

CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE SHIFT  
IN TWO AMERICAN HUNGARIAN  
BILINGUAL COMMUNITIES\*

KLÁRA FALK-BÁNÓ

*College for Foreign Trade, Budapest*

*Introduction*

“A language shift may be defined as the change from the habitual use of one language to that of another” (Weinreich 1953:68).

Language shift is a long process influenced by a number of factors, determinants. A community can be a stable bilingual community, maintaining both languages for centuries and then may become an unstable one undergoing shift and therefore assimilation in the course of social change.

E.g. Lieberman et al. (1981) cite census data which show that as recently as in 1900 more than 40 per cent of the Indian population could not speak English at all. In 1940 20 per cent of the Whites of Louisiana still reported French as their mother tongue — almost 150 years after the purchase of Louisiana from France (Bratt Paulston 1981).

But we do not have to go as far as that to find examples of this tendency. It is shown by Gal (1979) in the small town of Felsőőr (in German: Oberwart) in eastern Austria that language shift started only in the recent decades, as a result of the process of urbanization after 400 years of Hungarian — German stable bilingualism. In the above cases the communities in question are *indigenous* subordinate groups, which did not seek contact with the dominant group; they found it imposed on them; ...“their groups in their entirety were

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brought into the environing society with their culture intact" (Bratt Paulston 1981:475).

On the other hand the linguistic, cultural attitude of *immigrant* subordinate groups is completely different to the dominant group, in our case the Anglos of the United States of America. The immigrants' goals were those of assimilation. They had voluntarily left their countries to find better, more satisfactory conditions in the new world, and language shift was an important aspect of their assimilation. This seems to account for the extraordinarily rapid language shift which is characteristic only of immigrant subordinate groups (Liebersohn 1981).

Thompson, speaking of Mexican American language loyalty, points out that typically in the United States the first generation prefers to speak the non-English tongue, the second generation is bilingual, and the third claims English as its mother tongue, learning the immigrant language mainly through contact with the grandparents (Thompson 1974). By first generation I mean immigrants born in the old homeland, the second generation is the first generation born in the new homeland, in our case, America. If we apply Veltman's terms for the degrees of bilingualism in the United States, we can say that the first generation is *simple bilingual*, meaning that the main language is the mother tongue, the second is *English bilingual* meaning that the main language is English but the mother tongue of the parents is maintained, and the third generation is *English monolingual*, i.e. the non-English tongue is hardly (if at all) maintained.

This is basically what I found in the two American Hungarian bilingual communities, too, in the urban community of New Brunswick, New Jersey, and in the small rural community of Árpádhon (this was its first Hungarian name given by the original settlers), i.e. Albany, Louisiana, where I was doing research in 1983/84 as an ACLS fellow for 10 months and as a fellow of the American Hungarian Foundation in New Brunswick, N. J. for the last 2 months of my one-year sojourn in the United States.

#### *Database and fieldwork methods*

I was doing fieldwork in the above mentioned two communities, New Brunswick, N. J. and Albany, La., but also in New York City I interviewed 34, and in Berkeley, California 6 individuals.

Altogether I have 54 hours of taped interviews suitable for analysis, 30 hours from New Brunswick, 12 hours from Albany, 9 hours from New York City and 3 hours from Berkeley. In New Brunswick data were collected from 79 informants, 39 women and 40 men including 15 married couples. In Albany I had 28 informants, 15 women, 13 men, including 4 married couples.

I had to cope with the problem of obtaining representative data. Random

sampling as Sankoff (1974), and Milroy (1980) point out, exacerbate the basic problem of what Labov so aptly names "the observer's paradox" namely, that the researcher wants to record natural speech yet he is a stranger whose presence let alone the presence of a microphone changes the character of the phenomenon he is observing. As Labov puts it: "We are left with the *Observer's Paradox*: the aim of our sociolinguistic research will be to observe how people talk when they are not being observed. The many partial solutions to this paradox form the heart of sociolinguistic methodology" (1972:10). Sankoff (1974) also point out that, for example, people who are being interviewed seldom use interrogatives, data may be limited not only stylistically but even grammatically.

With the help of a second generation female member of the Albany community (she accompanied me on several occasions during my fieldwork) I was able to follow Milroy's (1980) fieldwork method applied in Belfast. I had the status of a friend of a friend; A combination of an outsider and an insider. In this capacity I was able to record interaction between members of the community at leisure before and after — even during — the interview, thus having access to a wider range of the subjects' linguistic repertoire.

On these occasions I tried to fade into the background. Doing this I tried to combine the individual interview method with the group session method that Gumperz started in his research in Hemnes, Norway (Gumperz and Blom 1972). Groups were recorded in interaction; the interviewer gradually receded from the situation.

