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**THE LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION OF THE  
CHILDREN LIVING IN MULTILINGUAL  
ENVIRONMENT**

Theses of a PhD Dissertation

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## Introduction

During the last decades, the topic of bilingualism has come to the front more and more, given the fact that for approximately half of the world's population a linguistic environment of two or more languages is the habitual linguistic context (*Göncz, 2004*). The social, economic and political processes influence not only the life of the speaking community but also the languages. Globalization, migration, the enlargement of the European Union radically transform the image related to the role and future of the majority or minority languages. On the one hand, the voluntarily accepted, elite forms of the bilingualism (especially through the learning of the English language) is expanding significantly; on the other hand a large part of the ethnic minorities living in bilingual milieu experiences the language shift: they switch over to the usage of the majority language giving up their original language in a shorter or longer period of time (*Bartha, 2003*). The scientific interest in the knowledge of this typically interdisciplinary area increases with the development of the phenomena; in line with this, the opinions concerning the psychology of bilingualism and its social effects also change.

While at the end of the 19th century the bilingualism was considered harmful from the perspective of the child's cognitive development, after the period highlighting the „impartial influences” illustrating the middle of last century, nowadays the research increasingly supports the advantages of bilingualism (*Baker, 1993/2006*). Referring to these advantages, the researchers particularly emphasize the gradual language sensitivity, the developed meta-language awareness, the high levels of the divergent thinking, the more developed analogical thinking, the facilities of the reading-learning process, as well as a more democratic approach (*Jarovinszkij, 1994; Navracsics, 1999; Bialystok, 2001; De Houwer, 2002*). According to *Skutnabb-Kangas (1998)*, both at individual and community level, the monolingualism suggests an out-of-date, obsolete and primitive status, therefore, the educational system should provide both the children belonging to minorities and to majority with a high level of bilingualism.

The motto of the European Union, „United in Diversity”, emphasizes that multilingualism represents a determinant characteristic, in the contexts where the linguistic diversity is not a burden, but a value. According to all these, it supports the citizens and

communities in the usage of their mother tongue, and the learning of foreign languages. The year 2001 was the European Year of Languages; in the next years, they set up proposals, action plans and strategies to motivate people in the language learning and to stimulate the diversity of languages. The work program called „Education and Training 2010” pointed up the capacity of communication in foreign languages as an essential competence; and, consequently, the updated frame-strategy (Education and training – 2020) strengthened the actuality of the objectives already formulated in Barcelona: the acquisition of two foreign languages besides the mother tongue.

Living as a minority, generally is a bilingual and/or multilingual existence, as either the linguistically mixed families, or the monolingual families using a language differing from the majority linguistic environment, are natural places to become bilingual. On the other hand, we experience the bilingualism of the minorities as a kind of multilingualism under constraint, therefore, the multilingual values are not in the limelight; we rather associate it with the processes of language shift and the issues of the linguistic assimilation.

The assimilation of a national community can be documented most of all with the exploration of the process regarding the loss of the mother tongue, since under such circumstances the linguistic mechanisms in socialization, destined for the language transmittal do not function well enough. In these contexts, we speak about the unstable bilingualism (*Fishman*, 1968) defined by the process of language shift (*Gal*, 1991; *Borbély*, 2001). Lately there have been numerous studies regarding the endangered status of the Hungarian language, (*Lanstyák*, 2000; *Sándor*, 2000; *Göncz*, 2004; *Péntek*, 2009), which indicate the fact that, beyond a general stability, at the level of micro-regions and settlements, the bilingualism is rather relative. There are more and more places where the effective and symbolic functions of the Hungarian language tighten, while the majority language gets more and more significant. Besides the social, economic, demographic and political factors, the ethnical vitality of education and local communities is also important and influences the processes of the language shift (*Osváth*, *Szarka*, 2003). The analysis of the local processes is necessary in order to elaborate the differential strategies (*Bartha*, 2003).

