

## On the Linguistical Characteristics of the American Hungarian. (An Outline)

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The establishment of the first sizable Hungarian settlements in the United States of America, beginning with the 1870's, has coincided with the issuance of the first set of standard handbooks on the history, grammar, lexical elements, dialects, etc. of the Hungarian language. In this period, attention of the scientific community was focused upon linguistic problems as they appeared in a historical setting. Being of short duration, Hungarian immigration to the United States has been regarded for decades as temporary and beyond any sort of research value. Accordingly, not much significance, if any, was attributed to the appearance of the first symptoms of an English (American) – Hungarian bi-lingualism. While during the life span of three generations the speech habits of American Hungarians have gained a fairly constant and firm character, and the number of Hungarian speaking persons on the North-American continent was climbing close to 800,000 (totaling more than 700,000 in the United States and about 80,000 in Canada at the time of this writing), linguistic research in Hungary has completely overlooked this new area of research objectives and all attempts outside Hungary trying to initiate a positive approach to them<sup>1</sup>.

Mostly in the course of the past seven years, this writer was

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<sup>1</sup> The Eastern American Dialect of Hungarian; An Analytical Study, by *Pierre Ervin Szamek*, a 145-page (typed) dissertation presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Princeton University in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1947, went unnoticed by Hungarian linguists. In this connection, it has to be stated that the method applied by Mr. *Szamek* does not appear to this writer as correct or purposeful. Since his findings were based upon materials derived from a very small group of speakers of a couple of communities in New Jersey, such a material does not permit the drawing of conclusions regarding analysis and definition of American Hungarian dialect speech phenomena.

conducting tape-recordings of Hungarian dialect materials in the Northeastern United States. His trips covered the area between Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the West, and Boston, Massachusetts, and the City of Washington in the East. A total of about two hundred selected speakers were interviewed, the 150 hours of their recorded dialogs and narratives representing about 3,000 pages of dialect texts when fully transcribed<sup>2</sup>.

The present occasion does not permit the inclusion of detailed sample material. However, based upon the above mentioned collection of American Hungarian dialect texts (a considerable part of which is already transcribed and indexed), and of other observations and studies closely connected with it, the following characteristics became apparent to this writer:

1. As a general rule, the overwhelming majority of the oldest generation of American Hungarians speak one of the dialects instead of the literary (or educated middle-class) form of the Hungarian language. Consequently, any type of phonetical research directed at American Hungarians has to set out under the guidance of methods and principles genuine to dialectology.

2. Hungarian immigrants to the United States came from all regions of Hungary's pre-World War I territory, representing, practically speaking, all main dialects and many of the sub-dialects of the Hungarian language.

3. Accordingly, all Hungarian dialect units were and are exposed to the North-American variants of the English language, and to various American versions of other, non-English languages. Such a multi-lingual environment creates an abundance of interlingual phonetical, lexical, structural, etc. interferences.

4. Consequently, studies of the American Hungarian dialects offer a full set of subjects and objectives for the researcher, comparable only to those known to and pursued by phoneticians and dialectologists active in Hungary itself. More than that, interlingual borrowing of phonetical, lexical and structural elements between Finnish and Hungarian as it is practiced in communities of mixed

<sup>2</sup> See: Bako, Elemer: Goals and methods of Hungarian dialectology in America. *Az amerikai magyar népryelvutatós célja és módszere*. Published for the American Hungarian Institute by the American Hungarian Studies Foundation at Rutgers, The State University, New Brunswick, N. J. (USA), 1962, 24 p. (American Hungarian Dialect Notes, 1), and, by the same writer, a conclusive report on tape-recording trips made in 1962 and 1963 under a grant received from the American Philosophical Society which was published in the Society's *Yearbook 1963*, Philadelphia, Penn., 1964, pp. 494-497.

Finnish-Hungarian majority in Ashtabula County, in the State of Ohio, or similar contacts of Hungarian dialect speakers with persons speaking Italian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish, Flemish, Greek, Welsh, and other languages in the giant cities or areas of varied ethnic character all over the United States and Canada, resulted in a wealth of unique cases for phonetical analysis and comparative phonology.

5. Since the presently living oldest group among Hungarian dialect speakers in America has left the European homeland some 50-70 years ago, their dialect forms may be more archaic than those of the people residing in their land of origin. Consequently, the possibility that American Hungarian dialect forms may be regarded as possible links in a chain of transition of Hungarian dialect phenomena, cannot be excluded.

6. It is recognized that the majority of Hungarian dialect speakers was never exposed to the influence of recently developed vocabulary and phraseology in Hungary. Thus, the American Hungarian dialects have retained numerous elements of their original vocabularies (with phonetical characteristics attached to them) which may not be anymore among the actively functioning speech elements of their mother dialects.

7. Most dialect speakers interviewed by this writer have exhibited a sort of "dual personality": in their Hungarian conversation, they usually appear as bearers of the traditional speech habits of the rural Hungarian types, whereas, in forms of conversational self-expression as well as in the light of subjects selected for conversation in English, the same persons often appear as urban citizens of a highly industrialized society. This shift is accompanied by changes reflecting a motivation of social attitudes, characteristic features which distinguish the peasant from other socio-economic types slightly below the middle-class level. Such shifts usually affect speech production, both when speaking in Hungarian or in English.

8. A number of the persons interviewed use English as a second home language, especially in the presence of their children, grandchildren or their American friends or spouses. Most members of the second generation speak Hungarian in a form which unveils many compromise solutions or borrowings between Hungarian and English. Third generation speakers if they had enough opportunity to live with their grandparents during their early childhood and their teens, have often developed amazing consistency in their

Hungarian speaking abilities and habits, often surpassing those of their own parents.

9. As a general rule, there is a numerical and functional predominance of the so-called Northeastern Hungarian dialect among dialect speakers in the Northeastern part of the United States; this fact being attributable to the circumstance that persons from the Northeastern regions of pre-World War I Hungary were in majority among the immigrants in those times.

10. Another contributing factor to the emergence of the Northeastern dialect as a dominant idiom and formative element in the development processes of the American versions of Hungarian dialects was the presence and activity of a considerable number of Hungarian Reformed (Calvinist) ministers who came mostly from the same Northeastern parts of Hungary.

Since the Hungarian literary style and orthography were developed largely on the same historical-geographical basis (beginning with the first complete Bible translation by *Gáspár Károli* in 1590 and including most of the influential poets and writers of the 19th and 20th centuries such as *Ferenc Kazinczy*, *Ferenc Kölcsey*, *János Arany*, *Endre Ady*, *Zsigmond Móricz*, and others), the weight of the printed material used by American Hungarian readers was constantly reaffirming the trend toward the acceptance of the Northeastern dialect as the structural pattern for generally recognizable new forms of the American Hungarian speech.