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### The Dynamics of Identity– a Different Approach

“The best form of objectivity lies in explicitly identifying preferences so that their influence can be recognized and countermanded.”

(Stephen Jay Gould: *The Mismeasure of Man*)

1. For a long time, measurement was considered as an objective scale in scientific (biological, anthropological) research exploring men. Recently, scientific criticism has called the authenticity of former measurements in question. That is, it questions the presupposition, the statistic evaluation and conclusion of the measurements and thus, the above-proclaimed objectivity of the whole procedure. Some similar myth surrounds the sociological, sociolinguistic surveys, and the public-opinion polls and interviews made on the basis of ‘representative samples’. In any case, it is a custom to hold these reliable.

On a Hungarian and Central European scale, most of the research of this nature of the past decade was aimed at the minority communities.<sup>1</sup> I myself took part in the bilingualism research carried out with a similar method, which was conducted in the framework of the program entitled ‘The Hungarian language in the Carpathian Basin’. Although the summary dealing with Transylvania has not appeared yet, naturally both the results of the questionnaire survey and those facts and data we had gathered from reliable and verifiable sources are known to me.

The adoption of the method has not turned us, linguists, into sociologists: I cannot consider myself competent as far as the methodology of the sociological interview and the evaluation related to it are concerned; I do not really have an insight into what those methodological and subjective elements are which could shift the assessment and the conclusions into one or the other kind. As I am not an expert, it would be quite irresponsible from me to say that there is a chance for manipulation in most of these researches and that presuppositions or the expectations of the ‘customers’ can sometimes decisively determine the outcome. However, my worries are of a methodological character only in so far as their consequences. What disturbs me is that the results and conclusions of several investigations of similar method running parallel to each other and dealing with connected or exactly the same phenomena differ from each other or, what is more, contradict each other once in a while. My concern stems from the fact that there is a great deal at stake in this region even if researchers are led by the best intentions.

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<sup>1</sup> On the most recent ones see Gereben, Ferenc, *Identitás, kultúra, kisebbség. Felmérés a közép-európai magyar népesség körében* [Identity, culture, minority. A survey among the Hungarian population in Central Europe]. Osiris–MTA Kisebbségkutató Műhely, Budapest, 1999. p. 20.

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Conditions of Minorities

For obviously not even the best intentions can exempt anybody from the responsibility of the obtainable objectivity. The essential question is: Is it possible to separate theory and ideology? It is most probably inevitable that the conclusions escape ideologies but it would be most unfortunate if the presuppositions, too, were ideological.

As follows, I shall confront in the first place the conclusions of the study of György Csepeli, Antal Örkény, and Mária Székelyi published in the 1999/4 issue of *Minority Studies* (entitled *The Steadiness and Transformation of National – Ethnic Identity*, 499–514)<sup>2</sup> with other research results, facts, and figures.

**2.** The conclusion that the family is a key institution in the preservation or the abandonment of identity is fundamental and relevant in every respect:

‘Obviously, marriage has a key-role in the survival-strategies of the Hungarian ethnic minority. The homogeneity of ethnic-national status inside the family does not favour the identity-shift of the children.’ (503)

The question is, of course, what we compare with what and how we word something. This is not merely a dilemma similar to that of the ‘half-filled and half-empty glass’, for this one involuntarily suggests that the identity change of the children is a *beneficial* phenomenon. It would have been possible to draft the second sentence of the former citation as ‘the homogeneous family serves the preservation of identity’. However, the authors did not opt for this version and this basic position of theirs characterizes the entire study.

A statement preceding this one reflects a similar comparison and approach:

‘We found that the rate of those living in ethnically homogeneous marriages is rather high, both in Transylvania (93%) and in South Slovakia (80%).’ (502).

According to other views, the proportion of heterogeneous families is ‘rather high’ and increasing: according to the data of the 1992 census, 13 percent of the Hungarians living in marriage in a complete family in Romania is living in a heterogeneous family (the authors do not mention this, not even as a parallel); this ratio is 5-6 percent higher in urban areas than in rural surroundings, and it is possibly way above the average at scattered settlements. Given the divergence of the size of the population, this proportion hardly exceeds one percent at the Romanian side. When we come to forming a judgement of this, we cannot disregard the scale of values—reflected in the traditional customs of choosing one’s partner in the various communities—which can be characterized more and more by a local, denominational, and ethnic endogamy.

