

Working Papers
in European Language Diversity 1

Rita Csiszár

**Hungarian in Austria:
An Overview of a
Language in Context**

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Working Papers in European Language Diversity is an online publication series of the research project ELDIA, serving as an outlet for preliminary research findings, individual case studies, background and spin-off research.

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Funded under Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities

ELDIA is an international research project funded by the European Commission. The views expressed in the **Working Papers in European Language Diversity** are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

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ISSN 2192-2403

During the initial stage of the research project ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All) in 2010, "structured context analyses" of each speaker community at issue were prepared. These context analyses will act as a starting point for further deepened research by linguists, sociologists and lawyers. Thus, they will form the basis of further case-specific reports and the comparative report which will be the main outcome of the whole project. However, as these will be available for interested readers only at the end of the project, we wanted to publish shorter versions summarising our work so far already at this stage, thus providing up-to-date information for both the academic community and stakeholder groups. This paper, based on the context analysis by Rita Csiszár, gives a brief and up-to-date overview of the status of and research about Hungarian in Austria.

As all papers appearing in the series Working Papers in European Language Diversity, these context analyses have been subject to an anonymous peer-reviewing process. Whenever the present document is referred to, due reference to the author and the ELDIA project should be made. For more information about the ELDIA project see <http://www.eldia-project.org/>.

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1 Introduction: Speakers of Hungarian in Austria

The aim of this study is to present the situation of two Hungarian communities living in the Austrian Republic, namely the autochthonous minority of Burgenland and the Viennese diaspora of migratory origin.

With regard to their origin, the antecedents of the autochthonous minority¹ were settled in Western Hungary by the Hungarian kings in the 10-12th centuries to act as border guards. It was in return for this service that they were granted noble privileges, which were officially confirmed in several charters. They came under Austrian control in 1921, after the First World War, as a result of The Treaty of Trianon and its territorial regulations. The other group of Hungarians is mainly made up of a diaspora living in Vienna and other provincial capitals, who migrated or escaped there at various points in history². Their number has been augmented considerably by arrivals from the Hungarian-speaking regions of the Carpathian Basin³.

The origin of the Hungarian minorities in both locations is well known, and is a historically documented fact, which has never been the subject of dispute. According to the 2001 census in Austria, there are 40,583 people who gave Hungarian as "the language of habitual use" (*Umgangssprache*), the language most often used in communication with family and friends.

¹ Members of the autochthonous Hungarian ethnic group traditionally live in two speech islands in the easternmost and newest province of Austria: in Felsőpulya (Oberpullendorf) located in the middle part of the province, and further south in Southern Burgenland's Felső-Őrség, in the villages of Felsőőr (Oberwart), Alsóőr (Unterwart), and Őrsziget (Siget in der Wart). Viennese migrants live in every district of the city, but they do not constitute a coherent ethnic enclave.

² The Hungarian diaspora came into being in 1918 when the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy fell apart. The number of migrants and refugees started growing in the 20th century reaching a peak during and shortly after the Revolution of 1956. The constant "leakage" during the communist era was followed by a large wave of migration in the second half of the 1980s.

³ Hungarians living outside the territory of Hungary, in other countries of the Carpathian Basin (mainly in ex-Yugoslavia and in Romania) also migrated in large numbers to Austria. The first to arrive legally were Hungarians from Vojvodina, who came as guest workers after 1966. A group of refugees gained entry during the war between Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992/93). Transylvanian Hungarians arrived in large numbers during the Romanian Revolution (1985-88) and around the change of the regime in 1989.

In Burgenland there were 6,641, while in Vienna 15,435 people declared themselves to be speakers of the Hungarian language⁴.

The number of people with a Hungarian language background has witnessed an increase in all provinces during the last decades. The rise is especially significant in Vienna and in the neighbouring provinces of Lower and Upper Austria, making the concentration of Hungarians in and around the capital more pronounced. However, this growth applies only to the group of migratory origin. Consequently, the autochthonous character of the Hungarians in Austria seems to have diminished slowly.

