

Cataloging place names

András Kornai

Department of Linguistics, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, USA

and

Institute of Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

Linguistics holds a great deal of interest for those outside the field. For the psychologist and the philosopher, language sets humans apart from animals, and offers the key to all higher cognitive functions from common sense reasoning to abstract thought. For the historian and the anthropologist, language is one of the defining factors of nation and tribe, and often the best clue to their past. For the mathematician and the computer scientist, natural language is the most elaborate abstract system known to humankind: compared to the complexities of human grammar and vocabulary, all axiom systems and computer languages appear impoverished. For the sociologist and the political scientist, language is the main mediator of social and cultural values, and the central component of the presentation of self. Even the strictly academic matter of updating the rules of usage can lead to tempestuous debate and larger issues of linguistic policy, for instance the role native language should play in minority education, are volatile enough to lead to civil war. Nor is the study of etymology just an innocent pastime: ideologies of cultural supremacy have repeatedly been based on etymological arguments. Can we count on the dispassionate objectivity of science to temper these emotions?

A nyelvészetről - egyes szám első személyben [Linguistics in First Person Singular, MTA Nyelvtudományi Intézet, 1991] attempts to reconstruct Hungarian linguistics of the past fifty years on the basis of questionnaires sent to leading linguists. As we learn from the Introduction, the project was launched for no other reason than the curiosity of the editors, Marianne Sz. Bakró-Nagy and Miklós Kontra, who were “as certain as one could be that there are others who are just as fascinated by the history of linguistics” (p. vii). Unfortunately, the the volume is of limited use to those interested in the history of the discipline, because the selection of “leading linguists” is inappropriate. The Introduction notes that not everyone the editors approached was willing to contribute, but does not hint at the extent of gaps in the coverage of the most salient trends in postwar Hungarian linguistics.

Who were the leading linguists? Whose recollections should be of interest to us, to whom do we cede the right to reconstruct the past? One approach the editors might have taken is to start with the most famous and powerful professors, the most influential members of the Academy, and to exclude those who lost out in the competition for title, position, and power. History, after all, is written by the victors. But the two most powerful figures in Hungarian linguistics, Lóránd Benkő and János Zsilka, certainly meeting the editors’ definition of “colleagues born prior to 1945, who have made significant contributions to the Hungarian linguistics of the

past fifty years” (p. vii), are missing from the volume. Likewise absent are the great popularizers, the scholars epitomizing ‘linguist’ for most Hungarians: Lajos Lőrincze and László Grétsy. Missing also are individuals who have established schools of linguistics, people like Zsigmond Telegdi and György Szépe, whose impact on the development of the science has been enormous.

Another approach might have been to give voice to those world-class scholars who were not professors or academicians, having been driven out of the Budapest inner circle, and often out of the country. The history of Hungarian science in the last fifty years would be impossible to understand without them: their absence created holes in the fabric of science that were perceptible in every field. In the seventies, mathematics students still studied abstract algebra from lecture notes written by László Fuchs who had emigrated ten years earlier. Mathematics, however, recovered from these losses much better and much earlier than linguistics, where graduate students in the eighties still learned phonetics from the lecture notes of Gyula Laziczius who had been denounced by a party activist at the Institute of Linguistics as soon as the Communists consolidated their power, and died in poverty and disgrace in the fifties. While the volume includes some important emigre linguists like Iván Fónagy, Edit Moravcsik, and János S. Petőfi, and linguist emigres (who became linguists only after they left the country) like Robert Hetzron and Ádám Makkai, its failure to include the ‘grand old men’ of Hungarian linguistics, Robert Austerlitz, Thomas Sebeok, and Oswald Szemerényi is very disturbing. Perhaps the most important missing figure is László Antal, whose pivotal role in the Hungarian linguistics of the sixties we will consider shortly.

Fortunately, we do learn a great many things from the volume not just about those speaking in the first person singular, but also about those referred to in the third person, and to some extent this compensates for the deficiencies in the selection of leading linguists. Though they raise as many questions as they answer, the third person plural references are particularly interesting. “Kniezsa never quite got over their not having let him try his hand at Turkic Studies” (András Róna-Tas, p. 237). Who didn’t let him, and why? And how was it possible to restrict the academic freedom of a linguist as prestigious as István Kniezsa? “The thesis was defended in 1960, amidst some misconceptions as to the nature of the subject” (Ferenc Bakos, p. 4). Who harbored these misconceptions, and why? “Sadder yet and even more unpleasant is that to this day, there are colleagues of mine at the Academy, I could name a few names, who have not read a line of what I have written in the past forty years” (József Herman, p. 59).