The interview consisted of two parts. The first was the question-answer part with questions pertaining to the informant's family history, social network contacts and language use. (Suggestions by Susan Ervin-Tripp and Susan Gal were considered.) The informants were asked to speak both English and Hungarian. The second part of the interview consisted of a pronunciation test partly based on William Nemes's "Experimental Study of Phonological Interference in the English of Hungarians" (1971) measuring the degree of interference in the pronunciation of *voiceless stops* ("p"; "t"; "k";) and *interdental fricatives* (voiced and voiceless "th"). (Suggestions by Robert Austerlitz and Ferenc Kiefer were taken into consideration.)

#### *Fieldwork findings*

##### *Pronunciation*

It is interesting to compare the pronunciation differences between first generation speakers in the rural community of Albany.

There were four first generation informants:

A1 — female — is 94 years old, came to the U.S. at the age of 15.

A2 — female — is 80 years old, came to the U.S. at the age of 19.



A3 — female — is 71 years old, came to the U.S. at the age of 10.

B1 — male — is 83 years old, came to the U.S. at the age of 12.

None of these have ever gone back to Hungary since they left. Subjects A3 and B1 went to school in the United States for two years. B1 attended also a pressman course. A1 and A2 had no education in the U.S.

Speakers A1 and A2 substitute a voiceless stop “t” for a voiceless interdental fricative “th”. B1’s sound is something in between a “th” and a “t”. A3’s “th”s are roughly those of a native American English speaker. (It should be mentioned here that the English speech and the phonetical test were listened to by two native speakers of standard American English.) It is also important to point out that the pronunciation of a voiceless stop “t” in place of a voiceless “th” is common in some native American dialects and social registers. Speakers A1, A2 and B1 pronounce a “d” voiced stop as a substitute for voiced interdental fricative “th”. A3’s voiced “th” is approaching the standard English one. A1 and A2 do not aspirate initial voiceless plosives “p”, “t”, “k”. They say [pɪn] [tɪp] instead of [p<sup>h</sup>m] [t<sup>h</sup>ɪp]. Informants A3 and B1 aspirate them.

A typical example of vowel interference is that informants A1 and A2 do not make any distinction between short and long [ɪ] and [i:] vowels. They pronounce a half long [i] for both of them. The place of articulation is that of a Hungarian short [i] sound. They pronounce the vowels in *pin* and *peak* in the same way. A3 and B1’s short and long [ɪ] [i:] vowels approach those of a native speaker of English.

After comparing the above data I found that the most important factors in acquiring English as a second language are 1. age — at what age the informant left for the United States, and 2. schooling in the United States. Naturally these are closely connected because the younger the person the more schooling he will have in the U.S. Those informants (A3 and B1) who went to America at the age of 10—12 have much better results than those (A1 and A2) who left for America at the age of 15—19. There is not much difference between A1 and A2 or between A3 and B1. It goes to support the widespread view that the turning point is around the age of 13—14, i.e. the age of adolescence. At the same time A3 and B1 also went to school for two years in the United States.

An interesting finding is in connection with progressive and regressive assimilation. Progressive assimilation occurs in English but is not typical in Hungarian. That is why Hungarians often err by having regressive assimilation, especially in the past tense of verbs. Most educated Hungarian speakers — the 56-ers and more recent immigrants in the New Brunswick urban community-pronounce the past tense of the verbs *look* and *talk* as [ludg] and [tɔ:gd] instead of [lukt] and [tɔ:kt]. However, most first generation informants of the first emigration wave have the correct progressive assimilation both in the Albany and the New Brunswick communities. It is understandable since these

people did not study English from books; they just picked it up by listening to native speakers of American English, their pronunciation was not influenced by the written forms *looked*, *talked*.

It should be pointed out here that the main emigration waves from Hungary to the United States of America were as follows: the first and greatest of them was at the turn of the century (1870—1914) when one and a half million immigrants arrived in the United States from Hungary (or rather the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy). In character it was a rural mass emigration for economic reasons. The second wave is the so-called D.P.-s (displaced persons) who left the country after the Second World War for political reasons. At the time about 10—15,000 people arrived in the United States. The third wave took place in 1956—57. These immigrants were mostly — but not only — educated intellectuals. They were the so-called freedom fighters or 56-ers, who left Hungary also for political reasons. 40,000 immigrants arrived in the U.S. at the time.

Members of the rural Albany community are all from the first emigration wave.

In the urban community of New Brunswick we can find all the emigration waves represented plus more recent immigrants, therefore it is a much more complex task for the researcher to analyze characteristics of language shift in the community. This is why in the present paper I mainly concentrate on the Albany findings.

