

Kiss, Dénes. *Emberszám*, Fríg Kiadó, 272 pp. 2008.

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Dénes Kiss is a poet and literary translator who has translated works of Russian, German, Estonian, and mainly Finnish authors. In his recent book *Emberszám*, he delves into the realm of linguistics, purporting to illustrate the superiority of Hungarian to other languages. Specifically, he claims that the deep structure of Hungarian vocabulary has an ancient and fundamental connection with logic and mathematics. By logic he means that both the concrete and the abstract Hungarian vocabulary are constructed in a systematic way, with concrete concepts building the basic elements. For example, the title of the book, *Emberszám*, literally 'man-number', is both a concrete and an abstract compound in Hungarian whose abstract meaning is untranslatable. The abstract metaphoric meaning implies that someone can be classified as human in the sense that they get respect and ethical treatment. From one perspective one can consider the book as the Pandora's box of linguistics with a plethora of examples, a book written for a general audience, but yet, unfortunately, the examples are mostly unsubstantiated. Although the book is a formidable exercise of language's historical antecedents, nevertheless the analyses in the book should be considered as hypotheses rather than as scientific facts (see Pullum, 1991 for a readable explanation of how the uncritical acceptance of myths and misinformation can create stable and self-sustaining false theories in linguistics).

Hungarian is an agglutinative language, that is, one that pastes morphemes to words, adds derivational and inflectional morphemes to roots, which then become the ultimate building blocks that can further serve to build longer words. A root, usually comprised of two consonants with a vowel in the middle, is a unit with a semantic meaning, with the consonants encoding the meaning, and the vowel shading the root meaning. To illustrate, the *k/g+r* root (meaning: 'CIRCLE', 'ARC', any round-shaped object or motion), discussed by Kiss, gives rise to 300–400 words, such as *korona* 'CROWN', *kert* 'GARDEN', *kerek* 'ROUND', *kar* 'ARM', *köröm* 'FINGER NAIL', *korsó* 'JUG', *keres* 'SEARCH', or *körte* 'PEAR'. However, the Hungarian etymological dictionary (Zaicz 2006) does not categorize these words under the semantic root proposed by Kiss, but rather it treats some of them either as isolated instances of unknown stem origin or belonging to other stems. For example, according to the etymological dictionary the words *kerek* 'ROUND', *keres* 'SEARCH', and *kert* 'GARDEN' in fact belong to the same stem *kir-* 'TO WALK AROUND AT THE SIDES'.

In connection with derivational and inflectional suffixes Kiss presupposes that these elements were once meaningful words themselves or parts of meaningful words (47). Along these lines, for example, he analyzes the derivational suffix *-ság* (which creates a noun from a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb) as stemming from the word *sok* 'MANY', but again the etymological dictionary does not confirm this hypothesis. Neither does it support the author's analysis of the origin of the plural suffix *-k* as having developed from *sok* 'MANY' (49). Likewise, the author derives the suffix *-hoz*, *-hez*, *-höz* 'TO' from the verb *hoz* 'BRING', and he further postulates that the suffix belongs to the *h+z* root based on its meaning 'BRING' along with other words, such as *haza* 'HOME', *ház* 'HOUSE', or *hozam* 'YIELD', 'PURCHASE', etc., all of which is also in discord with the analysis of the etymological dictionary.

Kiss's method of analyzing words, although it does not follow current standards of academic research, might be seen as an alternative insight into language history and the functioning of our minds in that he suggests that Hungarian vocabulary is constructed from semantic roots, and these word origins are far more pervasive in Hungarian than in other languages. He claims that language, being a window to the mind, can provide access to ancient knowledge and phenomena, demonstrating this, for example, by pointing out that the Hungarian word *lendület* 'IMPETUS', 'MOMENTUM' contains, according to his analysis, the semantic root that encodes the spatial position down (*le* means 'DOWN') (42), which presumably proves that 10,000 years ago, before the advent of engines, people conceptualized impetus as something triggered by falling or sliding down a slope.

