritage learners to be able to step into the kind of supportive system that views them not as a burden or the kind of student language teachers label as being impossible to teach. The world today has expanded to include a vast array of opportunities in defining cultural identity; it is time we offer a helping hand to those heritage language learners who have—due to failures and misunderstanding—felt discouraged from continuing to develop their language ability. By doing so, the circle of culture and language binding Hungarians together throughout the entire world will not be broken.

References

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