Nice (though perhaps somewhat polished) portraits of the great professors emerge from the recollections of the students. Géza Bárczi, László Gáldi, Zoltán Gombocz, László Hadrovics, István Kniezsa, Gyula Laziczius, Dezső Pais and Miklós Zsirai are particularly often mentioned by graduates of Eötvös College (the last truly elite school in Hungary, systematically gutted as part of the Communist takeover) who form the nucleus of the volume: Ferenc Bakos, László Deme, László Elekfi, Péter Hajdú, József Herman, Béla Kálmán, György Lakó, Ferenc Papp and Endre Rácz. The formative influence of these professors is alluded to by practically all the contributors who studied linguistics in Hungary. Among the teachers and colleagues

spoken of with admiration we also find Ödön Beke, Bálint Csűry, Dávid Fokos, Antal Klemm, László Országh, Attila T. Szabó, and József Tompa, to mention just the names which stand out in the Index. We even learn a thing or two about *Kruzsok*, the informal circle of linguists which started meeting more than a hundred years ago under the guidance of József Budenz. Still, anyone interested in not just personalities but also in ideas will probably be disappointed. Though there is no lack of reference to the impact of Marxist and then Stalinist tenets which cast their shadows over Hungarian linguistics as soon as they became the official creed (much like Lisenkoism in genetics) in the Soviet Union, they illustrate the character of the participants, not the development of the discipline.

A comprehensive history of linguistic thought would have to start with the Indian, Greek, Latin, and Arab grammarians, but the historically continuous development of modern linguistics is more conveniently dated from the famous 1786 lecture of William Jones that established the Indo-European family of languages. Hungarian linguistics can take pride in the fact that the Finno-Ugric family was established by Sajnovics (1770) and Gyarmathi (1799) at about the same time, and using methods that were just as sophisticated. Historical linguistics grew by leaps and bounds, with the “neogrammarian” synthesis of the field best summarized in Paul’s *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* (Halle, five editions between 1880 and 1920). With the neogrammarian view yielding to structuralism, linguistics as a whole was cured of “the poverty of historicism” long before Popper appeared on the scene. But the shift away from historical linguistics had a much delayed, and to this day rather limited impact on Hungarian linguistics. Looking at the Index of this volume one would think that those interviewed received their most significant intellectual impetus from Saussure (i.e. structuralism) and from Chomsky (i.e. generative grammar). This turns out to be a mistaken assumption even in the case of some Eötvös College graduates, many of whom first heard of basic structuralist tenets (such as the strict separation of synchronic from diachronic linguistics and the methodological priority of the synchronic approach) in the negative, rather than the affirmative form. “Instead of being strictly separated, as was then the vogue, in [Pais’s] morphology and syntax the synchronic and the diachronic formed a harmonious whole” (László Deme, p. 13). The problem is not that Pais, who received his degree in 1909, remained an unreconstructed neogrammarian till his death in 1973 – the problem is that Deme, and many others of his generation, have completely lost touch with modern linguistic thought.

With the publication of Saussure’s *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*, in Leipzig in 1879, structuralism is well over a century old, yet its results have not been incorporated to mainstream Hungarian linguistic theory to this day. While structuralism flourished first in Geneva, Prague, and Copenhagen, and from the thirties in the United States, its key idea, that language is an abstract system of arbitrary elements, was (and continues to be) resisted by most Hungarian linguists, many of whom prefer to spend their time cataloging place names. Since even an Eötvös College graduate can proudly declare that “like most of Professor Pais’s students, I too started out in onomastics” (Endre Rácz, p. 227), the intellectual landscape of Hungarian linguistics must have been

bleak indeed. The reputation of the Eötvös College as an elite institution is saved only by the acerbic in-joke of another graduate, who coins the term ‘podicology’ from the Latin *podex* (backside) and goes on to explain that “for a more modest linguistic accomplishment, podicology is sufficient: for instance, you can have as many works of “The Place Names of Hajagospettend” type as there are settlements in the country” (Péter Hajdú, p. 45).

