

The Language Situation in Komárno

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Introduction

Nowadays, the variedness of ethnics, languages and cultures is more and more acknowledged as the cultural heritage of mankind (Šatava, 2009, p. 12). Parallel to the globalization trends, the world is turning towards the unique, special and individual. This is demonstrated also by the approach of the European Union, usually supporting globalization. On the other hand, it also protects the rights of national minorities, sustaining and supporting minority languages (Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages).

A language is more than just sounds and words. It is a key or a bridge to the world. If we omit the idealization of this expression (cultural enrichment of the spirit by learning a new language) and look at it strictly from the practical point of view, there are more advantages to it. Among them, there are benefits from the economic sphere, where the knowledge of a minority language may become – paradoxically – an advantage. Among minorities living in the border regions, the theory of cultural and economic sphere is visible (Ibid., p. 66). This is also the case in the border region of the southern Slovakia.

In the communication environment of Slovakia, there are known stereotypes about the Hungarian speaking minority (“You won’t get far with Slovak in southern Slovakia.” “The Hungarians there

do not want to learn Slovak.” etc.). These xenophobic opinions and stereotypes grow stronger as we go further north (Dolník, 2012, p. 240).

A Bilingual and bicultural approach, understanding of their culture and tolerance taught from childhood, however, would be beneficial for everyone. Stable bilingualism can last for several centuries, if the languages are being used next to each other as equals and the users of one of them do not exert the others in favour of their language. The others can resist such pressure only by realizing their language is not worse than the other one and that they can learn both languages, as the bilingualism and multilingualism is the standard in a majority of countries (Šatava, Op. cit., p. 70). This is visible among the Hungarians living in Slovakia, Romania or Germany, as well as the Slovaks, Romanians and Germans in Hungary, who communicate in both languages every day. The alternating usage of two or more languages is not rare also in African countries, India, or Papua New Guinea, where it would be strange to communicate only in one language (Bartha, 1999, p. 13). J. Navracics (2004, 13) reasons against the “monolingual understanding of the world” by the fact that there are 4 to 5 thousand languages in only 200 countries in the world. And only 25 of them are officially bilingual. However, this is quite contradictable, as there are only very few “truly” monolingual countries, as the minority members living there use their “unofficial” language next to the state language. On the other hand, in officially bilingual or multilingual countries, most people are monolingual, i.e. they are users of different languages living in a territorially mixed or isolated country. A society can be called bilingual, if there are two languages being used on its territory (Patten, 2003, p. 296)

In an ideal case, the minority language should be seen as an alternative, not as something disturbing and redundant. J. Dolník (Ibid., p. 251) provides a vision in which the development of Slovak and Hungarian relationships leads to “establishing a state of natural multi-culture characterized by common accommodation and assimilation proportion regulated by how the members of majority and minority

“negotiate” it in their every-day social interactions”. This would lead to a majority versus minority super-collective, in which the collective spirituality guaranteed cohesion (Dolník, *Ibid.*, p. 252).

Language situation

The language situation is one of the key terms of sociolinguistics. It is a dynamic phenomenon, changing its components by change of relationships between its segments. J. Dolník (2009, p. 351) introduces three components building up the language situation:

1. Social component – represented by the users of the language. It includes the different layers of the society. From the point of view of its impact on the change of language situation, it is decisive, which layer is currently dominant and has the biggest influence on it.
2. Communicative component – consists of functional and situational communication layers. The functional communication layers are identical with the areas of social activities (science and education, public service, management of socio-political activities, journalism, and arts). The situation of the communication or the environment, in which the communication takes place, determines the situational communication layers. They include country-wide communication, communication within a region or local communication (urban, rural, group communication). From the point of view of the change of the language situation, the structural change of the communication layer is important.
3. Language component – containing the languages used in the country and their diversification to language structures. The structure of national language and the ratio between the languages is important.

“A part of the language situation is also the sociolinguistic situation, i.e. the total state of standard language, in comparison to

other components of the national language and social conditions, in which it is being used” (Dolník, Op. cit., Ibid).

