

Language policy in Hungary

by Antal Paulik and Judit Solymosi

Abstract

Neither the Constitution, nor any comprehensive language law stipulates in Hungary the official status of the Hungarian language. The linguistic rights of the 13 recognised minorities are regulated by the Act on the rights of national and ethnic minorities. The level of linguistic assimilation within these communities is rather high; the use of minority languages is almost non-existing in public life. Linguistic minorities have become more active since the change of the political system, and the setting-up of minority self-governments made things move back in gear. The Hungarian State seeks to promote the use of minority languages by developing cultural and educational autonomy and favourable legal conditions as well as by actively supporting minority activities.

Summary

1. Introduction
2. Historical background and current data
3. The situation of minority languages
4. Legal framework
5. Institutions and practice

1. Introduction

Differently from most states in the region, the official status of the dominant -Hungarian-language is not stipulated either by the Constitution or by any comprehensive language law in Hungary. Although Hungarian is used in state administration, no law in force prescribes this use. However, some specific provisions *do* regulate the use of Hungarian such as the 1997 Act on consumer protection and advertisements or the 2001 Act on the presentation in Hungarian of economic advertisements, shop trade-signs and communiqués of public interest.

The preamble of the latter act ascertains the particular importance of the national (Hungarian) language: "The Hungarian language is the most important manifestation of our national existence, it expresses our national affiliation and constitutes the most important vehicle of Hungarian culture, science and information. This is why its protection, its transmission to our descendants, the preservation of its adaptability and the maintenance of a sound linguistic environment constitute the common responsibility of the present generations."

One of the final clauses of this act states that its provisions do not affect commercial advertisements and inscriptions formulated in one of the minority languages in settlements where the given linguistic minority has established a minority self-government.

The linguistic rights of minorities are regulated by the Act on the rights of national and ethnic minorities in a comprehensive way. The provisions of this act will be detailed hereafter.

2. Historical background and current data

Before the peace treaties closing WWI, only less than half of the population living in the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy spoke Hungarian as his/her native language. This is why the will of establishing a Hungarian-language administration was

hindered not only by political but also by linguistic barriers. As a result of the peace treaties putting an end to the Monarchy, the still multilingual Hungarian Kingdom reorganised itself with an exclusive Hungarian-language dominance. The supplanting of minority languages from public life was raised to the level of conscious state policy. This was facilitated by the fact that the minority communities living now in Hungary had generally left their original home region before the development of a standard literary language, consequently the language they spoke in the 20th century were archaic dialectal versions hardly adapted to meet the communication needs of this modern era.

The forced or voluntary resettlement of populations after WWII still enhanced the "effectiveness" of the forced linguistic assimilation that went on between the two world wars. The resettlement fundamentally destroyed minority communities, weakened their identity and speeded up their assimilation. Although the minority policy carried out before 1990 recognised some minority communities and seemingly supported the transmission of minority cultures and the development of an educational basis, cultural assimilation and the diminution of the role of minority languages continued.

As a consequence of this, the majority of minorities living in Hungary today profess dual or multiple affiliation: their ties to the Hungarian culture and language are as strong as (or sometimes stronger than) their original nationality ties.

The last census took place in Hungary in 2001. Accordingly, the population of the country was 10,198,000 at the turn of the century. The proportion of people belonging to the 13 minorities within the whole population is rather low: in 1990 and in 2001 it only reached 2.5% and 3.2% respectively. When evaluating these data, we have to consider that answering affiliation-related questions was not compulsory, and the willingness to declare one's identity is still influenced by negative historical experiences.

Results of the 2001 census

Minority group	Assumptions of mother tongue			Assumptions of minority belonging			Number of those attached to minority culture and traditions	Number of those using the language with friends	Proportion of language users as compared to mother tongue			
	Number											
	1990	2001	Change %	1990	2001	Change %						
Bulgarian	1370	1299	-5,2%	..	1358		1693	1118	86,1			
Gypsy/Roma	48072	48685	1,3	142683	190046	33,2	129259	53323	109,5			
Greek	1640	1921	17,1	..	2509		6140	1974	102,8			
Croatian	17577	14345	-18,4	13570	15620	15,1	19715	14788	103,1			
Polish	3788	2580	-31,9	..	2962		3983	2659	103,1			
German	37511	33792	-9,9	30824	62233	101,9	88416	53040	157,0			
Armenian	37	294	694,6	..	620		836	300	102,0			
Romanian	8730	8482	-2,8	10740	7995	-25,6	9162	8215	96,9			
Serbian	2953	3388	14,7	2905	3816	31,4	5279	4186	123,6			
Slovak	12745	11816	-7,3	10459	17692	69,2	26631	18056	152,8			
Slovenian	2627	3187	21,3	1930	3040	57,5	3442	3119	97,9			
Ruthenian	674	1113		..	1098		1292	1068	96,0			
Ukrainian		4885		..	5070		4779	4519	92,5			
Total	137724	135787	-1,4	213111	314059		300627	166365	122,5			
Budapest		16061			29884		35372	21958	136,7			
Countryside		53973			115262		115520	66920	124,0			
Villages		65754			168914		149735	77488	117,8			