The problem that arises in connection with the statistical data available is not so much its reliability but rather its scarcity. Results that can be accessed free of charge are restricted to the geographical distribution of the minority group and its distribution among Austrian and non-Austrian citizens. Furthermore, due to the organisational set-up of Statistics Austria, no uniform data with reference to the whole country is available.

Burgenland Hungarians display a local identity, with loyalty to a micro-region. They are more closely attached to the village and region in which they live than to the states of their residence or to the Hungarian “nation” as a whole (Gal 2008). A significant number of migrants who have arrived from Hungary define themselves as “Hungarian-Austrians” (double national identity). People who have arrived in Austria from Hungarian successor states have a clear need to express their regional identity in addition to their national identity; i.e. they call themselves Hungarians from Transylvania or Vojvodina.

2 Socio-political Context

Due to the different historical circumstances of their development as communities, for decades the Hungarian minorities living in Burgenland and Vienna constituted groups of different legal status. The Hungarians in Burgenland became an officially recognised autochthonous minority in 1976. The declaration of the Viennese Hungarians as a minority was finally achieved in 1992.

⁴ Statistik Austria. www.statistik.at

Official recognition has a paramount importance because today only members of the six officially recognised minority groups⁵ can benefit from the financial support provided by the state and the privileges provided by the law⁶. In the 1976 *Act on Ethnic Groups (Volksgruppengesetz)*, members of the autochthonous minority groups are defined as having a non-German mother tongue, traditionally living (*beheimatet*) in the territory of the country, having their own ethnic traditions (*Volkstum*), and possessing Austrian citizenship.

Legislation on Hungarians in Austria includes the 1994 *Act on the Minority Schools of Burgenland*. It provides comprehensive regulation connected to mother tongue instruction from kindergarten to the secondary school leaving exam including all types of schools, and provides an opportunity for the different methods of Hungarian instruction – minority tongue only, bilingual, language instruction – within the bounds of civil education. The 1998 curriculum modifications put greater emphasis on taking local dialects into consideration, on strengthening minority identity, and also on forming dual cultural bonds. The 1990 *Act on the Kindergartens of Burgenland* regulates bilingual education in kindergartens, crèches and day schools. As it is the territorial principle that forms the basis of Austrian minority policy, these acts only deal with educational and pedagogical issues within the province of Burgenland.

Unfortunately, the opportunities provided by law cannot be completely capitalised on by the autochthonous Hungarian minority. The principal reason for this is the low prestige of the minority mother tongue within the community (Gombos 1995 In: Györi Szabó 2000). Due to the lack of an appropriate level of Hungarian language competence within the framework of minority Hungarian instruction, in practice Hungarian is frequently taught as a foreign

⁵ These include the following groups: the Hungarians in Vienna and in Burgenland, the Croats in Burgenland, the Slovenes in Carinthia and in Styria, the Czechs in Vienna, the Roma, and the Slovaks in Vienna. (The Austrian Sign Language – ÖGS – is an officially recognised minority language.)

⁶ The *Federal Constitutional Law (BGB1. 1/1920)* declares that the German language functions as the official state language when it states that "*without prejudice to the rights provided by federal law for linguistic minorities, German is the official language of the Republic. This does not refer to the rights granted to linguistic minorities by federal legislation*" (Art. 8, Sect. 1-2). In 2000, in the amended version of the Constitution (*Staatszielbestimmung BGB1. I. 68/2000*), the Republic recognises the increasingly varied linguistic and cultural nature of the country, which finds expression in the presence of the autochthonous ethnic groups. The text of the constitution advocates maintaining the languages and cultures of ethnic groups.

language. Studying Hungarian as an optional subject is often preferred to Hungarian as a compulsory subject.

In contrast to minority education in Burgenland, in the Austrian capital there is *de jure* no minority mother tongue education, as there are no laws or regulations concerning the teaching of Hungarian in the public education system. On the basis of the 1976 *Act on Ethnic Groups*, mother tongue preservation programmes organised by Hungarian associations can apply for state support, and as a result the Austrian state finances the major part of their organisational expenditure. According to current practice, the resources provided by the Chancery Office for Hungarian language education are distributed by the umbrella organisation called *Central Association of Austrian Hungarian Organisations (Zentralverband ungarischer Vereine und Organisationen in Österreich)*. It operates the two main institutions of mother tongue education: the *Viennese Hungarian (weekend) School* and the *Scouts*. The *School* enjoys high popularity with a permanently increasing number of student enrollments.