It is an important observation in connection to this that the mixed marriage of the grandparents and the parents encourages the heterogeneous marriage of the children and grandchildren. It might have been worth referring to the census data, which showed

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<sup>2</sup> The study, as we get to know, is a chapter of the comprehensive volume entitled ‘Bizalomépítés a Kárpát-medence térségében élő nemzetek között [Confidence building among the nations living in the area of the Carpathian Basin]’ written on the basis of researches between 1997–1999. The following participated in the research, which was supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Hungary and the PHARE Program: the ELTE-UNESCO Department of Sociology of Minorities in Budapest, the Márai Sándor Foundation, and the Department of Sociology of the Babeş-Bolyai University.

## 4 MINORITIES RESEARCH

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### Conditions of Minorities

that the children born in mixed marriages identified themselves with the dominant group regarding their ethnicity, language, and denomination alike in a 70:30 ratio roughly. This proportion is still another evidence showing that mixed marriage is a 'good investment' for the majority population<sup>3</sup>: if every member of the minority lived in a heterogeneous marriage, this would affect only an insignificant part of the majority while primarily this population would expand thanks to the nascent children. The way it is currently adding to it in the aforementioned ratio. One might as well demonstrate it numerically how much the 'gain' is on one side and the 'loss' on the other in this respect.

3. The following statement contradicts the conclusions of every other research and the facts of the national figures:

'The status of Hungarians living in Transylvania is higher in average than the status of the Romanians living there. This is true, even if the respondent is coming from an ethnically heterogeneous family. That means that the preservation of the Hungarian identity does not go along with marginalisation. The preservation of Hungarian identity seems remunerative.' (503).

This suggests that marginalisation is only an alleged and unfounded minority grievance which can be comforting for many politicians. Anyway, this is what becomes evident on the basis of the answers of the asked Transylvanians (only the sentence started with 'this is also true' is unnecessary for it is clear that this is true exactly *in that case*).

But on what basis can the social status of someone be determined? The authors specify this: they used 'the index number of social status that was created by an analysis of the main components from school qualification, and from property and income situation' (503) for the measurement of the position occupied in the social hierarchy. It is possible that here, the 'analysis of the main components' is the explanation with which an amateur like me is not familiar, but I would like to pass some remarks in connection to the three evaluated factors. First, no sociological theory and methodology can justify that a research concerning the relationship of the majority and the minority ignores their share in the power, the extent to which they represent the power, and the profession of the persons. Everybody can have a firsthand experience about the fact that e.g. Szeklerland is functioning practically in an internal colonial structure and that tens of thousands of Romanians fulfil important positions of power exclusively as full-time Romanians in Transylvania. The figures of the above-mentioned census relative to the professions are quite expressive in this respect. In comparison to the active population of Hungarian nationality which adds up to 6,68 percent, the proportion of those employed, for example, in scientific research is insignificant (law: 0%, social sciences—including economics and sociology: 1,8%, biological sciences: 2%); policemen, detectives: 1,1%; financial experts, employees of administrative and personnel fields of activity: 2,25%; economists: 2,4%; among the high ranking officials of public administration: 2,7%; those employed in higher education: 3%; practising lawyers: 3,1%. And the other side of the scale is: timber cutt-

<sup>3</sup> Sándor Szilágyi N. drew my attention to this aspect.

## Conditions of Minorities

ing and conservation: 17,2%; leather and skin industry: 14,7%; agriculture: 11,1%; house painters: 10,6%; labourers, craftsmen: 8,7%; unskilled labourers: 7,6%, etc.

There must have been problems also with the 'representative' character of the sampling in Transylvania as the educational level, an important factor with respect to the Hungarians, appears as negative: it is widely known that with regard to higher educational qualifications—again, on the basis of the figures of the census—the Hungarians occupy the 9<sup>th</sup> position among the nationalities in Romania, lagging 2 percent behind the Romanians who represent the national average (the national average is 5,5%, the Hungarian is 3,5%). The 2 percent means a lack of 30–40.000 persons at the most highly qualified level. As far as the secondary school education is concerned, Hungarians were still at the lead in 1992. It was exactly in the years of the cited research, in 1997–1998, that the proportion of the Hungarian children going to secondary school dropped below the national average for the first time (this can be verified on the basis of the annual reports of the given ministry). Moreover, all of these factors are such that the results of an investigation like this can be compared with the available national statistical figures, and it is conspicuous when they are not in conformity with these latter data.