Based on the data of the Central Office of Statistics
Compiled by the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities

Similarly to earlier census returns, the 2001 data also highlighted the fact that minorities live geographically scattered throughout the country and they generally constitute a minority within the settlements they inhabit. The former regional localisation of minority communities is no longer possible; the exodus towards urban centres has started also among them. This

process has speeded up linguistic assimilation and makes the enforcement of linguistic –and more particularly, educational- rights rather difficult.

In spite of what has been said, minority linguistic communities have shown increased activity since the change of the political system. Minorities that had not been officially recognised earlier (Rom, Bulgarians, Greeks, Poles, Armenians, Ruthenes and Ukrainians) created their organisations and associations and took an active part in working out the principles of a democratic minority policy. The elaboration of the Minorities Act by 1993 was largely due to the active contribution of minorities. It is this Act that determines the minority policy of the Republic of Hungary. Considering the fact that this act puts a great emphasis on linguistic rights, we can regard it as the first systematic summary of minority language policy.

Historical past and lengthy historical co-existence constitute an important criterion in the definition of minorities given in the Act on the rights of national and ethnic minorities. According to this definition, "All groups of people who have lived in the territory of the Republic of Hungary for at least one century, who represent a numerical minority in the country's population, whose members are Hungarian citizens, who are distinguished from the rest of the population by their own languages, cultures, and traditions, who demonstrate a sense of belonging together that is aimed at preserving all of these and at expressing and protecting the interests of their historical communities" are national and ethnic minorities recognised as constituent components of the state.

This act defines 13 communities –the Bulgarian, Rom (Romany), Greek, Croatian, Polish, German, Armenian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian and Ukrainian ethnic groups– as national or ethnic minorities native to Hungary. In conformity with Article 51 of the act, "In the Republic of Hungary everybody may freely use his/her mother tongue wherever and whenever s/he wishes to do so. The conditions of the language use of minorities -in cases provided for by a separate law- must be guaranteed by the state."

3. The situation of minority languages

Due partly to the lack of minority self-organisation over almost 50 years, the use of minority languages in public life has practically disappeared, and their use has gradually become restricted to the family sphere. Parallel with the modernisation of society and the dissolution of big families, the transmission of the minority language is not now ensured even within the family. During the past decades, the members of the middle generations did not participate in mother tongue education, therefore they do not know the erudite or literary version of their language, and thus they are unable to transmit it. It is increasingly typical that the educational system is taking over the task of the transmission instead of the family. As a result, the dialect – that the members of the given minority are familiar with– is disappearing and is being replaced by the standard literary language spoken in the kin state.

For objective reasons, the process of the headway of the literary languages has become irreversible by now. What the State and the minority communities can do is to promote the documentation of the still existing linguistic monuments and to ensure that pupils wanting to participate in minority mother tongue education are given the opportunity to learn the literary version of the language.

As regards language use, the 13 minorities can be divided into three bigger groups. In the first group we find the Rom, the majority of whom –an estimated 80%– speak Hungarian as their mother tongue. (The smaller part of this population –a minority within the minority– has a different mother tongue and belongs to the second group explained below. The use of the Romany and the Beash differs from the use of other languages within that group only in that respect that the Rom communities are less integrated in their social environment.)

The second group is composed of smaller minorities (Ukrainians, Ruthenes, Poles, Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians). In the past decades a proportionally great number of newly arriving members joined these communities without any, or any substantial knowledge of the Hungarian language, and they immediately started taking an active part in the life of the community. It is typical for these minorities that the minority language is actively used both in family and in public life. However, we can expect that language transmission between the generations will become problematic in the future, and the use of the language by the next generations will differ from the present use. The so-called Sunday schools can only

contribute to improve the language knowledge acquired in the family, and so far we have had no experiences as for the teaching of the language at school.

The third group is composed of the bigger communities (Germans, Croats, Slovaks, Romanians, Slovenians, and Serbians) that arrived in the country before the emergence of the neologist movement in their homeland and that therefore typically speak an archaic version of the language. These communities have reached a high level of linguistic assimilation and they hardly use the minority language even within the family.

