

**Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities**

DOCTORAL THESES

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**THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THE PREFERENCE FOR THE
LANGUAGE OF EDUCATION AMONG HUNGARIAN PARENTS IN
SUB-CARPATHIA BETWEEN 2008–2014**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Transcarpathian part of the Hungarian nation is a minority community, in their case “the preservation of language likely equals with national persistency with schools being the most important area of preserving language aside from families” (BEREGSZÁSZI 2002: 7). Therefore, the existence and functioning of a Hungarian school network in Transcarpathia is one of the prerequisites of the Hungarians existing and functioning as a community and having a future in the area with the Hungarian having a prestige among its speakers. The long-term maintenance of the Hungarian school network in Transcarpathia depends on Ukrainian Government’s decisions in education policy and on the Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia: in the latter case, on their decision regarding the preference of the language of education at the school of their child(ren)

I have been examining the theme of the preferences regarding the language of education, the putative or real ideologies behind parents’ decisions and have been analyzing the efforts of the Ukrainian Government in education policy, more specifically its efforts in language policy, since 2008. I have graduated in History and Hungarian Language at the Ferenc Rákóczi II. Transcarpathian Hungarian Institute where my professors encouraged students – including myself – to carry out researches primarily dealing with contemporary, socially important – often sensitive – topics related to the local Hungarian community, therefore our results can be applicable from the view of future of the Hungarian community living in minority in Transcarpathia. The compulsory matriculation in Ukrainian language and literature introduced by the Ukrainian Government had such an increased social topicality in 2008. The successful completion of this exam (performed in Ukraine similarly to the increased level of matriculation in Hungary) became the mandatory prerequisite for entering third level education in Ukraine. This decision made it more difficult for graduates of Hungarian schools in Transcarpathia to enter third level education (for details see CSERNICSKÓ 2008a., 2009a., 2009b.) leading to a change in decisions regarding the language of education among Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia.

2. TOPIC AND PURPOSE OF WORK

Accordingly, the topic of this dissertation is the examination of the motivations for school selection among Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia in the period of 2008-2014 as well as the processing and interpretation of the data and results of case studies made within the community. I have made seven case studies during the period of examination within the community of Hungarians in Transcarpathia and one case study in Zoboarlja in Slovakia (with the aim of outlook and possible comparisons).

The starting hypotheses of the research examining the motivations behind the preference for the language of education among Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia are:

- the existence of a school network operating in the mother language has an important role regarding the maintenance and the future of the Hungarian community living as a minority in Transcarpathia, while the maintenance and level of operability of this network is in relation with the decisions in the language of education among Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia;
- for many parents it is difficult to decide that which language of education should be chosen for their children and considering which aims regarding this decision, however, it is presumed that their decisions are in relation with the role they intend for their child(ren) to have in the future (third level education, profession, etc.);

- when selecting schools from the perspective of the language of education, the parents are influenced and motivated by the following factors: local factors, social factors (mixed marriage, religion, financial situation), stereotypes related to social mobility (further education and placement after education will be easier if the child speaks the official language of the state), the need for acquiring the language, personal positive or negative examples and the level of quality in education;
- the Ukrainian education policy and support policy of the motherland impacts the Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia when choosing the language of education. This impact can be both positive (the strengthening of efforts aimed at preserving identity, hence the selection of a school with Hungarian as the language of education) and negative (the acceleration of assimilation, the selection of a school with Ukrainian as the language of education).

In accordance, the purpose of the dissertation is threefold:

1. Grasping and describing the motivations behind the decision of Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia regarding the language of education, recognizing and describing the general “trends” (in a concrete time period ranging from the introduction of compulsory matriculation in Ukrainian until today, 2008-2014);
2. Proofing that the selection of the language of education is a complex and multidimensional issue with the motivations being formed by many factors, and therefore, could not be examined with a single method (be it singly a method of questionnaire or interview);
3. Displaying that the issue of selecting the language of education is not a static but a dynamic problem constantly changing in accordance with contemporary social, cultural and political situation and dimension. My results and case studies with their various methods serve the purpose of grasping the dynamism and current change of these factors that affect parents.