The *Hungarian Official Language Law* of 2000 provides the opportunity for Austrian citizens and for citizens of the member states of the European Union to use the Hungarian language (beside German) in the political regions of Felsőpulya/Oberpullendorf, Felsőőr/Oberwart, Vasvörösvár/Rotenturm an der Pinka and Alsóőr/Unterwart in local council offices and places of service (*Gemeindebehörden, Gemeindedienststellen*), in local police stations (*Gendarmerieposten*), district courts (*Bezirksgerichte*) and in district offices (*Bezirkshauptmannschaften*).

As a result of the *Topography Decree* of 2000, bilingual place name signs appeared in four Hungarian settlements in Burgenland⁷.

In 2001, the new *Media Law* introduced regulations concerning ethnic minorities with ethnic group councils in the programming policies of public service radio and television broadcasters. A special ethnic editorial office has been created that maintains an informative Hungarian-language Internet website. Nevertheless, the marginal position of minorities living in Austria within the mass communication media is one of the most frequently stressed points of criticism concerning minority policy. As Hungarians only have a 30-minute

⁷ Alsóőr (Unterwart), Felsőőr (Oberwart), Felsőpulya (Oberpullendorf), Őrisziget (Siget in der Wart).

general interest programme broadcasted six times a year, and an 85-minute-per-week Hungarian radio transmission, it can be argued that the frequency and duration of programmes provided does not have any practical importance from the point of view of minority mother tongue maintenance but can rather be considered a symbolic gesture showing good will⁸.

The legal discrepancy outlined above is especially notable as both Hungarian minority groups officially possess equal legal status. The reason for this may be found in the fact that Austrian minority politics at national, provincial and local council levels is not standardised. Thus, the legal status of minorities that are defined as autochthonous but live in different provinces does not conform to a unified standard. The other reason is that the minority-political concept, developed for ethnic minorities originally living close together in compact settlement structures, is not equipped to deal with the situation in big cities, and especially in the capital. This can be felt in the unresolved nature of the language to be used for official business by Hungarians living in the Viennese diaspora, as well as in the problems related to minority mother tongue education.

The ethnic composition of the population living in the territory of present-day Burgenland has always been heterogeneous; the co-existence of the different ethnic groups, such as Germans, Hungarians, Croatians and Roma, has a history of thousands of years. As a result of this, the region has always been characterised by ethnic, linguistic and religious variety. The dynamics of the multilingualism of the territory have been to a large extent shaped by the social, economic and political conditions present in the region. From the end of the 18th century, the role of the Hungarian language has changed many times in this region: at times it became stronger, while at other times it was forced into the background as a consequence of the promotion of the German language. Following the First World War (1921), the western part of the region came under Austrian rule under the name of Burgenland, and this greatly contributed to a change in the linguistic prestige relations: the previously multilingual groups (Croatian, Roma) in Austria started to become bilingual. Both the newly-formed Burgenland and later the unfavourable political climate of the national socialist period

⁸ For a long time, programmes could only be viewed in the traditional Burgenland settlements and thus, until March 2009, ORF's Hungarian language programmes were not available to Hungarians living elsewhere, either in Vienna or in other parts of the country.

played a very important role in the decrease of the prestige of the Hungarian language. A conscious shift happened at this time, during which the inhabitants of the border region, due to overt discrimination, considered being Hungarian a burden for the first time. The sense of isolation, created by the barbed wire fence along the Austrian-Hungarian border, was felt most intensively during the communist era⁹.

3 Cultural Context

In Burgenland the cultural symbols are connected to traditional peasant culture. Every settlement has at least one folk dance and folk music group, choir or theatre group in many cases attached to the local church community. (An important characteristic of the associations is their lack of both social division and political orientation.) However, as both the local majority community and the peasant culture of the Croatian minority living in the province use more or less the same symbols, they do not have a clear demarcating function.