My research represents a study describing such local processes; it was carried out in the last years in a traditionally multilingual region, a part of the Romanian Banat, namely in Timis county. My purpose was to analyse the language socialization of the children living in multilingual environment, to survey the linguistic „socialization area”, to reveal the connections between these processes and the institutionalized education in the mother tongue of the minority. I have studied both the language skills in Hungarian and Romanian and the

process of becoming bilingual of the children belonging to families which have undertaken the maintenance of the minority language (having a lower linguistic prestige) concretely through a visible measure: the enrolment of their children in minority educational institution (kindergartens, schools), by which, they have also contributed to the bilingual development of their children. The children were between three and ten years old, when the learning of their second, even third language is characterised by the natural acquisition of the language; globally, the acquiring of languages develops on more levels, the communicative function is essential, the connection and action represent the core of language-learning (Krashen, 1985). During the research, the educators assessed the level of language knowledge (both Hungarian and Romanian) of the nursery-school children and the pupils of the lower grades and, based on these, I have determined the bilingual level of the children and tested the linguistic age in Hungarian of those ready to attend the primary school courses.

In the introduction of the thesis I dealt with the presentation of the topic and with the motivation of the research. The next two chapters are dedicated to the review of the theoretical context: the fundamental concepts and research directions related to the topic of bilingualism, the language socialisation and the questions regarding the process of becoming bilingual. In the fourth chapter, I presented the multilingual environment within the frames of the ecological systems theory. The fifth chapter is destined to the presentation of the empirical research; the thesis closes with a summary and the formulation of deductions and conclusions.

## **Theoretical basis**

### ***Bilingualism and the process of becoming bilingual in childhood***

The issue of what level of language-skills should one acquire in order to be qualified as bilingual is one of the fundamental questions in defining the bilingualism. In this respect there are definitions according to which it is necessary to have full „mother tongue control” in both languages, and also, definitions according to which a minimal knowledge or practice of the second language would be sufficient for such purpose. Besides the development of the notion of bilingualism, the accentuation of its continuum-nature came into the front more and more (Bartha 1999); the emphasis is transferred from the attempts of defining certain level of language-knowledge toward the language usage, and the function occurs as a new element (Grosjean, 1982).

The individual's process of becoming bilingual is part of the language socialization, which is a life-long process, since the bilingual individuals keep experiencing throughout the years numerous situations from language maintenance to language shift. In multilingual societies the various language socialization patterns influence differently the language-maintenance (*Garrett and Baquedano-López, 2002; Bayley and Schecter 2003*).

Should bilingualism is formed during childhood, we refer to this as simultaneous, respectively sequential bilingualism. In the case of simultaneous bilingualism the child assimilates the two languages at the same time. When it comes to that, bilingualism is described as the child's mother tongue (*Lesznyák, 1996*). Its specificity resides in the fact that it occurs in the families speaking two languages, where the child gets in touch with both languages from the very beginning of his life, generally according to the „one person – one language” approach. There are two main systems of views with respect to the development of the simultaneous bilingualism (*Romaine, 1995*): the hypothesis of the unique system, respectively the hypothesis of separated systems. We speak about sequential bilingualism in childhood when the child acquires the languages successively, and the learning of the second language begins before the school years. Qualitatively, this process of language development is different than the simultaneous bilingual development (*Tabors and Snow, 1994*). The question of when the learning of the second language should begin represents a controversial matter of the sequential bilingualism. The analysis of the researches performed on this topic indicates that there is no one single „critical period of time” with generalized validity, but there are several, which are connected to the development of different linguistic competences.

*Krashen* (1985) differentiates between the acquisition and the learning of languages – according to him at the age of ten the individual changes his learning strategies, therefore, the acquisition of the second language differs at a further stage of development: while in case of the first language the acquisition of the language occurs simultaneously at many levels, in a global way, in case of the second language the learning process occurs at a single level, analytically. *Cummins* (1976) also considers that age has an important role in the process of becoming bilingual, and the two languages influence each other in their development. Although Cummins' theory of threshold hypothesis has divided the researchers, its influence on linguistic planning, linguistic policies and linguistic pedagogy has been significant during the last decades (*Macswan, 2000; Takakuwa, 2003*).

### ***The socialization media of becoming bilingual***

In the case of members of a linguistic minority, the influence of different socializing linguistic factors is well apprehensible through the analysis of the socializing linguistic area of those individuals. Nevertheless, this socializing area is affected by numerous influences, which interact each other – this complex circumstance is well modelled by the ecological systems theory (*Bronfenbrenner, 1979*).