### Vocabulary

In connection with the use of interlingual words in the Albany community, we can say it is similar to the well-known pattern of old timer American Hungarian vocabulary: *káré* (car), *farma* (farm), *hálé* (hall), *muffolni* or *muffunyi* (to move), *lódolni* (to load), *boxi* (box), *kekszi* (cake), etc. The original settlers probably learned these while still working in the east or midwest, before they went down to Louisiana. (There is only one member of the community who came directly from Hungary. Informant A2. She was sent for as a bride.)

There are some special words, however, characteristic of the community. E.g. American people are referred to as *móc*. The word comes from Roumanian meaning Romanians coming from the Transylvanian mountains. (Explanatory Dictionary of the Hungarian Language 1972). It was a pejorative term meaning “hick” or “hillbilly”. Now the word is always used accompanied with a smile, losing its pejorative force. Another example is *berry* meaning strawberry, which was the main crop in Albany. The local inhabitants pronounce the word with a one-flapped “r” and use it also when they speak Hungarian. They do not know the Hungarian word for *strawberry* at all. The word *sandi* means *shed*. It is a salient example of French-Cajun influence in Louisiana. *Sandi* comes from *shanty*, which is a French loanword in American English.



It is also interesting to mention that black people in Albany, and also in other American Hungarian communities, are called *cigányok* (gypsies). The word has special content in the community. The farmers often hired Negro families to work as berry pickers during the strawberry season. They always called them "cigányok" (even when speaking English) relegating them to the lowest social class in Hungarian society.

### *The History of the Albany Community*

The Albany community was founded by three Hungarian immigrants in 1896. The three men met in St. Louis and went to Louisiana. They found a very advantageous situation for newly arrived peasants from Hungary there. We must bear in mind that the vast majority of immigrants in the first and greatest emigration wave were landless agricultural labourers who did not plan to settle in the U.S. They wanted to earn money to purchase farmland back in Hungary. A lot of them did in fact go back to Hungary and some of them went again to the U.S. for a second time.

They worked in factories in Ohio, Illinois and New Jersey, or in the coal mines of West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Some of them, however, sought farmland in scattered parts of the country. The Brackenridge Lumber Company was in need of reliable, steady labourers in the sawmill. (The company was established in the Albany area in 1893.) At the same time, cut-over timberland could be purchased and turned into farmland. This was enough inducement for the three men to settle, and to write to friends and relatives in the U.S. encouraging them to join the community. They also put advertisements in the Hungarian - language newspapers in the East and Midwest. The endeavours of the first settlers were successful and by 1908 approximately 40 families settled in the area. By 1910 this number grew to about 70. In 1916 the sawmill closed and its labourers had to rely on farming as their only source of income. By the late 1920's there were about 175 families in Albany. That was the heyday of the *Árpádhon* community. Most of the immigrants came from the northeastern counties of pre-First World War Hungary. The majority of them had very little education, five or six years in elementary school, or no education at all in Hungary and did not know any English. We can say that the socioeconomic and sociocultural background of the settlers was basically homogeneous.

Many members of the second generation left the community during the depression of the 1930's. They often returned to the industrial centres of the midwest and some of them went back again to Albany after some years. (Two of my male informants in fact did so.) Some of them settled in the big cities of the area, Baton Rouge or New Orleans. Those who remained became farmers or established small businesses (gasoline service stations or grocery stores).

Members of the second generation could, and still can, speak Hungarian fluently. They were raised in a basically isolated community which had almost no contact with the local white population which in fact resented the intrusion of the Hungarians. Up to the 1940's members of the community did not marry outside the community which as a result is characterized by close kinship ties. From my 17 second generation informants only 5 (3 men, 2 women) have American spouses. (Recent or second marriages, with one exception.) Second generation people learned English when they went to school, until that time they spoke only Hungarian. As one of them put it: "When I went to school I didn't know a word of English."

This in fact is typical of second generation bilingual speakers in all immigrant ethnic groups with similar socioeconomic — sociocultural background. It is the third generation that is shifting to the language of the nation of which they form a part (Thompson 1974). This phenomenon is connected with the general pattern of urbanization, the strong move away from farming, too. My findings in Albany and also in New Brunswick seem to support this general tendency.

As to the size of the community at present, census figures of 1980 show that in the Baton Rouge SMSA (Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area), that includes and in fact mainly consists of the Albany community in this respect, there are 593 persons (287 female, 306 male) five years old and over, living in families in which Hungarian is spoken. Of this total 310 speak Hungarian. If we add the 42 people living alone, the number is 352. From these 276 persons are over 18 years of age.