In the case of these minorities, the establishment of minority self-governments made things move back into gear, although this development has had only limited results so far. The efforts of minority self-governments to "rehabilitate" the mother tongue and to bring it back to public life have had a certain effect.

The ongoing educational reform might bring about wider opportunities to re-learn and use the languages. The consultative and veto rights legally guaranteed to local minority self-governments can ensure the protection of minority language education. The detailed elaboration of minority language and literature requirements and the introduction of compulsory further training for teachers make the improvement of school instruction possible.

4. Legal framework

The *Constitution of the Republic of Hungary* (Act No 49 of year 1949) stipulates that national and ethnic minorities living in Hungary are constituent components of the state. The Constitution guarantees the minorities the right to collective participation in public life, the nurturing of their own culture, the widespread use of their native languages, education in their native languages, and the right to use their names in their own languages.

The *Act No 77 of year 1993 on the rights of national and ethnic minorities* provides the thirteen historical minorities individual and collective minority rights including the right to non-territorial (personal) autonomy and the establishment of self-governments.

The Minorities Act splits linguistic rights into individual and collective categories. Among individual linguistic rights we can find the right to hold family festivities and ecclesiastic ceremonies in the mother tongue, the right to one's name in the mother tongue –including the right to personal documents issued in the mother tongue and in Hungarian– as well as the right to mother tongue education and culture.

The act guarantees minority linguistic communities the right to regular mother tongue information in the public service electronic media, the right to initiate and run mother tongue education at all educational levels, the right of safeguarding and nurturing the cultural values, the traditions and the festivities of the community in the mother tongue as well as the right of using the native language in public administration and before the courts. The minority members of local governments are also entitled to use their mother tongue during sessions.

According to the act, local governments are obliged to publish local decrees in the minority languages that are spoken in the settlement, to make the different forms used in administration available in minority languages as well as to ensure minority language inscriptions and signs on buildings accommodating public services and on plates indicating the boundaries of the settlement and its streets. In settlements inhabited by minority communities it is compulsory to employ staff members speaking the language of the given minority when filling posts in public administration and public services.

The *Act on public education* stipulates that –besides Hungarian– the language used in pre-school and school education as well as in school dormitories is the language of national and ethnic minorities. The 1996 amendment of this act took already into consideration all those competences enshrined in the Minorities Act that entitle minority self-governments to influence the contents and the framework of minority education. According to this amendment, a National Minority Commission composed of the representatives of all minorities was set up as a consultative body to the Minister of Education.

The 1996 *Act on radio and television* stipulates that the compilation of programmes presenting the culture and the life of minorities is a compulsory task of public service media. The dispensers of public service programmes are obliged to disseminate mother tongue information.

The 1997 *Act on the protection of cultural goods, museum institutions, public library services and cultural education* considers that the preservation of minority cultural traditions, the improvement of the personal, intellectual and economic conditions for individual and community education as well as the support to institutions and organisations carrying out activities focusing on these values is the common task of the whole society.

Minority rights and the use of minority languages are also regulated in international agreements signed and promulgated by the Republic of Hungary. Among these, the two basic documents of the Council of Europe –the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages- are of outstanding importance. Hungary was among the first countries to accede to both documents.

In conformity with the specific structure and contents of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Hungary undertook to implement the optional regulations contained in Chapter III in respect of the Croatian, Slovakian, German, Serbian, Romanian and Slovene languages. Our undertakings particularly focus on the education of minority languages and their use in public life. The report on the implementation of the Charter as well as the recommendations made by the Committee of Ministers can be read on the website of the Council of Europe.

5. Institutions and practice

Thanks to her consequent and continuous minority policy, Hungary possesses the institutional background necessary for the protection of minority languages. At the level of legislation, the Standing Committee of Human Rights, Minority and Religious Affairs of the Hungarian Parliament supervises that no violation of minority and linguistic rights occurs in the process of the elaboration of legal provisions. The institution of the Parliamentary Commissioner of national and ethnic minority rights –created in conformity with the provisions of the Constitution and Act No 59 of year 1993– answers exclusively to Parliament. The minorities' ombudsman is responsible for investigating any kind of abuse or violation of minority rights (including linguistic ones) by official authorities that may come to his/her attention as well as for issuing recommendations and initiating general and individual measures in order to remedy it. The monitoring of the enforcement of minority linguistic rights makes also part of the duties of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities.