When studying the language situation in Slovakia, one should not forget the ethnical heterogeneity of the country, especially when comparing languages the minorities speak. According to M. Homišinová (2008), one of the most important aspects of minority development is the language. Among the basic ethnically integrating aspects is the mother tongue, one of the most important minority-defining criteria. Logically, preservation and development of the mother tongue is decisive for preservation and life of a minority in the majority environment.

Komárno – historical perspective of the ethnical diversification

Komárno is a Slovak town with the highest number of citizens of Hungarian nationality and citizens with Hungarian as their mother tongue. It lies on the confluence of the rivers Danube and Váh and is one of the longest inhabited places of the Carpathian basin. The area of the town was inhabited since the early Bronze Age by Celts and Romans. Even Avars lived here for approximately 250 years during the Migration period. After the fall of the Avar realm, Franks tried to claim the land, as well as the Moravian tribes of Slavs. At the end of the 9th century, Hungarian tribes came to the area. They built a fortified settlement on the rivers confluence in the 10th century named Camarum. The town, spreading on both banks of the Danube river, was important from the point of view of trade, as it was on the crossroads of important land and water trade routes. In 1265, King Béla IV granted the settlement town rights. The Komárno castle and the fortress built in the 16th century became a place of important battles not only in the Ottoman wars, but also in the revolution of 1848-1849, being the last bastion of Hungarian bourgeois revolution. After the end of World War I, the town was divided in two and the new Czechoslovak border was drawn by the river. The part

of the town on the left bank became a district town. Although the national composition changed by establishing the Czechoslovak administration, the most of citizens were still Hungarians. The town was re-connected to Hungary by the Vienna Arbitration of 1938. In 1945, it became the border town among Hungary and Czechoslovakia again. Repressive actions against the citizens of Hungarian nationality in 1945-1948 had a significant impact on the national composition of the town, as a part of the Hungarians were moved to Hungary within the citizens' exchange between Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

At present, Komárno is a border and district town of the Slovak Republic, with a population of 34,349 (census of 2011; census of 2001 – population of 37,366). In 2001, 60% of citizens were of Hungarian nationality, what represents a drop in comparison to 1991, when it was 63.5% of all the citizens. However, this drop was significant in all Slovakia, as the number of citizens of Hungarian nationality was decreased by approximately 1%. The last census of 2011 (www.scitanie2011.sk) indicates a significant decrease of the Hungarian population of Komárno (53.9%). However, this data is not very precise, as 10.8% of the town citizens did not answer the question on their nationality and the number of Slovaks dropped, as well.

Previous research in Komárno

In 2008, French historian Muriel Blaive conducted a research based on the oral history method. Her aim was to research the complicated relationships between the minority and majority of the town population. According to her, the young Hungarians speak poor Slovak (if at all) and do almost nothing to achieve integration in the Slovak society, living a parallel life. This results in the regressive development of integration (2011, p. 189).

In the conclusion of her research, M. Blaive said that the Slovak Hungarians have built a mental/cultural/linguistic barrier around them, which is unshakeable, because within the intentions of democracy,

voluntary acceptance is hard to question or change. She also points out that Slovakia has often executed unacceptable actions towards the Hungarian minority (Ibid., p. 200). M. Blaive considers the biggest problem to be the language barrier as a symbol of hard integration of Slovak Hungarians. She did not see the young generation try learning Slovak. If this went on, they would remain prisoners of their region, living secluded in the majority Slovak community.

The main goal of the research of J. Dolník and M. Pilecký was “to contribute to understanding the relationships between the citizens of Slovak and Hungarian nationality in southern Slovakia, with respect to usage of Slovak and Hungarian” (Dolník, Pilecký, 2012, p. 7). The authors found out (Ibid., p. 27) that both the groups are adequately adapting in terms of language. Adequately means that they adapt to each other in their language to such an extent that their ethnic equality and parity are not violated. Although they encountered a not insignificant number of citizens not speaking Slovak, connected to lack of interest in it by the Hungarians, more than two thirds of the respondents of both nationalities consider this to be unnatural and do not reject the obligatory need to speak Slovak.

