



**János Péntek–Attila Benő: *A magyar nyelv
Romániában (Erdélyben)***

(The Hungarian Language in Romania (Transylvania)), pp. 473
Cluj-Napoca: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület, 2020

Review by

Enikő BIRÓ

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Cluj-Napoca, Romania)
Department of Applied Linguistics, Târgu-Mureş
biro.eniko@ms.sapientia.ro

Petteri LAIHONEN

University of Jyväskylä (Finland)
Centre for Applied Language Studies
petteri.laihonen@jyu.fi

There is a long history of studies on minority languages and research focusing on various topics from language maintenance to endangerment, from language shift to revitalization, and from education to language policies. However, from the point of view of minority communities and speakers, Cenoz and Gorter (2008: 5) have succinctly summarized the challenges of such studies as follows: “Minority languages have traditionally been the concern of minority language speakers themselves and to a large extent ignored by speakers of majority languages. Minority language speakers feel minority languages as part of their identity.” The Hungarian minority language community in Transylvania has 1.25 million speakers according to the 2011 Romanian census, making it one of the largest linguistic minorities in Europe by all definitions. As the reviewed book convincingly establishes, according to several studies, the identity of Hungarian speakers is based on language in the first case, not on Romanian citizenship or own choice. At the same time, the large number of the Hungarian minority or their commitment to the minority language are hardly known internationally. One reason for this in comparison to other middle-sized or large minorities, such as the Basque or Catalan, is the tendency to speak about Hungarians in Romania, where they make only 6% of the total population. A nationwide 6% population would be a significant minority in other countries, but – as the authors argue – it belittles the significance of Hungarians in the region. To counter this, the book title includes Transylvania, where the number of Hungarians grows over 18% of

the population. Transylvania, home to 99% of Hungarians in Romania, constitutes a historical principality, much older than Romania, which has formed the second largest region for Hungarian language and culture since the first millennium.

At first glance, this very comprehensive book titled *The Hungarian Language in Romania (Transylvania)* by János Péntek and Attila Benő fulfils two aims. Firstly, it is part of a series of six volumes based on a standardized sociolinguistic survey of Hungarian language varieties in Hungary's neighbouring countries, which was initiated by Miklós Kontra and originally conducted between 1995 and 1996. As a result of this survey, a series of books were published under the title *A magyar nyelv a Kárpát-medencében a XX. század végén* [The Hungarian Language in the Carpathian Basin at the End of the 20th Century]. The first book in this series was authored by István Csernicskó, *A magyar nyelv Ukrajnában (Kárpátalján)* [The Hungarian Language in Ukraine (Transcarpathia)] (1998), followed by Lajos Göncz's *A magyar nyelv Jugoszláviában (Vajdaságban)* [The Hungarian Language in Yugoslavia (Vojvodina)] (1999). The next book was authored by István Lanstyák, *A magyar nyelv Szlovákiában* [The Hungarian Language in Slovakia] (2000), followed by co-authored volumes by István Szépfalusi, Ottó Vörös, Anikó Beregszászi, and Miklós Kontra, *A magyar nyelv Ausztriában és Szlovéniában* [The Hungarian Language in Austria and Slovenia] (2012), and by Éva Fancsaly, Erika Gúti, Miklós Kontra, Ljubi Mónika Molnár, Beatrix Oszkó, Beáta Siklósi, and Orsolya Szentesi Žagar, *A magyar nyelv Horvátországban* [The Hungarian Language in Croatia] (2016). Secondly, the authors present the linguistic situation in Transylvania in a very broad socio-historical context, including the events of the two decades in the post-communist Romania and their consequences.

This volume is more than a detailed, comprehensive study of the Hungarian language in Transylvania. It is the result of decades of linguistic research. Moreover, it also contains a diachronic perspective, describing the past, present, and future of a linguistic community in a minority situation. It is a book worth reading. The authors, János Péntek and Attila Benő, are well-known and respected experts, and their books and studies constitute the fundamental works on the subject.