4. Thus, it is rewarding to be a Hungarian in Transylvania but it is even more profitable to become a Romanian, that is:

'However, there is a group of few people with Hungarian origins who declare themselves Romanian and have a rather high status. They are those who were integrated as Romanians into the Romanian society.' (503)

I doubt the general validity of this statement as well (precisely because of my doubts with respect to the sampling). However, it is clear that all this taken together fully agrees with the nation-state ideology according to which minorities 'can only win with the assimilation into the greater nationality'<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, we are at the point with regard to Transylvania that it is rewarding to be a Hungarian but it is more practical to become a Romanian. The analysed study declares this expressly:

'Whether it is Romania, Slovakia or Hungary, the assimilation of the minority national-ethnic groups clearly depends on the social profit assimilation promises. If the change of the national identity is followed by advantageous changes in the social status and by

<sup>4</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas quotes this from Hobsbawm with sharp criticism (Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove, *Nyelv, oktatás és a kisebbségek* [Language, education, and the minorities]. Budapest, 1997. p. 6).

Ferenc Gereben, after having emphasized the interethnic and intercultural openness of the Hungarians of the outer regions, writes the following in contrast to the previous conclusions: 'Moreover, the *forced elements* and *asymmetric* aspects of intercultural openness cannot escape our attention. And neither can the discrimination tendency, which marks the rural society and the strata of lower qualification as the most adequate social medium for the dominant minority mother tongue. Thus, *minority status*—at the examined localities—*degraded the social prestige of the usage of minority language*: with studies only in the mother tongue, one can become no more than a manual worker (or, at most, and office worker); one can become an intellectual (what is more: a skilled labourer!) mostly only in the language of the minority.' (Gereben, *op. cit.* p. 55)

## 4 MINORITIES RESEARCH

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### Conditions of Minorities

the opening of careers of upward mobility, the attraction of minority identity is diminishing and the attraction of the majority is increasing.' (504)

5. However, it poses difficulties just to interpret the following:

'There is linguistic homogenisation hidden in the program of national homogenisation and that is a great challenge for the members of the group that is interested in preserving minority language-usage. *They cannot respond to the challenge unless they learn the official language of the state, which is the language of the majority.* We cannot talk about reciprocity, at least not in Central and Eastern Europe. The language of the minority is not taught in the schools of the majority.' (504; italics by J. Péntek)

I am unable to interpret the statement 'they can meet the challenge only in that case'. Learning the official language is the condition of what? The minorities can become more homogeneous or they can resist becoming homogeneous with it? 'Integration' and, even more than this, assimilation, the change of the language calls for bilingualism indeed, while it is obviously not a condition for the conservation of the mother tongue. That the positive outcome (according to the nation-state concept) is in reality a smooth (or painless) assimilation, is indicated by the next, slightly rebuking statement: 'the linguistic segregation originated in the lack of knowing the language of the majority characterizes mainly the Hungarians of Transylvania (15%).' (506). Segregation, that is, isolation, characterizes naturally not the majority which does not even want to hear about any minority language, but instead the minority in which bilingualism is around 85% (in my opinion, somewhere around 80%). Yet, it would be difficult to tell from whom that Székely countrywoman is segregated who lives all her life in her own village, or that little child who has not reached school age.

The asymmetry of minority bilingualism is evident from this. However, what is less palpable for many and the further research of which cannot be expected from sociological research, is that becoming bilinguals is only the initial phase of a longer process. Due to a few determining factors, it might continue with the second language (the official language) becoming dominant and the first language losing ground. This subtractive bilingualism is the hall to language change. Thus, the previous conclusion could be continued in a similar tone like this: 'in the absence of civic loyalty and diligence, 40% of the Transylvanian Hungarians speaks the mother tongue better and uses it more voluntarily; however, the other 40% has understood the voice of our times and speaks the official language better and uses it more voluntarily. They are ready even to put the mother tongue aside as if it was some unnecessary burden and replace it with the official language.'