The methodological conflict between structuralism and the dominant style of historical linguistics that was completely outdated by the forties could surface only at the end of the fifties. Ferenc Bakos (p. 7) mentions the 1961 “structuralism debate” at the Institute of Linguistics, and we get a glimpse of the ensuing confrontations as well: “Because of the unethical behavior of the leaders of the Institute I was relieved of my post as department head.... Of all the department heads at the Institute (for instance, Fónagy, Országh, Tompa, and Lakó), there was practically not one who was relieved from his responsible position in a honorable fashion, and now I joined their ranks” (Sándor Károly, p. 115). There can be no doubt that Hungarian linguistics became much more receptive at this time; the first generative grammarians also made their appearance. “Soon I got a package of books [from György Szépe]; it contained works by Bloomfield, Harris, and Chomsky” (Ferenc Kiefer, p. 130). For the most part they worked outside the bulwarks of the Institute of Linguistics: the majority of them were employed in the computational linguistics group set up at the Cybernetics Center of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; the rest worked with Ferenc Papp in Debrecen. Yet the focal point of linguistic controversies in the Hungarian linguistics of the sixties was neither generative grammar nor the closely related computational and mathematical linguistics of the period, but structuralism. “Then came the structuralists with László Antal in the lead, and attracted considerable attention, but they also caused quite a sensation with their truculent ‘dismissal’ of meaning” (Ilona Molnár, p. 185).

The Hungarian reception of American structuralism as represented by Bloomfield, Bloch, and Harris was anything but enthusiastic. “We have built and have started operating enormous supertankers, in order that we might at great risk get from the distant New World regular deliveries of an apparently unknown liquid that Americans call *milk*, and which they extract there from an animal they call a *cow*” (László Deme, p. 17). László Antal’s seminal *A magyar esetrendszer* [Declension in Hungarian, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1961] is published together with the referees’ reports (no other volume of the *Nyelvtudományi Értekezések* series ever published the internal reviews). It is typical of the era that not only Antal mentions the Soviet Academy of Sciences’ endorsement of synchronic analysis (p.4), but that the referees, each in his own way, also find it necessary to vindicate Antal in the face of the ideological censure that he can expect to get. Zsigmond Telegdi concedes in advance that “[Antal] has not yet managed to give a thoroughgoing professional and ideological reevaluation of the methodologies of general linguistics current abroad, particularly in the West” (p. 138). József Tompa, for his part, feels that Antal, “thoroughly versed in his field as he is, has given, proceeding on the principles of dialectical materialism, a courageous critique of American and other foreign (and

native) analyses, and has incorporated them into the bloodstream of Hungarian linguistics according to their merit” (p. 139).

In the light of the Marxist and then Stalinist linguistics of the preceding period it is easy to understand that, aside from wagging the compulsory red tail, every participant strove to exclude Communist ideology from the debate, and wanted to support his stand with strictly linguistic arguments. It was only later that Marxist ideology reentered the field, primarily through János Zsilka’s writings on “the dialectics of linguistic change”. In the early 1960s, it was structuralism’s challenge to Paul, not to Marx, that made it so provocative in the eyes of mainstream Hungarian linguists. What annoyed them most was probably the fact that in the splendid disarray of the data, where his forefathers have groped in vain, Antal, at the burning light of the method, was able to create order where there had been chaos. The wholesale repudiation of the role of meaning in determining structure, the consistent exclusion of historical data, and the utilization of the latest methods of synchronic analysis led Antal to a series of significant results, such as the clear definition of declension, or the analysis of morphologically expressed tenses and moods within a unitary system. Anyone who takes the trouble to look at the popularized version of these now classic results as summarized in the *Gyorsuló Idő* [Accelerating Time] series (László Antal, *Egy új magyar nyelvtan felé* [Toward a New Hungarian Grammar], Magvető, 1977) will be surprised how ordinary the data charts look and how commonsensical the argumentation appears to be. Is it really all that simple? Psycholinguistics (greatly influenced by generative grammar) suggests that it really is, in fact it has to be, or it would not be something that every normal child can learn.

Anyone who has ever tried to write a computer program will know that simple structures that can be described by a few rigid rules can convey extremely complex meaning. The structuralist method enables us to get at these structures precisely by excluding from its sphere of investigation the complexities of meaning, of usage, and of the history of the language. Hungarian linguistics still owes us a “hard” structuralist descriptive grammar, and we can look only to the emigre linguists to fill the need: “Róbert Vágó will collaborate with me in writing this grammar” (Róbert Hetzron, p. 70). If Hungarian was a tribal language it would be easy to understand that Hetzron, trained in Paris, Jerusalem, and UCLA, and teaching in California, could find no better co-worker than a Harvard-trained linguist teaching in New York (Vágó) – after all, we don’t expect native speakers to know anything about grammar. But given the existence of the Institute of Linguistics, the fact that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences publishes several journals devoted to linguistics, and that a flagship publication, *A mai magyar nyelv rendszere* [The structure of contemporary Hungarian, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1962] summarized the ideas of mainstream Hungarian linguistics more than thirty years ago, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that the marginalization of structuralist and generative linguists was remarkably successful.