The book is divided into eight chapters. One of the strengths of this work lies in the details; each chapter focuses on different aspects of the Hungarian language as a minority language variant. The introduction of the book itself points at a very important detail, namely at the definition and meanings of the term "minority". Regarding Hungarian minority speakers in Transylvania, the term "minority" is not neutral, it carries a negative connotation, meaning "insignificant", "weak", or "powerless". According to the authors (p. 23), minoritization (Williams 2005) as a concept refers to the process by which the structural position of one or another ethnic group or ethnicity is adversely affected by power relations. Therefore, the aim of the book is to describe a range of phenomena and processes of the Hungarian language community and language use in Transylvania in a minoritized

situation. The book points out that Hungarian language use cannot be evaluated in a minority position in the same way as the monolingual, majority Hungarian language used in Hungary; therefore, there is no single linguistic standard.

The first chapter presents a detailed historical description, showing the demographic development of the population of Transylvania up to the 20th century. It presents the linguistic contacts, and the maps illustrate the development of the three linguistic regions in Transylvania: the region with a Hungarian majority, the transitional and the diaspora regions from a Hungarian point of view.

The second chapter discusses the characteristics of the Hungarian language in the 21st century. In this way, a separate chapter is devoted to the last twenty years, which is missing from the other volumes of the series. The evolution of the population, the structure of settlements, the issue of linguistic attitudes and identity, and the causes and factors of assimilation are analysed from a rich variety of perspectives.

The third chapter examines the specific features of the Hungarian language varieties and registers in this region. The authors analyse the situation of specialized languages, the phenomenon of linguistic decline after Trianon, the drift away from the standard language variety, and the changes after the fall of the communist regime.

The fourth chapter deals with language ideology, language policy, and minority policy in Transylvania; it presents the characteristics of Romania's minority policy and identifies the barriers to minority language use. Romania grants minority languages a subordinate status compared to the state language. A very important finding of the authors – who also refer to the studies of Angella Sorbán (2014) – is that bilingualism, contrary to expectations, is neither an advantage nor an added value in economic terms.

The fifth chapter describes the use of language in education, science, culture, religion, and the media and analyses changes and trends based on the experiences of the first two decades of the 21st century.

The last two chapters examine the Hungarian-speaking minority community from the perspective of bilingualism, analysing the concept, definition, types, and varieties of bilingualism in Transylvania. Contact phenomena and code-switching issues are also investigated in these chapters.

The large-scale monographic work concludes with a summary, in which the authors outline the linguistic developments of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania in the last hundred years. In fact, from 1990 onwards, there has been a convergence of Hungarian language varieties, although their core characteristics remained the same. There have been no substantial changes in the legal status of the language use. The language rights are exclusively individual and not collective rights in Romania. János Péntek and Attila Benő undertook an objective description and analysis of the situation; their analysis serves the

Hungarian minority in Transylvania, enabling its members to plan, take action, and develop a realistic vision of the future.

To summarize, the book is profoundly rich in information, thorough in its analysis, and objective in its description. However, beyond these excellent values, it appeals to its readers and engages them into planning and action whether they are members of this ethnic minority or just sensitive readers of these diverse, complex, and highly significant linguistic phenomena and issues.

References

- Cenoz, Jasone–Durk Gorter. 2008. Applied linguistics and the use of minority languages in education. *AILA Review* 21(1): 5–12.
- Sorbán, Angella. 2014. *Kisebbség és kétnyelvűség. A kétnyelvűség szociológiai aspektusai az oktatásban és a munkaerőpiacon* [Minority and Bilingualism. Sociological Aspects of Bilingualism in Education and on the Labour Market]. Szabó T. Attila Nyelvi Intézet kiadványa. Sepsiszentgyörgy: T3.
- Williams, Glyn. 2005. *Sustaining Language Diversity in Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.