6. The conclusion regarding the language of education reflects a similarly absurd approach. In general, we believe that education is natural when conducted in the mother tongue, it creates equal opportunities, and its cognitive role ensures the most effective way for the acquiring of knowledge. We also know that bilingual education does not have efficient models anywhere. The goal of the bilingual public education is the reductionism to one language according to the nation-state ideologies. The role of a sluice is reserved for the bilingual education which helps the minority children reach the official

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Conditions of Minorities

language. Another known fact is that the teaching of the official language is not conducted in a systematic way in any of the succession states. The knowledge of the official language is expected but the language itself is not taught on the basis of any methodology (as a second language, as a foreign language, as the language of the environment) whatsoever. This deficiency is sought to be made up with making the official language obligatory in the teaching of several other subjects in the schools of mother tongue as well (history, geography, PE, foreign languages, etc.)

On the other hand, the following statement can be read in the quoted study:

'... the most important means of preserving, transmitting and maintaining the Hungarian (and the Romanian and the Slovakian) national identity is the language. That explains *the high rates of those in both regions, who send their children to schools where the education is only in the language of the minority*. This tendency appears in the nursery schools and does not end with primary school education. If we observe the period of primary and secondary education in Transylvania or in South Slovakia, we find that 10–15% of the respondents sends their children to schools where the **education is in both languages**, while the vast majority (90 and 85%) prefers **schools where education is exclusively in Hungarian**.' (506; italics and emphasis by J. Péntek)

First of all, the lexical meaning of the applied terms has to be corrected: there is no **school teaching exclusively in the mother tongue**. There is bilingual education—at least in Transylvania—in every so-called Hungarian school and department. And not only to the effect which can be read in the notes of the study, namely that the teaching of the official language is something natural, but—as I have mentioned it before—to the extent that also other subjects are taught in that language in at least 30 percent of the weekly lessons. What the authors call an **educational institution of mixed language** (like this!) with their biased euphemism, is nothing else but an institution teaching exclusively in the official language, a place where not even mother tongue conserving activity is provided for the minority students. The comparison again reflects an 'official' point of view. We usually say, and not only because we ourselves belong to a minority group but because the mother tongue is the starting point also in education, that the ratio of those studying in the official language is 'very high' (and not the number of those is high who study in their mother tongue!). This ranges from the 10% at the nurseries until the 75% at the universities and, at places, the proportion is quite high already in case of the primary school. This is not merely a question of choice as it is inferred by well-intentioned outsiders, but the pressure of the situation (that is, the conditions of education in the mother tongue are not ensured at the scattered settlements).

It is fully evident for the analyst that the scale of values of the researchers is entirely different from the value structure of the examined social medium and that they consider theirs to be authentic and demand an account of it from the examined minority community. According to their opinion, for example, identity is not a value to be conserved, while identity change is a favourable development. What results from this is that the research and the study are biased for the benefit of the majority. However, one has to see that this bias is due to the nation-state concept which can be regarded as almost general in the European and the neighbouring countries; it is the 'one language—one country' concept.

## 4 MINORITIES RESEARCH

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### Conditions of Minorities

It does not correspond to reality either that the relationship of the majority and the minority is a symmetric one as it has been suggested by several afore-mentioned texts and as the following section underlines it: 'In Transylvania the rate of identity-preservers is equally high among the Hungarians and the Romanians and the rates are quite similar in the transitional category.' (508) Neither the proportion is the same and the less the conditions of the preservation of the identity. For the relations of the two groups are characterized exactly by the asymmetry in which there are other ever-present determining factors beyond the demographic disproportions: the many kinds of motives of force, power, and pressure.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> I analyse these factors in more detail in my study entitled *Aszimmetria-tényezők a kollektív két-nyelvűségben* [Asymmetry factors in collective bilingualism] (Terts, István (Ed.), *Nyelv, nyelvész, társadalom. Emlékkönyv Szépe György 65. születésnapjára barátaitól, kollégáitól, tanítványaitól* [Language, linguist, society. Memorial volume on the 65<sup>th</sup> birthday of György Szépe from his friends, colleagues, and students]. JPTE, 1996. I, p. 219–223).