The ultimate purpose of the dissertation is to contribute to the establishment of a list of recommendations – through revealing and summarizing the topic and based on the description of the trends and of this multi-factor social problem – that could help:

- a) the Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia to become more aware when making decisions regarding their children’s future that is to know the consequences of the selection of the language of education;
- b) the people involved in decision-preparation and decision-making (politicians, linguists, parents, teachers, public opinion) to see it clearly that the selection of the language of education is not a simple selection between A or B but one that has more complex social factors in its background;
- c) in creating a concept – based on the research data – which could help more and more parents to choose schools with Hungarian as the language of education.

Thereby, having the competitiveness and prestige of Hungarian schools increase in Transcarpathia, contributing to the maintenance of the Hungarian school network in the region and indirectly to the preservation of the community’s language.

Due to the complexity and sensitivity of the topic, I examine a period of seven years based on data acquired through various methods and from various locations. Through the case studies I would like to reveal that the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia is not homogenous and that a general profile of “Hungarian parent in Transcarpathia” as such does not exist. Although valid social tendencies can be displayed, individual decisions may include personal factors and aptitudes. Such diversity can only be revealed and displayed through case studies.

My research results fit together with the long-term language planning concept of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia, supplementing and (possibly) advancing its realization.

3. ISSUES OF METHODOLOGY: DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH ON WHICH THE DISSERTATION IS BASED

The topic of my work is the examination of the motivation of Hungarian parents' decision regarding the language of education in Transcarpathia in the period of 2008-2014 based on the data acquired through the research within the community and on the processing and interpretation of results. During the mentioned time period six case studies have been made within the Hungarian community living in Transcarpathia.

The case studies deliberately include various subjects questioned and various research methods applied. I primarily made structured interviews with the parents of children entering school in different years, looking for their motivations for selecting the language of education (both with parents who have chosen a school with Hungarian and who have chosen a school with Ukrainian as the language of education) and – with the intention of providing a wider reflection on the topic – with school teachers (both in Hungarian and Ukrainian classes) and had discussions with experts of education policy. It is my opinion that despite the narrow time-limit of the period examined, the case studies succeeded in outlining certain tendencies and motivations which affected the parents' decision in selecting the language of education (possibly with more emphasis in one year and with less in the following year).

Due to the political instability of Ukraine and to the lack of available data, the theme of selecting the language of education in schools is presented through various case studies. The selection of methodology was determined by my intention of recognizing and displaying a phenomenon and event over which I have little control (GOLNHOFER 2001: 18) yet having a case study focusing on a natural environment which could lead to acquiring a thorough and complex picture of the phenomenon examined. Although in this regard BABBIE (1996) notes that one of the weak points of this method is that it could not be expected to provide generalizing description of large populations (BABBIE 1996: 331), however, in my opinion, it can successfully outline some characteristic traits. A case study is mainly applied in qualitative researches as a deeper and longer study of a problem (case). Researchers study the examined object as a unit, collect information with diverse research methods, thereby ending up with a thorough and complex picture of the object examined (vö. MAJZIKNÉ 1991: 124).

I primarily made semi-structured interviews with the parents of children entering school in different years, looking for their motivations for selecting the language of education (both with parents who have chosen a school and who have chosen a school with Ukrainian as the language of education). The semi-structured interviews were based on previously defined questions. While I did set the main direction of conversation during these interviews, I also paid attention to the subject (person) of the interview and tried to follow the topic raised by him/her (BABBIE 1996: 313–317). I also had discussions with school teachers (both in Hungarian and Ukrainian classes) and experts of education policy, thereby intending to provide a wider reflection on the issue. In some school years, the in-depth interviews were followed and supplemented by questionnaires. In each case, the methodology was also determined (allowed, constrained) by the factor of the rapidly changing social and political situation in the country within a given school year revealing some allowance and/or constraint. The categories of the interviews were created in a way to reveal what factors influenced the parents when they decided to have their children go to a school with Ukrainian or Hungarian language of education and whether they were aware what impact these decisions have on the children's future and social mobility.