Questionnaire research

The Ľ. Štúr Institute of Linguistics and Institute of Social Sciences of Slovak Academy of Sciences cooperated in 2012-2014 on a sociolinguistic grant project named VEGA Nr. 2/0118/2012 “Language Situation and Language Politics in Slovakia in the Context of Europe” (Ondrejovič, 2012). The aim of the project was to conduct research on the language situation and language politics in Slovakia (especially in the areas of a nationally mixed population) in comparison with other countries. It was not a research on spoken language or language in terms of system linguistics, but the real language situation. The project partially continued the research from the 1960s when they analyzed the spoken versions of Slovak in towns where almost no non-Slovaks

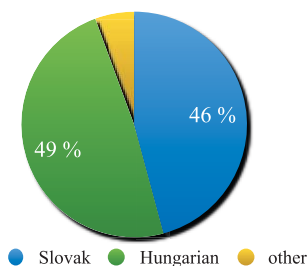
lived. The areas with a nationally mixed population were not subject to that research. Therefore, the research of 2012-2014 focused on selected towns – Bratislava, Komárno, Lučenec, Košice, Žilina, Nitra, and Zvolen. Towns with only minimal minorities (Žilina and Zvolen) served as a benchmark to compare the data from ethnically mixed populations. The respondents were selected in a quota selection process (72 respondents in every town), with the quota markers being gender, age and education (elementary school, secondary school, university).

Within this grant project, in 2013, they conducted a questionnaire research in Komárno, focused on the language and political situation in the town. The aim of the paper is to present partial results of this research, concerning (1) generation identification with the mother tongue, (2) its use at home and in public at the respondent group from Komárno. At the same time, we want to confirm or reject (3) some important conclusions among the citizens of Komárno.

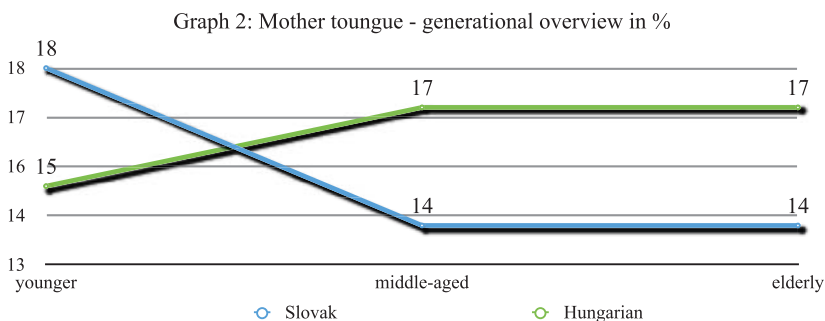
The respondents were divided into groups to create the generation evaluation aspect: younger generation (15-34 years), middle generation (35-54 years) and older generation (55+ years).

Out of the 72 respondents, 45.9% of them said Slovak was their mother tongue (18.1% - younger generation, 13.9% - middle generation, 13.9% - older generation) and 48.7% said it was Hungarian (15.3% - younger generation, 16.7% - middle generation, 16,7% - older generation) (graph 1). Among the respondents with