Kiss's non-mainstream analysis, written in an accessible non-scientific language, seemingly sheds new light on the intra- and interrelations of Hungarian vocabulary. Linguists who are aware of this type of popularizing etymology would dismiss the contents and analyses, considering it to be a layman's philosophizing about language. The main thesis of the book is that Hungarian is unique in the way that it is predominantly an imagery-based language, with semantic primitives forming the basic building blocks of concrete and abstract Hungarian vocabulary. This claim, however, would seem overstated to anyone with a deeper knowledge of linguistics. In Latin, for example, the verb *pensare* 'TO WEIGHT' gave origin in a metaphoric sense to *pensare* 'TO THINK', that is to weight in one's mind, to which compare also the English 'TO WEIGHT OVER [AN IDEA]'.

Illustrative of the type of etymological relationships that Kiss develops for many Hungarian word families, the foreword articulates this intention (Hungarian *szándék*) of the author (Hungarian *szerző*), eloquently presenting the main idea of the book. Kiss creates a mental bridge between the concepts 'AUTHOR' (*szerző*) and 'ACQUIRE' (*szerez*), so that according to his etymological paraphrase an author acquires new knowledge. Interestingly, Kiss claims that the same root is found in the word 'LOVE' (Hungarian *szeretet*), which he interprets as being based on the semantics of the root as the desire of acquisition. Kiss goes on to claim that the *sz+n* root in *szándék* 'INTENTION' is equivalent to *szám* 'NUMBER'. This proposed etymological relationship allows Kiss to interpret *szándék* as the use of numbers (counting) when considering opportunities, similarly to the idea of a metaphoric mapping in which people project and combine their intention (*szándék*) with their observed reality. In the case of this example the Hungarian etymological dictionary also confirms the *szán=szám* correspondence that is proposed by Kiss.

Kiss's book provides a myriad of speculative examples. He hypothesizes that the word *vér* 'BLOOD' is related to *ver* 'BEAT' on the grounds that the heart beats, and therefore, enabling blood circulation (164), where once again, neither relationship is confirmed by the Hungarian etymological dictionary. He provides analyses that are clearly in discord with the etymological dictionary; for example, he dissects *beszél* 'SPEAK' as *be-* 'IN' + *szél* 'WIND' (116), which allows him to interpret speaking as wind (air) entering the mouth. This analysis ignores the standard etymology of *beszél* 'SPEAK', according to which *beszél* is derived from *beszéd* 'SPEECH' with the derivational suffix *-l*, which (*beszéd*) developed from the Old Slavic compound **bez* 'OUT' + **sěda* 'SIT, PLACE' whose proper sense is 'a speech in public' and can be matched, in Old Indian, by the adjective *bahih-sad* (Loma 2008). Another disputable root proposed by Kiss is *t+k/g*, as in *veríték* 'PERSPIRATION', *halánték* 'TEMPLE', 'TEMPORAL', *tajték* 'FOAM', 'FROTH', *tekő* 'SHELL', *tok* 'CASE', 'SHEATH', *tök* 'MARROW', *tik* 'HEN', *toka* 'DOUBLE CHIN', *tekla* 'PEARL',

tégely ‘JAR’, for all of which one may easily deduce that the hypothetical common meaning proposed is the hemispheric shape. However, in this case once again in discord with Kiss’s analysis of the *t+k/g* root, the Hungarian etymological dictionary reports that the last example (*tégely*) is a German loan word (German *Tiegel*) which entered the Hungarian language between 1530 and 1586, and the German word itself is an adoption of the Italian word *teglia* ‘SAUCEPAN’, running counter to the author’s conception of the *t+k/g* root as an ancient Hungarian root. Similarly, the etymological dictionary cannot confirm Kiss’s proposed etymology of the word *tajték* ‘FOAM’, ‘FROTH’, nor can it validate the semantics of the root *t+k/g* proposed by Kiss in the word *toka* ‘DOUBLE CHIN’, which is a borrowing from the Slavic stem *tuk* ‘FAT’. Kiss’s dissection of *halánték* ‘TEMPLE’, ‘TEMPORAL’ is also discrepant with the analysis of the word in the etymological dictionary because the latter analyzes the *-ték* element as a combination of two derivational suffixes (*-n*, *-t/-d* and *-ék*) instead of one semantic root. What is more, the original meaning of *halánték* might have been ‘MORTAL’, ‘FRAGILE’, ‘PERISHABLE’ [THING], hence the present-day meaning of the word ‘TEMPLE’, ‘TEMPORAL’ (etymological dictionary).