The family, as one of the most important socialization factors, adopts its more or less conscious decisions also concerning language socialization, given the fact that the parents plan their children's linguistic future within the context of a „family linguistic policy” (*Grosjean, 1982; Piller, 2002; Csiszár, 2007*). This question becomes more and more complex when there are more languages in the family or in its immediate environment. The second significant linguistic area of socialization is the kindergarten and the school. In a multilingual milieu, the educational system has a great role in stating which language and culture become more important and powerful, and also, in deciding the languages which will be acquired, and later, used by the pupils (*Skuttnab- Kangas, 1997*). The age-group also has a more and more essential role in the language socialization. In the bilingual communities the dominant language of the group is the decisive one, it can strengthen or weaken a certain language, and it points up the stability of bilingualism and the direction of possible language shift processes (*Radó, 1996*). Even though the media do not represent a direct socializing medium, it has become an important element of the socializing process. The media is also important in the language socialization: it provides linguistic patterns, it can support the acquisition of foreign languages, it can strengthen the dominancy of one or another language or it can assure the systematic encounter with the mother tongue. The last one – the provision of a stage for the usage of the language - is likely to become an essential factor in the case of minorities (*Grin and Moring, 2003*).

### **3. The hypotheses, methods and instruments of the empirical research**

The goal of my research is the study of the language socialization of the children living in multilingual environment, the survey of the linguistic „socialization area” and the analysis of the correlations between the processes of the language socialization and the institutionalized education in mother tongue.

The hypotheses of the research:

H1. The heterogeneous language socialization area of the children learning in minority (Hungarian) educational institutions generates different levels of bilingualism.

1a. In multilingual environment the dominancy of the language spoken at home does not necessarily mean that this dominancy is going to be maintained in the bilingualism of the child.

1b. Not only the children living in linguistically mixed families are able to become balanced bilinguals, but also the children belonging to monolingual, Hungarian-Hungarian families.

1c. Under the influence of the diversified linguistic environment, the children raised in monolingual families become balanced bilinguals even before their school time, and this process strengthens more and more during their school education.

H2. In the case of children born in linguistically mixed families, the educational institution may have essential role in the process of becoming bilingual.

2a. Part of the children attending the Hungarian kindergartens start their transformation into bilingual individuals only during the pre-school period.

2b. At the start of the school, there are such school mature children living in linguistically mixed families who are enrolled in the Hungarian schools, although the Hungarian language-skills of the children does not reach the level, which would make the child's efficient education possible.

2c. Both the language of the kindergarten and of the school, as well as the dominant language of the age-group formed there, contribute to the compensation of the asymmetrical linguistic effects experienced in the linguistically mixed families.

H3. The minority kindergartens and schools teaching in Hungarian are prepared neither to overcome the linguistic handicaps nor to manage the linguistic development level differences.

In order to confirm the formulated hypotheses I carried out the following research tasks:

For the verification of the first assumption, I analyzed the linguistic practice of the children three to ten years old, attending minority educational institutions teaching in Hungarian, their linguistic environment, the development of the Hungarian and Romanian linguistic skills (based on observational forms completed by the educators) and, according to the evaluated language-skills, I have defined the level of the children's bilingualism. Then, I looked for correlations between the level of bilingualism and the dominant language of the

micro-levels. I have performed the study of the language socialization on the sample composed of all the children enrolled in the Hungarian minority educational system: in the school year 2005 – 2006 there were 502 kindergarteners and 404 primary school pupils attending the minority educational institutions teaching in Hungarian in Timis County.

In order to certify the second assumption, besides the revealing the correlation between the language socialization area and the language-skills, I have surveyed the educational level of maturity of the children attending school in the last three years (by means of the brief DIFER) and the linguistic age (according to the Descoedres test), then I compared the data I had obtained. I have surveyed 114 pupils entering the school. I have examined the language socialization of the children belonging to linguistically mixed families using partially structured interviews with the parents; I have analyzed 40 interviews altogether.

In support of the third assumption, besides the connections of the language socialization area and the language-skills, I have studied the opinions of the educators regarding the bilingualism by means of questionnaires focused on a sample composed of 64 educators.