If at this point we use a typical structuralist ploy and substitute a zero element for this non-existent descriptive grammar, we can ask who will want to read “it”. Certainly not the general public, for a grammar of this sort will not address the

issues of usage that are of interest to the man in the street. It would, however, be read by professional linguists, primarily those, I would venture, who have chosen linguistic usage and history for their area of specialization. Saussure's structuralist approach has captured the stronghold of historical linguistics, Indo-European studies, for the simple reason that its predictions have been largely borne out by the subsequently discovered Hittite fragments (see in particular Jerzy Kurylowicz, *Études Indoeuropéennes*, Krakow, 1935; and Manfred Mayrhofer [ed.], *Nach hundert Jahren: Ferdinand de Saussures Frühwerk und seine Rezeption durch die heutige Indogermanistik*. Winter, 1981). Modern historical linguistics also makes full use of the results of generative grammar (see e.g. Robert King's *Historical Linguistics and Generative Grammar*, Prentice Hall, 1969), but neither this, nor the generative approach to dialectology has had any great part in the education of Hungarian linguists. The development of structural dialectology was already forcibly arrested: "The scientific rigor and personal reserve of Laziczius simply put me off; his system and theory of dialectology, established without any immediate experience of dialects, seemed to me to be inadmissible; as for his views on the normative questions of pronunciation – basing his rules on the simple statistical average as opposed to some prescriptive ideal – that I had to attack head on". (László Deme, p. 13). Perhaps if Deme were more specific about the methods he used in attacking Laziczius this volume would be a more valuable source about the history of Hungarian linguistics. But the general reader, who wants to know linguistics not just as an arena where scholars vie for position, title, and power, but also as a field of serious research whose object is to answer questions that are of significance to everyone, will be disappointed.

Questions of linguistic prescriptivism, a constant source of friction within the academic community, and an issue on which the Hungarian experience is of great relevance to the rest of the world (for example in Israel, where Modern Hebrew was constructed by scholars directly acquainted with the Hungarian "language renewal" movement), are addressed only in the most superficial manner: "But perhaps it is not superfluous to note that we need not necessarily consider to be a linguist everyone with very definite opinions on linguistic matters, particularly matters of everyday usage" (Samu Imre, p. 95). "Dezső Pais cautioned us...against entering into arguments with printers, newspapermen, and self-styled experts on usage; beyond a certain point, one should not write letters to the editors of papers and journals – for a professional, it's not worth it" (Edit Hexendorf, p. 84). Hungarian linguistics has a rich normative tradition, and if the remarkable homogeneity of the language across dialects and social classes can be used as a measure of success, a rather effective one. It is of course debatable whether such homogeneity is indeed desirable, but the volume is too vapid to provide ammunition for either side in this debate.

Another issue of immediate significance, given the resurgence of nationalism and even racism all over Central Europe, is the methodology of linguistic reconstruction, and the problem of origins. Since several world-class experts in Finno-Ugric and Uralic studies (Péter Hajdú, Béla Kálmán, György Lakó, Károly Rédei) answered the questionnaire, but none of them could address this issue, the fault lies with

the questions. The editors decided to model their volume on Davis and O’Cain’s *First Person Singular* (Benjamins, 1980) and asked the following five questions: 1. *What makes a linguist a linguist? Are there any personality traits specific to linguists?* 2. *How did you yourself become a linguist? Did anyone or anything have a decisive influence on your making this decision?* 3. *In what institutions have you found circumstances conducive to your doing linguistic research?* 4. *How did your views on linguistics develop, and how have they changed over the years?* 5. *What influence have great linguists had on your career, and on the development of the discipline?* Only one question specific to the Hungarian situation was added: *What trends do you see as having influenced Hungarian linguistics, and as influencing its development today?* It is not clear how the respondents could have expressed their views on the origins of Hungarian or, indeed, on any technical issue, given these questions.

If Bakró-Nagy and Kontra decide to put out further volumes of *Egyes szám első személyben*, perhaps they could explicitly ask the respondents what they felt was their most significant scholarly achievement, what they have contributed to Hungarian linguistics, and to linguistics in general. How do they see the impact of their work at home and abroad? What have they managed to say better than anyone else? What result or exciting problem are they bequeathing to posterity? As a linguist, I hope there will be a sequel. As a reader, I hope the second volume will be a distinct improvement over the first.