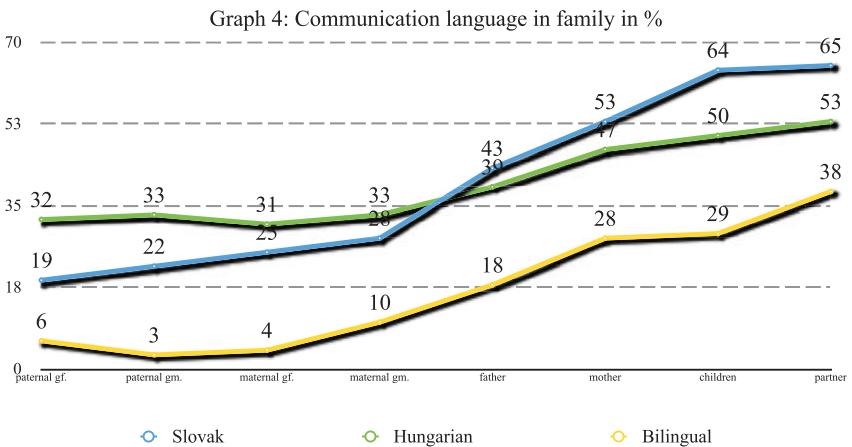
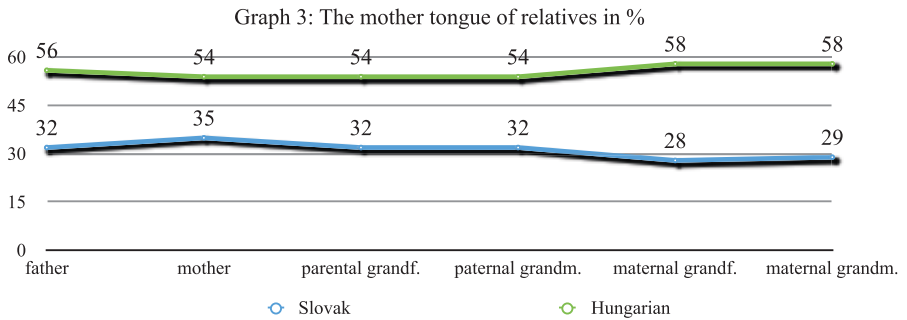
Graph 1: Mother tongue



Slovak as their mother tongue, the younger generation is predominant. At respondents with Hungarian as their mother tongue, it is the older one and middle-aged (graph 2), with a significant generation drop in their number.



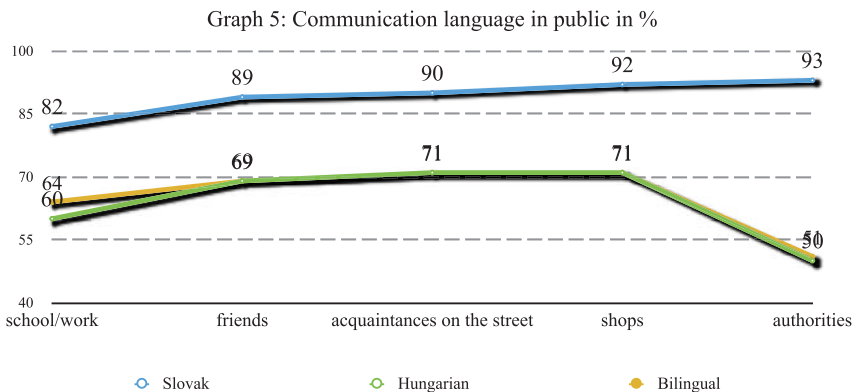
To specify the language situation in Komárno and focus on the variants of the mother tongue within a family, the mother tongue of the family members of the respondents was investigated. Not all the respondents specified the mother tongue of all members of the family. Out of 72 respondents, 32% of them stated Slovak was the mother tongue of their father (56% Hungarian). 35% of them said the mother tongue of their mother was Slovak (54% Hungarian). When asked about the mother tongue of their grandfather from the father's side, 68 respondents answered the question. 32% of which stated Slovak to be his mother tongue (54% Hungarian). When asked what was/is the mother tongue of the grandmother from the father's side, 71 respondents answered, 32% of which stated Slovak to be his mother tongue (54% Hungarian). 28% of the 71 respondents said that the mother tongue of their grandfather from the mother's side was Slovak (58% Hungarian). 72 respondents stated the mother tongue of their grandmother from the mother's side, 29% stating it was Slovak (58% Hungarian). As shown in graph 3, the Hungarian mother tongue is predominant in the families of the respondents, exceeding 50% at all the above mentioned relatives.