My other qualitative methodology belong to a popular group of interview types, namely the group interview applying social science, more specifically the most often applied sub-type, the focus group (vö. BALÁZS–MARIÁN–OBLATH–SÍKLAKI 2002, VICSEK 2006).

In both types when selecting the providers of data – and as seen later throughout the analysis – I did not intended to meet the criteria of each and every factor (i.e. not intended presentativeness) but strived with each case study to comply a cohesive text-body of the quotes from the interview subjects, through the analysis of which a picture can be extracted of the object of research.

The advantage of the qualitative method – in contrast to the quantitative one – is that through the reflection on the deepness of the interviews a more detailed and complex knowledge can be acquired (vö. FERENC 2012: 82). Collecting data via interviews is a widely prevailing method in anthropology and sociology (KVALE 2005, PAPP.Z. 2008) and can be applied well in areas of linguistics where the researcher is examining stereotypes and attitudes.

In addition to qualitative interviews, my research also included questionnaires having sent altogether 140 questionnaires to parents living in Beregszász and Munkács. Parents of children attending schools with Ukrainian and Hungarian as language of education have filled these questionnaires in these towns. When filling and determining the pattern of these interviews, I encountered several problems. Since the last census in Ukraine was held in 2001 – in contrast with several other countries having Hungarian minorities such as Slovakia and Romania – there is no data on how many Hungarian children study in schools with Ukrainian as the language of education within Ukraine. Therefore, I could not rely on representativeness when selecting the pattern. In the case of schools with Hungarian as the language of education, we strived to acquire a full pattern, however, in the case of the “Gipsy shoools” which are filed under the schools with Hungarian as the language of education this was not achieved. Based on the notes also available in the minutes of field-study, in the case of Gipsy children, many parents were illiterate and therefore did not fill the questionnaire. Regarding the the schools with Ukrainian as the language of education, in the case of Beregszász and Munkács, it was the head teacher of the class whose opinion served as a basis in determining which are the students who speak Hungarian and whether one of the parents possibly speaks Hungarian. In these cases, the questionnaires were available for the parnts in both Hungarian and Ukrainian (offering the free option between these languages in all cases). The other major problem was the situation of the country’s domestic politics and the sensitivity of the minority issue. The distribution of the questionnaires was not allowed in several institutions, with the questions being regarded as provocative in several cases and urging for emendation and specification in the Ukrainian questionnaire in two cases (e.g. inaccurate translation into Ukrainian, the sensitive formulation of the nationality issue).

The filling of the questionnaires was realized in the spring of 2014 (from March to May). A questionnaire aimed at mapping the motivations for selecting the language of education was filled by 140 providers of data (adult parents).

The questionnaire contained closed and open questions focusing on the use of language, the preference regarding the language of education, the identity and the issues of support in education and upbringing. The basis for selecting the providers of data was my intention to ask those parents about the motivations for selecting language of education, who have selected a school with Hungarian or Ukrainian as the language of education. Accordingly, I have made interviews with parents of children who studied in their sixth grade in the school xear of 2014-15 in Beregszász and Munkács. The aim within each class of a given school was the achievement of the full pattern. In the case of schools with Hungarian as the language of education this was successfully achieve. However, in the case of schools with Ukrainian as the language of education, firstly, in many cases it was only the teachers of the

given class who was available for helping us to determine how many parents are in that class. Secondly – in the case of Munkács – the parents received the mentioned questions in both Hungarian and Ukrainian and it was through this that we managed to receive information on the given parent's use of language and on his/her family background. The filling of the questionnaire was further hindered by tension related to the pressure in domestic politics, as many times – due to the repeated politicization of the minority issue and the war situation – the Hungarian questionnaire was perceived as provocation and in many cases was prohibited to be filled. During the filling of the questionnaire, the minutes of the field studies have been taken. The filling of the questionnaires was assisted by the interns of the Antal Hodinka Institute for which we would hereby like to express our thanks. All interviewers approached the schools and parents after receiving appropriate preparation.

