

“Does it matter much what the EU wants?”: adult learners’ language biographies and ideologies about learning Hungarian in Romania

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The EU encourages multilingualism and promotes the long-term objective that every citizen should have practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue. Eastern Bloc generally countries rank at the bottom of the lists when it comes to foreign language competence. The recent Eurobarometer reports also show that in all EU countries five major languages dominate language learning preferences. The economic crisis plays an important role in East-Central European countries’ perception of language learning in mostly utilitarian terms. Ability to work in another country is cited as a main motivational factor. Other aspects, that are markedly present in the West, or northern Europe, as keeping up knowledge of a language spoken by the family, personal satisfaction, or feeling more European hardly figure in this context.

In the EU reports regional and autochthonous minority languages are statistically insignificant, and invisible among the preferences of European language learners. I perceive this as a seed of crisis in the EU’s multilingualism. Despite of its significance, the voluntary learning of historical minority languages by the titular majorities has received little attention both as a subject of study and as a practical tool to foster tolerance between cohabitating and neighboring ethnicities. Such a need has been noticed by EU institutions (Rindler Schjerve and Vetter 2012: 34-35). In fact, the ongoing economic crisis –that has significant implications on European integration and the language markets–, has made this task even more urgent than before.

In the general framework of learning historical languages, there has been a number of studies in the Western European context focusing on learning minority languages in endangered or regional and autonomous settings. So far, however, few attempts have been made to present the complexities of voluntary learning of Hungarian by titular language speakers in the neighboring countries. A group of EU intellectuals suggested the use of the term “personal adoptive languages” (Maalouf 2008: 7) that could have significant relevance in the context of Hungarian as a second, heritage, and language of the environment in these countries.

I argue that language ideologies are central to understanding issues involved in the learning and teaching of a historical minority’s language. I understand language ideologies as “cultural, metapragmatic assumptions about the relationship between words, speakers, and worlds” (Gal 2006: 388). The aim of my paper is to illuminate the language ideologies that challenge and hinder, or foster and enable the learning of Hungarian by the adult members of the dominant majority population. To achieve this objective, I approach the field from the perspective of anthropological sociolinguistics and apply ethnographical data collection methods (see Heller 2008; Blommaert & Dong 2010). I conduct a fine-grained ethnographic study in order to reveal aspects of learning Hungarian that would otherwise go unnoticed. I draw up typical Second Language Learner portraits: map family background, motivation, language contact, and the socio-cultural aspects of my informants in order to gain insights into their language ideologies.

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