The Viennese Hungarian diaspora also operates many active and well organised associations. A large proportion of the organisations represent mixed (scientific, cultural, art and political) programmes. An important difference from Burgenland is that, up to the time of the system change, the main characteristic of these institutions was their political orientation.

In terms of religious denomination, the autochthonous Hungarians have always been strongly divided. By the 17th century, the inhabitants of the three neighbouring South Burgenland settlements belonged to three different Christian denominations¹⁰. Although religious division greatly affected the everyday life of people until the 20th century, and prevented the unity of the local Hungarians, it did not serve as a pretext for discrimination or interethnic conflicts. However, religious affiliation did facilitate assimilation as locals attributed more importance to religious affiliations than to linguistic ones (Baumgartner 1993). The religious heterogeneity of local Hungarians is also reflected in the history of local

⁹ The different socio-economic structures of the two countries contributed to the ambivalent nature of the relationship with Hungary; the Hungarians living in Austria's consumer society and pluralist democracy could not "look up to" their mother country.

¹⁰ Alsóőr is the centre of local Catholicism and the Hungarians living here, like the majority community and the local Croatians, are Roman Catholics. Felsőőr is the home of the Reformed Protestant congregation, while the Hungarians of Órisziget traditionally belong to the Lutheran church.

organisations: many of the civil associations within the framework of the parish communities were started on the initiative of priests/pastors or their wives.

Cultural activities performed by the associations receive financial support mainly from the Austrian state but they are also applying for grants provided by Hungarian funds.

4 Language

4.1 General description of the language

The Hungarian language is assigned to the eastern, most commonly called Ugric, branch of Finno-Ugric. Hungarian dialects spoken in Hungary generally differ very little from each other or from standard Hungarian. Speech islands outside Hungary, such as the Burgenland Hungarian (BH) dialect, are exceptions to this. The greater divergence can partly be attributed to the lack of constant influence from the standard and from neighbouring dialects. Consequently, it has preserved many features that are archaic in relation to today's standard. At the same time, divergence has also been influenced by German, belonging to the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European family, with which the speech island has been in close contact. As a result, large scale borrowing of German elements into Hungarian sentences has always been characteristic of Burgenland Hungarian (Imre 1977).

In Burgenland, the local Hungarian dialect which does not have a standardised literary form, functions as a vernacular language. At the same time, the local German dialect, the national standard variety of German, and the literary standard variety of the Hungarian language are also present. Each of the above communication tools is used in clearly defined situations: the national standard variety of German is the language used in education, in formal relations, and in mass communication, whereas the local German dialect is used in informal German language interactions. Both language varieties – albeit to varying degrees, depending on which generation the speaker belongs to – constitute part of the linguistic repertoire of the people living in the region. The local Hungarian dialect is the language used during in-group communication among autochthonous Hungarians living in the region, while the Hungarian literary standard variety is the language variety that is applied in school education and with speakers from the mother country.

Standard Hungarian has, undeniably, a higher prestige than the local variety, which is characterised as “imperfect” and “incomplete” (Gal 1979:78). Descriptions provided by informants on BH focus on the need to adopt new lexical items from other languages, as well as on the difficulties of mutual understanding when meeting Hungarians from outside the province. In these situations, minority members view their language variety as an impediment to mutual understanding.

This problem arises less in Vienna, where a significant proportion of the mother country migrants speak standard Hungarian or a regional variety that is both objectively and subjectively very close to it. The only exceptions to this are the migrants arriving from Transylvania, who see their dialect as a tool of identification, and an opportunity of expression of their immediate community. For them, their own dialect is a language variety that possesses a higher prestige than standard Hungarian, and they associate it with the attributes “ancient, clear and unspoiled”. They are proud of the characteristics that differentiate it from literary Hungarian and they emphasise its group-boundary-maintaining nature (Csiszár 2007).