4. RESULTS

My work examines the motivation for selecting the language of education among Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia in the period of 2008-2014. The issue dealt with is highly topical for the local Hungarian minority community (within the mentioned period and today as well). During my research I was looking for the answer of the question: on what do the Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia base their decision of selecting a school with Hungarian or with the majority language as the language of education for their children?

I first intended to set the issue of selecting the language of education in the appropriate theoretical framework, analyzing the issue as a question of language policy, of language planning and of education organization. The theoretical part was intended to prove that issue of education in Hungarian as the minority language as well as the motivations of Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia to select the language of education can only be understood in a wider scope. The issue is complex in terms of ideology and politics, and is not a neutral issue in terms of economy either. The participants, influential actors and implementers include the politicum of the land of the majority (Ukraine), the motherland, the local Transcarpathian political elite and profession and lastly the international organizations as well.

I have established that *language policy*, and in many cases the *language ideology* and *language planning* decisions behind it, has an important role in a linguistically heterogeneous community, especially when a given language issue is approached from differing sides.

My work includes the presentation of international agreements, regulations and laws accepted by the Ukrainian state. In this section, I particularly focused on the language aspects. The issue of language the use thereof has been politicized in Ukraine since the country's independence and therefore the duel of the Ukrainian and the Russian language has been a favourable topic of domestic politics. This does not help in settling the issue of minority language.

The work overviews the language and nationality characteristics of Ukraine, including the language policy efforts. After examining the various eras of Ukraine's education policy I have established that during the first period of the country's independence the minorities received positive terms regarding the use of language, aligning to the requirements of international organizations. Subsequently, the rights regarding the use of (mother) language were decreasing in the country. The 2012 language act represented a step forward within the legal declaration on the minorities' use of language, however, the sanctions regarding the actual non-adherence to the act have not been put into place even to this day. The role of minority languages were raised as a central issue during the developments at Kiev's Maidan and the war situation that has been present for a year. Nevertheless, the political debates regarding the status of languages have much deeper roots with social, economic and political forces in their background. Still, it raises the questions of how these developments will

influence/formulate the future demography of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathis, how they will affect the school network with the mother language and the parents' motivations regarding the selection of the language of education.

The second major structural unit of my work is based on the presentation of my empirical researches and research results. After summarizing the research results and based on the analysis of the semi-structural interviews, we have established that the selection of schools has symbolic and real reasons in the background.

According to the interviews, the symbolic motivations of the selection of schools are: acquiring the state language, achieving oneself easier by knowing the specific language, emergence, the importance of achieving oneself with the mother language, the importance of Hungarian identity, disguised compensation on behalf of the parent and disguised compulsion to conform.

According to the interviews, the **real arguments** for the selection of schools are: the school's location, the quality of education, following the pattern of family and friends, decisions based on the teachers as persons, the school's level of equipment and opportunities. Practical aspects play an extremely important role in selecting the school. The type of residence, its accessibility (is it easy to get to the school), the school's level of equipment (how up-to-date, does it have heating and does it offer leisure activities) are also important (especially in schools within towns). In addition to the practical aspects, the quality of education is also emphasized showing relation partly with the preparedness of teachers and partly with the presence of Gipsy/Roma students in Hungarian schools.

The final outcome of the parents' decision includes both arguments. According to the analysis based on the questionnaires we also established that apart from the mentioned motives the quality of education and the issue of acquiring state language occurred in most cases as the chief determining argument behind the parents' decisions.