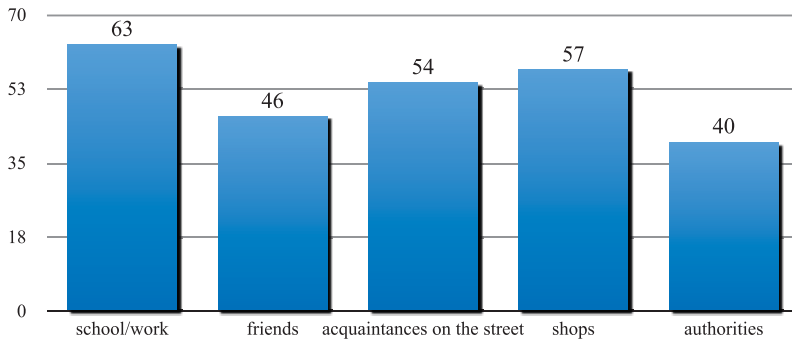
As visible in the previous graphs, the Hungarian mother tongue is predominant among the respondents from Komárno, as well as their relatives. The question remains, whether it is also their language of communication. The research tried to find out the answer in adding a question asking about the language the respondents communicate in with their closest relatives. The acquired data are visible in graph 4, showing an inverse dominance of communication language in the home environment. When talking to older members of the family, the dominant communication language is Hungarian. However, in the communication with the closest relatives (father, mother, children, or partner), it is mostly Slovak. From the perspective of bilingual

communication, we can see a growing tendency to use Slovak from the parents to the children, being most significant in communication with partners.

The differentiation of the communication language in public was more significant. The respondents stated Slovak to be their dominant language. However, they stated Hungarian was their communication language in more than a half of all areas of public life (see graph 5). Bilingual communication overlaps with the communication in Hungarian in almost all areas, exceeding it in the area of “school/work”, and slightly exceeding it in communication at authorities. When researching on the extent to which the respondents with Hungarian nationality use Slovak as the means of communication, the research showed that 63% of the Hungarians communicate often to almost all the time in Slovak at school/work, 46% with friends, 54% with acquaintances on the street, 57% in shops, and 40% at authorities (graph 6).



Graph 6: Communication of ethnic Hungarian in Slovak in public in %



Conclusion

Following the analysis and results interpretation of the questionnaire research in Komárno, it is possible to come to these general conclusions:

1. From the point of view of the mother tongue, the research sample was balanced (46% Slovak, 49% Hungarian). When analyzed in more detail, we found out that most respondents with Slovak as their mother tongue are among the younger generation. Among respondents with Hungarian as their mother tongue, it is the older and the middle-aged generation. It can be said that although the difference is statistically not significant, the younger generation (15-34 years) has predominantly Slovak as their mother tongue. When analysing the mother tongue of their relatives in Komárno, the results indicate that Hungarian is predominant. Although 46% of the respondents said Slovak was their mother tongue, only 35% of their relatives had Slovak also as their mother tongue. This supports the finding that the older generation has predominantly Hungarian as their mother tongue (also among their relatives).
2. Despite the fact that Hungarian is dominant as a mother tongue

of the respondents from Komárno, its usage or preference is not as clear. While the respondents prefer speaking Hungarian to the older relatives, they speak predominantly Slovak to the younger relatives and to their closest family members. Again, this supports the preference tendency of Slovak among the younger generation of the respondents.

3. The previous research in Komárno said that the Hungarians were not interested in learning Slovak and built a kind of a “wall” around them, separating them from the Slovaks. The respondents of this research, however, do not confirm this theory, as it has been shown that not only do the younger generation of the respondents (Slovaks and Hungarians) speak Slovak at home, but Slovak is also preferred in the public life. When researching the respondents with Hungarian as their mother tongue, another finding contradicts the previous research results in Komárno. Approximately half of this group stated that they speak often (approximately 50% of the time) to almost all the time (more than 50% of the time) Slovak in public. While bilingual communication in the family is rare, as many as two-thirds of the respondents spoke Slovak and Hungarian in public. Therefore, they can be seen as bilingual.

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