## **Results**

The results of my research certify that the heterogeneous language socializing area of the children attending the minority (Hungarian) educational institutions causes bilingualism of different levels, and this process develops towards a balanced bilingualism during the school age.

From linguistic viewpoint, the socializing area of the pupils attending minority educational institutions teaching in Hungarian is heterogeneous: more than half of the kindergarteners (55,8%) come from environment where the mother tongue of one or both parents is other than Hungarian, while in the case of primary school pupils this rate is decreasing to one third (31, 2%), yet it is still relevant. Subsequently, the dominancy of the Hungarian language can be noticed in 45, 5% of the kindergarteners' families, while in the case of primary school pupils, in 69,8% of the families; the dominancy of the Romanian language characterizes 25,4% of the families whose children go to Hungarian nursery schools, respectively 17,4% of the families whose children are primary school pupils. In the internal communication of the Hungarian-Hungarian families the majority language is also used: in the case of kindergarteners this usage-percentage is 10%, and in the case of the primary school pupils is of 8 %. The same phenomenon is emphasized by the results obtained from the comparison of the Hungarian language-knowledge with the Romanian one: significant

differences may be revealed only for the kindergarteners, related to their vocabulary ( $t'=2,583$ ,  $p<0,05$ ), respectively in relation with the correctness of language usage, in both cases in favour of the Romanian language-knowledge.

This diversified linguistic environment results in different levels of bilingualism: out of the children attending the Hungarian nursery schools 22,6% are bilinguals with Hungarian language dominance, 37,1% are balanced bilinguals, 28% are bilinguals with Romanian language dominance and 12,3% are two-semilinguals. In case of the primary school pupils, 17,4% are bilinguals with Hungarian language dominance, 57,4% are balanced bilinguals, 16,6% are bilinguals with Romanian language dominance, while 11,6% are two-semilinguals.

In multilingual milieu the dominance of the language spoken at home does not necessarily imply that this dominance is going to be maintained in the child's bilingualism: 46,5% of the kindergarteners speaking the Hungarian language at home are bilinguals with Hungarian language dominance, while 37,2% are balanced bilinguals. As for the case of primary school pupils, 24,3% of the children growing up in families with Hungarian language dominance are bilinguals with Hungarian language dominance, while 61,6% are balanced bilinguals; thus not only the children living in linguistically mixed families can become balanced bilinguals, but also the children of monolingual - Hungarian-Hungarian - families. Among the kindergarteners speaking Romanian at home but learning in Hungarian, 74,65 are bilinguals with Romanian language dominance and 11,9% are balanced bilinguals. In the case of primary school pupils who attend Hungarian minority schools but living in families with Romanian language dominance, 73,3% of such children are bilinguals with Romanian language dominance, while the rate of the balanced bilinguals is of 15,6%.

During the primary school age, while advancing towards higher classes, the number of bilinguals with Hungarian, respectively Romanian language dominance shows decreasing tendency, as long as the number of the balanced bilinguals increases. While during the first class 56,5% of the pupils living in monolingual – Hungarian-Hungarian – families are balanced bilinguals; in the fourth class this percentage increases up to 74,6%.

In the process of becoming bilingual of the children born in linguistically mixed families, the educational system has an essential role; the educational language of the kindergarten and school, and the dominant language of the age-group formed there, contribute to the compensation of the asymmetrical linguistic influences experienced in the linguistically mixed families.

In the case of early sequential bilingual children, in families where the child firstly acquires the Hungarian language, the teaching and practice of the majority language have

already started in the family. If the child firstly acquires the Romanian language, he will get in touch with the Hungarian language in the nursery school; the parent expects the nursery school to teach the Hungarian language, thus the process of becoming bilingual starts only in the kindergarten. At the same time, referring to the children attending the Hungarian minority nursery school, the rate of the bilingual children with Romanian language dominancy is the highest at the beginning of the pre-school period (more than 30% at the age of 4-5).

A rate of 21, 9% of the children enrolling in Hungarian classes do not achieve the level of Hungarian language generally corresponding to his age. With one exception these children belong to linguistically mixed families.