4.2 Language contact and multilingualism

In Burgenland, the initial stage of the language shift process began in the late 1950s and early 1960s. During this period, the overwhelming majority of the Hungarian inhabitants were already bilingual in Hungarian and German. After the Second World War, the traditional social and economic structure of the Hungarian settlements – up to that point constituting a relatively untouched, to a greater or lesser degree closed, language island living off agriculture – changed in Burgenland. In the course of industrialisation, the acquisition of social mobility and economic status became attached to the knowledge of the majority language. The situation has changed considerably since the 1970s and 1980s; the system change, the improvement of economic relations between the two sides of the border, and Hungary’s accession to the European Union, have all substantially contributed to the rise of prestige of the Hungarian language. However, the emerging economic value of the Hungarian language applied only to the standard variety, and not to the local dialect spoken in the region.

As a result of the long-standing language contact, asymmetrical patterns of language use, frequent code-switching and large scale lexical and structural borrowing of German elements into Hungarian sentences are characteristic of the Hungarian dialect spoken in Burgenland. Attitudes within the circles of the autochthonous minority towards code-switching and borrowing are much more homogenous than in Vienna. Burgenland Hungarians consider the use of guest language elements as part of their everyday linguistic practice. In the capital, the use of “pure Hungarian speech” is considered as an example to be followed. (Purity ideals can mainly be attributed to education.) In the Hungarian migrant community of Vienna the mother tongue is regarded as an obligatory element of ethnic identity while in Burgenland, language is currently seen as only one – and not necessarily the most essential – factor of ethnic identity (Csiszár 2007).

4.3 Language use and maintenance

Data concerning language use in different domains is restricted to a single micro-census carried out in Burgenland in 1990-1991 (Holzer and Münz 1993). In the easternmost province, Hungarian is mainly used in occasional conversations, at work, and in public institutions within the community. In one of the four traditional Hungarian settlements, the minority language is able to keep its position in situations connected to ecclesiastical life (for example church and prayer). The position of the minority language is much weaker in the different areas of family communication; the lower prestige Hungarian can be heard mostly during communication conducted with grandparents and least frequently with children. The generational distribution of language choice preferences is also characteristic of typical acts of communication outside the family. The minority language is present in the community as a language used primarily by old people and when addressing old people. Using both languages in similar settings is characteristic of middle-aged people, while a preference of the majority language is the main characteristic of the language use of young people.

Among migrant Hungarians of Vienna, local Hungarian associations represent the exclusive territory of the use of the minority language. The mother tongue has a strong position with respect to ecclesiastical life and within the nuclear family. Due to the heterogeneous nature of the migrant diaspora, there are substantial differences in terms of language maintenance strategies between the various migratory waves characterised by different sociological

features and migratory motivations (Csiszár 2007). Generally speaking, the minority language seems to disappear from official language use areas first, and is able to maintain its role within the family and the intimate sphere for the longest time.

In Austria, there are no explicit attempts to revitalise the Hungarian language.

Research on Hungarians in Austria concentrates mainly on the autochthonous minority group; publications on the Hungarian Viennese diaspora are far less numerous. Due to their high level of social integration and their relative lack of self-promotion, Hungarians rarely find themselves at the centre of public attention in Austria and thus are seldom the topic of social science research. Research on the various aspects of the two communities has been carried out most often by Hungarian researchers from the "mother country" targeting a Hungarian readership living in the Carpathian Basin. This explains the fact that scientific publications have appeared almost exclusively in the Hungarian language.

This trend is expected to change as two research institutions have been established recently with the aim of studying the Hungarian minority in Austria. In Alsóőr (Burgenland) the *Imre Samu Linguistic Institute*, a member of the trans-border network of Hungarian language institutes, was set up in 2007. In Vienna, the *Presidential Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Abroad* has recently established (in 2010) a research group consisting of representatives of various scientific fields.

The most notable gaps in the research include, among others, up-to-date sociological studies on the language community, analysis of recent migratory processes between Austria and Hungary, sociolinguistic studies on language shift and language maintenance of Hungarians in Austria, research on the theoretical and practical aspects of Hungarian mother tongue education in minority settings, the use of new media by Austrian Hungarians, and media discourse analysis. The long list could be extended to include attitudinal aspects, such as the attitudes of Hungarians towards language legislation or towards the majority group. It is hoped that some of these gaps will be filled by the the current project.

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