Kiss’s methodology raises serious doubts about the etymological reality of roots, as he does not take into account questions such as borrowing, or where the line between coincidences and meaningful correspondences should be drawn (e.g., *szám* and *szem*, ‘NUMBER’ and ‘EYE’, respectively, according to Kiss’s hypothesis), or, how can we be positive if two words are semantically related? For example, Kiss’s assumption that the Japanese word *samurai* is related to the Hungarian root *sz+m* ‘NUMEROUS’ seems unwarranted (34), as well as the assumption that the *s+m* consonant combination in the Hungarian word *sámán* ‘SHAMAN’ has analogical meaning (58, 77). The *sz+m* root made me think about further potential members of this proposed word family, and I did a research on the name *Samuel*, which came to my mind first, in the hope of unraveling the meaning but was disappointed to find that not all that glitters is gold because Hebrew *shem* ‘NAME’ and *shama* ‘HEAR’, ‘LISTEN’, ‘OBEY’ do not point to the meaning of the Hungarian root *sz+m*. I also considered another possible candidate, *Samos* (Old Greek ‘A HEIGHT’), to see whether it would fit the word family, but I arrived at the same conclusion. What it all amounts to is that we should make a clear distinction between coincidences and correspondences. Another Hungarian-Japanese hypothetical correspondence put forth by Kiss is mentioned about the common meaning of the [o] phoneme (253) on the grounds that the phoneme means ‘OLD’ in both languages. Even more farfetched is the “discovery” that given that the common pronunciation of the Hungarian copula (*van*) and the English word *one*, the two words are related (35).

In spite of the too many speculative examples proposed by Kiss, the approach of the book can be well accommodated with cognitive linguistic methods, pursued, for example, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999), who propose that our conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Kiss’s book raises an interesting cognitive linguistic question of whether the semantics of ancient roots are deeply seated in our thinking or whether they are “frozen”, as shown, for example, by the idiom *kick the bucket* ‘TO DIE’, which does not activate the concepts ‘KICK’ or ‘BUCKET’ (unless one changes it syntactically, such as ‘the bucket was kicked by him,’ but then it would no longer carry the metaphorical meaning). Further, it would also be interesting to ponder about the potential phonological motivation of roots proposed by Kiss. Recently, for example, Monaghan and colleagues (2011) have showed that some systematic sound-to-meaning correspondences exist, which runs counter to the traditional tenet of Saussure’s linguistic theory that there is an

almost completely arbitrary relationship between phonological form and meaning. For example, in the study by Monaghan and colleagues, evidence showed that toddlers consistently matched rounded vowels, such as “koko”, to rounded shapes, and non-rounded vowels, such as “kiki”, to jagged shapes.

There is an interesting cognitive metaphoric relationship detailed in the book between mood and sounds (115). The author enlists a bunch of words that contain the consonants *ng* that sound-related words (e.g., *hang* ‘SOUND’, *zongora* ‘PIANO’) also contain. Interestingly, these concrete or abstract words (e.g., *korong* ‘DISC’, *kereng* ‘CLOISTER’, *barangol* ‘ROAM’, *dereng* ‘DAWN’, *dorong* ‘DONG’, *dülöngél* ‘LURCH’, *szorong* ‘DISTRESS’, *mereng* ‘MULLING OVER SOMETHING’) do not refer to any sound events. Kiss argues that the *ng* builds the metaphoric bridge between moods and sounds because this *ng*-element evokes an affective content.

All in all, *Emberszám* is highly controversial from a linguistic point of view because of its shortcoming of proof-validity, but at the same time it gives impetus with its approach to a new strand of thinking in language history and etymology. The theory still needs serious and methodologically sound research because reconstructed original stems should be considered instead of present-day Hungarian examples. Also, an extensive bibliography with reference to linguistic research should have been provided and referred to, even if to argue with the findings of linguistics. It seems that the author ignores much of linguistic research on the subject, such as the works, e.g., by Bereczki, 1995, or Rédei, 1998. The non-mainstream and highly debated Etrusco-Hungarian theory according to which Hungarian is the archaic form of Etruscan is also advocated by the author. This theory is supported in some circles especially in Hungary, because such a theory tries to prove some ancient glory for the Hungarian nation. The author’s research also touches upon political issues in a more direct way, by including a diary at the end of the book whose contents are unrelated to a linguistic proposal but instead deal with Hungarian political events in 2006 and 2007. While the inclusion of these diary excerpts makes the author’s political agenda clear, it is scientifically irrelevant for a book that purports to discuss etymology.

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