The teaching language of the kindergarten and primary school, as well as the dominant language of the age-group formed there, contribute to the compensation of the asymmetrical linguistic influences experienced within the linguistically mixed families; in case of Romanian language dominancy, the shift towards the bilingualism certifies the role of the school in the process of becoming bilingual of the children coming from linguistically mixed families: 11,9% of the children living in families with Romanian dominancy and attending Hungarian nursery school are balanced bilinguals, while in case of primary school pupils living in similar environment such rate is 15,6%.

The role of the institutions is also emphasized by the fact that while only 2, 2% of the bilingual kindergarteners with Romanian language dominancy speak in Hungarian with their peers, in the case of primary school pupils this percentage is 41, 3%, which may indicate the influence of the school teaching in Hungarian as well as of the group formed in such school. In the case of balanced bilinguals the usage of the Hungarian language is also more significant within the peer-group: while in the pre-school age 44, 6% of the balanced bilingual children use the Hungarian language in their communication with their colleagues during their free games, 74, 8% of the primary school pupils use the Hungarian language in their peer-group. This phenomenon is also influenced in case of the primary school pupils by the language dominancy experienced in the institution: in so far as in the institution the Hungarian language is also the dominant one (the case of the independent Hungarian schools), the likelihood that the children also use the Hungarian language in their mutual communication is higher.

The Hungarian minority kindergartens and schools which are accustomed to teaching children, who speak Hungarian at mother tongue level, are prepared neither to overcome the linguistic disadvantages nor to manage the linguistic differences.

More than two-thirds (69, 8%) of the children belonging to linguistically mixed families attended the Hungarian nursery school and from these, only each second one acquires average or above-average linguistic knowledge. The results may be explained by the individual differences, but also by the lack of proper pre-school language-acquisition programs or methods serving for the overcome of the linguistic disadvantages.

According to the educators' opinion, the early acquisition of the second language is an important condition of the development of bilingualism. The family has the outstanding role in the process of becoming bilingual, therefore the teaching of the Hungarian language to a child who does not speak or does not speak well Hungarian does not constitute one of the daily tasks of the educators. Half of the interrogated teachers do not consider such a didactic problem, which might concern their work, arguing that the improvement of the language acquisition level is not a trans-disciplinary task; many of them consider it only the problem of the language teachers.

### **Summary. Further research directions**

The outcomes of my research describing local processes contribute to the more precise knowledge of the process of children living in linguistic and ethnical minority becoming simultaneous or sequential bilinguals, paying special attention to the children belonging to linguistically mixed families. They also emphasize those correlations, which can be demonstrated between the most important linguistic media of socialization and the holistically interpreted level of bilingualism.

Its actuality derives from the fact that during the last decades in the regions and micro-regions rendered as diaspora the number of children belonging to linguistically mixed families and attending the Hungarian minority schools has increased more and more; at the same time, at community level, the already launched processes of language shift in the case of children belonging to Hungarian-Hungarian families are more and more perceptible. The minority educational system teaching in Hungarian has also to adapt to this changed cultural context. If we step out of sphere of problems determined by the relation between the indigenous minority and the majority, the timeliness of the research theme is provided by the fact that nowadays we find all over the world such children, who live in another linguistic environment than the

one they experience in the educational institution, respectively such monolingual or multilingual institutions which educate groups with very heterogeneous language-knowledge.

Besides revealing the problem, the results of the research give us the opportunity to elaborate new questions, and provide us with starting points for further researches. Such themes consist in the connections between the heterogeneous language socializing area and the development of bilingualism; the analysis of the role of mass-media in the process of becoming balanced bilinguals or bilinguals with certain language dominance during the kindergarten or primary school age; the relationship between the children's level of bilingualism and the language dominance in the educational institution.

In bilingual or multilingual environment, for the purpose of reducing the rhythm of the linguistic shift, the institutional educational strategy of teaching in mother tongue has to be reevaluated; strengthening the impact of the mother tongue outside the school or kindergarten, raising the prestige of the mother tongue, making more efficient the language integration of the children belonging to mixed families, as well as increasing the knowledge of the educators and parents in relation with bilingualism are necessary. The outcomes of the research may serve as basis for preparing community programs developing the ethno-linguistic vitality, linguistic revitalization programs, as well as for elaborating optimum strategies for education in mother tongue. These can substantiate the development of those educational policy, institutional management and language pedagogy strategies which can shift the situation experienced by the minority as coercive multilingualism towards the valued multilingualism.

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