During the verification of the hypothesis I established that

- the existence of a school network operating in the mother language has an important role regarding the maintenance and the future of the Hungarian community living as a minority in Transcarpathia, while the maintenance and level of operability of this network is in relation with the decisions in the language of education among Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia;
- when selecting schools from the perspective of the language of education, the parents are influenced and motivated by the following factors: local factors, social factors (mixed marriage, religion, financial situation), stereotypes related to social mobility (further education and placement after education will be easier if the child speaks the official language of the state), the need for acquiring the language, personal positive or negative examples and the level of quality in education;
- the Ukrainian education policy and support policy of the motherland impacts the Hungarian parents in Transcarpathia when choosing the language of education. This impact can be both positive (the strengthening of efforts aimed at preserving identity, hence the selection of a school with Hungarian as the language of education) and negative (the acceleration of assimilation, the selection of a school with Ukrainian as the language of education).

One of the most important reasons and possible social increments of the dissertation is that it sets forth proposes for people involved in decision-preparation and decision-making (politicians, linguists, parents, teachers, public opinion) based on the research results and the summary of the theme of selecting the language of education.

What should the Transcarpathian parents consider before selecting the language of education for their child?

1. The selection of the language of education is primarily important due to its effect in forming identity. When selecting school, the parents also select the language of education for their child which which they considerably influence the formation of their child's same identity.
2. The language of education could affect the students' professional knowledge and the in-depth/superficial acquirement thereof (superficial/communicative competence).
3. Parents should consider whether they regard the acquirement of state language as a goal or a means in their child's life.
4. The researches show that if the parents (reconsidering their earlier decision) later decide to alter the language of education for their child, this could have a negative effect in the child's school advancement.
5. The in-depth acquirement of certain knowledges can only be achieved in the mother language (cognitive knowledge).
6. The language of education could also affect the knowledge acquired and the placement on the labour market.

Why should the child attend a school with Hungarian as the language of education? (a few thoughts for the parents)

1. Learning in the mother language results in deeper and profound knowledge.
2. Schools with Hungarian as the language of education have an important role in forming and preserving Hungarian identity, as they transfer the segments of Hungarian culture to their students.
3. Students who acquired Hungarian language – in many cases professional terminologies – can be useful to those companies from Hungary and other EU countries that intend to establish locations in Ukraine or Transcarpathia.
4. Education institutions with Hungarian as the language of education can offer several programmes – not receiving state support – to the students (field trips, trainings, contests).
5. According to the Hungarian Parliament's act on allowances, students attending education institutions with Hungarian as the language of education can receive support in the area of education and up-bringing.

Proposals for people involved in local or Hungarian political and education decision-making (based on my research experiences)

1. In order to counterbalance the decisions stemming from the negative situation in education policy and rights, the Hungarian Government should encourage the strengthening of education in the Hungarian language and the prestige of the Hungarian language (development of institutions, existence of Hungarian school, the availability of options in the given settlement; policy on support).
2. The more self-aware and goal-oriented utilization of support in the area of education and up-bringing so that it could truly serve the strengthening of education in the Hungarian language (representative analysis regarding the rate of utilization of the support).
3. The strengthening, development and modernization of education institutions with Hungarian as the language of education (establishment and support of new functions apart from the already existing ones).

4. The development of state language in the direction of effectiveness within the Hungarian schools in Transcarpathia.
5. The establishment of school programmes and methodologies aimed at Gipsy/Roma students.
6. The increase of the quality of education in the schools with Hungarian as the language of education, since this increases the chance of the parents sending their child to a school with Hungarian as the language of education.
7. Creation of complex action plans for certain situations in life and for various types of settlements.

The current conditions in social and education policy within Ukraine and Transcarpathia are pointing in the direction that the issue of selecting the school based regarding the language of education continues to be an important factor among the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia affecting the community's preservation as a part of the nation in the future. That is why it is extremely important to have the issue of selecting the language of education being handled by the decision-makers and executors in a self-aware and professional way, not free of political sensitivity, and to have a responsible attitude being established among the parents, the people involved in education policy and the public opinion. This dissertation intends to contribute in some extent to a professionally more well-founded and responsible management of these set of issues.

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