By comparison, the corresponding figures for the New Brunswick, Perth Amboy, Sayreville SMSA are as follows: There are 10,403 persons five years old and over, living in families in which Hungarian is spoken, 7920 persons speak Hungarian (including 1149 people living alone). Of this total 7406 are over 18 years of age.

These census figures show how much bigger the New Brunswick community is, which in fact includes at least three communities or subcommunities as all the main emigration waves are represented and there are also recent immigrants.

### *The History of the New Brunswick Community*

New Brunswick has been referred to as the most Hungarian city in the United States because proportionally it once had more Hungarians than any other American city. In 1915 Hungarians constituted 18.6% of the total New Brunswick population and in 1970 this percentage was still as high as 15.4%. In 1970 the total population of the town was 41,885. Of this total, Hungarian foreign stock was reported as 2,588. Though 2,670 persons reported Hungarian as their mother tongue or language spoken in the home, not counting third



generation Hungarians, with them the number would rise to a total of 6,470 (Molnár 1977).

The first Hungarian family settled in New Brunswick in 1888. Ever since that time there has been a Hungarian migration to New Brunswick. This tendency can still be observed. Naturally, only a few people arrive nowadays (especially young ones) but every year it gives new impetus to language maintenance in the area.

The Johnson and Johnson Company played an important role in attracting Hungarians to New Brunswick. At one time, nearly two-thirds of the J and J employees were Hungarians. Some skilled workers, especially women, found jobs in the cigar factories. The workers formed associations, e.g. the Hungarian American Athletic Club (1913), the Magyar (=Hungarian) Savings Bank, etc. There are still six Hungarian churches in New Brunswick, (in Albany, there are two). Hungarian is taught as a subject in St. Ladislaus Catholic School and in the Sunday School sponsored by the Hungarian Faculty Alumni Association of Rutgers University. The association was formed in 1960 by educated immigrants of the 1956–57 wave.

It should be mentioned here that the only public school in the United States where Hungarian is taught as an elective subject is in Albany, Louisiana. The program started in 1977, teachers from Hungary teach the pupils Hungarian. The main problem with the program is that it came too late. Not all the pupils choosing Hungarian as one of their subjects come from Hungarian families, and even those who do, are fourth or fifth generation Hungarians; they use Hungarian as a language of songs, games but not as a means of communication.

### Conclusions

At this stage of the project I cannot yet present conclusions supported by ample evidence. All the interviews need to be transcribed and carefully analyzed which is a very long process. What I intended to do in this paper was to describe some preliminary findings that seem to support my general impressions, hypotheses about the two bilingual communities concerned.

The old rural Albany community was a stable bilingual community until the 1940's. The process of language shift started in the mid 40's or early 50's with the gradual dying out of the first settlers. Language shift is evidently in full force in the community at present. After the second generation passes away (my 17 second generation informants were between 50 and 80 years of age), the process of linguistic assimilation will probably be even faster. Only one of my third generation informants speaks Hungarian fluently. He is 45 years old and has been in Hungary a couple of times.

If we draw a comparison between the earlier mentioned (see page 1) Fel-

sóór rural community in eastern Austria (Burgenland) with 400 years of stable bilingualism and the Albany community with only about 90 years of Hungarian — (American) English bilingualism, we can see how much quicker the process of language shift starts in an immigrant community embedded in an alien country, the question of distance might be an important factor, even if it was relatively isolated from the native population.

The community in the New Brunswick area is of a very different type. It is not so isolated as Albany down in Louisiana, is located near New York City and it is a typical urban community. New Brunswick is a difficult community for research because it consists of at least three Hungarian communities. The old-timers are similar to those in Louisiana but the communities of the D. P.s, the 56-ers and the recent immigrants are difficult to explore in terms of social stratification and educational background and how these effect the process of language shift. On the whole I would say that, apart from those who consciously try to maintain Hungarian as the language at home sending their children to St. Ladislaus School to learn Hungarian and to the Hungarian Scout Association, or to the Hungarian Sunday School, the second generation of the 56–57 immigration wave and that of the more recent immigrants are shifting to a much larger extent to English than the second generation of the old-timers did. It seems that the process of language shift is speeding up in our age due to the demands of modern life. Contemporary childhood with television is different from that of 40 years ago. Children of our age have a different social background; their motivation is different; they want good positions in the social hierarchy; they want to have, or their parents want them to have, the best possible education. All these factors have an influence on the process of language shift.

Though it should also be mentioned that the contacts with Hungary are getting better and a lot of 56-ers and more recent immigrants go to Hungary every one or two years or send their children to Hungary to learn Hungarian from their grandparents. That is a phenomenon that must not be left out of consideration either. Whether it will have any real effect on the process of language shift still remains to be seen.

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