There are specific minority departments in the two most important line ministries, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage. In both ministries specific Romany ministerial commissioners help solve the particular educational and cultural problems of the Rom minority.

Minority self-governments as part of the public administration system are the main advocates of the protection of linguistic rights at local, regional and national level. The provision to minorities of rights to collective language use figures also in the bilateral documents issued by the joint intergovernmental commissions for minority protection.

After the change of the political system, we witnessed an extraordinary revival of minority public life. Besides the establishment of the minority self-government system, a great number of minority civil organisations were set up with the primary aim of protecting minority languages, promoting their use and representing minority educational interests. Among the organisations of bigger minorities we can find several professional associations of minority writers and artists that play an outstanding role in promoting the literary use of dialects, and their publications constitute important teaching aids to be used in minority education.

With the exception of the Serbian minority, all minority communities have established their own research institutes. Their importance consists in publishing and researching minority history, ethnography, dialects and the present life of minorities in the language of the given minority. In some cases these research institutes work in close cooperation with the academies of sciences of the kin states. Their research findings are often referred to, and used by, the research workers of the kin state who are keen on studying some linguistic or cultural phenomena that disappeared in the mother country several centuries ago.

The Minorities Act as well as the acts of public education and on higher education constitute the legal framework of minority language education. The conditions to teach in minority languages or to teach the minority languages have been developed at all the levels of public education (kindergartens, primary and secondary schools). In the higher education, there are departments training teachers of minority language and literature.

As minority affiliation is a sensitive private issue, the local municipal government will organise and launch minority education only upon the initiative of parents. According to the law, the request of the parents of 8 pupils belonging to the same minority is sufficient, and it obliges the municipality to organise a class with minority education.

Three forms of minority education are simultaneously present in the public education system. The most widely spread form consists of education in which the minority language is taught in four lessons a week and all other subjects are taught in Hungarian. However, children are also taught the past, the origin, the history, the geographical specifics, the customs, the folk art of their minority as well as the history and the present life of their kin state. It can be stated that the number of children enrolled in this form of education is continuously decreasing, except for the German minority.

The second form consists in bilingual education where the humanities, for example history, literature and geography, are taught in the native language while natural science subjects are taught in Hungarian. This form is increasingly popular with minority families and the language knowledge acquired here can prove later on very useful for the children.

The third form of minority education is education offered in the minority language: all subjects –with the exception of Hungarian language and literature– are taught in the language of the given minority. This form is not prevalent as minority parents often consider that a better acquisition of the language of the mainstream environment is more important than knowledge acquired exclusively in the mother tongue.

As for smaller minorities, they try to teach their children minority language, literature and other subjects in the framework of the so-called Sunday schools, which constitute a special form of minority education and are organised outside the school system. Although the Ministry of Education gives financial support to this form of education, further progress in this field would require that these minorities organise their own schools within the public education system, which is fully possible in conformity with the act on public education.

The legal obligation of provision of minority language library services is fulfilled by the public libraries run by the local (municipal) governments. This network provides services for the Croatian, German, Romanian, Serbian, Slovak and Slovenian minorities in hundreds of settlements throughout the country. Within the system of public libraries, 19 so-called “basic libraries” also contribute to the provision of these services. In the case of the other communities, their national minority self-governments are making efforts to set up a basic fund of books for the purposes of a library.

Minority theatres are currently organising themselves. The German, Croatian and Serbian theatres are already institutionalised, and the organisation of the professional Slovak theatre is under way. The companies of the other minorities still work as amateur groups. In 2004, the 3rd Festival of Minority Theatres offered 17 performances presented by 12 minorities.

The most efficient institutions serving the safeguarding of traditions are the minority community centres working with state support. These centres host not only activities related to folk art, folk music and folk traditions, but –to an increasing extent- also activities in the field of modern culture, fine arts, literature and film. Besides presenting the cultural heritage and richness of minorities living in Hungary, minority community centres often organise events presenting the culture of the kin states.

The written press and the publications of minorities are almost exclusively financed from central state resources. These publications are often bilingual. Minorities have the opportunity to present their most recent publications at the annual Budapest Festival of Books. The most popular minority publication of this year's festival was *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, published in Romany.

The ongoing amendment of the minorities act is aimed at the strengthening of minority self-governance and will hopefully also result in a more effective enforcement of linguistic rights. The amendment ensures minority communities the possibility of taking over and autonomously running the institutions promoting the preservation and the development of their languages. This process has already started, and the bill proposed contains elements that would guarantee the safe take-over and operation of these institutions.

Antal Paulik

Judit Solymosi

solymosj@mail.datanet.hu

Office for National and Ethnic Minorities